

## business

### Something new on the menu



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Steven Schussler stood with some of the statues that will be used in Dynasty, one of his restaurant concepts, featuring Chinese cuisine served amid artifacts collected from the Qing dynasty.

• Steven Schussler, the eccentric founder of Rainforest Cafe, has risen from the swamp with a \$100 million deal to build 30 restaurants.

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Steven Schussler, the brash entrepreneur who founded Rainforest Cafe, has not had a winning restaurant concept in more than a decade. But he hasn't lost his ability to shock, entertain and, ultimately, to raise millions of dollars for his fairy-tale-like ideas.

This week, RED Development, a major developer of open-air shopping centers, agreed to build Schussler's themed restaurant concepts in more than 30 locations across the country, in a deal valued at more than \$100 million.

Designed to overstimulate the senses, the concepts include a Chinese restaurant with statues from China's Qing dynasty; a Parisian jazz club with a giant airplane descending from the ceiling; a restaurant with Harley-Davidson motorcycles, and a hot dog stand with more than 3,000 types of mustard.

The deal with RED is the biggest in Schussler's 28-year restaurant career — and one that could go a long way toward restoring his reputation as a business visionary after some well-publicized blunders. In 1991, a once-trendy nightclub he founded in downtown Minneapolis known as JukeBox Saturday Night went bankrupt. Then, nine years later, he angered shareholders of Rainforest Cafe when he sold the publicly traded restaurant at a low ebb in its stock.

Now, Schussler is on a roll again. A year ago, he made \$76 million when he sold 80 percent of his dinosaur-themed restaurant, T-Rex, to Houston-based Landry's Restaurants. And ground has broken on two of Schussler's restaurants — T-Rex and Asian-themed Yak & Yeti — at Walt Disney World in Orlando.

Schussler continues: Warehouse is like a theme park of concepts. **D2 ▶**

#### SCHUSSLER'S RESTAURANT CONCEPTS

##### AMERICA'S ROADHOUSE

A 275-seat restaurant made to replicate classic eateries along Route 66. Decorated with antique jukeboxes and motorcycles and present-day choppers. Menu includes "comfort foods" like meatloaf, pot pies and roasted chicken.

##### DYNASTY

Chinese cuisine served amid vases, statues and artwork collected from the Qing dynasty (1644 to 1912). Guests enter through massive red doors and watch opera dancers perform every 40 minutes.

##### HOT DOG HALL OF FAME

Hot dogs and sausages served with 3,000 types of mustard. Guests can sample pickles,

relishes, horseradishes and peppers from all over the world.

##### AEROBLEU

Food, martinis and jazz mix in a 325-seat nightclub featuring live jazz and an old DC-3. Classic Cuban cars are parked outside, and extra Gibson guitars are available for guests who want to play with the band.

##### WINTER WONDERLAND

Model trains whistle around giant candy canes, gingerbread houses and animated reindeer. There will be lifelike snowboarders and skiers, as well as crackling logs in a fireplace. The menu includes pot pie, mashed potatoes and baked macaroni and cheese.



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Detail from Aerobleu, a concept featuring food, martinis and jazz in a 325-seat nightclub featuring live jazz and an old DC-3.

# Something new on the menu

## ◀ SCHUSSLER FROM D1

Schussler leads regular tours of his offbeat headquarters in Golden Valley, where he has converted a one-story warehouse into a playground for testing his restaurant concepts. Inside, visitors find screeching robot dinosaurs, jungle sounds, Harley-Davidsons, original artwork from 15th-century China and fake mists and snowfalls.

"Nowadays, there are so many shopping centers being built, you've got to stand out," said Dan Lowe, managing partner with RED Development, which is based in Kansas City, Mo. "And Steve's ideas really stand out."

At times, the scene at Schussler's laboratory in Golden Valley resembles a Martin Scorsese movie set. His concepts attract the sort of Donald Trump-like characters who favor the grandiose. Gaming entrepreneur Lyle Berman, an early investor in Rainforest, is a frequent visitor. Raphael Ghermezian, one of the four Ghermezian brothers who developed the Mall of America, will tour the facility next week.

Each tour costs about \$5,000 and is carefully choreographed by Schussler, who often recruits magicians to perform and chauffeurs his visitors to and from the airport.

## Yelling his themes

On a recent weekday, six executives with Olympia Gaming, which owns Casino Fandango in Carson City, Nev., stepped into a brightly lit room with a red carpet, gold chandeliers and 8-foot ivory statues of knights from 19th-century China.

Schussler, a Joe Pesci look-alike wearing a designer suit over a purple T-shirt, doesn't speak so much as yell.

"I'm telling ya, you could build a whole casino around this! You could do it!" he shouted in his thick New York accent.

"You know who would really appreciate this is our Asian customer that comes to Vegas," said Gary Goett, chair of Olympic Gaming. "They would love it!"

"Yeah, this is totally off the charts!" Schussler yelled.

Behind each door in the warehouse is a different world. One door leads to a room filled with mechanical dinosaurs. As Schussler talked, a brontosaurus tail swiped across the room, knocking one of the casino executives in the shoulder.

Schussler led the group into a jazz club concept, where he explained the marketing benefits of having urinals shaped like saxophones. "Guys, you'll never forget in a lifetime that you peed in a saxophone," he exclaimed.

He talked louder and faster as he introduced the Hot Dog

Hall of Fame. "We should open up one of these in every airport, every stadium, every university around the world!" he yelled.

Schussler's style seemed perfectly suited to these casino executives, who laughed at his jokes and departed with big grins in a Cadillac Escalade.

"That Chinese concept could really work in Vegas," Goett said.

## Short shelf life?

But Schussler has wowed investors before with concepts that didn't pan out as planned.

His JukeBox Saturday Night, with a '57 Chevy sticking out of the front of the building and King Kong climbing up the side, went from lines of people waiting to get in to a bankruptcy court after the novelty faded.

"One problem with themed restaurants is the 'gee-whiz thing' only lasts so long," said Richard Martin, executive editor of Nation's Restaurant News, a trade magazine published in New York. "Take Planet Hollywood. How many times are you going to go in and look at the model of 'The Terminator'?"

After the demise of JukeBox Saturday Night, Schussler retreated to his St. Louis Park home, which he transformed into a prototype of his rainforest-themed restaurant. Schussler spent \$400,000 turning every room into a rainforest scene, replete with

jungle birds, waterfalls and a baby baboon named Charley.

At one point, federal agents raided the house, Schussler recounted, because he had the largest electric bill among homeowners in the state. Agents were convinced that he was growing marijuana.

Rainforest went public in 1995, just six months after opening its first restaurant at the Mall of America in Bloomington. Its stock debuted at \$6 per share, and within the first 10 weeks, the stock price more than doubled. In the fall of 1996, it was trading at \$34 a share.

At the time, Schussler was riding the wave of so-called "eatertainment" restaurants and clubs, such as Hard Rock Cafe and Planet Hollywood, that were popping up all over the country. But like many of these concepts, Rainforest expanded before proving diners would come again and again. Landry's bought the chain in 2000 for \$3.25 a share. After shrinking the chain, Landry's is expanding it again.

Schussler, however, made about \$7 million from the transaction — money that he has poured into his Golden Valley headquarters. And he has no misgivings about the deal. "I'll never forget who brought me to the dance. Never," he said. "Rainforest Cafe gave me credibility."

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