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Notes from the Deep End of the Restaurant Business

BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER

TILMAN FERITTA IS CHAIRMAN, CEO and president of Landry's Restaurants Inc. Undaunted by the flood of new restaurants entering the dining marketplace, Landry's Restaurants, recently acquired Oceanaire and also owns and operates Rainforest Cafe, Landry's Seafood House, Willie G's Seafood & Steak House, The Crab House and more. Here's Feritta's take on the restaurant business and the turning economic tide.

SS: You acquired Rainforest Cafe, a Minnesota-born restaurant chain in 2000, and now 10 years later you've acquired the Oceanaire chain. **TF:** Rainforest Cafe is an iconic restaurant and caters to the masses. Its mass appeal is the reason for its success. Oceanaire is another great Minnesota brand that we have acquired. Because they serve fresh fish flown in daily at the restaurant, the price point caters more to high-end business travelers. Due to the economy in 2008 and 2009, Oceanaire encountered some financial difficulties which allowed us to step in and acquire the concept.

SS: I understand that you come from humble beginnings; can you share some of the struggles you had along the way? **TF:** In the '80s, all of the banks in Texas failed and as a result, my bank failed to make good on a loan in the middle of a restaurant project. I had to use all of my credit cards in order to buy equipment to complete the restaurant construction.

SS: What are some of the biggest sacrifices that you endured while growing Landry's into the successful business it has become? **TF:** Time away from my family. I have four children and a wonderful wife and my work schedule does not allow me to spend as much time as I would like with them.

SS: Have you ever put everything on the line? **TF:** It took all the money I had to acquire Landry's. It was certainly scary; however, through hard work and some lucky breaks, I was able to open some additional restaurant locations and the rest is history.



SS: Talk about your biggest business mistake. **TF:** When we first became a public company, there was tremendous pressure to open restaurants. As a result, too many restaurants were opened in different geographic markets and were difficult to manage. In our business, slower controlled growth is what you have to do.

SS: We understand you're trying to take your company private again. Why? **TF:** Landry's consists of many different brands. We are more of a cash-flow story than a growth company and are therefore better off being private than public. Nothing will change, whether we stay a public company or go private.

SS: Who continues to inspire you in business and in your personal life? **TF:** My wife Paige. Although she is not involved in the business whatsoever, I can ask her any question about the business and her ability to comprehend and provide an answer based on her tastes and instincts is second to none. What she has done to raise and instill values in our children is far greater than anything I have accomplished in business.

SS: Part of being a good entrepreneur is giving back. What are some of the philanthropic goals and initiatives that you are involved in? **TF:** You are 100 percent correct; giving back is so important, especially when you have been as fortunate as I have financially. Children's charities, the police foundation, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, the cancer and heart societies require a lot of my time. All charities are equally important to me.

SS: What words of advice do you have to offer? **TF:** Never say you can't. Never let someone tell you you can't. Follow your dreams. If you stumble, remember that you haven't failed, just that you have hit a dip in the road, get back up, think why you stumbled and get back in the game. Remember, if you don't play, you can never win.

« Steven Schussler (steven@schusslercreative.com) is the founder, chairman and CEO of Schussler Creative, Inc., which specializes in creating, designing and developing theatrical attractions, restaurants, retail stores and entertainment venues worldwide. He is also the author of the upcoming book, *It's a Jungle in There—Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights, and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring*—to be released in September by Sterling Publishing.