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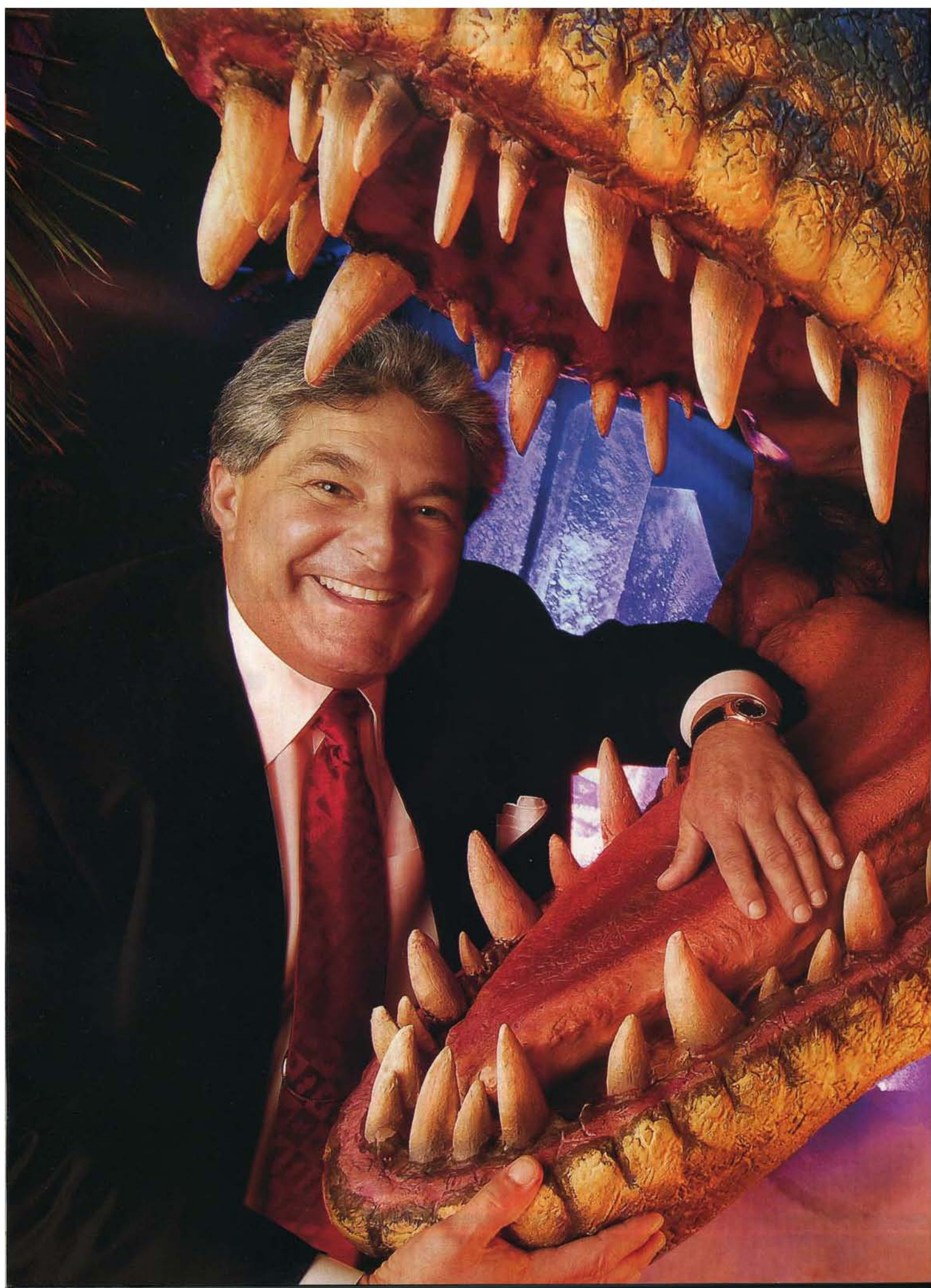
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# CRAZY AS A Tyrannosaur

Restaurant entrepreneur Steve Schussler  
is way beyond high concept.

BY STEVE MARSH | PHOTOGRAPHS BY TRAVIS ANDERSON

**S**teven Schussler's restaurant concepts company, Schussler Creative, sits in the middle of a single-story cinder block strip in Golden Valley. There's a Perkins and a Red Lobster nearby, a bus driver training school across the street, and an air-conditioning repair shop next door. Stenciled on the glass of Schussler Creative's front door is the message, INVENTIONS, IDEAS, CONTRAPTIONS, AND DREAMS. Inside you expect to meet Gene Wilder in a velvet top hat and tails, saying, "Invention, my dear friends, is 93 percent perspiration, 6 percent electricity, 4 percent evaporation, and 2 percent butterscotch ripple."



Instead, you meet Steven Schussler, a boisterous fifty-year-old Jew from Far Rockaway, Long Island. His five-eight, 218-pound body is draped in a Marty Mathis custom gray suit, complete with diamond cuff links and a violet silk tie. "I don't wear a suit that often," he says, smiling his laser-white smile. "But I feel great in it!" The office walls are filled with photographs of the perpetually tan Schussler (he owns a second home in Acapulco because he

T-Rex is Schussler's newest theme restaurant concept—"A Prehistoric Family Adventure." The restaurant food will be complementary elements of water, fire, and ice, but the big draw will be the animatronic dinosaurs, the actual fossil pieces that kids can dig up in an archaeological "dig zone," and, of course, a gift shop full of plastic dinosaur figurines, wooden dinosaur marionettes, and plush teddy bear-sized dinosaurs. "It's where whimsicality meets reality to educate and entertain!" Schussler whoops.

T-Rex is Schussler's follow-up to Rainforest Café, the international chain of restaurants that he opened in the Mall of America in 1994, fea-

ends Mall in Kansas City, Kansas—will have a massive wow factor. At 20,000 square feet, it's substantially larger than any Rainforest Café (the one in the Mall of America is 16,000 square feet), and it's being built at a substantially higher cost. Kansas City gave Schussler \$8.5 million in government bonds for the project (Schussler spent between \$2 million and \$23 million opening each of the forty-five Rainforests). While the restaurants will be larger—dino-sized—there will be only nine of them in the entire country, in order to hew closer to a "destination restaurant and retail" model.

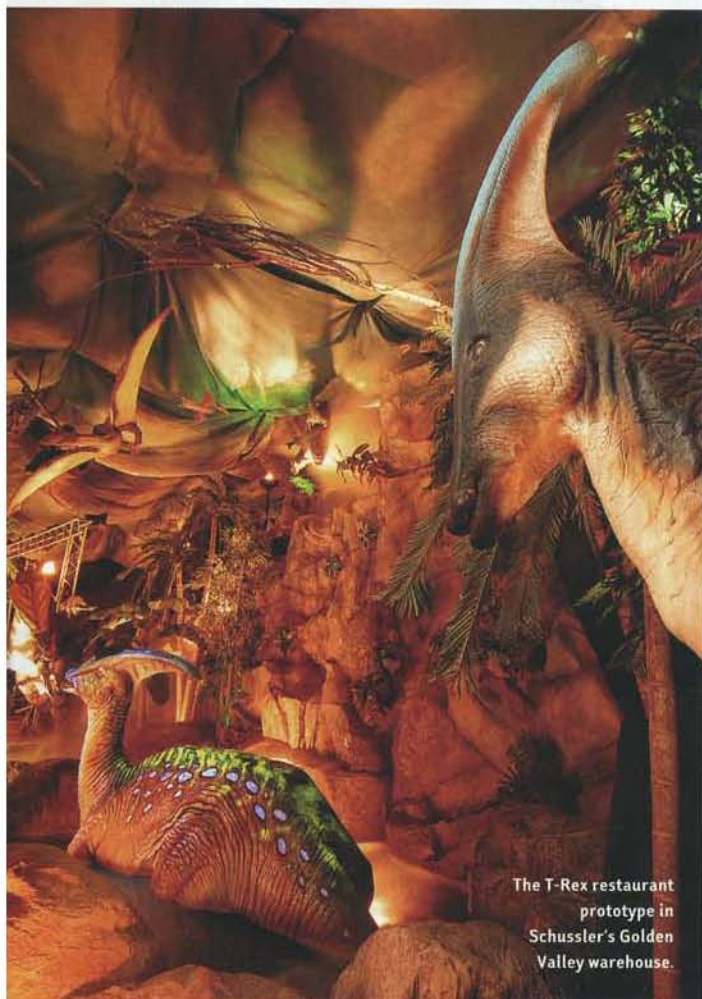
But the actual building and opening of T-Rex is just a front for Schussler's real passion, which speaks to the Willy Wonka sentiment stenciled on the front door: research and development.

## Schussler's high energy, positive-thinking, marketer persona projects an "Is this guy for real?" scent as strong as his Issey Miyake cologne.

turing menu items such as Python Pasta, Paradise Pot Roast, and the Congo Catfish Plate, as well as Rainforest Café T-shirts, caps, mugs, shot glasses, and stuffed tree frogs available in the café's gift shop, which you have to walk through

Schussler is compelled to enter into strategic partnerships—even if that means opening the door to compromise—because as his projects get bigger, they necessitate more millions. But the compromises don't seem to pain him that much, perhaps because he derives most of his pleasure from hunkering down in his dream factory, making sure his vision is just right before partnering with the financiers.

"We are essentially a think tank," he explains. "An R & D lab." Inside Schussler Creative's warehouses (three in Golden Valley and one in Texas), his team has been tweaking T-Rex—along with six other concepts in various stages of development—for the past five years. (In late February, Schussler sold 80 percent of T-Rex and another, Asian-centered, concept for \$7.6 million to Landry's, which will operate the restaurants.) This kind of multitask experimentation hasn't always gone down easily with his investors. In fact,



The T-Rex restaurant prototype in Schussler's Golden Valley warehouse.

hates our winters) smiling alongside celebrities—Larry King, Donald Trump, George W. Bush. He says he's had four flat-screen computer monitors installed in the office because he's "trying to learn the stock market."

Schussler's high energy, positive-thinking, marketer persona projects an "Is this guy for real?" scent as strong as his Issey Miyake cologne. He's wearing a suit today because, he says, he's closing a deal with Disney to build a T-Rex restaurant in Orlando.

on your way into the restaurant. Schussler sold Rainforest in 2000 to Landry's Restaurants, a Houston-based seafood conglomerate, for \$80 million. T-Rex is going to be a larger, more ambitious project than Rainforest, he says. Among the planned improvements is "taking the food up a notch," because, he says, "people come once for the wow but the next time they come for the food."

The first T-Rex—opening this spring as an anchor tenant in the Leg-





Schussler with an 800-pound Nepalese marionette.

T-Rex is one of the reasons Schussler sold Rainforest. "My partner said, 'Listen, Steve, keep focused. If you take your eyes off the ball and people think the creator of Rainforest Café is creating other concepts, they're going to think you're a flake. Our stock prices are going to go down, so let's just make this one work.' " Schussler says his brain doesn't need such constraints. "I believe I can think on multilevels. If I want to think about clowns one day and I want to think about a circus another day, let me do that. If I'm at the rock, mineral, and fossil show in Arizona researching for T-Rex, why can't I find something that would work in my Asian concept? If I see butterflies at the state fair and it gives me an idea for a chandelier, why can't I do that? That's my prerogative."

There's something Peter Pan about his obstinacy. "I missed parts of childhood," he acknowledges. "My parents were divorced when I was seven. By eight, I had a paper route. By nine, I

was tossing pizza. By twelve, I was hitchhiking to Shea Stadium to sell hot chocolate at Jets games so I could watch Joe Namath. By thirteen, I was a maitre d' and a cabana boy, and I was shaving even though I had nothing to shave—I was trying to stimulate growth." He always wanted to be older, he says. When he was twelve, he wanted to be fifteen. When he was fifteen, he wanted to be eighteen.

Now, according to one of his warehouse employees, Schussler will sometimes let himself in late at night, pour a glass of wine, and play pinball until dawn.

**S**chussler says he's ready to show me what I came to see—a tour of the warehouses. "Are you ready to see the Wizard?" he asks. When I assure him I am, he says, "It's Charlie and the golden ticket back there. You're going to see all kinds of fun stuff. You're going

to see all kinds of—what are they?—oompa loompas and those little guys who want to run around and make you happy, make you laugh." With that, he takes me into a kitchenette, where he introduces me to his two hired oompa loompas: Kim and Jimmy. Kim, who's in his fifties, with a salt-and-pepper beard and semiprecious stones on his fingers, is clearly the senior oompa loompa. A former prop man on the Warner Bros. lot, Kim—Schussler will tell me later—was once married to Stevie Nicks. Kim hands Schussler a remote control of some kind, and Schussler pushes open a door at the back of the kitchenette.

"Welcome to T-Rex!" he shouts.

Thirty years of Spielberg hasn't prepared me for this. Honestly, it makes Rainforest Café look like, well, a mall restaurant. There is a twenty-foot-tall T-Rex that roars and moves its eyes, neck, and jaw independently of each other. There are jungle sounds, waterfalls, mist, and fake trees that don't look so fake. "Is this great or what?" Schussler bellows over the screeching robot dinosaurs. A swooping pterodactyl beats its wings overhead. As Kim leads me up the faux-cobblestone trail, a brontosaurus swipes me with its giant tail, knocking my tape recorder out of my hand and spilling the batteries into the Jurassic foliage. After scrambling to put everything back together, I turn around to see Schussler pointing and laughing like a teenager who's just pulled a successful locker-room prank.

After a brisk walk-through, Schussler sits me down in front of a large mockup of the T-Rex restaurant prototype. "This took us two and a half years and \$180,000 to build," he says.





This Qing dynasty carved ivory statue isn't as old as it looks—probably dating to the late 1800s.

"Just the model!" From there, Schussler's a blur of excited notations: "Our kitchen is trademarked. We have three different methods of cooking: stone-seared, heat-seared, and flame-seared. We've got heating all the way around! Notice, you can have a sweet-sixteen, a confirmation, a birthday, an anniversary, and a bar mitzvah all happening at the same time. Couldn't do that at the Rainforest Café! This will be the ice bar in the Orlando location—a sushi bar actually made out of ice. We'll give people coats when they come into the bar!"

Then Schussler takes me to the next room to show me an actual 3D television. I can't help thinking of the Princess Leia message that R2-D2 projected for Luke on Tatooine, except instead of a tiny blue Leia going, "Help me, Obi-Wan, you're our only hope," the display is a full-color commercial for Herbal Essence shampoo. I'm gobsmacked. "Stand over here," Schussler commands. "Amazing, huh?" In the same

room, but having nothing to do with the fabulous TV, there's also a prospector's sluice, where—once the thing is set up in another Schussler restaurant—kids will be able to wash off minerals found in a bag of sand. "We could have real gold hidden in some of the bags!" he gushes.

Then Schussler hands me over to Kim and Jimmy to take me through a collection of ivory and bone statues from China's Qing dynasty. "I have to get back to this Disney deal, so I'll be poking in and out of the tour," Schussler says. "But I'll be back!" At this point, I'm still not sure whether he's putting me on or not. The man clearly has a deep comprehension of theatrical principle; with the lighting and the robots and the misting machines, I'm a little bewildered, and I don't quite put it past him to pump up the excitement of the "Disney deal" to impress the credulous writer.

The Qing dynasty ivory and bone sculpture collection is billed as museum-quality and is housed in a well-

lit red-carpeted gallery (still in the warehouse, of course). Actually, this sounds a little more ancient than it is—the Qing dynasty lasted into the early twentieth century. The artwork basically pays homage to the fifteenth-century Mongolian empire. Schussler acquired the pieces from a doctor who collected art.

"When Steve bought them," Kim says, "everything was in seventy-five crates, over 850 pounds apiece. When we opened them up, there were thousands of pieces of ivory and bone broken up, all over the floor, with some pieces missing and some tied together with string." Kim and Jimmy used magnifying glasses and crazy glue to put together these magnificent eight-foot ivory statues of Qing warriors and the massive model ships with tiny figurine emperors and soldiers. The detail of each piece is astonishing, with scenes of the empire's golden age carved into each surface—water buffalo hunts, battles, weddings. "I would get teary-eyed when I couldn't find a piece," Jimmy says. "I would



start to pout, but Kim, he just kept plugging away at the stuff."

It's hard to believe all that work will eventually end up in a Chinese restaurant in suburban Tucson, or some place.

**D**oing much more than necessary is the story of Schussler's life. For instance, when Schussler was a young man, just out of high school, he was working as a lineman for the phone company during the day and studying marketing at Miami Dade Community College at night. On lunch breaks, he would stay atop a pole, plug into a line, and interview for sales jobs with television and radio stations. "Months went by," Schussler recalls. "I'd come down the pole at five o'clock and go for my interviews. Five months and everybody said, 'You're a nice guy, good attitude, good guy'—but I didn't ever get the job. One day I decided I was going to do something they'd never forget." He says he was smoking a joint and watching a King Kong movie with his roommate, Brian Stone, who worked for WPLG-TV in Miami, and he told his roommate his idea. He would get a crate big enough to fit himself in it, dress up in a Superman costume, and have himself delivered to the general manager of the best station he interviewed with. "My roommate said he would give me \$50 if I did it, because I would need bail money," Schussler says.

The next morning, Schussler says, he rented a costume with blue tights and a cape, found somebody to build him a crate, and gave two police officer buddies \$100 each to take the morning off work to deliver the "package." "The girl next door convinced me to take a salami sandwich and a Diet Coke because we didn't know if I was going to have to stay in the crate overnight or what," he says. His cop friends helped box him up and took him for delivery. "So here I am, and it's 120 degrees in there, and I'm sweating like a pig, and the salami sandwich smells like a bad, bad, bad deli, and for some reason the Coke explodes. I'm crouched over in the box, soaking wet, and we're only ten minutes into the trip. I was praying

to God that I wouldn't die in a Superman costume in a crate. And the police officers are making fun of me, so I'm laughing and sweating and choking and I smell like a pig. Finally, they stop, put me on a dolly, wheel me into a reception area of this station, and say, 'We have an expensive piece of furniture from Mexico for Mr. Don Hamlin.' Someone says, 'Right this way,' and there's a secretary there who says Don Hamlin is out, he's in a board meeting, won't be back for two hours. She says leave the crate in his office. The cops say, 'Listen, this is a very expensive piece of furniture from Mexico—you're going to have to call him and tell him to come back to his office because we can't leave this crate alone.' So they get him on the phone, and I hear in the background, 'What the fuck, are you crazy? I've got twenty board members here!'

"By this time, I've probably lost ten pounds, we're going on forty-five minutes, and this is a newsroom. There's a crowd. There are two police officers with a crate, and everybody's gathering round and wanna know, 'What the freak is in this crate?' Must be seventy-five people in the place. I'm inside the box thinking this is either going to be the worst day of my life or the best.

**"They take the lock off, I come flying out in my Superman costume. I say, 'Hello, everybody, my name is Steve Schussler. I'm your new supersalesman!'"**

Hamlin finally comes back. He says, 'I didn't order any expensive furniture from Mexico.' They take the lock off, and like a jack-in-the-box I come flying out, just to breathe, the Diet Coke and pieces of sandwich all over, and here I am in my Superman costume. I say, 'Hello, everybody, my name is Steve Schussler. I'm your new supersalesman!' I went around and shook everybody's hand. They threw their papers up—some of them were eighty years old with canes—and they said, 'Son, you are the sickest person we've ever met. You're hired!'"

Schussler worked as an ad salesman in both radio and television for ten

years, moving to Chicago to work at Telerep Television. He was working at HRP-TV when he decided to open an antiques store called JukeBox Saturday Night and the station fired him. Schussler was obsessed with Wurlitzer jukeboxes. "The ones from the forties, fifties, and sixties were always a turn-on for me," he says. "The guys who designed them—Paul Fuller, guys like him—were Picassos. Those jukeboxes weren't built to play music—they were built as an attraction. You danced around them. You don't dance around a jukebox today." The jukebox store failed, but Jimmy Rittenberg, an impresario known as "Mr. Chicago" who owned Faces and Mike Ditka's restaurant, among others, bought the name from Schussler, built a fifties-themed nightclub around it, and took Schussler under his wing. The two of them opened JBSNs all over the country. In 1984, Schussler moved to Minneapolis to open one here. JukeBox was on Fifth Street downtown. The site now houses Dreamgirls, but the old King Kong airplane still sticks out of the side of the building. "I learned everything from Jimmy Rittenberg," Schussler says.

But after a few years, Schussler burned out on nightclubs. "I decided I

wanted to be in a family business," he says. "I was tired of drunks, tired of druggies, tired of staying up until two in the morning." In 1990, he closed the local JukeBox and built a prototype of Rainforest Café in his 4,500-square-foot home in St. Louis Park. He spent \$400,000 transforming the house, painting the walls and ceilings black, building three-dimensional rainforest scenes, and stocking the place with forty tropical birds, twelve tanks of saltwater fish, two tortoises, an iguana, and a baby baboon named Charlie. He dumped antifreeze in the pink waterfall so it wouldn't stop flowing in the winter.

*continued on page 294*



"I begged, borrowed, and stole to create Rainforest," Schussler says. "I had my gas and electricity turned off every month. I found new ways to turn them on myself. I bounced checks. I kited checks. I wrote checks to cover other checks. It was insane. It wasn't like I didn't have money—I just spent the money I had on greenery and other things to sell my concept because I thought that was more important."

The lifestyle took a toll. The DEA raided the house because agents thought all that electricity was for growing marijuana. And he couldn't stay in a committed relationship because the ladies he knew weren't wild about sharing space with birds and baboons. (When his current girlfriend moved in with him a year and a half ago, it was the first time he'd ever lived with a woman other than his mother.) There were nights spent staring in the mirror. "People said, 'Are you out of your mind?"

How do you live like that in that house?' Do you know how many times I'd look at myself in the mirror at night before I went to bed and cried real tears? 'Am I out of my mind?' I'd ask myself. And then I'd laugh."

Schussler's big break posed another test. In the spring of 1992, his father, now deceased, was living in Las Vegas when he barged into the World Championship of Poker and sat in Lyle Berman's chair when Berman got up to go the restroom. Berman, the CEO of Grand Casinos and founder of the World Poker Tour, was and is based in Minneapolis. When he returned, Schussler père badgered him into meeting with his son. "My dad called me at 3:00 that morning," Steve says. "And, hey, I'm not a fan of four-letter words, but I answer the phone and my dad says, 'Get a fucking pen.' I say, 'Who's this?' He says, 'It's your fucking father. Get a fucking pen.' And he tells me about this guy that I've never heard of before and he says make an appointment to see him. My father was so

loud. You may think I'm such an outgoing guy, so how can anything embarrass me? But it's unbelievable. Embarrassing. *Embarrassing.*"

But after meeting with the younger Schussler several times over a couple years, Berman plunked down nearly \$2 million and became chairman of the board of Rainforest Café.



We're in the fifth hour of the tour, going through the artifacts that make up the Hot Dog Hall of Fame, which will soon be installed at a Philadelphia racetrack owned by the Mohegan Sun Indians. It's a ludicrous idea, with jukeboxes, pinball games, and fiberglass characters testifying to America's long infatuation with the hot dog. "There're going to be hot dogs and ketchups and mustards from around the world!" Schussler says.

Schussler is a charming guy. And he really seems to buy what he's selling, but at the end of the tour—after going

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through T-Rex, the Qing dynasty, Asia, the Parisian Jazz Club, the medieval Harry Potter concept, and now the Hot Dog Hall of Fame, I can't help but wonder if I'm being taken in by this guy.

We may like to be fooled, but nowadays we like to know we're being fooled. We hate it when we catch a pop star lip-synching. As far as restaurants go, aren't we becoming more and more sophisticated? Aren't we trending toward the "authentic, chef-driven" dining experience? And, despite all those *real* dinosaur fossils, isn't T-Rex going to be an over-the-top contrivance? For that matter, isn't the theme restaurant dying? But when I challenge Schussler on this point, he's unfazed. "Authenticity, huh?" he says. "OK, let me tell you about the giraffes and the elephants in the real rain forest. There aren't any. But there are in Rainforest Café. Giraffes and elephants live right outside the tree line, in the tropical savannah. They're being poached and they're endangered, and I'm stretching the educational

message and taking some liberties, but there's nothing wrong with that. If you can entertain, you can educate."

It's clear then that Schussler's heroes aren't Emeril Lagasse, Wolfgang Puck, or any of the other celebrity chefs who often create a "chef-driven" restaurant experience. Three other names did come up during my tour, though, usually with the word *genius* attached: Thomas Edison, who invented the light bulb; Steve Wynn, who invented modern Las Vegas; and Walt Disney, who invented Mickey Mouse. The last name seems especially important to Schussler right now.

"Becoming a part of Disney's world is a big, big deal for me," he says. "If I wasn't an entrepreneur, I would work for Disney. The whole story is pretty exciting. I'm starting T-Rex in Kansas City—that's where Walt Disney started. Disney is apple pie, vanilla ice cream, mom and dad—to me that's the top of the line. You don't do any better. I've been working five years for Disney to embrace us."

Failure, meanwhile, is not a serious question. I asked him about things like the Hot Dog Hall of Fame: "I mean, you never have a doubt?"

"Do you know how many thousands of people went through T-Rex in the last five years [without making a deal]?" he says. "Nobody does R & D for five years. Nobody spends \$14 million to \$15 million on a laboratory in a suburb of Minneapolis, filling warehouses with themed environments for restaurant and retail concepts. *Nobody*. The commitment we had was unparalleled. No one's ever thought about it, because it's a huge financial debt and it's a huge time commitment and commitment of personnel. It's impossible to put the time, money, energy, passion, and the commitment into it that we have and not have it work."

Then he breaks into his huge laser-white grin. "Impossible! Impossible!" ▲

Mpls.St.Paul associate editor Steve Marsh helped write the "Hipster Handbook" in the February issue.