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Tablecloths are Masters of Disguise



Photo courtesy of Deborah Payne

Clever tablecloths provide decoration and table protection, be they easy-wash material or fine linen.

Count tablecloths among a home's iconic features. Vintage or new, they've cloaked tables for centuries, elevating mundane meals and brightening the countenances of those gathered around them.

"Every mood, party or holiday starts with a tablecloth," said Teresa Stone, the Washington-based secretary of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club. "It can change a room from spring to summer, Thanksgiving to Christmas as quickly as it takes to unfold and float it onto the table."

The nonprofit VTLC preserves an important piece of American history in the form of kitchen textile art, said Stone, whose trove spans the 1920s to the 1950s. Her rarest pieces are part of the 1,300-piece digital collection housed on the club's website. She covers her dining room table, a side table and porch dining table and regularly rotates the cloths. In the fall, when her garden harvest is in full swing, Stone displays a tablecloth with jam jars and other preserved foods, which reminds her to "keep on canning." She places cloths in a cupboard, on a display ladder and along a second-story railing in her home.

"In late winter when things are so dreary, changing the tablecloth can brighten up your whole outlook," said Deborah Payne, the North Carolina-based vice president and treasurer of VTLC who owns Damask cloths from the 1920s and printed styles from the early 1940s. Payne uses every one and showcases her collection on bakers' racks in her den.

"If I am making a Southwestern dish, I use my Southwest or Mexican cloths," Payne said. "For cocktail parties, I use the Wilendur Liquor Labels cloth."

Jimmie Bucci, guest relations specialist for Not Your Average Joe's in Massachusetts, was the VTLC's first male member and now serves as president.

"There's something nostalgic and homey about a vintage tablecloth that really ties a table and a whole room together and they certainly are a conversation starter," Bucci said.

Bucci's interest in tablecloths was piqued by one his grandmother used when company visited. His 1930s-to-1970s collection includes novelty cloths and 100-plus Christmas motifs. Some have been used as window valances and to top his dining room buffet and dressers.

"I try and use them all, except for some that are Mint With Tag (MWT), which means the original paper label and sometimes even the price tag is still attached," Bucci said.

The Picket Fence — a gold mine of stylish modern cloths in Ketchum, Idaho, and online — features Sferra's Festival table linen collection (101 colors); Matouk (neutrals); and Lowell and Mirasol (accent colors).

Rabbi Michael Datz, of Illinois, has used tablecloths for years. For autumn settings, he brings out green and gold coverings. His mother gave him a white Irish linen tablecloth and two cloths she embroidered. He covers his glass-topped table for Shabbat, holiday and formal dinners.

"There are occasions when a tablecloth gives a more finished look and allows you to squeeze more people around a table than with placemats," Datz said. "Of course I iron them. Twice, in fact. Once when they come out of the wash and again when I spread one on the table. Need to get rid of those creases and folds."

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Resources:

The Picket Fence - thepickettfence.com

Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club - vintagetableclothclub.com

Matouk - matouk.com

Sferra - sferra.com

Free tablecloth guide at graciousstyle.com