

BUSINESS

Rainforest Cafe creator licenses 'Puff, the Magic Dragon'

Schussler Creative wants to open new themed restaurants based on "Puff, the Magic Dragon."

By John Ewoldt (<http://www.startribune.com/john-ewoldt/10644811/>) Star Tribune |

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The restaurant entrepreneur who created the original Rainforest Cafe has found a new inspiration: "Puff, the Magic Dragon."

Steve Schussler of Schussler Creative in Golden Valley announced Friday that he has purchased the licensing rights to the beloved folk song by Peter, Paul and Mary to develop themed restaurants, related merchandise and attractions.

"It has been a dream of mine to bring this song to life," Schussler said. He has been in negotiations for two years to get the rights from Leonard Lipton and Peter Yarrow, the songwriters and author of the 2007 book by the same name.

"They're very particular about the rights," Schussler said. "They want to be sure that whatever I create has the characteristics of what they intended in their song."

Yarrow said he wanted to work with Schussler because of his ability to take an idea and create a universe that exposes people to another dimension.

"He has an extraordinary imagination and an amazing way of articulating it," said Yarrow, who was Peter in Peter, Paul and Mary. "He's kind of like the way director Julie Taymor took people to a special place on the stage of 'The Lion King.'"

In Schussler's still-being-developed concept, Puff will not be a fierce dragon as seen in "Game of Thrones," said the family-friendly restaurant entrepreneur.

"He may or may not have smoke coming out of his nose and fire from his mouth, but he will be friendly," Schussler said.

He's currently pitching Puff to executives in Orlando, where Disney and Universal have parks; Dubai, where American concepts and icons are commonly sought; and Shanghai, China, where dragons are popular because they are thought to bring good luck. Within a year, Schussler thinks he will have an agreement to build the first restaurant.

Usually, Schussler creates his own brands from scratch, including Rainforest Cafe in the Mall of America, and T-Rex, Yak & Yeti and the new Boathouse for Disney in Orlando. This is one of only two concepts, the other being the jazz-themed Aerobleu, where Schussler is licensed to use the concept but does not own it.

Lipton and Yarrow wrote "Puff" in 1959. Both were attending Cornell University at the time. The lyrics were from a poem Lipton wrote based on Ogden Nash's work, "The Tale of Custard the Dragon."

Peter, Paul and Mary hit the charts with the song in 1963. Lipton and Yarrow's children's book from 2007, illustrated by Eric Puybaret, about the dragon and his playmate Jackie Paper sold more than 1 million copies.

Asked if some might accuse Yarrow of selling out his song, he said: "I know what selling out is and what it is not. We haven't done anything injurious to the song up to this point. Why start now?"

Peter, Paul and Mary were offered a "fortune" to do a cigarette ad years ago but declined, he said.

Yarrow has long disputed that the lyrics are a veiled reference to smoking pot.

"Lenny and I were a junior and senior at Cornell when we wrote the song. Marijuana hadn't even come to Ivy League schools," he said. "Beer and panty raids were the worst things we knew about."

Schussler said the decision to approach Yarrow and Lipton was an easy one.

"It makes sense to do something about one of the most mystical animals in the history of time," he said. "Whether it's 'Game of Thrones' or 'Harry Potter,' dragons are current and timeless."

Yarrow will be in concert at Ames Center in the Burnsville Performing Arts Center on May 21, where, he said, "I will once again explain that the song has no subtext."



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"Puff the Magic Dragon," was sung by Peter Paul and Mary.

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