

**In Business. In Life.**  
NOV/DEC 2006

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Steven Schussler enjoys success the second time around.



# Top OF THE FOOD CHAIN

Once a budding entrepreneur recovering from Chapter 7, **Steven Schussler** has built a restaurant empire worthy of legend.

**BY PATRICK SAUER PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK LUINENBURG**

A MAGAZINE WITH A HISTORY LIKE *SUCCESS* KNOWS A THING OR TWO about comebacks. So we can appreciate the trajectory of Steven Schussler, who we first profiled 19 years ago in our "Great Comebacks" article. Back then, Schussler had just recovered from his first business going under. Although it was difficult, he remains proud of the way he handled it. "It was embarrassing, but I paid off all my creditors and never filed for personal bankruptcy because I wanted to keep my name intact," says Schussler. "I picked myself up and kept going." Today, Schussler's entrepreneurial undertakings have multiplied, and he's achieved more than he ever thought possible. But he hasn't forgotten those early lessons. "Life comes full circle," he says, "so treat everyone right on the way up."





## THE STORY

When we first met **Steven Schussler** in 1987, he was the brash, exuberant, 32-year-old owner of **Jukebox Saturday Night**, a chain of 1950s-style nightclubs. The former television-advertising salesman had bounced back from a Chapter 7 filing (a 1950s-nostalgia retail store he started had gone belly up) that found him living with his English sheepdog—who had recently attacked him—in a 9 by 12-foot office above a honky-tonk bar. Jukebox Saturday Night was Schussler's first taste of success in the themed restaurant game, and at the venture's height, there were eight locations grossing roughly \$20 million. After seven years, though, the Eisenhower-era novelty wore off, as did Schussler's tolerance for the late nights and liability issues, so he shifted his focus to family eateries—and tropical birds.

## THE COMEBACK

In 1994, Schussler opened the first **Rainforest Café** in the Mall of America. He says he couldn't believe that no restaurateur had thought to exploit the rainforest concept before then. "A local air-conditioning contractor and I invented a ventilation system that collected dander out of the air so we could feature birds," he explains. "We had to have the realism." The café's popular mix of education, entertainment, and Caribbean coconut shrimp caught the attention of Wall Street. Even though the Minnesota location was the only one up and running, the company completed its **initial public offering** in April 1995.

Going public gave Schussler the capital he needed to grow, but he soured on meeting the demands of the Street. Rapid expansion (45 stores in seven years) and revenue demands eventually trumped his belief in enhancing the Rainforest Café experience, so in 2000, he sold the company to **Landry's Restaurants** for upwards of \$100 million. Schussler says the four-hour lines should've mattered more than same-store increases. The experience cemented his belief that his strength was research and development and that operations were best left to the experts. He took a chunk of his savings and sale money and put it into **Schussler Creative**, a workshop he established that brings together painters, designers, carpenters, and other craftspeople, all in the name of bringing his dreams to life. "Creating attractions is what we do," says Schussler. "I'm like the Nutty Professor in a white lab coat and crazy glasses, having fun."

In 1996, the prehistoric world caught Schussler's imagination. He went full throttle developing **T-Rex Café**, an interactive restaurant filled with animatronic dinosaurs, a Paleo Zone, and dining rooms designed around

water, fire, and ice. "I believed museums had become ugly boneyards that weren't three-dimensional," he says. Schussler and his team—which included in-house artisans—**spent five years and \$15 million** working on the concept without earning a dime. But Schussler was okay with that; he spares no expense in bringing his visions to fruition. Schussler Creative starts by writing extensive treatments, histories, and character bios before construction commences. And it doesn't build scale models: The company has a lab where its full-size triceratopses and cascading waterfalls were first created. Schussler also utilized the recommendations of his focus groups, ages 2 to 15, and even hired a kindergartener to draw dinosaurs that were printed on some of the souvenir T-shirts.

After an aggressive pitch from a group of Kansas City-area government officials, Schussler agreed to open the first 20,000 square-foot T-Rex in a suburban development. T-Rex became an anchor tenant last summer alongside the **Warren Buffet**-owned **Nebraska Furniture Mart** and the **Kansas Speedway**, which is supposed to bring in 200,000 people a year for **Nascar** races and other events. Schussler expects a high number of guests will visit the establishment, where they can enjoy Dino-Tinis (complete with dry ice and a commemorative glass for \$9.99) and Mes-O-Bones baby back ribs, while the kids excavate fossils in the Discovery Dig sand pit.

Serving many visitors would certainly please Landry's, the majority owners of T-Rex. For Schussler, though, success comes with the process of trying new things and taking on new challenges. "There's nothing more exciting to me than allowing the creative juices to work and bringing my dreams to reality," he says. "And there's nothing more rewarding than to overhear a family awed by the experience."

## THE COMEBACK TRAIL

1979: Opens Jukebox Saturday Night in Minneapolis



1987: Success profiles Schussler in its "Great Comebacks" article



1980

1985

1990

1978: Schussler opens a 1950s Nostalgia Retail Store

\*1980: Schussler files for Chapter 7 for his Nostalgia Retail Store

1987: Schussler is attacked by his English Sheepdog





## THE FUTURE

The clincher for opening T-Rex in Kansas City was that it's where Schussler's hero, **Walt Disney**, founded his first animated film company.

**Laugh-O-Grams.** Schussler takes great pride in the fact that the Rainforest Café was the only restaurant to have opened in every Disney theme park. In July 2007, a Himalayan village-themed eatery, **Yak & Yeti**, will open in **Disney's Animal Kingdom** in Orlando, Florida. It's one of a number of projects under way at Schussler Creative. Others include **Aero Bleu**, an art deco jazz nightclub in Las Vegas that will have a saxophone player blowing his horn from a DC-3 airplane hovering over the audience, and the **Hot Dog Hall of Fame**, an ode to all things wiener that will be licensed to stadiums, casinos, airports, and other operations. (It will offer "a hundred kinds of mustards, ketchups, and relishes!" Schussler says with the excitement usually reserved for lottery winners.)

Schussler loves the creative process so much that he's flexible on business models, just so long as his reveries come to life. He's open to ideas from anyone and anywhere and has built a culture that keeps the creative juices flowing companywide—the wackier the idea, the better. After all, the **Magio Kingdom** was born out of one entrepreneur's wild imagination. "I'm following in Walt Disney's footsteps," Schussler beams. "How cool is that?"

■ Read more Comebacks in the next issue of Success.



■ The bar at T-Rex.



■ A Pterodactyl's-eye view of the T-Rex Café.



■ Elephants graze at the Rainforest Café.



■ A family grazes at the Rainforest Café.



■ Three more Schussler Creative projects in production

"There's nothing more exciting to me than allowing the creative juices to work and bring my dreams to reality. And there's nothing more rewarding than to overhear a family awed by the experience." **Steven Schussler**



**1994:** Schussler opens the first Rainforest Café in Minneapolis' Mall of America

**1996:** Schussler & company go full-throttle developing the T-Rex Café concept, which premieres in Kansas City



**2000**

**2000:** He sells the Rainforest Cafés to Houston-based Landry's Restaurants, Inc.

**2007:** Schussler plans to open his Himalayan village-themed eatery, Yak & Yeti, at Disney's Animal Kingdom in Orlando

**2005**

