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Themed Restaurants: Chad Emerson Interviews Steve Schussler

Steven Schussler (*right*), Chairman of the Board of **Schussler Creative, Inc.**, is master of themed restaurant development and probably be known as the founder and creator of Rainforest Café. He has also created Yak & Yeti at Disney's Animal Kingdom, and T-Rex Café in Downtown Disney. Schussler also created and opened the first Betty & Joe's, Baker and Coffee Maker, and Hot Dog Hall of Fame in Wilkes-Barre, PA. When developing a themed restaurant concept, Schussler oversees all creative development, as well as the design and construction at each location. He is also responsible for all real estate transactions, public relations, and marketing.

Blooloop's **Chad Emerson** recently interviewed Schussler about his unique career and some details of T-Rex.

Q: Tell us about how you got started partnering with theme park companies and your restaurant concepts.

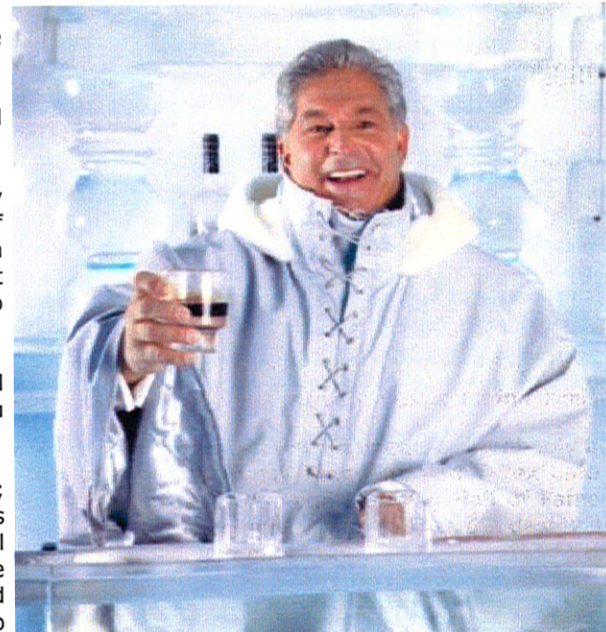
A: I've been in love with Disney since I was a kid. Walt is my hero. I approached Disney regarding Rainforest Café and they gave me this fantastic opportunity to take over Chef Mickey's Diner in Downtown Disney. They visited our Rainforest Café at Mall of America, in Bloomington, Minnesota and learned that it was "A Wild Place to Shop and Eat" and thought it would be a great addition to Walt Disney World Parks. We're lucky and fortunate enough to have built a Rainforest Café at every Disney Park in the world.

Q: You recently opened a prehistoric-themed restaurant at Walt Disney World known as T-Rex. Tell us about some of the back-of-house innovations that you incorporated into this restaurant.

A: First of all the tile in the kitchen is slip-resistant. We often look for new technologies; we are always working for ways to prevent slips and falls, and are always very conscious about matters of safety. Our Back of House (BOH) at T-Rex Walt Disney World is like a small city; with dry storage for the restaurant, retail storage for retail, coolers, freezers, ice machines, manager's office, chef's office, break room, utility room, special effects room, and more. BOH is as important as the Front of House and operationally, we would not be able to perform without constantly thinking of new ways to operate a BOH more efficiently and efficiently.

Q: What are some of the creative and theming innovations that you incorporated into T-Rex?

A: Our Ice Cave is an incredible accomplishment with a special fabricated and trademarked process to create acrylic ice panels, special LED light effects and of course an incredible meteorite shower incorporating new audio and visual technologies, laser lights, and a mixed media, are all new at



innovative. We have 23 animatronic dinosaurs, a 40-foot-long octopus with eight animated tentacles creating an underwater canopy, and many different kinds of custom theatrical lighting effects including our world famous jellyfish booth, which incorporates fiberoptic lighting. In our bathrooms, you'll find fossils on the walls that are tens of millions of years old. We creatively educate and entertain.

Q: What advice can you give to restaurateurs who are considering working with amusement industry companies?

A: Make sure you have a big enough budget, a creative enough team, and an appetite to take on what's never been done before. Make certain that you're willing to be more creative and passionate than they are. Always take the high road, and respect work and learn from what their creatives have to say about how they can compliment and work with your team.

Q: Looking back at this T-Rex location, what do you consider to be its "signature" features?

A: Without a doubt the Ice Cave is simply magnificent. T-Rex will probably be one of the most photographed areas in Walt Disney World, with the World's largest Dinosaur, at 125 feet long, and a replica of the original Argentinosaurus, from a museum in Argentina. This dinosaur is considered to be the largest dinosaur in the world, as well as our Paleo Zone, Dino Dig area and Build-A-Dino by Build-A-Bear which are all featured signature items that we are certainly proud of.

To see all Chad Emerson's interviews and articles for Blooloop, click [here](#).

Image: *Steve Schussler raises a toast in the Ice Cave at T-Rex*

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