

STEVE SCHUSSLER: Passion personified

VARIETY



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variety

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Steve Schussler can sell just about anything, including the notion that his adopted state is the perfect place for him.

A mouthful of Minnesota

By JEFF STRICKLER • jstrickler@startribune.com

Steve Schussler has orchestrated some pretty impressive conversions since he jammed the front end of a 1957 Chevy above the front door of a Minneapolis nightclub 27 years ago.

He has turned a concrete bunker at the Mall of America into a rain forest, is putting a 1940s jazz hall inside a Las Vegas casino and is working on a plan to adapt a historic barn in Eden Prairie into a circus motif.

His most amazing conversion, however, might be his own: The flamboyant New York City native has managed to merge his over-the-top exuberance with Minnesota's penchant for plaid shirts and green Jell-O.

"Minnesota has become embedded in my soul," said Schussler, 55, who first came to the Twin Cities to open Juke Box Saturday Night in downtown Minneapolis. "I consider myself a Minnesotan."

But traces of his East Coast origins are still apparent. When he speaks, the words come exploding out as if he's afraid the world is going to end before he finishes his thought. And he talks as much with his hands as he does with his mouth. But none of that seems quite so

alien when he's singing the praises of his adopted home.

"I love this place," he said. "I love that there are more boats per capita here than in Miami. Here! A place where the lakes are frozen five months of the year. ... I love the people here; they're so friendly."

"OK, when I first arrived, some of them thought I was in the Mafia, but now they're friendly."

That self-inflicted putdown might be the definitive proof that he really is a Minnesotan. It's also one of the reasons he has so few public detractors: It's hard to make fun of someone who has stolen your punch line.

Yes, he's a master at self-promotion: A classic story is when he donned a Superman costume, climbed into a barrel and had friends deliver him to the manager's office at a radio station to try to land a job as a sales rep.

Schussler continues on E2 ►

GETTING PERSONAL

Q. What book are you currently reading (other than your own)?

A. The latest Harvey Mackay book, "Use Your Head to Get Your Foot in the Door."

Q. What's your favorite TV show?

A. "CSI."

Q. Favorite movie?

A. "West Side Story."

Q. Favorite food?

A. Italian food and sushi.

Q. Favorite type of music and/or performer?

A. I have varied musical tastes from Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra and Louie Armstrong to Del Amitri and Jack Johnson.

Q. Do you have a pet?

A. Lucy is a 3-year-old white Lab and she is the greatest dog on Earth!

Q. How many hours of sleep do you average a night?

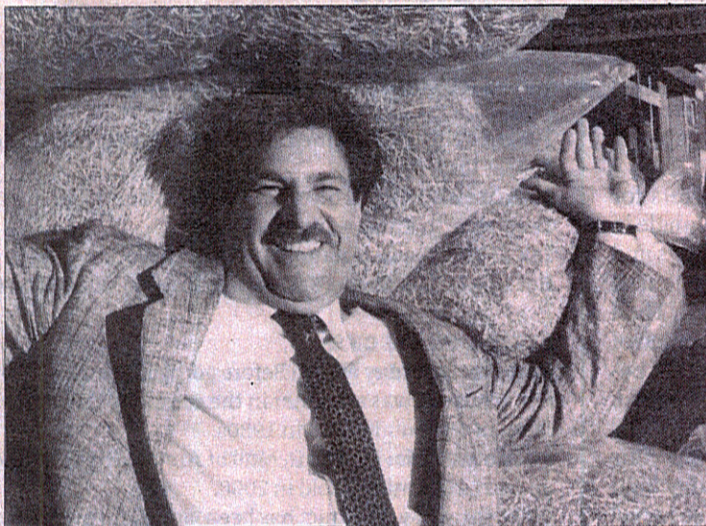
A. Five.

Q. What do you do to relax?

A. I like to mountain bike, play tennis and go motorcycle riding.

Q. What is something people don't know about you?

A. I love the game of chess and I collect chess sets. I love the architecture and design of all different types of chess sets.

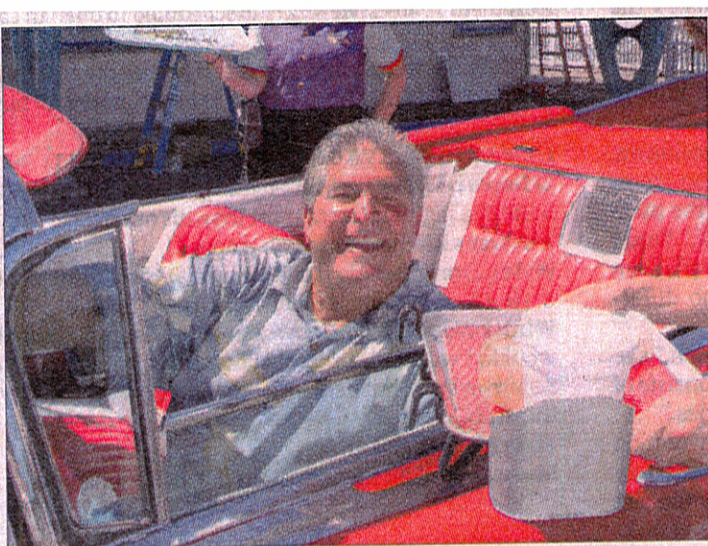


Steve Schussler came to Minnesota to open Juke Box Saturday Night.

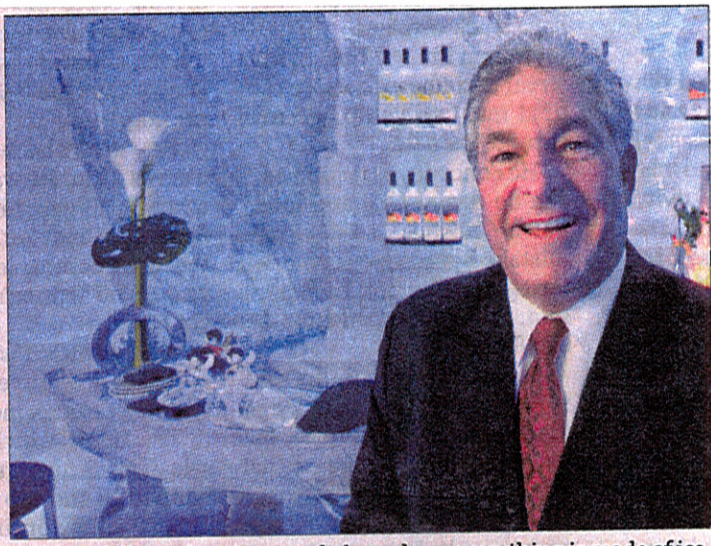


At the Rainforest Cafe in 1987.

STAR TRIBUNE FILE PHOTOS



Schussler celebrated the 2009 opening of the Galaxy Drive-In.



He has a full-sized prototype of a bar where everything is made of ice.

A mouthful of Minnesota

◀ SCHUSSLER FROM E1

But he even mines that story for self-deprecatory laughs, noting that he made the combined mistakes of not drilling enough air holes and of bringing a soft drink and sandwich with him.

"As the lid slid away from the barrel, I came flying out like a jack-in-the-box, gasping for air and wiping Coke and salami from my eyes," he recalled. "The stench from the barrel filled the room."

He also is forgiven some of his brashness because of his background. He grew up in a rough area of Far Rockaway in Queens, where swagger was a survival mechanism. The instincts he developed there have stuck with him.

"When I'm walking down a street and I hear footsteps behind me, I still stop and turn around," he said.

He concedes that at times "I can be demanding and loud," but he bristles at those who mistake his competitive drive for ego fulfillment. In fact, he said, he hasn't heard from his ego for years.

"I have no ego left," he said. "I lost it long ago. I've failed so many times I've lost track. But by doing that, I learned that ego is the single biggest career killer. Now I surround myself with people better than me. You have to put your ego aside and do what makes sense."

Passion with capital P

Becoming a Minnesotan didn't come easy. "When I left New York, I spent a year losing my accent," he said. "I practiced every day in front of a mirror until it was completely gone."

He's sharing his secrets for success in a book, "It's Jungle in There: Hard-Won Insights and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring" (Sterling, \$19.95). Then again, there really isn't much of a secret to his approach. It begins and ends with one word: passion.

"I'm not talking about your run-of-the-mill, everyday kind of desires that all people have," he wrote. "Those yearnings don't rise to the level of the driving force that shapes the way people live their lives. I'm talking about the 'give me liberty or give me death' kind of passion."

He's always been passionate, even as a kid. He was so intent that his pals gave him the nickname of "Heart Attack." Sunhi Ryan, his companion of seven years, said that he's no different now.

"He has no 'off' switch," she said. "His downtime consists of sleeping through movies."

The book, which went on sale Oct. 5 and immediately jumped to the top of the list of best-selling business books at both Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com, begins with a quote from T.S. Eliot that has become Schussler's credo: "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go."

He's gone broke, and he's gone big-time. Before he launched Rainforest Cafe, he had his heat turned off so many times that he figured out a way to jerry-rig a bypass around the gas meter. When he sold the restaurant chain for \$75 million, he collected an estimated \$3 million for the stock he personally held plus another \$400,000 in severance pay as the company's senior vice president.

A singular vision

If there's something that frustrates Schussler, it's that people have trouble seeing the grandiose scope of the visions he has in his head. He tried to describe what he had in mind for the Rainforest Cafe, but when no one got it, he got desperate. He converted his home into what you see in the Mall of

A FULL PLATE

STEVE SCHUSSLER'S RESTAURANTS:

Galaxy Drive-In: "Retrofuturistic" 1950s drive-in in St. Louis Park.

T-Rex: Prehistoric-themed eateries in Disney World and Kansas City.

Backfire BBQ: Based on cable TV reality show "American Choppers," in Kansas City.

Yak & Yeti: Asian restaurant in Disney World.

Hot Dog Hall of Fame: Self-explanatory, in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

OTHER PROJECTS:

Juke Box Saturday Night: Before going into business by himself, Schussler was a partner in the company that launched the chain of retro nightclubs in 1980s.

Rainforest Cafe: Started in Mall of America in 1994 and ended up with 45 locations; sold in 2000.

Mahogany Bay: Contract has been signed for a speedboat-themed restaurant in Disney World, although the name is likely to change.

Aerobluu: 1940s-style jazz club scheduled to open in Las Vegas next year.

A still-to-be-named circus project is tabbed for a historic barn in Eden Prairie that his company is in the process of buying.

IN VARIOUS STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT:

Zi Imperial Kitchen: Ming-dynasty theme, envisioned as more of a high-end restaurant than his others.

Sorcerer's Kitchen: Based on magic.

Water, Fire & Ice: Also called the Polar Ultra Lounge, it's a bar in which everything is made from ice.

Winter Wonderland: Snow-themed restaurant "probably wouldn't work in Minnesota because we have enough of that," Schussler said, "but people in other parts of the country love this stuff."

Pizza Market: Italian.

Musical Garden: Vignette merging music and food.

America eatery: huge tanks of exotic fish, jungle foliage and even a live baboon (although that turned out to be not such a good idea).

"I didn't want to do that," he said of the in-home demonstration, which cost him \$400,000 to set up and another \$300,000 to take down, including replacing nearly every piece of wallboard in the house after it was destroyed by the heat and humidity. "But I needed some way to show people what was in my head. I needed to take a vignette and turn it into reality."

He persuaded a local venture capitalist, Lyle Berman, to help him raise funds to launch the cafe. But it took 20 visits over two years for Berman to finally join the cause. These days, Schussler is dealing with mega-financiers, including a \$100 million deal he struck in 2007 with RED Development, a shopping center firm that wants to include his restaurants in their malls.

Although he no longer builds prototypes in his home,

that's the way he still works. Schussler Creative Inc. has warehouses in Golden Valley and St. Louis Park that hold full-sized mock-ups of restaurants he wants to build. The rooms serve three purposes: They can be used to drum up financial support from potential investors, they're real-life demos for places that might want to put in one of the restaurants (Disney World just signed a contract for a speedboat-themed eatery, its third Schussler project), and they offer him a chance to keep tinkering with the rooms until they're exactly the way he wants them.

"The R&D [research and development] never stops," he said. "I'm not willing to settle for good; I want the best. I don't want anyone to ever say, 'This is nice but I could have done it better.' No. When my team and I get done, we want to say, 'No one could have done a better job.'"

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