

Rainforest founder plots big return

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Ellen P. Gabler

Staff reporter

Walt Disney, Willy Wonka: Move over. Steve Schussler is back.

The founder of Rainforest Cafe is again dreaming big -- this time positioning Tyrannosaurus Rex, hot dogs, ivory statues, Asian puppets and magic as the fixtures for his newest lineup of themed restaurants.

For years Schussler has twirled the concepts for seven separate restaurants in his mind. Now, he's ready to act. The first concept -- T-Rex -- will debut in Kansas City, Mo., this fall, with additional sites slated for the Mall of America, Las Vegas and five other cities.

His six other concepts -- Hot Dog Hall of Fame, Asia, China, Children in Motion, Aerobleu and one with a magical Renaissance theme -- all will open in various locations later on.

Described by Schussler as "entertainment and education," each restaurant will spare no expense in creating the ultimate dining experience.

Every T-Rex restaurant, for example, will cost a minimum of \$15 million to build.

Some would say that's a bit steep for a restaurant. What does Schussler think?

"The thing I hate the most is when someone says I can't do something."

Achieving the "can't-be-done" is indicative of Schussler's personality. At one point, the man whose accent comes straight from Queens had 40 tropical birds, two tortoises and a baboon living in his St. Louis Park home -- all to convince investors Rainforest Cafe was the next big thing.

This time around, Schussler has his own self-financed laboratory in Golden Valley, complete with roaring dinosaurs, manufactured snow and statues circa 1600 to give potential business partners a glimpse into his mind.

Since selling Rainforest Cafe five years ago, Schussler has immersed himself in research and design. The result? An army of ideas and two warehouses in Golden Valley that would make Pee Wee Herman and Willy Wonka green with envy.

Think a tangible version of Jurassic Park, with a "life-sized" Tyrannosaurus Rex standing amid glaciers, torches and flying dinosaurs.

A look inside

In his office, sporting tinted blue glasses, Schussler constantly calls out to his left brain -- also known as his assistant Kari Honoroff -- to remind him where he tasted his favorite hot dog or who he's meeting at 4 p.m.