

St. Louis Park

OUR COMMUNITY / OUR MAGAZINE



Restaurants:
Spice It Up
in SLP

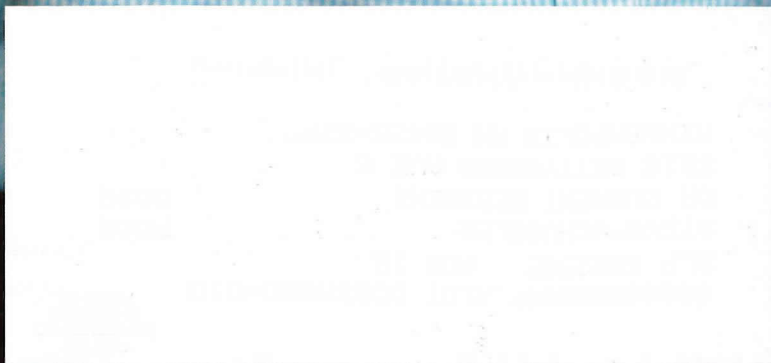
A World of
Fascinating
Finds at Ciel

Maggie's Farm
Theater ***Cultivates***
Creativity

Local Foodies
Dish ***Healthy***
Cooking Tips

Being **Steve** **Schussler**

How his eccentric ways made him a local legend





Steve Schussler's St. Louis Park backyard hosts large statues including, but not limited to, Humpty Dumpty, a life-size dog and an oversize chess set.



THE WORLD

ACCORDING TO STEVE SCHUSSLER

PEELING BACK THE MANY LAYERS OF ST. LOUIS PARK'S
GREGARIOUS RESTAURATEUR, AUTHOR AND PHILANTHROPIST.

Steve Schussler, wearing a loose purple polo shirt under a tan suit jacket, sits in a big chair behind a long desk, with a computer and phone. Photos of the gray-haired man with dignitaries like Muhammad Ali line the walls of his corner office. Before embarking on the entrepreneurial tales of Schussler Creative Inc., he says he doesn't want to be rude if distractions arise during our interview.

"I'm in the middle of three to four other projects," he says. "They aren't more important than you, but they might interest you."

These are just some of the layers of Schussler, the St. Louis Park creator of mega-hit restaurants such as Rainforest Café and T-Rex Café, as well as his newer and smaller hometown hangout, Galaxy Drive-In on Highway 7.

In the lobby, I was handed an itinerary titled "Schussler Creative Laboratory Tour." Beside Rainforest Café, Schussler and his team have concocted more

than 10 other creative cuisine concepts, some with elaborate models inside his 10,000-square-foot office/warehouse in Golden Valley. Schussler was also handed an itinerary, with each restaurant concept's logo in black-and-white.

Schussler begins with a story about

**"I LIKE TO DO THINGS A
LITTLE DIFFERENTLY
THAN OTHER PEOPLE DO THEM."**

—STEVE SCHUSSLER

one of his first bold actions. At age 18, he moved from his childhood home of New York to Miami. He went to school to be in broadcasting, but climbed phone poles for Southern Bell Telephone company, trying to ascend other career ladders. He interviewed for sales jobs at radio and TV stations, but wasn't hired. To finally get in the door, Schussler rented

a Superman costume, had a crate made that he could squeeze into and hired two off-duty police officers to take him to the office of a radio station's general manager, with whom he had interviewed twice. With the manager in the lobby, Schussler sprang from the crate and says, "Hello everybody, my name is Steve Schussler! I'm your new super salesman!"

"They said, 'Son, you are the sickest person we've every seen. You're hired,'" Schussler recalls with a grin.

As he tells the story, Schussler has the itinerary in his hand. He sets it down, pushing a pager button to reach his office manager, Heather Hanson. "Heather, can you come in here, please?" he says before releasing the button. "All of this should be in color, right?" he says to me.

"It's OK," I reply. "No, it's not," Schussler says, as Hanson walks in.

"This should all be in color, right?"

BY ANDY GREDER
PHOTOS BY TATE CARLSON



Steve Schussler with fiancée Sunhi Ryan and their dog, Lucy, in their St. Louis Park backyard.

**"I STILL HAVE THE SAME ADDRESS.
I DIDN'T MOVE AND PUT MY NOSE UP IN THE AIR.
I'M PRETTY PROUD OF THAT."** —STEVE SCHUSSLER

Schussler says as he pointed to the logos. "You know me." She nods.

"Thank you so much," he says cordially.

"I like to tell it like it is; that's really important," Schussler tells me as Hanson exits. "I like to do things a little differently than other people do them." Within seconds, Hanson dutifully returns with new color copies, and again, Schussler is gracious.

Schussler opened the Juke Box Saturday Night club in downtown Minneapolis in 1984. He calls it "a loving place," with a 3D sculpture of King Kong and unique marketing events. But in 1991, the business went bankrupt and Schussler retreated to his home in St. Louis Park, where he has lived for 28 years.

From his unassuming split-level house, Schussler formulated his next venture. He asked friends about a restaurant featuring live tropical birds in a rainforest-type setting, with a canopy, waterfalls and animatronic alligators and monkeys.

"I like to design by layering," he says. "People would look at me, and they would say, 'Steve, it's a great idea.' [Then] you would see their eyes roll in the back of their head, and they would say, 'Call us when you're open.'"

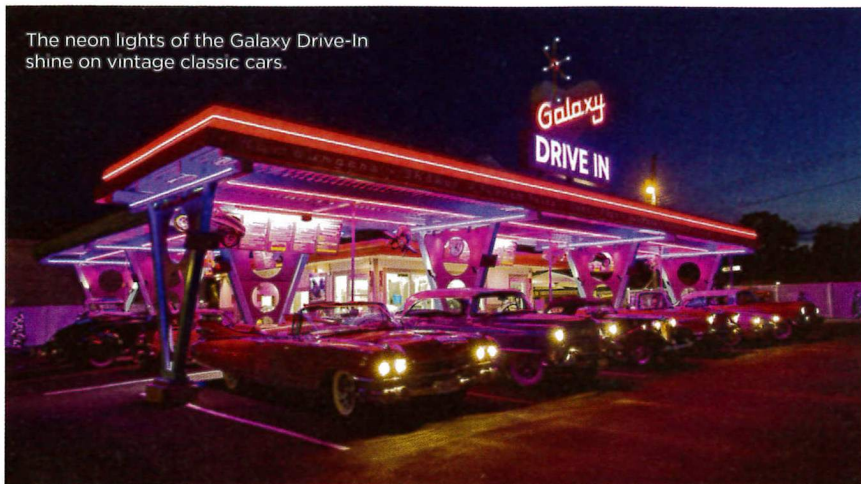
Schussler started the layers by painting his home's ceiling black, in preparation for his greenery treatment. He did it at home because after Juke Box closed he had no other location, and he also "wanted to show investors that I had skin in the game."

After spending a reported \$400,000 to remake the house, Schussler says he welcomed investors past his 12-foot neon "Paradise" sign out front and into his jungle home. Some weeknights, 30 to 40 cars lined the residential streets.

While his bed looked like it was suspended in a tree with a waterfall behind it, he felt like he was hanging from reality and drowning in doubt.

"There was a time when [Juke Box] was failing, and my friends were abandoning me in droves," Schussler wrote in his book, *It's a Jungle in There*, published in 2010. "Then there were the years I couldn't find an investor for my Rainforest Café concept, and I didn't have enough money to pay the gas bill. There were even the moments when people said

The neon lights of the Galaxy Drive-In shine on vintage classic cars.



I was crazy to pursue my dreams, and I'd look in the mirror and wonder if they were right. These were bad times, really bad times. I was physically and psychologically decimated. I was financially crushed."

Schussler's neighbors describe him as eccentric, fun-loving and someone who's built community by inviting the neighborhood to his investment tours. Hillary and Dan Feder live a few doors from Schussler with their children, Joel and Hannah, who were about 5 and 7 years old at the time. The kids were "unbelievably enchanted" with Schussler, she says. "He really welcomed you in."

The Drug Enforcement Agency hadn't been invited, however, when they arrived one night at 3 a.m., tipped by an energy drain caused by 3,700 extension cords, 20 sound systems, lights and fog pumps, which created "the largest residential electric bill in the state," Schussler says. The agents thought it signaled a marijuana operation, but saw Schussler's greenhouse of benign tropical plants instead.

Schussler becomes slightly distracted again, so I pick up the story. I ask him about stories regarding those DEA agents supposedly becoming investors when Rainforest Café opened in Mall of America in 1994.

Schussler perks up at this and summons Kim Anderson, an employee since 1994, into his office.

"Well, he just can't come here and believe everything you tell him," Anderson says, as Schussler roars with laughter.

Schussler and chief investor Lyle Berman sold Rainforest Café's 28 U.S. and 10 international locations for \$128 million to Landry's Restaurant in 2000.

That's when Schussler moved on to other projects, including T-Rex Café. Yet he still dealt with doubters, saying, "Oh, I get it. T-Rex is Rainforest Café with dinosaurs."

Schussler shakes his head and shares how he started T-Rex Cafés in Kansas City, Mo., and Orlando. From there, Anderson shows me other prototype restaurant models including the Boat House, which harkens back to classic wood boats of the 1950s and Zi Imperial

Kitchen, which incorporates a multimillion-dollar collection of artifacts from China's Quing Dynasty.

"I like to create concepts, breathe life into them, but the daily operation, I want to give to someone that is better than I am," says Schussler. "That is ego check and learning about what you are good at and what you aren't good at."

One of Schussler's strengths is his unsurpassed spark, says friend Kim Valentini, who first met Schussler in the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport in 1993.

"He had three or four pay-phones going at one time. I nudged my husband to say, 'Look at this guy,'" she says. "It's 5:30, 6 in the morning, and he already has a million things going on. He had way too much energy."

Valentini founded Smile Network International, which funds missions to repair children's cleft lips; Schussler became one of the nonprofit's founding board members in 2003.

All of Schussler's proceeds from his book go to Smile Network. "For every \$500 from sales of the book, we are able to change one child's life with the gift of a new smile," Valentini says.

Schussler, 58, smiles at how he has stayed rooted in St. Louis Park. "I still have the same address," he says. "I didn't move and put my nose up in the air. I'm pretty proud of that."

Schussler, whose home was remodeled back to normal, purchased the iconic Wagner's Drive-In, which he rebranded as Galaxy Drive-In and opened in 2009.

After our interview, I go to Galaxy for lunch. On Schussler's recommendation, I eat fried chicken with fries and coleslaw. Suddenly, he pulls up in his black SUV, with his fiancé Sunhi Ryan and their Labrador Lucy. Schussler approaches and asks, "How is everything?"

I tell him, "Great," and also that Peggy, the waitress, was at my car before I had put the Nissan in park.

"That's the best thing I've heard!" he shouts. He finds Peggy, shares my compliment and punctuates it with an emphatic high-five. //

SCHUSSLER TIMELINE

1994
RAINFOREST
CAFÉ

2007
YAK & YETI

2008
T-REX CAFÉ

2009
BACKFIRE BBQ

2009
GALAXY
DRIVE-IN

TBA
HOT DOG HALL
OF FAME

TBA
THE BOATHOUSE