

food & dining

Aprons and memories

a national exhibit and a book rekindle nostalgia for that quiet or loud - but much-worn - kitchen cover-up

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Colorado Springs - Ellyn Anne Geisel is a cross between an eagle-eyed observer of social change and the sister from another planet, with a substantial dollop of steel magnolia thrown in.

This daughter of the South has done what would have made militant feminists fall down faint a decade ago: Geisel has restored dignity to a symbol of domesticity long gone from many kitchens - the apron.

What was once an idea is now a national exhibit, a book and a genuine source of joy to a North Carolinian who never wanted much more than a good husband, children and a home to care for. She still irons her husband's shirts.

But don't let this portrait in domesticity fool you. Don't let the prematurely silver-gray hair, sparkling eyes, perfect teeth, pearls and floral cotton dress lead you astray, either. Anyway, it's a strapless dress. And she is wearing two aprons over it.

Although Geisel's "Apron Chronicles" recently closed at the Pikes Peak Center, the exhibit moves to the Artspace Gallery at the Jackson Hole (Wyo.) Center for the Arts Nov. 16, 2006 to Jan. 26, 2007, and "The Apron Book: Making, Wearing and Sharing a Bit of Cloth and Comfort" will be published in September. The attention has left her "just a-twirl at what my interest in aprons has wrought."



Ellyn-Anne Geisel, the originator of the "Apron Chronicles" exhibit. (Special / Chuck Bigger)

"I can't believe how far this has gone in six years," she says. "It's almost overwhelming that I've put together the only apron exhibit in the country that I know of, and they've become incredible collectibles."

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, Geisel is darting about like a mountain-loving Calliope hummingbird. She is the featured speaker at an afternoon tea about aprons. First she's here, greeting a familiar face; then she's there, momentarily still for a photographer.

Within what seems to be nanoseconds, the photographer has lost her because she is conferring briefly with event organizer, Dot Lischick, general manager of the World Arena and the Pikes Peak Center.

"You know, I never thought this would happen," she says, speaking in her high-pitched, still very Southern drawl. "I just wanted to know for myself about aprons because rather than denigrate women, they celebrate the spirit of the women who wore them. "

As her audience nibbled a spread of scones, salmon cream cheese on cucumber slices; roast beef with blue cheese; and egg salad with watercress on white bread (crusts removed), servers from Center Plate Catering poured drinks.

One of them, Kyle Kovalick, who stands some inches over 6 feet tall, has donned an apron over his black pants, white shirt and bow tie. It's easy to get into the spirit of things where Geisel is concerned.

Sandy Coughlin took a vacation day to attend. "I don't recall my mother wearing (an apron), but my sister made aprons for each of our parents," Coughlin says. "Dad wore his when he cooked. He traditionally did Thanksgiving day prep and made peanut brittle Christmas gifts.

"Seeing something like this reminds you that an apron is not just this piece of fabric that has a functional purpose. There are memories woven into each thread."

Geisel, a freelance writer, never wore an apron until 1999, while she researched the apron's history for an article.

"But I had to find one first," she says. "So I went to Goodwill, found one I liked, brought it home and washed and ironed it. While I was ironing, something just shot up my arm, like a shock. I realized someone had washed and ironed it a long time ago, just like I was doing. All of a sudden I was on a mission. I put it in a basket and toted it everywhere I went."

She took it to the grocery store, the bank and to visit friends. She began to collect them as she traveled the United States. She realized that each apron had a story.

"People allowed me into their lives, and I would listen," Geisel says. "Sometimes they'd tell me they didn't have any stories; and I would say 'yes you do.'"

That's how she met Linda, who bought a moose apron in Alaska to celebrate a new lease on life; Anjanette who dons her apron and is transformed; Cristie, who remembers both of her grandmothers through the aprons she wore when cooking with them; Ray, who remembers that his grandmother was wearing an apron when she first held his son.

Geisel has not only written "The Apron Book" (Andrews McMeel, \$16.95), the foreword is written by Ellen Levine, who made publishing history when she became the first woman to be named editor-in-chief of Good Housekeeping.

The character of Bree on "Desperate Housewives" has worn two of Geisel's aprons. She now makes aprons (apronmemories.com), some based on little treasures too fragile to wear or travel.

It's not for nothing that she's known around Pueblo as "The Apron Lady." Mail addressed that way actually reaches her. As she displays a small portion of her 300 aprons, she shares notes and photographs that accompanied them. She wears white gloves to protect them from hand oils.

There's a two-sided one with Christmas decorations on one side and martini glasses on the other for New Year's Eve; the 4-H one that belonged to a 10-year-old who made it as part of a project; aprons made from feedsacks; children's aprons; aprons tied with ribbons. Others are embroidered.

There are hand-made party aprons, message aprons ("I Hate Housework," "Kiss the Cook!") and aprons made from handkerchiefs. Aprons with tulip-shaped inserts and attached pot holders. Shabbat aprons from Russia. Plastic aprons made from B.F. Goodrich material.

The aprons, the exhibit, the tea, the book, all came from an ephemeral sense of purpose borne of aprons. At a book convention, Geisel met someone who invited her to a party where she met Jean Rather, wife of newsman Dan. Jean Rather, intrigued by Geisel's project, called her friend Ellen Levine. Levine was smitten and will host a book-signing party for Geisel in October.

"When I met her the book was just an idea with some photos behind it," says Levine. "When Ellyn arrived at our offices, we swept her into a conference room while we gathered the staff together. When we walked in, the aprons were strung up on a clothesline. I was awestruck by her presentation. She gives aprons an elegant appeal, but not in a retro way. It's intelligent and informed."

Geisel's project motto is "Aprons don't hold us back, they take us back." Part nostalgia, pop culture, and contemporary fashion, Geisel has been mentioned in the Wall Street Journal, Time, Country Living and Good Housekeeping.

Geisel might be overwhelmed, but she also is grounded. "All the attention is coming at once, and I know will fade as quickly," she says. "This time is my carpe apron diem."