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From makeover to takeover, Cheryl takes charge

August 27, 2012

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Colin and Justin

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Cheryl Torrenueva, Canadian makeover maven and all-round style beacon, is sitting in the kitchen of her Toronto loft looking relaxed and poised; quite an achievement for a woman who crams into one month more work, travel and excitement than most people see in a lifetime.

Yup, Cheryl is busy. Very busy. And that's just how she likes it. Indeed it's fair to describe the Ryerson-educated Ms T as a whirlwind, one that caught our attention six years ago when casting for an on-screen project manager to accompany us on our *Home Heist* juggernaut. We have no idea how many candidates we considered (dozens, from memory) but, each time we viewed a subject's tape, it compared less favourably to Cheryl's. And take it from us, we considered some supremely talented designers — Canada, after all, boasts a rich pedigree of creative talent.

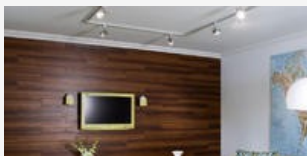
To cut a long story short, Cheryl got the job, and the rest, as they say, is history. Fifty-two glorious episodes later, the dye was cast; not only were we colleagues, we'd become close friends into the bargain.

Whenever time permitted, Cheryl also appeared on *Restaurant Makeover*, a popular Food Network Canada show that ran five seasons. Ms T's remit was to breathe new life into rundown restaurants, working alongside high-profile chefs such as Massimo Capra and Corbin Tomaszkeski.

With *Home Heist* complete, we travelled home to Britain, for a period, to film shows such as ITV's *Sixty-minute Makeover*, *I'm a Celebrity Get me out of Here* and *Home is Where the Heart is*. Cheryl, concurrently, turned her attentions to the U.S., a move that provided traction for her current Canadian opportunity.

"I shot a couple of American pilots, which didn't get picked up, but I didn't sweat it. I've always been a believer that stuff happens when the time's right."

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The room witnessed in our before shot is an utter moose and we're not just referring to the choice of horny-beast artwork.

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The right time, it transpired, lay just around the corner. Shortly thereafter, the team behind *Restaurant Impossible*, a U.S. show hosted by Robert Irvine, approached Cheryl to ask if she'd be interested in appearing as a guest designer. "It went so well I ended up doing a large chunk of the series."

But one particular episode stands out: "The White House Edition." The team worked with First Lady Michelle Obama to renovate the kitchen and create a dining room and community garden for a non-

profit community centre.

"It was lovely watching the kids anxiously waiting to see their new space," says Cheryl. "The secret service even turned up to make sure the First Lady was well-looked-after. I had to keep pinching myself; it was just so surreal."

After the reveal, Cheryl chewed the fat with Mrs. O, who purred her approval of the redesign. "If I live to be 100, I'll never forget that moment," Cheryl says. "Me, the girl from Scarborough, and Michelle Obama. Wow!"

"It was such a rewarding experience," she adds. "It wasn't just about making everything look cool; it was about saving businesses from closure. It was my biggest challenge ever, transforming The Horton's Children's Community Centre in Washington into a functional space for thousands of needy kids and families. And all at the behest of Michelle Obama."

Meanwhile, back on home territory, the production company who made *Restaurant Makeover* was approached to re-launch the popular show, albeit with a makeover all of its own. Renamed *Restaurant Takeover*, the plan was to re-engage selected players from the past few seasons (Cheryl and Massimo Capra, etc.) but to suffuse the mix with a few new names and a sequence of tweaks to freshen the format.

The show, we learn, teams chefs and designers to rescue troubled restaurants. Familiar stuff, perhaps, thus far. Then, with the help of hidden cameras, the drama amplifies as chefs and designers go undercover to reveal why business has faltered.

"The biggest challenge, aside from the new secret filming aspect, is the fact we're dealing with the actual livelihood of restaurateurs," says Cheryl. "They hand over a cheque for a maximum of \$15,000 and the show matches that figure. It's often the last money they have so we're really under pressure to make it work."

As we chat, Cheryl strides purposefully across her polished concrete floor, six-inch Gucci heels clicking rhythmically. Mesmerized by the impossibly high hooves, we regain our professional composure and ask about the differences, if any, between TV restaurant design and client restaurant projects, the latter being another field of business that keeps Cheryl busy.

"When it's a TV show, the owners haven't met me, so I'm basically sussing what's best without consultation. Or, as is the case with *Restaurant Takeover*, via covert cameras and a whole lot of spy work.

"My designs, on screen and off, are built to last but I rarely base decisions on trends or current fads. Choosing the wrong wallpaper can literally make or break a restaurant. If I dared use something too fancy — and the crowd was, say, more casual — then clearly there'd be a problem. Every decision is planned. I'm working for the restaurateur but, at the same time, trying to analyze what customers will appreciate."

We remember, from old-style *Restaurant Makeover*, regular spats between the show's various protagonists and we wonder if the same drama will apply now that T replaces M in the title.

"If there are animated discussions, as I prefer to call them, then it's because we're all so passionate about helping the owners," Cheryl says. "My vision must appeal to all the senses, so I'll take into account what the chef is doing to ensure each space reflects the overall flavour. It has to be right for the owners, clients and, of course, functional for staff."

And all this has to be completed in just six days?

"Yes, but I get along really well with Igor, so it always comes together." Ah yes, Igor: the show's long suffering contractor. "He's actually a sweetheart," assures Cheryl, "and crucial to the success of each project."

As an adjunct to her TV career, Cheryl also works with private clients and Toronto-based design firm C-Living Inc. Alongside father-and-daughter team Reza and Azadeh Banai, she's helping steer the launch of the company's new showroom in King East. The new address will provide a complimentary service to the existing Barber Green Road operation.

"C-Living is a major provider of contemporary design solutions for residential and commercial projects," explains Cheryl. "While space division is a particular forte, they're a true multi-discipline concern. We open in the fall but, in the meantime, we're enjoying seeing it all come together."

If you like seeing it all come together, and fancy a spot of epicurean high drama with your restaurant design, tune in to Food Network Canada and prepare for gastronomic and designer lift-off.

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• *Restaurant Takeover* premieres Thursday, Aug. 30 at 9 p.m. on Food Network Canada. Keep up with Cheryl at cheryltorrenueva.com.

• If you're interested in applying to be a part of *Restaurant Takeover*, direct inquiries to restaurants@triconfilms.com.

Colin McAllister and Justin Ryan are the hosts of HGTV's *Colin & Justin's Home Heist* and the authors of *Colin & Justin's Home Heist Style Guide*, published by Penguin Group (Canada). Follow them on Twitter [@colinjustin](https://twitter.com/colinjustin) or on Facebook ([ColinandJustin](https://www.facebook.com/ColinandJustin)). Check out their new product ranges at candjhome.co.uk. Contact them through their website colinandjustin.tv.

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