

The West Wyandotte



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There is much to see and do in the newly opened T-Rex Café at the Legends Shopping Center. A young t-rex looms over the entrance to the Geo Tech Dining Room (above) while a giant dragonfly perches on a tree limb beneath a prehistoric canopy (top right); a friendosaur in waiting has an expansive view of merchandise that could distract those awaiting a table. (Staff photos by Paul Smith.)

T-Rex luring families for quality educational mealtimes

By Paul Smith

The hostess at the T-Rex Café in the Legends Shopping Center is hesitant about opening the front doors before the multimillion-dollar restaurant attraction is scheduled to open. With an hour to go, already a line is forming outside—and when the doors part, an eager little boy rushes forward like his birthday showed up early.

"Many of the locals have been watching us since day one," said Jennifer Currier, sales manager at the T-Rex. "People walk in and the mouths just drop. We're

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almost bombarded in a good way—it's anticipation."

For weeks, Legends visitors have tried to sneak a peek through the windows of the nascent T-Rex Café. That determined gawking helped generate buzz about the unique prehistoric-themed restaurant that resulted in a two-hour wait for a table, with long lines stretching outside in the rain.

General Manager Patrick McKinney said the idea of a prehistoric family adventure (complete with educational opportunities and activities as well as quality food and service) appeals to the T-Rex target audience, which is essentially everyone—from toddlers to seniors.

"If we can add education to great food and service," McKinney said, "I think that's a great experience for the family."

The T-Rex Café falls squarely in line with the goal of the Legends Shopping Center to offer unique entertainment attractions. This is the debut restaurant in what could evolve into a nine-store chain, with the Legends holding monopoly on the concept restaurant until at least 2008.

An original opening to coincide with the Legends Shopping Center grand opening in April was delayed because McKinney said that as the flagship restau-

rant—with a cost estimated at \$15 million—it is important to get every detail right.

"The experience is very real," he said. "I've never seen the price tag."

One slogan McKinney offered is: "Where whimsicality meets reality." That is best expressed by factual exhibits on the tyrannosaurus rex alongside the whimsical appearance of Dexter the T-Rex—and other dinosaur characters—on the kid's menu.

The kid's menu is also one example of the very real emphasis placed on the edutainment aspect of the restaurant. Four of its six pages are devoted to various puzzles that test spelling and even offer lessons in Greek and Latin. In addition to educational exhibits throughout the restaurant—even in the bathrooms—there is a play area that kids can access for a \$2.50 charge where they can dig up fossils, explore a cave or learn more about dinos through interactive Paleo screens.

The restaurant also plans to offer educational tours for school groups. McKinney pledges no sales pitches imbedded within the tours: "It's all about the triceratops and t-rex," he said. "This is a great way to give back to the community. If they want to stay for lunch, that's great."

There are also shopping op-

tions within T-Rex, focusing primarily on clothing and games as well as a unique Build-A-Dino section. A partnership with the Build-A-Bear Workshop, this allows kids to assemble and accessorize their own "friendosaur," complete with electronic registration and ID so that it may be traced back to its owner if lost.

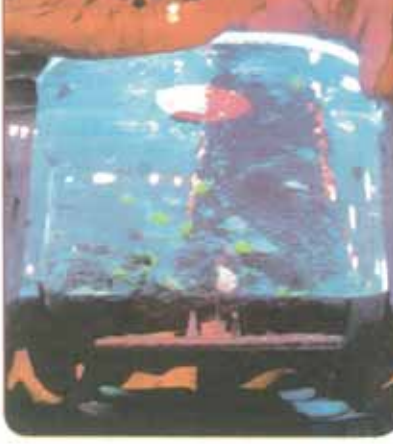
Getting lost or at least disoriented is certainly possible among various themed rooms within the sprawling two-story restaurant. Dining rooms have dramatic names such as the Sequoia, Fern Forest and Ice Age Rooms, but none surpass the Kitchen of Fire, a showcase kitchen that is actually surrounded by flames behind heat-resistant glass.

McKinney also offers another compelling reason—aside from the STAR Bonds that helped finance it—for the T-Rex Café to establish itself in Kansas.

"A lot of dinosaurs have been discovered here," he said—offering the fresh water dwelling mesosaurus as just one example. "Kansas was all underwater at one point."

He hopes to tell lots of school kids about the mesosaurus; once schools get settled in, they will start scheduling tours.

"They have a lot going on in the first weeks," McKinney said. "About as much as we do."



The Geo Tech Dining Room offers a variety of interesting seating for visitors, such as an up close look at a parasaurolophus and its young (above) and a table beside an active aquarium. The family friendly Shark Bar—with its 5,000-gallon shark tank and its toothy inhabitants—is not far away. (Staff photos by Paul Smith.)