

Practical but symbolic, too

Tie one on for Julia Child.

As the movie *Julie & Julia* hits theatres tomorrow, the once potent symbol of pre-feminist oppression – the apron – may turn into something less politically charged: a fashion trend.

These are not the novelty "King of the Grill" aprons worn by men at family barbecues.

These aprons, tied neatly at the waist, often flounced and ruffled and trimmed in contrasting rickrack, are for women. And they are experiencing a comeback.

In some cases, they are returning with their sexist undercurrents intact.

In Toronto, Jessica Gedge and Vanessa Lee of Domistyle Gifts specialize in contemporary aprons with such embroidered messages as "Will Cook for Shoes" and "Caution: Hot Dish."

Gedge and Lee, who started their company in 2003, sell their modern aprons and matching oven mitts

through their website, at retail outlets across North America and at trade shows including the One of a Kind Show.

Gedge says the explosion in television cooking shows and the downturn in the economy has more people entertaining at home. And that's boosting business, she says.



Jessica Gedge, left, and Vanessa Lee of Toronto's Domistyle Gifts model aprons. At far left, pearls and an apron help Meryl Streep channel Julia Child. Above, retro aprons from thepepperkids.com.

It's hard to know if people are actually cooking more, but it's apparent they at least want to look the part. This week's cover of the *New York Times Magazine* features a story by Michael Pollan who comments that our interest in watching food television shows has not translated into more home cooking.

While The Food Network can be seen in nearly 100 million homes and chefs are superstars, the household oven sits idle.

Credit for the interest in aprons may in fact go to other television shows such as *Desperate Housewives*, in particular the character Bree Van de Kamp played by Marcia Cross, as well as those domestic scenes from the set-in-the-'60s *Mad Men*, that are triggering a resurgence in the once reviled "pinny."

Much has been written on the subject of aprons – acknowledged by DIY sewing experts as the perfect beginner project.

Read *Aprons: Icons of the American Home* by Joyce Cheney, who lumps aprons in with other such hearth and home commodities as picket fences and apple pie. Cheney, who also produced a long-running travelling exhibit on aprons, called *Apron Strings: Ties to the Past*, acknowledges that the apron is fraught with meaning.

They are a nostalgic connection to the past, she wrote. They are complex symbols of status, occupation and oppression.

They are also "something we wear to keep our clothes from getting dirty."

Aprons are particularly meaningful in certain fundamentalist religious sects. And they are sexually charged in some cultures – the French maid's costume, for example.

They've even surfaced periodically on runways as fashion accessory.

Other apron-centred literature includes *Gingham Aprons of the 40s and 50s*; *Aprons of the Mid-20th Century*; *Apronisms* (a book of homemade pocket wisdom), and *A is for Apron*.

Mika Bareket is the owner of Good Egg, a cookbook store in Kensington Market dedicated to food culture where aprons figure prominently.

"It's simply become more fashionable to cook," she says.

Bareket carries a variety of aprons from the boisterous Marimekko line, made in Finland, to the Sabre collection from France – usually revealed in simple stripes and polka dots.

As well, the shop carries aprons for men and kids – a gentle invitation to them to grab a knife and start chopping.

The apron, whether it's worn by a man or a woman, "is fraught with meaning," says Patricia Bentley, senior curator at the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto.

"It is heavily endowed with gender symbolism."

As a cultural historian, Bentley is pleased this recent reincarnation of the apron is approached with irony.

"It's a positive sign," she says.

"It's the irony that makes it acceptable."

CAUSING A STIR

Significance of aprons tied up in knots

Julia Child movie prompts the question: Symbol of oppression or ironic accessory?

DAVID GRAHAM
FASHION EDITOR

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