

FROM 'CAKE' TO 'LOVE,' HIGH NOON FINDS THE RIGHT RECIPE FOR HITS

High Noon Entertainment has left a distinctive mark on reality TV during its 20 years in the business. With a mission statement that promises to “discover unknown breakout characters, create entertaining formats around them and tell their stories with authenticity, heart, and a healthy dose of humor,” the company managed to find success while eschewing many of the genre’s most lowbrow tropes. *Variety* got the stories behind three signature series — the mouth-watering “Cake Boss,” inspiring “Fixer Upper,” and invigorating “Tough Love” — that helped establish High Noon as a true force in the world of unscripted television. **RANDEE DAWN**

CAKE BOSS

TLC

1 Buddy Valastro and his eclectic family, owners of the 116-year-old Hoboken, N.J.-based Italian-American Carlo’s Bake Shop create cake confections while dealing with family and employee relationships. **Inspiration:** While competing on “Food Network Challenge” in 2007, Valastro emerged as a perfect reality star: charismatic, hyper-verbal, and funny. Plus, he really knew his way around a cake and had a genially chaotic home environment. TLC showed interest and Valastro pushed for the production to be done at High Noon. “They said it was the best pilot they ever saw and ordered 13 episodes and it aired in 2009 and boom, that was it,” says Valastro, who has now shot his 200th episode and spun off multiple shows.

Breakthrough Moment: “Once I saw the line to the bakery, I said, ‘We’re on to something here,’” says Valastro. Adds TLC president and general manager Nancy Daniels, “It was a good mix of family, and process — the cake builds. Buddy comes off as this blue-collar Jersey guy, which he is, but he’s also a true artist.” **Legacy:** Though far from the first, the docu-soap format achieved surprising heights with “Cake Boss,” and proved highly exportable. The series is seen in more than 220 territories worldwide. “We’re not trashy TV,” says Valastro.

FIXER UPPER

HGTV

2 With three wildly successful seasons now under their belts, husband-and-wife team Chip and Joanna Gaines help homebuyers purchase fixer-upper houses and turn them into the home of their dreams. **Inspiration:** Buying a home might prove stressful for most couples, but for the Gaines it turned out to be a ticket to stardom. The Waco, Texas-based pair, who had fixed up more than 100 homes together before the show even started, were scouted by High Noon. Then, says Chip Gaines, HGTV “put their own spin” on the concept. “I like to joke that the three of us got together and had a baby,” he laughs. Today, the show is heading into its fourth season and attracts more than 3 million live plus same-day viewers for each episode.

Breakthrough Moment: According to Gaines, it was when he scarfed down a cockroach in a video that went viral after being challenged. “I’m like, I’ve done a whole lot worse for a whole lot less,” he says. “People are like, ‘This guy’s like my neighbor! He’s like my uncle!’” **Legacy:** Much like a lot of Scripps/HGTV programming, “Fixer Upper” is rarely about the stunt (cockroach aside) and more about information. “It reminds us all that healthy television can be fun to watch,” Gaines says. “I hope some of that organic authenticity is what makes our show great.”



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TOUGH LOVE

VH1

3 For six seasons, Philadelphia-based Master Matchmakers CEO Steve Ward and his mom, JoAnn, advised singletons and couples about relationship difficulties. **Inspiration:** “Obsessed” with the book “He’s Just Not That Into You” in 2007, then-exec VP West Coast Pam Healey, now

general manager at Shed Media, zeroed in on the Wards. “VH1 pitched back: ‘What if we make it a love rehab element?’” she says. “People needed brutally honest feedback about what they were doing, right and wrong.” **Breakthrough Moment:** According to Healey, it was the pilot. “Steve has a gift, he and his mom, of matching and working with people,” she says. The show started out with single women,

and the authenticity of Steve’s advice had immediate appeal. **Legacy:** “Tough Love” eschewed the then-popular format of people living in a home together, with one going home each week. “Having a big, bold voice at the center of it, there wasn’t a lot of that on the air. But it wasn’t confrontational: We were trying to change people’s lives. I was trying to bring romantic comedy to unscripted,” says Healey.