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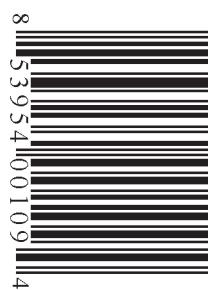
Morphy will offer impressive collection

National Page 1



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National Page 1



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Above (1): "The choice is yours!" And three pigs represent rare, medium, and well-done. This is one Bucci considers a favorite among favorites. **Above (2):** Love that "Patio Chef!" **Above (3):** This perky cowgirl with Marilyn Monroe hair might have been rated "PG" in a nostalgic world that was generally "G"-rated. **Above (4):** Ooh-la-la! Poodles were a popular mid-century motif, so it shouldn't be surprising that they land on the front of an apron. (Images courtesy Jimmie Bucci)

Fire up the grill and don a festive barbecue apron

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM



"Let's have a barbecue." Guys work at the grill so their women can catch up on the neighborhood gossip.

On Mother's Day, Mom is Queen for a Day – breakfast in bed, followed by a shower of gifts and daylong pampering. And then, on this, the busiest day of the year for the restaurant industry, she is treated to a dinner that is cooked and served by someone else, who is also responsible for the cleanup.

Flip the calendar page and, just a few weeks later, Dad celebrates his day, the third Sunday of June, by putting on an apron and cooking his own dinner. So what's with the King of the Grill?

Since time immemorial men have cooked raw meat over hot flames, continuing the tradition in more recent times and doing the honors on family picnics and camping trips. Further, men in aprons is nothing new: For centuries, those associated with various trades (including blacksmiths, stonemasons, and carpenters) have protected their clothing with tie-on coverings, often color-coded to identify their guild.

But after World War II, backyard cookouts took on a new dimension, in part due to the contributions of George Stephen and his invention of the Weber kettle. Because grilling is part cooking and part showmanship – and in keeping with a general post-war spirit of optimism – so-called "barbecue aprons" became desirable weekend wear for male suburbanites. Today, as interest in mid-century artifacts continues to swell, collectors, particularly those with a sense of humor and an appreciation of kitsch, are snapping up these vintage garments.

And once again, these often-amusing aprons are delighting backyard partiers. One such collector is Jimmie Bucci, collector extraordinaire, who spotted his first barbecue apron in a thrift shop. The Massachusetts resident recalled buying it for a few dollars and wearing it the next time he was manning the grill.

"I thought, 'It'll be a hit,' and it was," he said. On subsequent collecting forays, he discovered some more and picked them up. The next thing he knew, he was actively collecting barbecue aprons.

Bucci explained these aprons were in their heyday during the 1950s and '60s, but gradually died out in the 1970s. Some were functional in nature. Others were branded, distributed as premiums and advertising products; Bucci described one that pictured Speedy Alka-Seltzer, subtly (or not so subtly) questioning the cook's abilities. And then there are the aprons that show Dad consulting a cookbook.

But the vast majority of aprons were comical in nature, and the more outlandish, the better. Bucci has examples still in their original packaging that indicate they were often marketed as "gag gifts," Father's Day presents "for the man who has everything." The fact that unopened aprons still exist suggests that not every original recipient were thrilled with his gift.

According to Bucci, a recurring theme is "men burn stuff." The chef is often declared "King for a Day," "Master Chef," "Big Daddy," or "Hot Stuff." With a nod to the times, many aprons have a cowboy theme, with campfires and chuck wagons. Some examples feature pictures of guys in aprons, the collector continued; a personal favorite bears the image of a guy wearing an apron with the same image – a triple mirror, so to speak.

Finally, many of the aprons picture the ideal outdoor barbecue scene. Some of them pose the question: "How would you like yours done?" Perhaps best illustrating this is the apron that portrays a beauty pageant ("The choice is yours") with pigs sporting

SEE APRONS ON PAGE 15



Above Left: Bucci's fascination with barbecue aprons extends to matching accessories, including serving trays, napkins, and plates. **Above Middle:** Who would imagine portraying the man at the grill as the director of a chorus line of hotdogs? When it comes to barbecue aprons, the more absurd, the better. **Above Right:** Even Barbie and Ken got in on the backyard grill craze.



Above: Call him "King for a Day" or "Big Daddy," men in the 1950s and '60s donned these "gag gifts" when participating in a backyard ritual.

Below: The anthropomorphism of hotdogs is a popular theme.



Below Left: Cowboys were big in the 1950s (think Cheyenne, Gunsmoke, and Sugarfoot), so it's only natural that they would find their way to cook-out togs. **Below Right:** Sometimes the man at the grill was also the man at the bar. Note the doll wearing a similar apron.



Aprons

FROM FRONT PAGE

sashes ("rare," "medium," and "well") and dressed in complementary bathing suits (red, pink, and black). And then there's the apron that features a seated director, donning a chef's cap and ogling a chorus line of high-kicking hotdogs on the grill.

Animals are often pictured on aprons; Bucci is particularly amused when pigs and cows, the source of the meat being grilled, are pictured. Dogs might be seen in conjunction with hotdogs. Meanwhile, aprons with poodles are appealing to not just apron collectors but also poodle collectors. One particular favorite ("C'est si bon") features a poodle with a chef's cap on his head and a cooking spoon in his mouth.

And then there are the aprons that are, in Bucci's words, "a little risqué" ("zippers are common") – which he pointed out are fairly tame compared to modern standards.

As for style, although some examples are half-aprons, most of them are full-sized with a loop worn around the neck and a tie at the waist. These vintage garments were made of cotton and usually had a white background ("impractical," Bucci declared). Because they were generally intended as a novelty gift, they do not launder well and the graphics fade. On the other hand, Bucci said they "lose their punch" and are not quite as funny the second time they are worn.

Often sold in plastic packages or boxes, they were sometimes accompanied by coordinating toques. Matching tea towels were also produced.

"Really good" examples can be purchased for as little as \$10 to \$20,

although a "special" example (Bucci has a soft spot for poodles) might realize \$20 or more. The more absurd, the better. As for condition, he believes a few stains are acceptable, but he tends not to purchase ones that are "ripped and torn."

At last count, Bucci owned at least 77 aprons (he knows some are still lurking in his basement). He regularly culls through them, upgrading his collection when he finds duplicates.

No longer relegated to thrift shops, barbecue aprons now turn up at antique malls, "especially this time of year," he said. As it turns out, some barbecue aprons are signed, especially those made by Barth & Dreyfuss of California; Parvin is another company that produced collectable barbecue aprons.

This collecting category is so appealing to Bucci that he has not limited himself to aprons; he also can't resist any item that pictures men in barbecue aprons. Along these lines, he owns an outdoor coffeepot, small potholders, and metal serving trays that reflect the theme. And then there are those mid-century male dolls (think Ken and Jeff) whose wardrobes included backyard attire.

In addition to wearing his aprons, Bucci loves to display his favorites, both indoors and outside around his grill. As president of the Vintage Tablecloth Collectors Club, he appreciates the unique place men's barbecue aprons holds in the world of vintage wares. "There are not too many linens geared to men," he concluded. "These are a lot of fun. They recall a nostalgic time, whether it was real or idealized, of happy families and friends."

And, they make him – and his friends – laugh.



Above: Meat on the grill was often seen in its original form on the front of the cook's apron. Note the blue ribbon and real bell on this example.

Below: Mid-century barbecue aprons were often made of white cotton and did not launder well. But then, most of them were intended for a one-time appearance by the grill.

