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## Mood is mega-Mesozoic at Schussler's latest over-the-top eatery



c.j. the dish

Twin Cities restaurant creator extraordinaire **Steve Schussler's** favorite childhood "toy" was a coffee pot, his mother, **Gloria Palazzo**, said. "With a percolator," she added with emphasis.

So Palazzo wasn't entirely surprised that her son went into the restaurant business. But the expression in her eyes last week suggested that she never imagined that Schussler's fascination would percolate into something quite as mammoth as T-Rex, a new restaurant at Walt Disney World in Orlando.

An artist, who flew in from her home in Guadalajara, Mexico, Palazzo joined a bunch of Minnesotans (including me) who flew down for the grand opening of Schussler's biggest (30,000 square feet), most expensive (\$30 million) restaurant concept, in partnership with Landry's Restaurants.

The founder and creator of the Rainforest Cafe and many other concepts, Schussler opened his first T-Rex in

Kansas City in July 2006. The House of Mouse version is much grander.

In addition to the life-size automated roaring dinosaurs, there are gentler noises coming from young animated woolly mammoths with eyes so soulful they're a little unnerving. In the aquatic area hangs an enormous octopus over the bar; rocks there are covered with colorful rubbery replicas of ocean plant life that beg for a touch.

Other Twin Cities talents are on display. The meteor shower video projected on the ceiling every 20 minutes was created in Roseville at ProMedia Productions. Owners **Julie and Steve Keller** attended the opening.

The ice cave, created by **Paco aka Francisco Caballero** of Savage's ThemeDesign, changes color with lighting by **Michael Cohen** of Minneapolis' Schuler Shook. **Steve Frattalone**, of St. Paul's Frattalone & Associates, handled audio systems, including sound tracks for the jungle noises and animal sounds.

For something low-tech, there is a sandy "fossil pit," where kids can dig up the bones



Photo by Alain Boniec

Left to right, Millie Egan, Steve Schussler, Colleen Kelly, John Goodman, Sidney Goodman and Sunhi Ryan attended the opening of T-Rex at Disney World. See the Jurassic dining adventure at [startribune.com/video](http://startribune.com/video).

from an entire replica of a T-Rex. Really? "Absolutely," said Schussler. "A T-Rex and Argentinasaurus [the dinosaur hovering over the entrance], the largest heaviest dinosaur, 37 feet tall and 146 feet long."

Neither one is very cuddly. For that, Schussler approached the Build-A-Bear Workshop folks to create a Build-A-Dino product, available in the retail part of T-Rex.

The restaurant, as you can see at [startribune.com/video](http://startribune.com/video), is over the top because that's Schussler.

"I want the first reaction to

be 'Wow.' People come once for the wow factor. They come back for quality food and service and that's what Landry's provides," Schussler told Schussler Creative staffers in a meeting before the big opening. "We created the concept, but we have to give credit to our partners who not only gave us a lot of money but did a fantastic job with food and service."

The environment is totally hyperactive, much like Schussler as a man ... as a child.

"We didn't know what to call it back then," his mother said of her obviously ADHD son.

"He wouldn't stay in his crib, he wouldn't stay in his playpen and when I walked him down the street in a stroller he would just scream," Palazzo said, gesturing wildly with her arms the way Schussler still does.

One of Schussler's most unforgettable stunts at school involved telling schoolmates they didn't have to return in the afternoon because there was going to be a storm.

"So the school was empty," Palazzo said. "I get a call at work from the principal. ... He said, *You have to come up to school. Steve dismissed school. I had to do everything to not burst out laughing because this man was absolutely beside himself. I mean, what do you say about Steve? He could just do all kinds of things.*" But Schussler couldn't do much when he learned I had been talking to his mom.

"Oh, MY GOD!" he said, darting away.

### 'My license?' Er ...

Steven Schussler's early-morning arrival to T-Rex got delayed by the police.

A Downtown Disney police officer observed Schussler driving the wrong way and

doing so too fast. After being pulled over, Schussler got out of his car — a no-no the size of T-Rex's Gigantosaurus Burger.

The officer asked for a driver's license. Schussler volunteered that in his haste he'd forgotten his wallet, which meant, oops, no driver's license.

*This just gets better and better for you*, said the cop, who eventually, mercifully issued Schussler a warning.

### Sidney's yes, Petters no

Asked if he was one of the wealthy people who invested with **Tom Petters'** company, **John Goodman** said, "Nooo," in his usual super-cool way.

Goodman is the deep pockets of Goodman Group, a senior living builder.

He owned the defunct Sidney's pizza restaurants and attended the T-Rex grand opening with his dad, **Sidney**, and their steadies, **Colleen Kelly** and **Millie Egan**, respectively.

C.J. is at 612.332.TIPS or [cj@startribune.com](mailto:cj@startribune.com). E-mailers, please state a subject — "Hello" doesn't count. Attachments are not opened, so don't even try. More of her attitude can be seen on FOX 9 Thursday mornings.