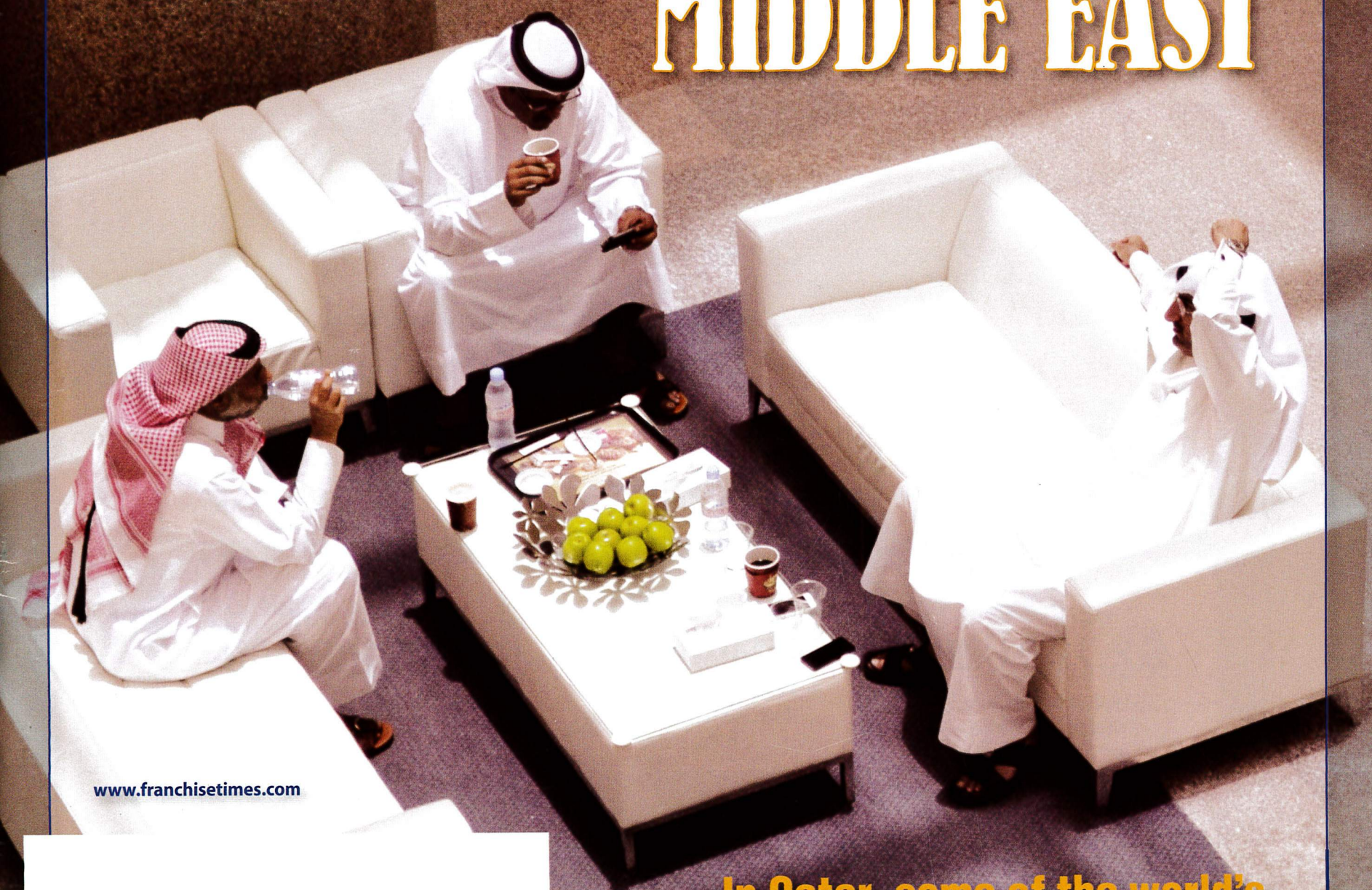


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FRANCHISING'S WELL-OILED MACHINE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST



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In Qatar, some of the world's wealthiest men give a whole new meaning to hanging out at the mall

New Themes

'Barn meets bling' is latest concept for restaurant impresario

Chandeliers hanging from the rafters? Plastic cows wearing business suits? It's par for the course for the creator of Rainforest Café and T-Rex, who now is working on two new concepts that he plans to franchise.

By Beth Ewen

The man who thinks every restaurant needs rumbling thunderstorms or roaring dinosaurs has created two new concepts—and for the first time in his career, he's preparing to franchise them.

Steve Schussler is the man, so obsessed with creating the Rainforest Café that he spent years tending a tropical jungle complete with exotic birds in his suburban Minneapolis home. He once endured a police raid when neighbors wondered exactly what he was growing.

"We can't be like everyone else," Schussler says with a giant grin and his perennial tan, seated in a bright-red vintage convertible outside his latest venture—a barn, yes, but not the kind familiar to any farm kid. "I love the smell of horse manure," this native New Yorker says, even though there's no such smell here because there are no real animals.

After years and years of trying, Rainforest Café is now owned by Landry's and has 300 locations where the thunder rolls every few minutes under a tropical canopy. At T-Rex, his other national chain that attracted a majority investment from Landry's, animatronic beasts from the Jurassic era spin and snarl.

Channeling James Bond

His two new concepts are distinctive if not so heavily themed, and each has elements that are signature Schussler—like a cigar-store Indian that he had rigged to rise and reveal a wine cellar. "I love those James Bond movies with the hidden doors," Schussler says.

The first is Green Acres Event Center, housed in a historic barn in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, which Schussler saved from demolition. He wanted the building so badly he kept raising his offer in the sealed-bid process, only to learn that he outbid himself three times. The only bidder, he won it for \$82,000, then spent \$1.5 million—so far—for renovations.

"Barn meets bling is how one bride described it," Schussler says, then he adds his own characteristically passionate take before starting the



Steve Schussler spent \$1.5 million to turn this Minnesota barn into Green Acres Event Center. "I became addicted," he says. "It's easy to fall in love with the place."

tour. "Oh my God. Oh my God. You're gonna die!" A long row of fiberglass cows leads up to the barn, one wearing New York Yankees garb because that's where Schussler grew up, another sporting a jacket and tie—an unusual look for a cow.

He originally bought the barn to store his many vintage motorcycles and cars, and his many statues and props under development by his firm, Schussler Creative, which he calls a "creative laboratory" for restaurant concepts. But then the neighbors started sending him letters, saying those cows made them smile, and thanking him for saving the barn. He decided to refurbish the barn for an event center so the public could use it, for bar mitzvahs or weddings.

He installed enormous chandeliers in the wooden barn, antique jukeboxes, LED lights outside that can flicker red or green or blue, a John Deere tractor purchased at the Minnesota State Fair—and Paul Dzubnar, CEO of the Green Mill and Crooked Pint franchised restaurant chains, to provide catering services and run day-to-day operations.

Dzubnar's background in franchising got Schussler thinking about the business model for the first time. When Schussler learned there are "hundreds and hundreds" of empty barns around the country, he decided to roll

out Green Acres. The idea is to purchase those barns and move them if necessary, then turn them into event centers.

Somewhere out in the Galaxy

His second concept is Galaxy Drive-In, a declining, single restaurant Schussler saw every day, across the street from his office. He bought it, tricked it out with s'mores pits and more, and started offering free ice-cream cones to dogs. After a couple of years of modest success, he again turned to Dzubnar to make the restaurant work.

Dzubnar and his team visited all the diners within driving distance, one time ordering every single item on the menu to test the competition. "We overwhelmed their kitchen, but I learned everything about their food," he says.

They went door-to-door in the neighborhood, asking what people liked and disliked about the diner. (The answer: They disliked the food and the prices, they liked the ambience.) Dzubnar and Schussler talk every morning at 8:30, Dzubnar says, one recent day discussing every aspect of their ice cream for almost an hour.

Schussler believes both concepts are ready to franchise, yet he's never started a franchise system before, not to mention operated one. Colleagues believe Dzubnar will likely play a



role, although Dzubnar says they've had only "loose" discussions about that. Schussler's long-time attorney, Doug Holod of Maslon law firm in Minneapolis, is drawing up the documents now, Schussler says, with the goal to start granting franchises later this fall.

Also daunting are the concepts themselves. Green Acres involves finding a barn and converting it. Enough said. Galaxy Drive-In is a

drive-in, and drive-ins have risen and fallen before. Then there are themed businesses themselves, notoriously faddish.

On the other hand, Schussler raised \$100 million from investors to build T-Rex, restaurants that feature enormous robotic dinosaurs, gnashing their teeth. A barn with bling? Could be easy. **FT**

Steve Schussler, above, founder of Rainforest Cafe and T-Rex restaurants, outbid himself three times to buy his historic barn. What did he think when he learned he was the only bidder? "It made me think I see things differently than other people," he says. Above left, Galaxy Drive-In is one of two concepts he's planning to roll out nationally.

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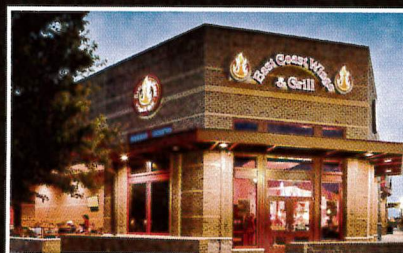
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