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## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### CanWest lands deal for Canadian Top Chef

By Susan Krashinsky  
From Thursday's Globe and Mail

*Deal with NBC will début in spring of 2011 on company's specialty channel, Food Network Canada*

From bruléed lemon curd to cactus jelly doughnuts, the culinary competitors on the hit reality show *Top Chef* count on innovation to get ahead. But for the TV executives who bring such shows to the airwaves, sometimes an old recipe makes the most appetizing dish.

CanWest Global Communications Corp. announced Wednesday it has signed a deal with NBC Universal to produce a Canadian version of *Top Chef*, which will début in spring of 2011 on its specialty channel, Food Network Canada.

While broadcasters and specialty networks commonly buy the rights to broadcast popular American shows in Canada, it's the first time NBC has licensed a local version of one of its shows to be produced here.

Reconstituted television shows have become "very, very hot over the last five or six years," said John Brunton, president of Toronto-based Insight Productions, which will develop the show for CanWest. His company also worked on the now-defunct *Canadian Idol*, which aired on CTV for six seasons, and other adaptations of popular American shows, such as *Deal or No Deal Canada* and *Project Runway Canada*.

For Canadian media companies, it's a chance to capitalize on established success. Food Network Canada has aired six seasons of *Top Chef* and two seasons of its spinoff, *Top Chef Masters*. The premiere of the latest *Top Chef* brought in the biggest ratings Food Network Canada has seen in its history. The channel will run the Canadian version in between seasons of the American show, as a way to attract fans hankering for new episodes. Food Network Canada also regularly airs reruns of the show, which will be replete with promotions for the Canadian version.

"The show is so hot in the States, it raises awareness in Canada," said Karen Gelbart, senior vice president of content for CanWest's Lifestyle Channels. "It would be a tremendous promotional vehicle. We could use it to promote our casting calls, we could use it to promote our local version."

The terms of the deal were not disclosed. However, because the *Top Chef* franchise demands high production values, the show represents the largest financial investment the Food Network has ever made.

"It's a big show, it's a very big show. So just because of that, it's going to be a bigger commitment," said Leslie Merklinger, Director of Original Production at Food Network Canada.

But if the ratings match up to expectations, it could be worth the cost. A popular show can be used to cross-promote other offerings on the network, and feature lesser-known personalities, Ms. Gelbart said. Advertising deals are still in the works.

For NBC Universal, such local format agreements are attractive because they offer the opportunity to profit more widely from a popular show, while the cost of production is carried by the local producers.

A *Top Chef* for Brazil could theoretically stay on the air for years once its original is finished, and continue making money for its creators. The French version of the show saw great success in its first season, and NBC has done similar deals to format *Top Chef* for Greece, India, Mexico, Brazil, Finland, Sweden, and Australia.

In most cases, especially in Europe, local productions outpace imported ones in ratings most of the time, said Yvonne Pilkington, executive vice president of international format sales for NBC Universal.

"It's very appealing," she said.

Of course, it's unusual for a Canadian production to outperform a U.S. program, but Ms. Pilkington said Canada's distinct culture means there is an appetite for local versions of *Top Chef* - and possibly other NBC productions in the future.

"We're really excited," she said. "If it hits, it can only open the door for more."

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