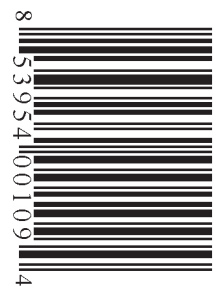


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Vintage linens make 'lite' of counting calories

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

It's New Year's Day, 1950-something. Last night, the ball dropped in Times Square. Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians played "Auld Lang Syne" for lucky couples at the Roosevelt Grill in New York City; others tuned in on their radios or television sets and celebrated at home. And this is the first day for keeping New Year's resolutions, the first day of the diet, time to count calories.

Fast forward to 2020. Although some things have changed, much remains the same. The ball still drops in Times Square, although those in the crowd must first pass through security checkpoints. Guy Lombardo ("Mr. New Year's Eve") belongs to the ages, having died in 1977, but not before his annual gig was relocated to New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel. And topping the list of resolutions made this year: eating healthier, exercising more, and going on a diet to lose weight, be it low-fat or low-carb, Atkins or Paleo. Indeed, the diet industry has grown into a multi-billion-dollar business, and it is, in no sense of the word, a laughing matter. Counting calories? Most likely not.

Whereas the definition of a calorie was formulated in the 19th century, dieting took a dramatic turn in 1918 with the publication of *Diet & Health: With Key to the Calories*. Written by Dr. Lulu Hunt Peters, this, er, slender volume was a bestseller, one that advised readers that they could eat anything they wanted as long as they restricted themselves to the equivalent of 1,200 calories a day. As it happened, though, a few years later, overindulgence was not much of a problem with the dawn of the Great Depression, followed by food rationing during World War II.

But by the 1950s, families had more money, more leisure time, and more occasion to indulge.

Whereas weight is now something of a sensitive subject, mention of a few extra pounds in the post-War time (and extending into the mid-1960s) was a topic treated in a humorous man-



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Above: Collector Jimmie Bucci appreciates the sometimes-corny humor from another time.

Below Left: Calorie-themed linens were often "gag gifts," and this one is particularly outrageous. Below Middle: Indeed, it's "the little things that count." Below Right: A close-up view of a calorie-themed vintage tea towel. Whereas the diet business is now a multi-billion-dollar industry, it was once the butt of some lighthearted humor.



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Linens

FROM FRONT PAGE

ner. Just ask Jimmie Buccì. An avid collector and president of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club, Buccì finds the topic of calorie consciousness to be a source of great amusement. Need proof? Witness his stash of vintage linens making "lite" of the subject.

"Probably right at the top of New Year's resolutions is, 'I'm going to lose some weight,'" the Boston-area resident agreed. Vintage tea towels and aprons, tablecloths and napkins, even potholders and handkerchiefs, all served as "whimsical reminders," "preachy, but not really." He is drawn to calorie-related tea towels that typically feature bright colors (including a liberal use of pink and turquoise), iconic images, and funny sayings, all spelled out in eye-catching fonts.

One of Buccì's favorites is a towel picturing a scale (the needle of which is a fork), and announcing "Holiday Savings Time: Set your scales back 10 lbs!" Indeed, scales are a common motif. Another example features a woman in heels, wearing an apron over her mid-calf dress, sporting a halo and wings. Perched on a scale, she is flanked with the words "Be an angel, watch the calories." Surrounding her are an appetizing portrayal of food with not-so-enticing calorie counts. When vegetables and cakes are pictured, there is little doubt which ones tip the scales ("Guess what wins?"). The cornier, the better, in his mind.

Another favorite that cracks Buccì up is the "Calorie Towel," with a cartoonish woman (complete with an ice cream cone falling out of her hand), standing on a scale, which bears the face of a dismayed human. Milk shakes? "Pure poison!" Dessert? "All you can eat with (a) boxing glove." And a cocktail? "You'll get a hangover in more place than one." As one towel proclaims, "It's the little things that count—count your calories!"

Buccì's collection is not limited to tea tow-

els. Not surprisingly, he also has a number of calorie-related tablecloths, many of which have a checkerboard motif, highlighting specific foods and their calorie counts, seldom specifying portion amounts. Toast, for instance, is 100 calories, as are olives, a bunch of grapes, and milk. Fish is a mere 50 calories, likewise a pineapple, an oyster, and a cucumber. Water clocks in at 0 calories, whereas a stick of butter is "danger."

Many of the linens are found in mint condition, and some retain their paper tags. This suggests to Buccì that these items were often purchased as impractical "gag gifts." He displays some of his favorites, including a framed handkerchief, for daily amusement, and he enjoys using the non-mint pieces in his collection when entertaining.

Diet-related collectibles are not limited to household linens, though, and include calorie counters (little plastic gizmos with dials), exercise machines ("jigglers" and belted models), and scales. For Buccì, who confesses to having survived college drinking the diet soda, "Tab," it doesn't stop there ("It was so fake tasting"). He counts Tab bottles and Tab premiums (including hourglass-shaped soda glasses) among his calorie-counting treasures. And of course, diet books (large and pocket-sized) and magazines are of interest to collectors.

After decades of "fad" diets, as well as nutritional plans rooted in medical knowledge, the subject of weight control is no longer a source of public amusement. What was considered funny half a century ago seems, in some circles, to be insulting and a case of "fat-shaming." But Buccì and others enjoy taking a lighthearted look at mid-century diet attitudes, although, he concludes, he personally finds the practice of restaurants listing caloric counts on menus "so disturbing."

And as for those New Year's resolutions, although many continue to vow to do better in the coming year, statistics show that the great majority of the best of intentions are doomed to failure, biting the dust in February. Time to lighten up? Maybe next year.



Above: A close-up of a vintage tablecloth, with a good helping of turquoise and pink. Buccì is drawn to this collecting specialty because, he says, it's fun.



Above: Included in Buccì's linen collection are tea towels in mint condition, as well as examples with their original paper tags.

Below: After a tempting season of indulgence, New Year's resolutions have long included cutting back. Rather than taking a serious stance, this vintage tea towel pokes fun at dieting.



Below: There's no mistaking when this "angel" was counting her calories.