

WEST METRO

Restaurant creator took Minnetonka to Downtown Disney

Steve Schussler's idea for the Boathouse began to form a few years ago when he drove his own Amphicar into Lake Minnetonka with his dog.

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

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ORLANDO — For five years, Disney executives rejected new ideas pitched by Steve Schussler, the Twin Cities restaurant creator who made millions with Rainforest Cafe and other colorful dining destinations.

Then, he gave them Minnesota.

As Disney Co. redevelops Downtown Disney, a shopping, dining and entertainment complex near its Florida amusement parks, executives wanted something more sophisticated than the shrieking monkeys, bubbling geysers and dinosaurs in Schussler's past restaurants.

So he turned to the lure and lore of Lake Minnetonka, near where he lives, to craft what is now the most lavish restaurant at the Disney complex — the Boathouse.

The 600-seat restaurant opened last week in quiet fashion by Disney standards. Company executives, Schussler and other partners spoke at a brief ribbon-cutting ceremony, a low-key start compared to the star-studded frenzy when Schussler opened a Rainforest Cafe at the complex in 1996.

Crowds formed anyway, drawn in part by the restaurant's most distinctive off-menu attraction: a fleet of six Amphicars, the car-boat convertible made in Germany in the 1960s that is now one of the rarest vehicles on the planet.

Schussler's idea for the Boathouse began to form a few years ago when he drove his own Amphicar into Lake Minnetonka with his dog. "People were literally running from their homes pointing," he said. "One person even called the police thinking a car had driven into the lake by mistake."

But it took Schussler until 2012 to strike a deal for another venue in Disney's Florida resorts, where three of his earlier restaurant concepts have been built. In addition to Rainforest, there's Yak & Yeti, a Himalayan-themed outlet that opened in 1998, and dinosaur-themed T-Rex, which opened in 2008.

"They said they'd like to give other people an opportunity," he said of the years he spent prodding Disney for a fourth outlet.

His track record of affordable, family-style restaurants didn't match the company's desire to push some of Downtown Disney in a more upscale direction.

For Schussler, Disney's resistance was another example of a phenomenon he's encountered throughout his career, one he calls with a pithy phrase — "No is yes waiting to happen."

Schussler, 59, grew up in Queens, N.Y., and didn't finish college. He sold ads for TV and radio in Miami and Chicago, where he moonlighted by starting a store that sold vintage jukeboxes. When that failed, he transformed the concept into a chain of nightclubs called Juke Box Saturday Night. He moved to Minnesota in the 1980s to manage a location in downtown Minneapolis.

After closing the nightclubs in the early 1990s, Schussler decided his experience in entertainment could be applied to theme restaurants, which were starting to become a phenomenon. Since then, Schussler battled financial constraints and skeptical investors to become a leader in the volatile segment of the restaurant industry called "eatertainment."

As he refined the concept for the Boathouse, he suggested that Disney make greater use of the lake at Downtown Disney, which had been just a backdrop for its restaurants and shops. "For years, they fought the idea that the front of the restaurant should face the lake," he said.

Then, he turned to Gibsons Restaurant Group, owner of the highly praised Chicago restaurants like Gibsons Bar & Steakhouse and operator of the RL in the Polo store on Michigan Avenue, to develop a more refined and expensive menu than he's previously offered. That includes crab-stuffed lobster and smores-topped baked Alaska.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_14300)

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In downtown Disney at Steve Schussler's newly opened Boathouse, some Disney employees got caught in a quick rain shower as "captain" Alex...

The upscale vibe in the restaurant breezes into the Ship's Store gift shop too, a preppy, mahogany-accented dreamspace where many of the items come from Minnesota. Along with Rubba Ducks, the rubber duck characters from Minneapolis, there is Lake Girl clothing from Detroit Lakes, tote bags made of recycled sail cloth from the Wayzata Yacht Club and vintage, fully functioning toy boat motors supplied by a collector in Winona.

Schussler said he pressed Disney executives to allow the \$20 Rubba Ducks. "I knew from my experience with selling Beanie Babies at Rainforest Cafe and Build-a-Dino at T-Rex that rubber ducks would fly off the shelves and they already have," he said.

Maribeth Bisiener, senior vice president of Downtown Disney, said Schussler's sensibility is unique, and she likened the experience of his restaurants with stories that unfold for customers. "No one tells a story like Steve does," she said. "He is a natural storyteller."

Phil Edwards, a Brit vacationing in Orlando, liked the unusual selection at the Boathouse. "It's quite swish — ugh — nice," he said, translating for the American reporter. "This is stuff that you would literally have to come here to buy," he said.

Schussler's biggest ideas float outside the restaurant. In addition to the fleet of Amphicars, there's a flotilla of multimillion-dollar vintage boats, including a 40-foot Italian water taxi that used to ply Lake Minnetonka and an 1880s steamboat replica once owned by the Cargill family.

On opening day, Patty and Vern Libke of Minocqua, Wis., were among the first to check out an Amphicar, though they didn't go for a ride. "They are so cool, so fun," Patty said. "I'd only seen photos of them before. We've already decided we're coming back again next year to ride in one."

Disney executives at the opening said they were glad they partnered with Schussler again. Keith Bradford, vice president of Downtown Disney, called the Boathouse the new standard for venues at the complex. "We will make every partner walk through the Boathouse and see what we have done," he said.

Schussler, who co-owns the restaurant with investment partners, declined to say how much it cost to build, though he said it was in the same ballpark as his other restaurants. T-Rex in Orlando cost \$30 million, he wrote in his autobiography.

Schussler's ideas sometimes exceed his financial capabilities. Before he opened Rainforest Cafe at the Mall of America in 1994, he was \$2 million over budget.

Lyle Berman, a Minneapolis venture capitalist who was an investor in Rainforest, recalls asking Schussler to watch the movie "Bugsy" about an entrepreneur who vastly overspent investors' money in Las Vegas. "Steve is incredibly creative, but he doesn't always look at the practicality of his creativity," Berman said.

Schussler said he remembers Berman's lesson but confessed he hasn't mastered it. The Boathouse came in over budget, he said.

Even before opening Rainforest Cafe, Schussler spent \$400,000 to create a rain forest in his home, complete with live tropical birds and tortoises, to attract Berman and other investors. After its success at the Mall of America, Schussler built it into a chain and sold it to Landry's Inc. in 2000.

With the proceeds, he built a \$15 million warehouse and laboratory in Golden Valley where he's developed more than a dozen other concepts.

Because he spends so much time in Orlando, Schussler is often asked why he doesn't move there. "My friends are here," he replies.



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In downtown Disney at Steve Schussler's newly opened Boathouse, the restaurant is a high-end dinner destination which features the creator's...