

EAT & DRINK

Rainforest Cafe, a little less wet, reopens at the Mall of America

The restaurant kept most of its features but lost water elements as it starts fresh

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The rain forest is quiet no more.

The animatronic gorillas, elephants and Tracy the talking tree are back to entertain diners at Rainforest Cafe in Mall of America.

On Friday, the themed restaurant reopened on the mall's third floor after closing in its original, first-floor location a year ago after representatives from the mall wanted to centralize more of its restaurants.

The family restaurant, created by Golden Valley businessman Steve Schussler, debuted to long lines in October 1994. Its new version is slightly scaled back.

"It's more comfortable and intimate," said Schussler, who attended a preview event on Thursday. "They're still giving guests escapism and comfortable food in an atmosphere where kids rule."

Schussler sold the restaurant chain in 2000 to Houston-based Landry's Inc. but still considers himself the face of Rainforest Cafe.

"Thunderstorms," was the one-word shout out when 6-year-old Vinny Hunkins of Apple Valley was asked his favorite part of the restaurant. Vinny, his mom Ally and 4-year-old brother Tyson visited the restaurant Friday. "It's an awesome family place," she said.

Many of the same familiar elements have returned, including the animatronic Nile the crocodile and Bamba the gorilla, thunderstorms every 22 minutes, Rasta Pasta, Mojo ribs and the Carmen Miranda pole.

But the new Rainforest Cafe is experiencing a dry spell. The 3,000-gallon aquarium, smaller fish tanks, mist-making machines, waterfalls and the wishing pond are gone. They were replaced with new vignettes, such as a tiger family and a Mayan theme.

"I miss the water," said Ken Brimmer, former president of Rainforest Cafe, who attended the preview.

He's not the only one. Lana Knoke of New Prague waited in line in the mall with about 20 others at noon Friday to eat lunch there. "It's a fun atmosphere. I love the misting of the water," she said. When told the misting was history, her eyes widened. "Oh no. That is a disappointment."

Brimmer described the former location as iconic, but he realizes that change was inevitable. "I understand that the mall wants to centralize the food, but the jury's still out," he said.

The cafe's former location is now home to an AT&T store, a Minneapolis Institute of Arts T-shirts pop-up shop, a Kate Spade store and Kit and Ace.

Dennis Lombardi, a restaurant consultant with Insight Dynamics of Columbus, Ohio, said he believes that creating synergy with other restaurants is smart. Rainforest Cafe is now near Landry-owned Bubba Gump and a Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurant that will open later this year.

"Creating a bigger concentration of themed restaurants in one place draws people in more easily," Lombardi said. "Generally, it's not desirable to move from the first to the third floor, but Mall of America is unique and it mitigates that quite a bit."

Another factor in the restaurant's favor is the nearby opening later this year of Crayola Experience, a 60,000-square-foot family attraction in the third-floor space of the former Bloomingdale's store.

"Seventy percent of our tables include children," said Keith Beitler, chief operating officer of Rainforest Cafe. "Kids from 3 to 6 years old are our primary audience. By 8 to 10, they're graduating to Bubba Gump."



grandma, Glo Conlon, on the opening day for http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_14535
Rainforest Cafe's new location at Mall of America. RENEÉ JONES SCHNEIDER

Three-year-old Kai Anderson took in the decor at the front entrance of Rainforest Cafe's new location on Friday.

The new restaurant seats 320 in a 12,000-square-foot space. The original location started out at 13,500 square feet but was expanded to 16,000 square feet, seating 350, Schussler said. When it closed last year, the Mall of America location was in the company's top seven of 22 RFC locations in the country for revenue, according to Beitler, who said the average Rainforest Cafe brings in more than \$10 million annually.

At the peak, Rainforest Cafes produced more than \$15 million a year in sales. Lombardi said a decline is not unusual for a restaurant concept more than 20 years old.

When Rainforest closed on the first floor of the Mall of America last year, the appeal of its food and service was getting 2.5 or 3 stars on Google and Yelp. Lombardi said that's not a huge concern for a restaurant that is a destination.

"These eatertainment restaurants work best in high-tourist destinations like Myrtle Beach, Orlando, Chicago and Mall of America," he said. "They would have trouble surviving in Columbus, Ohio. There's not enough nonlocal traffic."

Mall of America reports that 60 percent of its visitors are local residents and 40 percent are tourists. At Rainforest Cafe, 40 percent of its customers were local, Beitler said.

Lombardi said he suspects the percent of tourists dining at Rainforest Cafe in Mall of America is even higher than reported. "Some of the credit cards may be local, but it's grandparents taking out their grandkids from Oklahoma and Ohio," he said.

For many visitors it's the uniqueness of the experience that drives the traffic, but the maintenance of animatronics isn't cheap, Lombardi said. People are willing to pay \$13.50 for a hamburger instead of \$9 because of the atmosphere, but at some point the locals say, "Been there, done that, got the T-shirt," Lombardi said.

Ally Hunkins said she thinks the price of the kids' meals is reasonable at Rainforest Cafe, but she'd eat somewhere else if the kids weren't with her. "The prices are a little more than I'd normally spend," she said.

After 22 years, Schussler is starting to see the second generation of fans, with young parents who experienced Rainforest as kids now bringing in their toddlers to ogle the snakes, crocs and butterflies.

"People used to say the concept had an eight-, 10-year life span," he said. "Everyone thought I was crazy, but I always said it would be 25 to 30 years or more."

Inception: Opened Oct. 4, 1994 in Mall of America, the first of what would grow into 40 locations in the U.S. and five international locations at its peak.

Current locations: 22 in the U.S. and five international. It is the only restaurant chain to have branches in all of Disney's theme parks.

Ownership: Schussler sold the chain to Landry's in 2000. Landry's owns more than 500 properties with 40 unique brands, including Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., McCormick and Schmick's and Oceanaire.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_14535)
ELIZABETH PAGE BRUMLEY

Children observed the electronic alligator at Rainforest Cafe's new location, which moved from the first to the third floor at Mall of...