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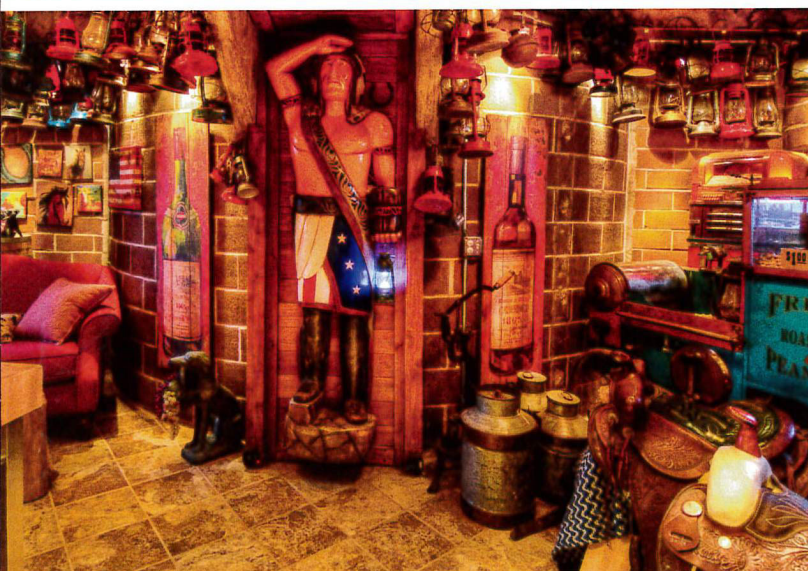
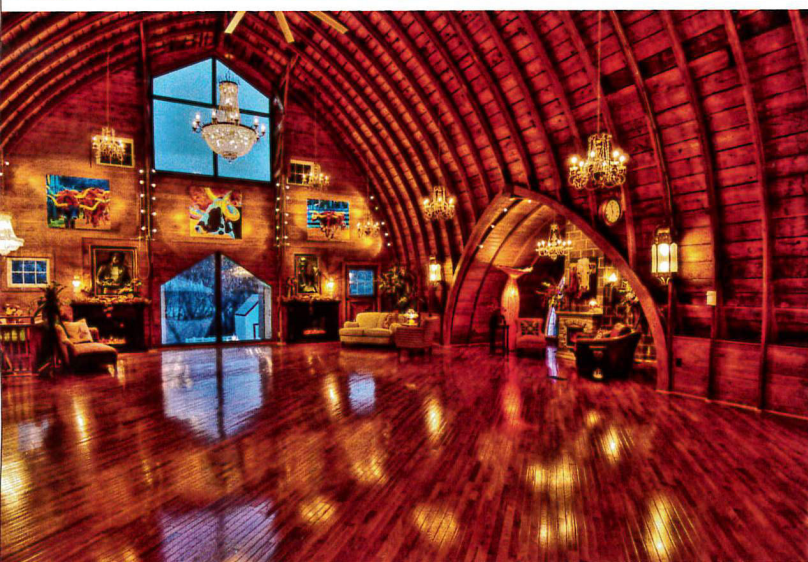
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Greener Pastures

Entrepreneur Steve Schussler transforms a historic Eden Prairie barn into an eclectic event center.

BY IVY GRACIE

Steve Schussler has built a career — and an empire — out of bringing the fun. From his concept restaurants (Jukebox Saturday Night, Rainforest Cafe, Galaxy Drive-in and a host of others) to his branding partnerships with Disney and Build-A-Bear, he's amassed a fortune by blending kitsch and kitchens, revelry with retail. None of his ventures take themselves too seriously (in spite of the profit they generate), and they're all focused on one thing: fun.

About three years ago, Schussler bought the historic Goodrich-Ramus barn on Pioneer Trail in Eden Prairie with the plan to use it for storage. And even though he had lowly plans for the property, he decided to have some fun. Schussler put up a white-picket fence and placed a herd of fake cows in the field. "I did it to make people smile," he recalls. He didn't count on the response his pasture-scaping efforts would generate, nor did he think he'd be starting another business.

"We started getting letters and emails saying, 'Thank you for the cows, thank you for making us smile and laugh on the way to work. Can my daughter have a wedding there? Can my son have a bar mitzvah there?'" Schussler recounts. "I realized we should be sharing this with the community."

But actualizing what seemed like a simple idea became a complex process. Because the barn is considered a historic property, there were red tape and bureaucracy to weed through. "They made me sign covenants that said we would never do anything with the barn," Schussler says. "I had to go through 19 government agencies to make it work. And when we went to the city fathers and asked them to let us turn this into an event center, they said it wasn't zoned for that. So we had to turn that around. It cost us a fortune in time and materials. It wasn't easy."

After the legalities were finalized, Schussler and his team transformed the rundown barn into an event destination and dubbed it Green Acres. And now, just like the cows standing guard outside, the interior reflects Schussler's quirky, almost cockamamie wink-and-a-smile aesthetic. Oil paintings of Texas longhorns in vibrant colors hang on the lofty walls of the voluminous second floor, while large crystal chandeliers dangle from the arched ceiling. On the main floor, a cigar store Indian guards the entrance to the silo-turned-wine cellar. Throughout the property are devilish details that evoke smiles and giggles.

"It's barn meets bling," Schussler laughs. And apparently the joke has widespread appeal: Green Acres is quickly turning into a hot spot for weddings, birthday parties, reunions, bar and bat mitzvahs, and corporate events. And nothing could make Schussler happier.

"It's time to share it," he declares. "It's exciting to save something; it's exhilarating to restore and bring back to life something that was dead, ended and over. And Eden Prairie didn't have an event center, so to be able to save this barn for Eden Prairie — that touches me." **AL**

farm fun Creating a gathering space for all to enjoy, Steve Schussler conceived an eclectic atmosphere for the barn-turned-event center.