



**Barn meets bling.
That's the idea behind
turning a vintage Eden
Prairie barn into a glitzy
event center.**



Photos by RICK PEARSON

Steve Schussler will open Green Acres Event Center early next year. He restored the historic Eden Prairie dairy barn to be used for weddings and other events.

A barn 'brought back to life'

By KELLY SMITH • kelly.smith@startribune.com

People just can't keep away from the cows.

It's an accidental attraction that eccentric entrepreneur Steve Schussler created when he put 15 life-size, colorful fiberglass cows outside a dairy barn in Eden Prairie. They've spurred dozens of gawkers to stop and pet or pose with the cows.

They also inspired an even bigger idea for Schussler, causing him to nix plans to use the 1940s-era barn he bought for storage.

Instead, he's about to unveil the Twin Cities' latest event center — a sort of "barn meets bling" for weddings, bar mitzvahs, fundraisers

and other such events.

This is, after all, no average country barn.

The more than \$1 million renovation to the building that will open to the public in February or March includes 35 crystal chandeliers, a silo-turned-wine cellar, vintage jukeboxes and theatrical lighting that includes illumination of the outside of the barn in a bright purple glow.

"It's one of the coolest things I've done in my life, especially to share with Eden Prairie," he said. "The goal is to make people smile and to share with everyone, instead of private space for my laboratories. There's probably nothing



The 15 playful fiberglass cows are a big attraction.

Barn continues on AA6 ▶

A barn 'brought back to life'



GLEN STUBBE • Star Tribune file
Steve Schussler in the room at right, when it was a work in progress.

◀ BARN FROM AAI

like it in any barn in the United States."

He and his Golden Valley company, Creative Inc., are best known for dreaming up the 45 Rainforest Cafes and other wild-themed restaurants nationwide. Now the 57-year-old St. Louis Park resident and New York City native is taking his characteristic fanciful flair to the former farm fields, "bringing back to life" the barn in a new way.

Named Green Acres Event Center, the barn is located at 14150 Pioneer Trail, next to Flying Cloud Airport. It won't open for a few more months, but it's already getting daily inquiries, and more than a dozen reservations have been made for 2013 and 2014.

'One of a kind'

It's taken nearly three years to get to this point.

In 2010, the condemned Godrich-Ramus barn faced extinction — it was in the way of a road-widening project along Pioneer Trail. Hennepin County initially planned to raze the barn to make way for drainage ponds, but history buffs argued that it should be preserved.

The county agreed to sell it — if anybody wanted it.

After hearing about it in a Star Tribune article, Schussler offered the lone bid of \$82,000.

His new purchase was in massive disarray.

Windowless and with a caved-in silo roof, it was coated in dirt and mouse and bird feces. He rebuilt the roof, added insulation and electricity, installed an elevator and made changes to get health and historical preservation approval, along with 15 agencies' support. The City Council unanimously gave its final approval Nov. 20.

"The city came really close to losing the whole thing. He saved the barn," City Council Member Ron Case said. "It's one of a kind."

It's not the only surviving barn in Eden Prairie — the city, in fact, owns one that can be rented out as well, though it's more rustic — but Case said this barn is one of only a half dozen in the nation with the 1940s arch-roof architecture.

As for possible criticism about Schussler turning the iconic barn into something too over the top, both Case and Schussler say the project stayed true to the barn's past. Schussler even got input from the son of the original owner.

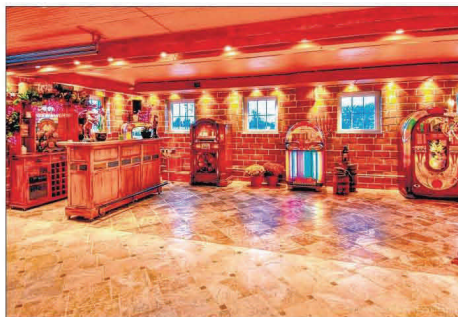
"We haven't touched the integrity," Schussler said — "just added my design touch."

Wine, cheese — and geese

It's a design touch that's certainly unique, but the creative CEO said this project is different and simpler than any of his



Photos by RICK PEARSON
The main hall features chandeliers, fireplaces and original artwork. People are already making event reservations for 2013 and 2014.



Vintage jukeboxes will entertain guests on the lower level.

80-some projects elsewhere around the country.

There's a wine-and-cheese tasting area, two pianos, a warming kitchen for caterers to use and decor honoring the barn's past — from pitchforks and a vintage 1942 tractor to 150

oil lanterns.

Joining the cows outside are eight fiberglass geese.

"It doesn't matter if you're 3 or 103, there's something you'll remember and love," he said.

However, the compact location only has 12 parking spots,

so valet parking is required for parking cars at a nearby business or church. Capacity inside is limited to 299 people.

Case's wife, Kathie, is the former president of the Eden Prairie Historical Society and is one of the people already lining up

BY THE NUMBERS

- 150 oil lanterns
- 15 fiberglass cows
- 8 fiberglass geese
- 2 tractors

MORE INFO

For more info or to rent Green Acres Event Center at 14150 Pioneer Trail, contact Sunhi Ryan at 763-746-3700 or 952-942-5220, or e-mail info@greenacreseventcenter.com.

to rent the space.

"It's so unique," she said. "The barn is just a piece of the past that is so important."

Rental prices likely will range from \$1,500 to \$3,500.

The Friends of Minnesota Barns, which advocates for barn preservation, recently presented Schussler its top award for non-agricultural adaptive reuse of a barn.

Some credit might have to go to residents who first planted the idea in Schussler's head to use the barn as more than just private storage. Besides paying him weekly visits, residents sent him letters praising those eye-catching cows and urging him to do more with the barn.

"It's become an obsession to share," he said. "We put our heart and soul in it."

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