

Schussler fired up about new BBQ concept

By Mark Brandau

KANSAS CITY , Kan. (Dec. 15, 2009) Nothing about the opening of Backfire BBQ, the latest concept from restaurant impresario Steven Schussler, is conventional.

First, it's a barbecue restaurant in a barbecue town. The concept is tied to reality TV stars, the Teutul family of the TLC show "American Chopper," who are known for motorcycles, foul language and family dysfunction, not food. And it's the dead of winter coming out of the worst recession in years.

Yet Schussler, founder of Schussler Creative in Minnesota, is ecstatic about the initial results following Backfire's Dec. 7 opening at The Legends at Village West in Kansas City.

"It's the smoothest opening I've ever had," he said. "We wound up being right on."

The restaurant, developed over a period of more than three years with the Teutul family of Orange County Choppers and Chicago-based Levy Restaurants, has dining, retail and live entertainment, akin to Schussler's other big-box theme restaurants. Schussler has created Rainforest Cafe, T-Rex, Yak & Yeti and Galaxy Drive In, among other restaurants.

Backfire's decor includes studded black-leather seating, one of the largest smokers in Kansas City, bronze-relief sculptures by artist Bill Mack and, of course, 14 high-end custom bikes from Orange County Choppers.

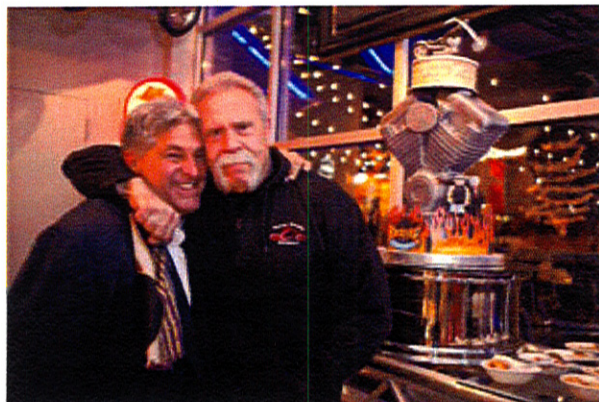
Family patriarch Paul Teutul Sr., who was on hand to light the smoker and pour the first draft beers at the grand opening, said: "Orange County Choppers is proud to partner with the innovative team at Schussler Creative and the family of passionate restaurateurs at Levy Restaurants to bring you Backfire BBQ. Together, we've created an incredible attraction with great food, entertainment and retail that I know you will enjoy."

Levy will handle management and culinary development of Backfire, whose menu includes items like NOLA Spiced BBQ Shrimp, the KC Rocker Reuben sandwich, the Flight of Fancy wing platter, and Sack of Nuts, a dessert of made-to-order doughnuts tossed tableside in cinnamon and sugar.

"As restaurateurs, we're excited to collaborate with the innovative teams at Schussler Creative and Orange County Choppers to bring guests a truly amazing experience at Backfire BBQ," said Andy Lansing, president and chief executive of Levy Restaurants.

He and Schussler pointed out that nearly everything on the menu at Backfire is made in-house and that products are procured from local sources as much as possible.

The 8,300-square-foot restaurant cost about \$650 per square foot to build, Schussler said, for an estimated cost of more than \$5 million. Initial guest counts and sales figures were beating expectations, though he declined to specify.



Steven Schussler, top left, and Paul Teutul Sr. of "American Chopper" at the new Backfire BBQ in Kansas City, Kan.

“What’s the one thing that we have to change after eight days?” Schussler said. “We have an inconsistency with one item, our deviled eggs. Here we have a barbecue concept in a barbecue town, and the only problem we have is the deviled eggs? We’re doing a good job.”

To have the restaurant open strong after three and a half years in development and make its projections, even in below-freezing temperatures, is “humbling,” Schussler said.

“It’s just amazing,” he continued. “With so many places in the industry being at risk more than any other business, the fact is people still have to eat in good times and bad. If you serve a good product at a decent price in an area where there’s traffic, you still have the opportunity to do well. You’ll still make a profit, too.”

Among the areas Schussler Creative and Levy are researching for tweaks are the selection of music and hours of operation, Schussler said. Talks are ongoing among Schussler, Levy and Orange County Choppers about possible replication, though Schussler stressed the principals want to be “1,000 percent” on the Kansas City unit before considering expansion.

He praised Levy’s established record in Kansas City for helping Backfire open successfully, including inviting the mayor, who presented Backfire with a key to the city and a mayoral proclamation.

“One of the strengths Levy has in Kansas City is that they run Arrowhead Stadium [home of the Kansas City Chiefs] and they know the market,” Schussler said. “When we gave away food [to promote Backfire], they were able to borrow equipment from existing facilities that’s the best that money can buy. A lone barbecue place maybe couldn’t have afforded to do that on its own. That’s great management and thought.”

Schussler Creative’s next project in the works at its laboratory in Minnesota is Aerobleu, to open at the New York New York resort and casino in Las Vegas. The concept will have an upscale, art-deco feel of a jazz club from the era around World War II.

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