

Busting Out

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"Oh, you had such promise. Voluptuous, yet chaste. Sturdy, but with a delicate blue tracery hinting of summer flowers. When I first saw you, with your ample cup, I thought I had found my match. Little did I know, it was all a surface charm. You itched. Your every seam drove me mad. The blue band, so lovely, chafed a rough pink line on my ribcage. Your padded cups made me sweat. And, the greatest disappointment of all: you rode up. In back and in front. Your early demise was a relief. It's hard to admit, but I see now: you were a bra of empty promises. Rest in peace, and leave me to search for the comfort and support I deserve."

So reads one woman's submission to the online Bra-soleum, created by Seattle author Elisabeth Dale as "a place to memorialize (or bury) your adored or detested bras." Next to the description is a photograph of an innocent looking baby-blue brassiere.

Although women have worn bras as we have known them for 70 years, a good bra remains hard to find. Bras have inspired desire, ire and irreverent art, and it's a wonder that half a metre of fabric can stimulate so much passion. From the frustration women feel in failing to find the right bra to the elation they experience when they've hooked a good one, the bra is much more than a garment. It's an evolving structural engineering project with a sociopolitical history.

Where did the bra begin? How has it changed over the years? And what is it about bras that women want to get off their chests?

To find out, I emailed a survey about bras and bra shopping to 30 family members and friends. Never has a mass query of mine garnered such an intense response.

"I hate underwire. I hate padding. I hate frills and shit. In short, I hate bras," one woman declared.

Talking about bras in a public forum is touchy enough that one woman in a lingerie shop I visited refused to give me her exact age, let alone her name. And almost no one among those surveyed, who ranged from their 20s to their 60s, wanted to be publicly identified.

I asked them why finding a good bra is so hard.

"I think it is because the industry caters to very specific shapes and sizes that mostly don't exist," one friend replied. "If I can get a nice looking bra in my size (you can get a 34D off the rack but not a 40B) then the underwire digs in at that unbelievably soft spot under your arm or the shoulder strap falls down. If you get one that fits well it looks like something used to restrain patients in a mental ward."

Another added: "No one has ever offered me help [fitting a bra], not even my mom. Is it taboo?"



Dead Bra Day celebrations
In 2004, Dead Bra Day celebrants in Nova Scotia strung their castoffs from a flagpole.
Photo courtesy Susan Balkam

I decided to find out more. My mother who dresses 36Ds waxed lyrical about a sheer black bra, which she wears infrequently to preserve it. She also loves her retired hot pink "lucky" bra and a racy red number that no longer fits.

She came to ponder bras early in life. "I remember when I was young, a photographer friend of my parents had a large picture in the hallway of a very classic bra. Egg foam cups suspended in a white background. In each cup was a grapefruit. They looked like they had been trying to fall and got caught, their freedom captured by lace and satin. I was drawn to the photo and hated that 'trapped' feeling at the same time."

So when did the entrapment begin?

"The term 'brassiere' was used commercially for the first time by the De Bevoise brassiere company in the United States [in 1908]," says local clothing historian Ivan Sayers.

His earliest specimen, which dates between 1909 and 1911, hardly resembles the over-the-shoulder-boulder-holders or pebble cups women wear today. The white cotton garment looks more like an apron dress with metal boning and previous models were typically fastened with hooks or buttons down the centre front.

From the 1500s to the 1800s, breasts depended on corsets to keep them aloft. Shifts cinched beneath them provided shaping and support.

In the early 1900s, women sought political and physical emancipation.

"This introduction of an undergarment that's a combination of a corset and a shift was probably seen as quite radical and very modern, and for many women, very liberated," says Sayers from his Kensington-Cedar Cottage home, which is chockablock with pristine and battered treasures.

In the 1920s, women flattened their breasts with taut, shoulder-strap bandeaux.

"During the war, Canada, and certainly many other countries, decided to give the vote to women," Sayers says. "They had proven their abilities physically and intellectually, so this idea of making the figure invisible was appropriate because it was their intellect that was becoming more important than their body."

From the 1930s to the 1950s, fashions increasingly emphasized the bust. By 1939, the Warner Brothers Corset Company had introduced cup sizes and the 1950s saw the torpedo bra emerge.

One survey respondent, a 34-year-old Vancouver-based graphic designer, expressed a saucy appreciation for the mid-century style.

"I have this vintage bra from the 1950s which I wear when I run out of horizontal surfaces on which to place snacks. Those were the days when it was important to have a time lapse between when your boobs and you entered a room," she told me. But not all her bras earn such respect: "I have one hideous cotton thing which has an actual texture (some kind of waffle-weave which makes my boobs look like they've been tenderized)."

The waffle bra could be a candidate for Elisabeth Dale's online Bra-soleum, a space to "mammorialize" uplifting and depressing bras.

"We've all got bras we hate, and let's face it, we've all got a favourite bra that's usually pretty butt ugly but we love to wear it because it's our most comfortable," Dale says on the phone from Seattle. "I thought this way we get to celebrate that or we get to take out our aggressions on a bra that's made us miserable."

Dale began focusing on breasts two years ago. The daughter of a breast cancer survivor and mother of three had had a breast lift and wrote a "mammoir" about how her breasts had morphed from the time she was a teenager to her late 40s. She met women who told her their own stories, which she collected for a book.

But her research convinced Dale to flesh out the personal tales with hard information. Her book *bOObs: A Guide to Your Girls* is due out this fall.

"We all wear the wrong size bra, and 89 per cent of us overestimate our risk of breast cancer, and eight out of 10 of us won't give ourselves a breast self-examine every month," she says. "So I figured well we don't know how to dress them, we're scared of them and we won't touch them, what's up with that?"

A similar realization prompted Sue Richards to publish the first *Breast of Canada* calendar in 2002.

Each month features an artistic photo of breasts along with basic information. The net proceeds of calendar sales go to the Canadian Breast Cancer Network. Her 2003 calendar declared Feb. 13 *Dead Bra Day*.

"It really is meant to be funny and draw a little attention to how we treat ourselves as women-which isn't always very nice-and to be positive," says Richards, a 48-year-old Guelph, Ont. woman.

"I had an embarrassing amount of dead bras in my underwear drawer. I had silly things in my mind like I'll keep this bra for when I'm doing renovations," she says. "As if I'm going to be doing them in my bra. And why would I subject my breasts to such cruel treatment?"

Richards thought that in the lead up to that other big relationship day, women may want to re-evaluate their bonds with their bras, celebrate the ones that supported them and give those that made their lives miserable the heave ho.

Because women sometimes receive lingerie from their lovers on Valentine's Day, Richards figured Feb. 13 would be the perfect time to clear out the old.

Richards describes a deceased bra fit for the *Bra-soleum* this way: "Usually stretched beyond return. There's a distinct colour, a change of hue so to speak, leading itself toward the greyish tone. Occasionally there are safety pins involved. I even had one that had a knot in it-I'd tied it together_ If you put it on, it more resembles a sock than it does a bras-siere."

Word of *Dead Bra Day* spread and in 2004, she received photos from a *Dead Bra Day* celebration in Nova Scotia.

"They had 35 or 40 bras and they strung them up a flagpole and it was quite a windy day."

A photo on the *Breast of Canada* website shows a long line of bras fluttering beneath a Canadian flag.

"They gave out awards for the most dead bra, had some chocolate treats and a couple of drinks and toasted their dead bras, told *Dead Bra Day* stories and generally had a riot," says Richards.

She also received a photo of a now extinguished bra fence in New Zealand, which created controversy for years.

During the Christmas holidays of 1999, four bras were strung from a fence near Queenstown on New Zealand's southern island, apparently for a laugh. By the following February, 60 bras hung from the fence. Then someone stole them. After the incident was reported nationwide, a new influx of bras poured in and by October, 200 bras festooned the fence. When the fence-at that point a tourist attraction-was pillaged again, it caught the attention of reporters world-wide. The river of bras became a flood, with the majority added by passing tourists. Parking bays were installed and the bra fence was used in fundraisers, school assignments and as a memorial site for grieving husbands who wanted to remember their wives as fun-loving people.

But some locals viewed the tourist attraction as an embarrassment. In April 2006, after discovering the fence rested on public road reserve, the local council determined the fence was a traffic hazard and an eyesore and ordered the bras removed. Last September, more than 1,500 bras were taken down.

While quirky bra news travels far, bra basics have taken ages to catch on.

"Women are hungry for information about bras," says Diane Thomson, president of Dianas Lingerie, from her sweet-scented office above her South Granville shop.

With 24 years in the bra business and 7,500 bras in stock, Thomson knows a thing or two about the bits that bind us.

Bra sizes are-theoretically-based on two measurements. The number denotes the band size, based on the circumference of the ribcage directly beneath a woman's bust, and the letter denotes measurement of the fullest part of the bust relative to the band size. If there's a one inch difference between the two measurements, the woman would need an A cup. A difference of four inches would call for a D. Dianas carries bras sized 30 AA to 56 J, priced from \$37 to more than \$200.

Previously most women wore a 34 or 36B, Thomson says, but now 34C, 36D and 38D are the most common sizes.

"Poor eating habits, as well as breast implants and the estrogens in birth-control pills, have led to an increase in the past 15 years," says a 2005 article in the American science magazine Discover. "For many women, this has been a burdensome trend. A pair of D-cup breasts weighs between 15 and 23 pounds-the equivalent of carrying around two small turkeys."

Thomson recommends women get fitted for a bra at least once a year because hormones, pregnancy, breastfeeding, sickness, medications and lifestyle cause sizes to fluctuate.

She says a bra should be fit to the middle hook so if its wearer gains or loses seven to 10 pounds, it should still fit.

The band on a properly fitting bra sits flat beneath the breast, parallel to the floor. If it rides up at the back, the band could be too large. The front centre of the garment should sit flat against the breast bone, and the underwire needs to clear the back of the breast tissue near the underarm. Breasts should not bulge from the cups, nor should cups wrinkle. The wearer should be able to slip one finger comfortably under a strap and feel some tension. Straps should be vertical, front and back. The fullest part of the bust should fall midway between the shoulder and the elbow.

Eighty per cent of Dianas' bras are underwire and Thomson says they offer the best support. Her boutique sells bras designed in France, Belgium and North America-Thomson says European bras fit better and last longer. To get the most out of these usually synthetic garments, bras should be rinsed, if not gently washed, after every couple of wearings because the body's oils break down the elasticity.

Thomson says every woman should own four bras: a black bra for dark clothes, a cream or white bra for light clothes, a sexy bra and a sports bra. Women who jump up and down need a sports bra that extends to their upper sternum, otherwise stretch marks can form, she says. Properly cared for, they should last a year.

A properly fitting bra not only raises a woman's profile, it can also take a load off her neck and back says Deborah Cheyroux, a fitter and operations manager for Dianas.

"I've had women just break down and cry because they haven't been able to take a deep breath in 10 years because the breasts are sitting on their diaphragm shrinking the amount of oxygen intake that they can get," she says. "Their whole health is affected."

With the quest for a good bra so frustrating, it's no surprise many women cling to threadbare favourites.

The women who responded to my survey reported spending an average of \$35 on a bra. Only three find bra shopping easy, while 14 said finding an attractive, comfortable and well-fitting bra is arduous.

"There has been many a time where I've felt almost frantic," said one young woman.

"There is not much consistency for sizing between manufacturers, or even under one manufacturer but between styles. This means you always have to try them on, usually in multiples sizes—a process that can be time consuming and frustrating," said one mother. "Most of the department stores don't have someone helping you, which means if you guess wrong on your size, you have to fully dress to exchange a size—if they have it in stock. The last time I bra shopped, I had about 30 bras, two children pulling each other's hair in a cart outside my change room, no salesperson anywhere, and I was completely stressed as I did an insane marathon of trying them all on."

Says a 30-year-old administrative assistant: "I am a low-maintenance woman who would rather spend my time reading. I feel it is a mundane chore, part of my upkeep as a woman. Not as devastating as bathing suit shopping, but not as tedious as buying curtains, either."

One described maternity bras as "sucky ugly," while at least two complained about the proliferation of padded bras.

"Wearing a padded bra just seems to say, 'Hey, look at me. I'm wearing a padded bra. That's right: I don't think my boobs are big enough,'" said a federal public servant.

Although Thomson says large-chested ladies have had a harder time finding a supportive bra, those with more diminutive "girls" also expressed frustration.

"I'm a 36-year-old, 5'10", 130-pound woman (dancer for fun, accountant for money) who has trouble finding a bra small enough for me," one wrote. "I'm a size 36A. It's easy to find a 32A bra, but good luck finding a 36A. I have broad shoulders and a pretty large chest cavity, but bra manufacturers always assume that if you have small boobs, you must have a small frame. Not in my case."

Another said that until she found a brand that suits her, shopping for a bra triggered "severe feelings of boob inadequacy."

And another said she usually leaves shops "feeling slightly dispirited and unfeminine after gawking at all the lovely things that simply do not fit on my body."

Making bras for women with generous chests is the fastest growing segment of bra manufacturing, says Seattle's Dale.

"Everyone is making larger bras because, guess what, women with large breasts buy more bras than women with small breasts. I wonder why that is? Obviously, they need more support. But, typically, in the past, they haven't gotten that."

Eve Grenier, president of C.J. Grenier Ltd., a lingerie company founded in 1863 and one of the few bra makers in Canada, says her designers are struggling with this weighty challenge.

"The weight of the breast has to be redistributed so it's not only the shoulder strap that's doing the whole work, because if the shoulder strap would be the main anchor point, then it would dig too much into the shoulders," she says from her office in Montreal.

She describes a bra as a technical garment typically comprising 30 different pieces.

"Each of these pieces are joined often with just 1/16th of an inch," she says. "So you can appreciate that each of them has to be perfectly cut so that it marries perfectly with the other parts."

Grenier bras are sold in boutiques like Dianes across North America. Grenier says customer comments have influenced their designs and that its cotton and seamless styles were developed to meet consumer demands.

Engineering is a key concern of Maria Monti, owner of Abbotsford-based The Healthy Bra Company.

Her models don't include underwire but offer support with a shelf of fabric beneath the breast and a cantilever system that eases weight from the shoulders.

"It goes back to the days when Howard Hughes was making bras for Jane Russell and they were all looking at aviation and it was from this structural engineering that they got created," she says.

Monti says if breasts are not adequately supported, front ligaments can stretch, straining shoulder and back muscles.

She established The Healthy Bra Company in B.C. in 2005. She visits trade shows and offices of chiropractors, naturopaths and massage therapists to sell her bras, which go for \$80 to \$135.

She says no two breasts are alike, not even on one woman's body where one breast is always larger than the other. She also says cosmetic surgeons are creating a new variety of breast with squared off ends that have trouble filling her cups.

The tall and curvaceous, auburn haired, self-described postural therapist wheeled three suitcases containing 500 bras into the Courier office for our interview. She claims to offer 1,800 sizes in eight styles.

While Monti, like the owner of Dianes, believes a supportive bra is a building block of good posture, she also believes underwire can obstruct lymph drainage and the flow of chi along the body's energy meridians.

The 1995 book *Dressed to Kill: The Link Between Breast Cancer and Bras* argued tight bras could inhibit proper functioning of the lymphatic system, which fights infection and disease, and lead to a buildup of toxins.

But Richard Gallagher, head of cancer control research for the B.C. Cancer Agency characterizes this concept as an urban myth.

"There's really no convincing evidence that there's any relationship between the two," he says.

Richards, the Breast of Canada publisher, knows what Gallagher says is true. "But for me, just intuitively, it makes sense. And certainly, I have taken off a bra that has been too tight or not properly fitted for me and have noticed embedded marks on my skin and I don't think that can be good," she says. "So let's wear things that fit us. Or don't wear them at all, in fact. We don't all have to wear bras."

In addition to Dead Bra Day, Richards has declared Aug. 30 No Bra Day.

"Every doctor that I've ever asked said there's no medical reason to wear a bra, none whatsoever," adds Squires. "But I think professionally, if you went to work and didn't wear a bra, there would be a problem. So maybe women are constricted in a way. As a society, we want our women kept in their bras. Maybe if they took their bras off they'd have too much power, I don't know."

For now, bras harness the power to both aggravate and titillate. Perhaps it's time for Vancouverites to express their abhorrence and exaltation on Dead Bra Day.

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