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Creating gourmet meals with a West Coast touch that customers just have to finish off are chef, Damian Connolly (left), and owners Brent Kyle and Tammy Siu of the business called Indishpensable.

# U.S. meal-preparation chain brings operation to Canada

**WHAT'S COOKING** | Dinners Ready of Seattle to have 15 locations here in next year or so

BY JOANNE LEE-YOUNG  
VANCOUVER SUN

Just as the Starbucks revolution sparked a new way for retailing coffee, there is another business concept with Seattle roots that has spread like wildfire across the U.S.

So-called meal preparation stores basically market relief from the daily drudgery of serving healthy dinners. They plan menus, get groceries, wash the food, measure out the spices and clean up all the pots and pans so that customers can walk in, busy themselves for an hour — mostly by mixing marinades and sealing food into giant Ziploc bags — and then waltz out with a week's worth of dinners to plunk into the freezer.

In the past several years, a number of B.C. entrepreneurs have launched their own version of this concept. The first meal prep business in Canada is reputed to have been Kelowna's Dinner Solutions. Later, Sensational Suppers and Dinner Works both opened in Vancouver and then added one or two other locations each, covering Langley, North Vancouver and Abbotsford.

Now, however, as local businesses such as these work to tell customers what they are all about, and some expand their

budding list of franchise operators, they face competition from an American chain that is blasting into B.C. with 15 new locations within the next year or so.

"This all started in Seattle about five years ago," said Terry Reid, who oversees Canadian franchises at Dinners Ready, a Mountlake Terrace, Wash., meal prep company that is the fifth largest in the U.S. by number of locations. "We are opening one location in Langley next to Willowbrook Mall and one in Burnaby on Marine Way, but we are aiming for a total of 15 in B.C., branching from the Lower Mainland to Vancouver Island and also the Okanagan."

It remains to be seen how the arrival of a much larger American chain will impact the relatively nascent, mom-and-pop landscape that currently exists in B.C. But for an idea of what this first foothold might spark, consider the pace of the industry's growth in the U.S.

The Easy Meal Prep Association, based in Cheyenne, Wyo., lists some 1,440 of these businesses by location across North America. There are only five in Alaska and 10 in Alabama (12 are listed for B.C.), but there are more than 160 in California. Some company names account for one or two locations. Others are much larger, like Dinners Ready, which has

almost 60. Two of the biggest chains, Dream Dinners and Super Suppers, each have more than 100 outlets.

The segment is not only growing quickly by number of stores, but also in sales. According to the EMPA, industry revenue has risen from \$7.2 million in 2003 to \$117 million in 2005. Its projections for 2007 soar to \$504 million.

Shannon Eddy, who started running Dinners Ready's first Canadian franchise in North Vancouver in March this year, first got hooked as a customer after visiting her sister who lives in Washington. "I was having my first baby and she said to me, 'You're having a baby,' you have to go to Dinners Ready. We would go there and then have all this food ready."

Later, Eddy wanted to bring the experience home to B.C. and run her own business. There were a few independent options, but she opted for a Dinners Ready franchise "because they have extensive experience and a map of how to set the business."

Most homegrown, B.C. meal prep operators steadfastly believe that they can compete against the entry of an American chain like Dinners Ready by emphasizing their ability to better read the whims and wishes of a local market.

"I have some doubts about how an American menu will translate to Canadians. We know how to word things. We know the importance to B.C. customers of something like

having wild sockeye salmon. We're close to the Fraser Valley and know about other nearby sources of organic and free-range chicken," said Chris Roscoe, co-owner of Dinner Works.

Indishpensable, another homegrown meal prep business, takes this focus even further, homing in on particular West Coast sensibilities when it comes to food.

"We listened to what people told us," said co-owner Brent Kyle. "They don't want to plan meals ahead of time and freeze them. We offer everything ready and fresh to go in a bag. They take it home and just assemble. There is no freezer step."

Also, "we don't buy ingredients from big wholesalers. Instead, we go to the little butcher shop that they want to go to, but don't have time to ... a great little produce market, seafood right off the fishing boats at Granville Island."

While other businesses may switch their menu seasonally, Indishpensable rotates every six weeks.

"We're not at all worried about competition from American franchises like Dinners Ready coming to Vancouver," added Kyle later in an email. "They don't understand the Vancouver market the way that Vancouverites do. Our chefs design our recipes in-house to specifically appeal to the sophisticated tastes of Vancouver."

[jlee-young@png.canwest.com](mailto:jlee-young@png.canwest.com)