

THE KANSAS CITY KANSAN

Wednesday,
July 26, 2006

'Fair and Forthright'

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Long-awaited T-REX opens for business

By **MATT KELSEY**
Kansas Managing Editor

Wearing matching powder blue T-shirts in the Tuesday afternoon sun, a group of area kids involved with the

Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City streamed through the doors of T-REX, the brand-new dinosaur-themed restaurant in the heart of The Legends at Village West.

The restaurant, which opened to the

public on Tuesday night, held a special preview event for members of the media and invited guests, including the Boys & Girls Clubs group, earlier in the day.

"These kids get the first glimpse to see T-REX," said Patrick McKinney, general manager of the new restaurant.

Restaurant executives hope the kids will be the first of thousands to experience T-REX. The Kansas City, Kan., location is the first-of-its-kind in the country, and organizers hope to open eight more in other unique venues in the U.S., including the second T-REX, to open at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla., in 2008.

"We think it's great to do this restaurant, and then go back and do Disney after this," said Tilman Fertitta, president, CEO and chairman of Landry's Restaurants, Inc., which owns a majority share in T-REX. "It gives us an opportunity to use this restaurant as a prototype."

"We're excited. We think this is a great area, and we think we're going to be very successful here for a long time."

But that attitude is admittedly a huge reversal for Landry's, which origi-



SUSAN McSPADEN/Special to The Kansas

The interior of T-REX features animatronic dinosaurs, a gigantic octopus hanging over the bar, and seating for 375 diners.



SUSAN McSPADEN/Special to The Kansas

Steve Schussler, founder of T-REX, spoke during a media preview ceremony for Kansas City's newest restaurant and attraction on Tuesday. The much-awaited T-REX is the first of its kind, and Schussler, along with Landry's Restaurants, Inc., plans on opening eight more of the dinosaur-themed eateries. The next one is scheduled to open at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla., in 2008.

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T-REX

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nally didn't think KCK could support the restaurant.

Steve Schussler, who came up with the T-REX concept, said that during development, he was contacted by RED Development Vice President Steve Graham. RED Development owns The Legends. Graham asked Schussler if they would consider placing a T-REX at The Legends.

"Quite frankly, we said that we didn't think (Kansas City) was on the map for us," Schussler said. Graham "flew up to my office with a pin and stuck it in a map and said we're going to Kansas City

"We decided that this is not only a worthy community to be in, but the first one we would open in. To be in Kansas City and to open up the first one is a pleasure."

Schussler is also the founder of Rainforest Café, a popular theme restaurant with locations around the country, including one in Overland Park, Kan.

"The thing that is so great about this is that everyone knows Rainforest Café," said Unified Government Mayor/CEO Joe Reardon on Tuesday. "To have the creator of that here, and to have the first T-REX here is incredible. If you have kids, you're going to bring them to T-REX."

On Tuesday, restaurant officials were out to show that T-REX is more than just a restaurant. The building

is covered, both inside and outside, with impressive replicas of dinosaur skeletons, as well as animatronic creatures in constant motion. For weeks, visitors to The Legends have been photographing a 125-foot-long replica of an Argentinosaurus, which curves over the main entrance to the restaurant. (The Argentinosaurus is aptly located in KCK, which features a neighborhood known as Argentine.) The dinosaur is believed to be the largest, heaviest animal to ever walk the earth.

Inside the restaurant, diners will be greeted with life-sized, moving animal replicas, including a gigantic octopus draped over the Shark Bar. The restaurant seats 375 people in a number of different, themed dining areas, including the Sequoia Room,

Shark Room, the Fern Forest Room, Aqua Room and Geo-Tech Room.

T-REX also offers lots of fun activities for kids, including the Paleo Zone's Discovery Dig, described as "a large excavation pit with replicas of fossil bones waiting to be uncovered." Also, children of all ages can create stuffed dinosaurs at the first-ever "Build-A-Dino," developed by Build-A-Bear Workshop. The restaurant also has a full line of products in its gift shop.

Landry's officials hope T-REX, which was much more expensive to build than an average restaurant, will prove to be a worthy venture for the company. But others are hopeful the attraction can do more than that. Reardon said the restaurant could help continue the development boom in western Wyandotte County, and

thereby benefit the entire county.

"This means that we're going to continue to attract people from the entire Midwest region to come here and bring their family," Reardon said. "That's what this place is all about."

"I don't think anybody could have predicted what has happened in Village West. But what I think it proves is that there's a potential for great things to happen anywhere in our community."

Reardon greeted visitors to the restaurant Tuesday with a particularly corny phrase, but Reardon's sentiments seemed to capture the mood at the opening of the first-ever T-REX.

"I can't take credit for this line," Reardon said, "but it's a T-REXcellent day in Kansas City."