

# FOODSERVICE NEWS

## INSIDE EDGE



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There are valuable lessons to be learned, sometimes the hard way.

Lindquist: Bits from TCO's Restaurant Week to spring tea at Hotel Ivy.

Local chefs and producers took center stage at the 15th annual F&W show.

## French street (and fast) food

By Mike Mitchelson

**Sure, the French invented fine dining. But La Belle Crepe puts forth evidence to suggest they were among the first in the fast food department, too.**

Consider: 1. A restaurant can thrive in a space roughly the size of a college dorm room, 2. Fast food can be very healthy. Don't believe it? Wander down Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis, just north of Ninth Street, and find La Belle Crepe for breakfast, lunch or dinner. There are larger walk-in closets within unsold McMansions in Eden Prairie. Six stools line a narrow counter against one wall. The "kitchen" is against the other wall behind a counter. Two crepes griddles are wedged into the small bay window in front out of necessity. The restaurant, owned and operated by Alain Lenne, a gregarious native of Lille, France, might seem unusual at first blush—and it is, given that creperies aren't a common site. But, after some



Alain Lenne, owner of La Belle Crepe in Minneapolis.

thought, it's so absolutely logical. Sure, one might fit another gourmet sub shop in that space, but how novel would that be? That's the thought Lenne had when he heard the space, a former

deli on the ground floor of the Medical Arts Building, became available last year. The idea came to Lenne last May as many great ideas do: during a night of serious imbibing. "It was three o'clock in the morning," Lenne recalled. "And I tell people, I really need come up with a concept for that place, and if I come up with an average concept, I'm not going to get it." The subject of crepes came up—an everyday street food in France. "And 'bling,' the light went on," Lenne said. He pitched the idea to the building managers, and beat out five others who had ideas for the tiny space. He opened in mid-October. "It's a great spot, location-wise," he added. Surrounded by offices—including the downtown Target store and corporate on an adjacent block—and those above him in the Medical Arts Building, "this is the busiest corner in (downtown) Minneapolis." The location is dependent on street-level foot traffic, which is, obviously, less in winter, but when the cold weather hit,

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## MRA navigates state budget woes

By Mike Mitchelson

The state budget, as any Minnesota resident has heard, is in a tight spot. Deficit calculations have ranged widely, but have generally settled around the \$5 billion mark. A recent Federal stimulus package will likely bring about a billion dollars in relief, but that still leaves a large chunk to reconcile. What does that mean for any legislation designed to help the restaurant industry? Anything that takes money from the state's general fund—such as a tax exemption—are going to be looked

at with considerable scrutiny. But that doesn't mean there isn't any hope to aid an industry that has been pummeled in recent months—a fact recognized by both political parties. The Minnesota Restaurant Association is bringing to the legislature a package titled the Restaurant Recovery and Jobs Preservation Act. Included in the package: • A tip credit, called the Super Wage. It's more than a repackaging effort, said Dave Siegel, executive vice president

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## Big ideas, big concepts



Qing Dynasty artifacts, anyone? Steven Schussler, founder and CEO of Schussler Creative, led a media tour through the company's warehouses.

By Mike Mitchelson

There is no single path to develop a restaurant concept. Nowhere is it more obvious than at Schussler Creative. The Golden Valley-based company, which bills itself on

its Web site as "an innovative team that embraces imagination and creates theatrical hospitality venues," and its owner, Steven Schussler, is, perhaps, most well known for Rainforest Café.

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## Big ideas | from page 1



Schussler Creative concepts, clockwise from top left: Sorcerer's Kitchen, Zi Imperial Lounge, Water, Fire & Ice Polar Ultra Lounge, Winter Wonderland, Aerobluu and T-Rex.

(Schussler also brought to Minneapolis in the 1980s the nightclub Jukebox Saturday Night—yep, that place downtown with the car sticking out over the front entrance).

Big concepts might not appear wise in today's economy, but, with strategic placement and key partnerships, Schussler Creative has thus far navigated difficult waters successfully.

The company developed the restaurant concepts T-Rex and Yak & Yeti, both found at the Walt Disney World Resort near Orlando, Fla., and both large in size and theme. Other concepts are smaller in scale, but equally potent in their personality: the Hot Dog Hall of Fame and Betty & Joe's café and bakery in Mohegan Sun Pocono Downs Casino in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. And there's more in various stages of design, with names that inspire one to ask, "What?": Zi Imperial Kitchen, Sorcerer's Kitchen, Water Fire & Ice Polar Ultra Lounge and Orange County Choppers America's Roadhouse (yes, those OCC guys on Discovery Channel).

But the best way to grasp those concepts is to take a tour of them, which is what Schussler does for prospective investors—the company's offices are also home to vast warehouses filled with... well, just tag along.

## Tour guide

The tour starts in the lobby. Schussler's obvious intent is to leave an impression. Walls are covered with framed media coverage of the company, and Schussler, when leading the tour, was a cross between circus ringmaster and pitch-

man. But there's no mistaking his genuine enthusiasm. He talks in depth, his hands are constantly in motion, gesturing or reaching out to touch one of many props—a dinosaur, a spinning propeller, a sword. The office itself is a mental playground, office cubicles festooned with objects from various concepts as if fertilizer for new ideas. Schussler's office is filled with paraphernalia from his many interests, which include classic cars, motorcycles and, of course, the restaurant concepts.

Schussler led the tour through a surprisingly standard-issue office lunchroom, and then through a door to an environment decidedly un-corporate: A warm jungle, with a tyrannosaurus rex peering over the canopy. The dinosaur territory is a sample of what is within the T-Rex restaurants in Kansas City and Orlando/Disney. It's not just the sights, but the sounds and feel. Steam roiled, lights flickered like lightning in the low light, thunder rumbled in the distance. It felt damp, like, well, a tropical island. Care had been taken to replicate the sensation of walking in a tropical forest springing with moisture, decomposition and fertility. "Shredded rubber," Helmut Lange, Schussler Creative's senior VP of retail, said over my shoulder as we trekked along the path.

We stepped from the jungle to stand in front of what appeared to be an illuminated ice block the size of a single-stall detached garage. The climate shift was significant enough that Schussler's breath was visible as he began describing the Polar Ultra Lounge concept. "Can you turn off the snow please?" he shouted to an unseen aid. The snowflakes,

Lange said, are fine bits of cloth.

Schussler opened a meat-locker door, the group donned frocks and stepped into an ice cave of sorts with modern lighting, a bar lined with alcohol bottles, with bench seating around a table—all ice. "Even the glasses are made of ice," Schussler demonstrated. "When you're done drinking, you throw them away."

Schussler led us from the ice bar cave to a corner lined with crystal formations, and a melon-sized rock supported by iron shafts. A meteorite. "Six of us couldn't lift this thing," Schussler said. "The retail area (of T-Rex) will be surrounded by this stuff."

We walked through a loading dock with a sculpture in one corner for a concept in the works, and on one wall hung a flatscreen television, broadcasting three-dimensional images, some effective, some not. "We get equipment donated to us by different companies around the world," Schussler said about the television. "We test it and see if we can incorporate it into anything."

The next door led into a room that one would expect to see at an art and antiquities museum—the space was lined with life size bone-white sculptures, some carrying weapons, some mounted on horses. In the middle, model ships from a bygone—obviously non-European—era.

The museum-quality pieces were recovered from a Chicago warehouse, most authenticated from the Chinese Qing Dynasty years from 1644-1911. "It's amazing to think that one family probably spent their whole life carving (one of these)," Schussler mused.

The sculptures, carved from elephant

bone and ivory, are worth about \$60 million, he said. They didn't carry the price tag when he got them, however. They were disassembled and packed, many broken—some into thousands of parts. Adding to the puzzle was they were caked with rat feces and dried urine, Schussler said.

Reassembly was left largely to Kim Anderson, the kind of "utility fielder" every company needs. He gave a historical rundown worthy of a tour guide at the Minnesota Institute of Arts (MIA) reps have inspected the sculptures, actually. "I thought Steve needed a psychiatric evaluation (when he brought these in)," Anderson said.

Schussler answered his cell phone, something about one of the T-Rex restaurants, and Anderson continued the tour, pointing out the intricate detail in each carving. The figures loomed, some carrying the brutal, spiked weapons of the era of hand-to-hand combat. A model ship roughly six feet long sat in the middle of the floor. The sculptures will be part of the Zi Imperial Kitchen concept, and leased to the operators, Schussler said.

We wandered from Chinese history through a door to mid-century America and the Aerobluu concept, which combines the then-growing airline industry with the peak of jazz creativity of the 1940s and '50s. A large model plane circa-1940 that would fill most suburban dining rooms hung from the ceiling, a stage with a piano was in the corner, comfortable seating and a bar in another, and jazz music blared. The design includes space for a full-size plane, Anderson said. With the gran-



diosity, small details, such as a framed print advertisement of Dizzy Gillespie concert from 1948, hung on the walls. "It gives it a reality," Anderson said.

There's also high-tech gimmickry, an apparatus called Human Beams, an open frame between which infra-red beams are projected. When a user passes their hands through the beams, computer generated guitars, horns, piano and other instruments "improvise" according to the users movements—and nothing is out of tune.

The machine was co-developed by legendary musician, conductor and super producer Quincy Jones, Anderson said, adding that it's been used for music therapy for autistic children. Its commercial uses are obvious: Aeroblex visitors—if the concept is developed—can record their music and purchase a CD.

From there, into Winter Wonderland, a room filled with kitsch for the winter fanatic. The tour climbed into Lange's SUV for a quick drive to another warehouse that included the concepts Hot Dog Hall of Fame and the in-development Orange County Choppers: America's Roadhouse, both an homage to the U.S. past and present and filled with paraphernalia.

## Business formula

Schussler calls his company a laboratory or incubator, but within there is a business formula. Creative thinking extends to generating revenue beyond what the restaurant kitchen produces.

Retail sales—in the form of animal "characters," T-shirts, toys and memorabilia—generate, Schussler said, 15 to 23 percent of sales at the restaurant, and build brand identity for the concept.

It's up to Helmut Lange to figure out what works. "With Rainforest Café, we learned we can't sell a frog, but we can sell Cha Cha," he said, pointing to a framed sketch of the Rainforest Café's star frog character. "(At T-Rex), we can't sell a dinosaur, but we can sell Dexter."

Dexter, and a cast of other characters whose wares are available at the restaurant, include a biography within coloring books and other items for children. To inspire Hot Dog Hall of Fame products and color schemes, Lange said he thought about when hot dogs became popular with America in the late 1950s and 1960s with grilling out at home. He said he then saw a Pottery Barn catalogue designed with a striping pattern that was very popular in the 1960s, which led to an idea about the Mini Cooper, and how both of these "retro" ideas are now currently being marketed to teenagers. All the research is incorporated into the nostalgia-heavy final design. And, of course, another cast of characters as an avenue into the wallets of parents with children: There's Molly Mustard, Hank the Frank, and Charlie the wiener dog, complete with grill-mark strips—get it?

Lange led a tour of his own, culminating with the massive dream closet every child—and every adult with a healthy inner-child—might want. Toys galore, from dinosaurs to cars and trucks, clothing, to faucet prototypes for the Orange County Choppers bar (think handlebars and the gas tank, it

makes sense) and other retail items.

## Partnership and possibilities

Schussler Creative's relationship with Landry's Restaurants Inc., which has multiple big-themed restaurant concepts across the country, began when the Landry's purchased from Schussler Rainforest Café in 2000.

Landry's helped complete the first T-Rex restaurant, built in a massive shopping development in Kansas City in 2006, and also partnered with Schussler Creative to develop a Yak & Yeti and a T-Rex at Disney in Orlando (the latter opened October 2008). The restaurants worked because of their guaranteed foot traffic and financing partnerships.

Fundamentally, while a concept like T-Rex has dramatic scale and theme-park atmosphere, good food and great service are still the primary drivers, said Jeff Cantwell, Landry's senior VP of development. "The theme is secondary to those two elements," he said, adding that implementing that philosophy into Rainforest Café after purchasing it was the key to resurrecting the troubled chain. "We immediately implemented that sort of mentality to T-Rex prior to the restaurant even being opened, to make sure the food was the 'Wow' factor. There was a lot of attention paid to the food (fire-roasted meats and grilled seafood), its presentation, quality and pricing to make it a good value to everybody—that was something that was important to Disney as well."

Schussler agreed. "People come once for the (theme), but they come back for quality food and service," he said. "As a laboratory, we know that, respect that, and also the reason we (work with) people that are better than us (in that area)."

Schussler also partners with Levy Restaurants, which operates the award-winning Spiaggia in Chicago amongst its many ventures, for the Hot Dog Hall of Fame and Betty & Joe's concepts.

## Hot in the cold

The plans to sell and grow Schussler Creative's outsized concepts haven't changed with the planet's economic realities—growth plans were already conservative given the financial investment involved. Growth for big-scale concepts like T-Rex hinge on the partnership with Landry's, and focus on Disney theme parks and overseas developments in growing-wealth regions such as Dubai. Schussler is blunt when discussing concept placement of those that require a sizable up-front investment—the T-Rex in Orlando Disney cost about \$30 million to build, he said. "We cannot afford a loser. This is not a hit and miss. There are very calculated decisions on where we operate our brands."

Stateside, Schussler remains the optimistic entrepreneur, and points to his company's prowess as an idea farm and consultancy. "I like to say we're hot even in a cold economy, and I like to say we're taking things to a different level," he said. "I think difficulty breeds opportunity, and we're sharing our expertise." **FSN**

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