

Always

Steve Schussler made it big by inventing the Rainforest Cafe, but that was only the beginning of his entrepreneurial odyssey

— BY SARAH JACKSON —

selling

Steve Schussler has been called the Walt Disney of themed restaurants. His influence on the business has been profound, global and lasting — not just with nearly 40 Rainforest Cafe locations worldwide, but also with his many other dining and entertainment concepts, including five at Disney World in Orlando, most recently The Boathouse (in 2015), a concept he duplicated this year at the new Shanghai Disney Resort in China.

But to see the 61-year-old mover and shaker at his Schussler Creative idea lab — housed in a non-descript Golden Valley warehouse — is to see a bit of Willy Wonka, too.

“Watch this,” he says, holding a large black-leather menu.

Opening it with a flourish, he reveals an elegant page that emits a low glow, made possible with an LED backlight.

“Tell me that’s not *freaking* cool! The *menu* feels sultry,” says the Rockaway Beach, N.Y.

native with a slightly Long Island accent. “It’s not just white. It’s soft white.”

This comes just after he’s finished explaining why purple is the most royal color in the history of all humanity.

The bold hue will play a major role in his latest concept — Zi Imperial Kitchen: Asian Antiquities & Culinary Art.

Zi, Schussler said, loosely translated, means purple in Chinese.

Ancient Phoenicians reportedly were among the first humans to create their own purple dyes by using a secretion produced by certain types of sea snails. To get enough dye to trim even a single garment in purple, workers of the day had to process more than 12,000 snails, which made the color a symbol of exquisite wealth.

“Purple is the most royal color in China. It’s not red,” Schussler says, stepping over to an amethyst-jeweled chandelier. “Tell me *this* is not royal.”



◀ Steve Schussler lounges in a chair made from an airplane engine body in the Aerobleu jazz room in his Schussler Creative idea lab in Golden Valley. Photo by Tracy Walsh



All grown up

Why such a high-end concept?

Well, after introducing a variety of kid-friendly themes at Disney — T-Rex, Yak & Yeti and multiple Rainforest Cafe locations — Schussler is adding more sophisticated themes to his repertoire.

The Boathouse welcomes families with its playful waterfront theme, nautical retail store as well as hugely popular rides in vintage Amphicars, collected from around the globe and lovingly restored to their 1960s glory.

But the seafood and steakhouse — inspired by Minnesota's own Lake Minnetonka — is decidedly swanky with an array of beautiful wooden boats. Vessels are used to both enhance the venue's mahogany-rich decor and to offer transportation, including a 40-foot Italian water taxi, The Venezia, which offers romantic champagne cruises.

In 2015, The Boathouse became one of the first restaurants to open in Disney Springs, formerly known as the Downtown Disney area of the resort. Since then, hundreds of reviewers on Yelp, Open Table and Trip

Advisor have given the restaurant ratings of 4 to 5 stars for signature dishes like crabbed-stuffed lobster and s'mores baked Alaska.

“The Boathouse is a home-run; the food is incredible as well as the hospitality,” said Schussler, whose culinary partner is the Chicago-based Gibsons Restaurant Group. His second Boathouse location opened this past summer in Shanghai Disney resort, thanks to a partnership with the Chinese restaurant holdings group, Xiao Nan Guo.

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Reconstructing antiquities

Schussler's next big thing is definitely geared toward adults, too.

Zi, which Schussler describes as “sultry and sexy,” isn't just an upscale Asian restaurant.

When the concept finally sees the light of day, it will include an unveiling of a restoration project that's been in the works at Schussler Creative for decades.

Ornate sculptures, two dozen of them — inspired by China's Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) — decorate a large, candle-lit room at his idea lab, carpeted in a rich eggplant hue, of course.

Carved out of elephant bone and ivory, the life-size warriors look ready for battle (some of them on horseback), wielding intricately carved axes and shields. Two huge tusks, lit by spotlights, create a stunning arch under a chandelier not far from an elegant table setting to help visitors imagine dining amongst these giants.

Then there's an enormous model of a ship that looks, along with the rest of the pieces, like it should be on view at the Smithsonian.

Schussler came across the one-of-a-kind collection by way of a private collector friend of his in Chicago. Broken into thousands of pieces, the sculptures came in salt-water-soaked, rodent-infested crates. They were pulled out of an old Fulton warehouse and thrown into two 40-foot shipping containers, dead rats and all, breaking them to even more puzzle-like pieces.

Today, the collection — having been painstakingly sorted and hand-pieced back together during the past 15-plus years by long-time Schussler employee Kim Anderson — is extremely valuable.

Some of the one-of-a-kind figures will most certainly adorn his first incarnation of Zi, though he has enough pieces to fill three locations, if needed. Asian decor and home goods will make up the retail portion of the experience, rather than toys.

Schussler said he's in development discussions — “with an array of suitors,” including folks in Las Vegas, as well as other locations in the U.S. and abroad — to bring the concept to life.



▲ The Boathouse in Orlando bills itself as the only place in the world that offers commercial rides on vintage Amphicars. Schussler purchased the vehicles from collectors around the globe and had them restored to their 1960s glory.

The five senses

Schussler's 10,000-square-foot idea lab — with its exterior door emblazoned with the words “inventions, ideas, contraptions and dreams” — features concepts past and future, including a two-story animatronic T-Rex, a large-scale animated restaurant model as well as 3-foot tall geodes (installed to sell his T-Rex concept, including the retail side of it).

Nearby is a heavy door that opens to a frozen room featuring an ice-block bar bathed in pink and blue lights. Fur-trimmed ponchos and fur-lined gloves hang outside so folks can stay warm when learning about Schussler's Water, Fire and Ice concept.

Schussler, however, seems most at home in his jazz club room, where swing music plays and the lighting is warm and cozy. Jukeboxes, displaying a rainbow of colors, dot every corner. (Schussler is an avid collector.)

“Everything we build and create is around the five senses,” he said. “Every six feet we put a speaker. It's cheap when you put four speakers in a room.”

Adding more speakers in a restaurant allows the music to be turned down low, but still be audible, he explains.

“Everything I do is in layers,” he said. “Layering is one of my secrets. But it's an expensive secret.”

Schussler came up with his jazz concept — Aerobleu — after discovering a fictional World War II pilot's journal of the same name that tells the story of Max Morgan, an American pilot who wins a DC-3 in an all-night poker game.

Schussler spied the faux-vintage book — which brings to life the popular music scene of post-war Paris — high on a dusty shelf at the Electric Fetus in Minneapolis.

“I'm turning the story into reality,” he said, amid a room

Always selling



packed with artifacts and icons, including a trumpeting Louie Armstrong, a dancing, sax-playing Bill Clinton and a large airplane that raises and lowers with a spinning propeller.

'Calculated crazy'

Basking in the ambience of his jazz-themed space, Schussler snaps his fingers.

He throws in a shoulder shimmy and adds, "*This is swing.*"

Another important part of selling themed concepts, Schussler said, is the so-called little details, such as restrooms.

"Bathrooms are one of the most important things in a restaurant," he said.

And that includes Aerobleu.

"The urinals, which I love to talk about, are saxophones," he said, adding that the women's toilets will be tubas, brass with porcelain rims. "You think I'm kidding," he said. "I'm not kidding."

◀ Sculptures depicting China's Qing Dynasty decorate a large, candle-lit room at the Schussler Creative idea lab in Golden Valley. Schussler hopes to use the museum-like pieces as decor in a new Asian-themed restaurant. Photo by Tracy Walsh

This is where Schussler gets that Willy Wonka twinkle in his eye. People, he said, have often called him crazy.

His original Rainforest Cafe idea lab was, after all, his longtime home in St. Louis Park, a major remodeling decision that made his neighbors wonder about his sanity until his first cafe opened in 1994 at the Mall of America.

Someone along the way came up with another term for the fearless entrepreneur's methodology — "calculated crazy," a description Schussler's happily adopted.

"We know exactly what we're doing," he said.

Local operations

Schussler said these days his ideas typically take five to eight years from creation to presentation to big wigs from Disney and beyond. It takes another two years to develop architectural plans and build out spaces.

"There's not a lot of luck. I have a great team," said Schussler, whose corporate offices are located at the idea lab. "I have to sell my team just like I have to sell Disney. I'm constantly selling."

Jean Golden, who's been Schussler's publicist for more than 20 years, said Schussler is hands-on and extremely involved in day-to-day development of ideas, including menu tastings, retail development and more.

"He has a vision most people don't have," she said, remembering how a Disney contact once told Schussler. "You've out Disney-ed Disney."

Schussler's enterprises aren't all out of state.

He's the guy behind Green Acres Event Center in Eden Prairie, the oldest standing barn in Eden Prairie and an important part of Minnesota history.

Schussler, working with two dozen local agencies, took two years to restore the barn, built in 1942, including its magnificent Gothic-arch roof.

It opened in 2013 with heat, air conditioning, bathrooms, an elevator, a sound system and theatrical lighting.

It's been popular with brides (and beyond) ever since.

Schussler's wife, Sunhi Ryan, who works as senior vice president of sales and marketing for Schussler Creative, manages the facility, which *The Knot* magazine recently named a Best of Weddings pick for 2016.

Schussler is also the guy behind the Galaxy Drive-In in



◀ In 2013, Steve Schussler renovated a 1942 barn in Eden Prairie and turned it into Green Acres Event Center, now a popular event and wedding venue.

St. Louis Park on Highway 7. He took on the venue in 2009 as a pet project, but put it up for sale this year after once-stellar revenues began to decline.

Recently, however, Schussler changed his mind, saying a celebrity chef fell in love with Galaxy on a recent visit to Minnesota. Now he plans to partner with that chef to expand the menu with gluten-free menu items, vegetarian offerings and fresh ingredients from local farms. Galaxy's website now says the restaurant — home of a burger topped with fried cheese curds — will open again in the spring.

What's next?

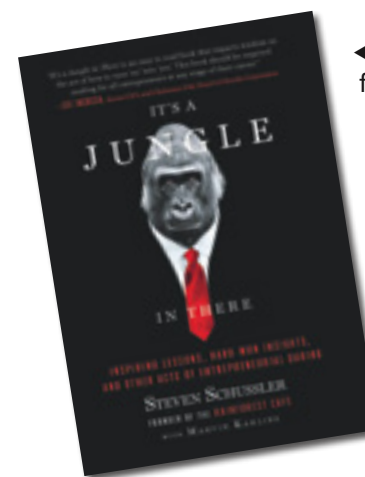
Zi and Aerobleu, of course, and a Puff the Magic Dragon concept.

Remembering ups and downs

Schussler, whose early career was in sales for TV and radio stations in Miami and Chicago, is proud of his unusual career.

That includes his 2010 book — *It's a Jungle in There: Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring* — endorsed by both Lee Iacocca and President-elect Donald Trump.

In the book, written with Marvin Karlins, Schussler tells the



◀ All of the profits from Steve Schussler's *It's a Jungle in There* are donated to Smile Network International, a Minneapolis-based humanitarian nonprofit organization he helped found.

story of his rise to fame, but also of the devastating failures he had along the way, including the demise of his Juke Box Saturday Night chain. (He came to Minneapolis in the 1980s to manage one of the night club's locations and never left.)

After the loss of his first enterprise, Schussler suffered years of financial setbacks and failed attempts at convincing would-be investors to help him open the first of many wildly successful Rainforest Cafe locations, an empire that was sold in 2000 to Landry's Inc., a Houston-based hospitality company.

In his conversational book, Schussler covers the five Ps — personality, product, persistence, people and philanthropy — and also preaches the value of passion and caring for others. He even describes some of his outlandish entrepreneurial antics. (Yes, he once shipped himself to a prospective employer in a superman costume to get a sales job.)

Today Schussler is still one of the Twin Cities' most gregarious characters.

To see him in his offices — sitting at a massive messy desk, wearing a tailored suit, cufflinks and a silk tie, scarf and pocket square — is to see his Walt and Willy personalities combined.

In the span of a couple minutes, he pops an Altoid mint, pets and kisses his dog (Daisy, a lab), shouts praise to his assistant ("Thank you, Kari, for your hard work. You're the best. I don't know what I would do without you."), interrupts his wife with yet another irrepressible thought and then just as quickly apologizes (sincerely, tenderly squeezing her hand).

Ryan, who's been with the guy for more than 13 years, smiles.

"Here," Schussler says, "we look at everything differently. And I'm happy about that."

Sarah Jackson is the editor of Minnesota Good Age.