

# THE MONTHLY

The East Bay's Premier Magazine of Culture and Commerce

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## Shopping Around

**Lingerie Epiphany** | Buying fancy bras and panties can be more about personal power than pleasing a partner.

By Mary Lee Shalvoy

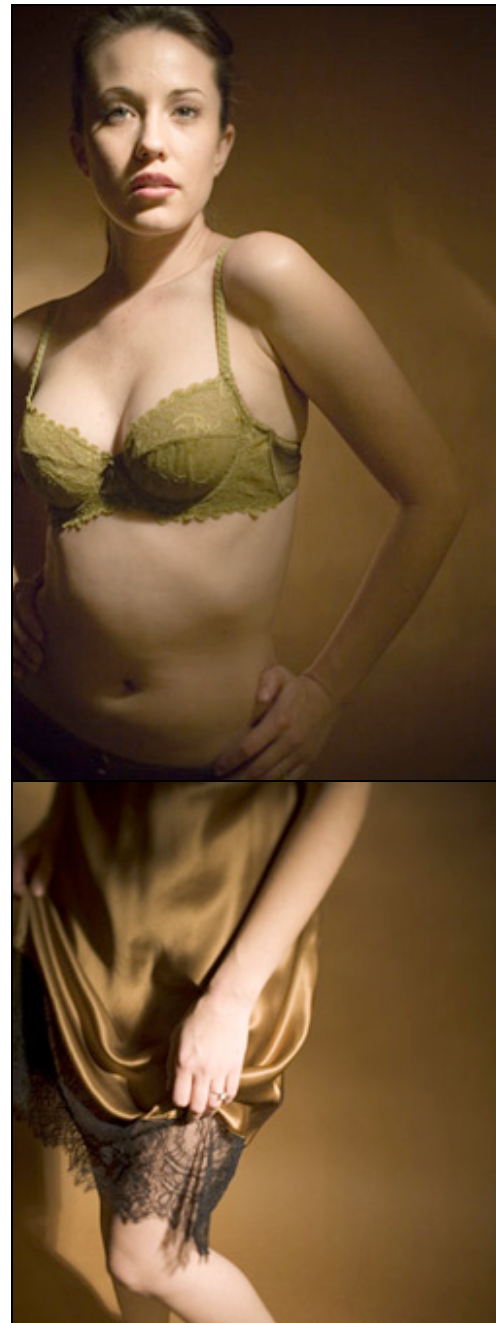
It's that time of year when all women's thoughts turn to gifts of chocolate, diamonds and lacy underwear. Or so we are led to believe. I have never been one of these women—well, except for the chocolate part (does any woman need a holiday to enjoy chocolate?). While Valentine's Day ranks second for marriage proposals (after Christmas), it ranks first for lingerie purchases, primarily by men and predominantly in red.

Lingerie was never my thing. Too pricey, uncomfortable and unnecessary for a mom's life on the school playground with three kids or for a writer's life in sweats at the computer in my home office. When I needed a new bra or panties (*foundations*, as they are called in the world of lingerie), I would dash into the local Mervyn's and do the grab-and-run with one or more children in tow. I'd end up with frumpy, lumpy underwear in beige or white à la Renée Zellweger playing the illustrious Bridget Jones. I'd save the rare purchase of lacy, racy undergarments for my "thin" phases or for stints with an appreciative man. I considered *underwear* and *lingerie* to be two separate entities, with *lingerie* having two subdivisions: sexy or naughty. Sexy is Victoria's Secret; naughty is Frederick's of Hollywood.

Oh, how wrong I've been! On a recent quest for a properly fitting bra, I tapped into a culture of women who are turned on by silky, sultry, clinging—and often very comfortable!—underthings. And it's not necessarily for their partners but rather for *themselves* that they linger daily in lingerie. It turns out that this girlie bra-and-panty thing can actually be a source of womanly power. Who knew?

### Some Bare Facts

The word *lingerie* comes from French and Latin roots meaning "linen" and, by definition, is simply, "women's underwear and night clothes." Lingerie is all-inclusive from white eyelet pajamas (remember flannel Lanz of Salzburg nightgowns?) to pricey La Perla bras or delicious Hanro camisoles, to that red-hot French



maid-influenced number with the matching garter belt.

"Lingerie is beyond a simple garment at this point," says Nafissa Tayebi, owner of A La Folie—an exquisite lingerie shop on Berkeley's Fourth Street—who also owns a formidable amount of lingerie of her own. "It's about respect for our bodies; it's about doing something beautiful for ourselves."

Algerian-born and raised in France, Tayebi owes her passion for lingerie to an aunt who helped her buy her first bra at age 13. That was just the beginning for Tayebi, and she eventually opened a store to assuage the addiction. She says that she enjoys educating American women about the inner strength attained through properly fitting underwear.

"It's really about empowerment," Tayebi says. In fact, she explains, women can feel empowered by wearing lingerie that is both beautiful and fits well. "Ever need to readjust your bra in a business meeting? By buying a bra that fits and supports you, you can focus on the important matters at hand, not whether your bra strap hangs off your shoulder or not," she says.

For Christina Brady, owner of Beauty and Attitude in Berkeley, lingerie is fundamental to life's passages: the first bra, the wedding night, the nursing bra.

"It's so much more than self-expression," says Brady. "It's all-encompassing. It's part of us and it's definitely part of me."

Brady is a fourth-generation purveyor of lingerie. Her great-grandmother sold stockings on the Jersey shore before opening the shop still run by her 80-year-old grandmother, Elizabeth. Brady's mother still owns the boutique in Colorado where, as a girl, Brady would grab a terrycloth robe from the rack and curl up for a nap in the dressing room. Now Brady has a two-month-old baby (named Elizabeth, like her great-grandma) and is carrying on the family's lingerie lineage in Berkeley with her one-year-old boutique.

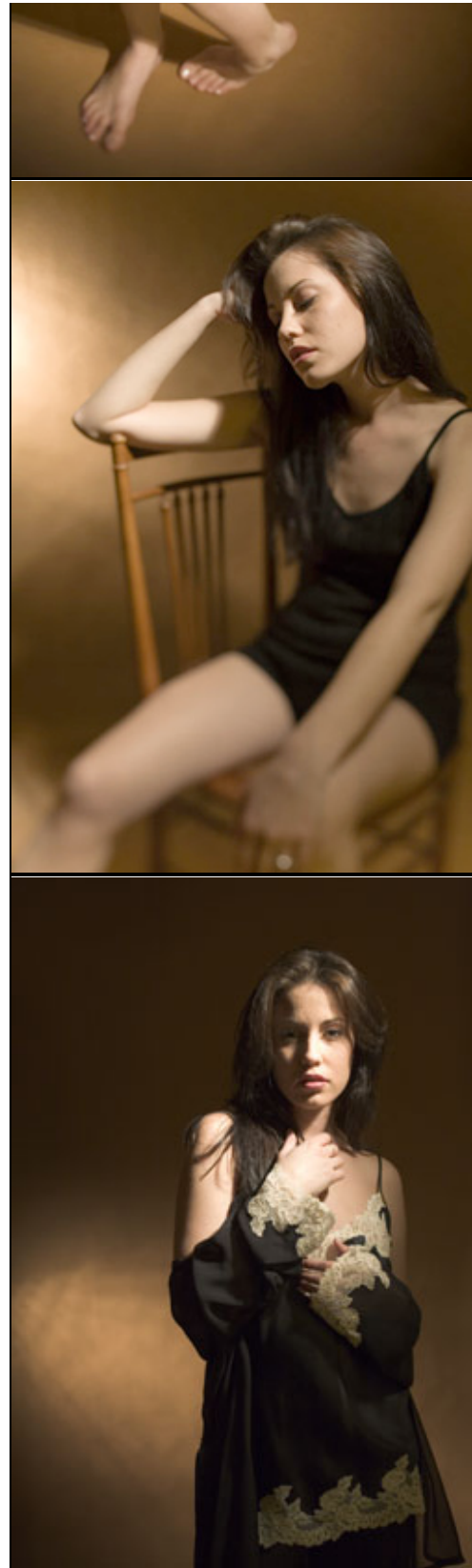
Sue Whitney, co-owner of Fiddlesticks on San Pablo Avenue, doesn't have a personal or familial connection to lingerie—in fact, like me, she thought she wasn't the "lingerie type."

"The biggest surprise in selling lingerie is that I would actually get into wearing it," says Whitney, who decided to sell sensual wares in her store because she figured it would "work well in the neighborhood" with sex-themed products store Good Vibrations a few doors down. She was right.

Fiddlesticks sells panties, corsets, slips and boxers (in plus sizes, too) amid the "potpourri" of household items, including whimsical fairies, mermaids, planters, mirrors and wall plates. She says the Fiddlesticks subtitle might soon be "a.k.a. Knickers and Knockers."

### Abreast of the Trends

As Tayebi and fellow experts explain, this is not your mother's lingerie. Today's gamut of bra- and panty-dom is wide and vast—



From top down: Your epidermis is showing: Comfy Cosabella bra, silky Skin Knit set and a Cosabella chemise from Beauty and Attitude show it off. Photos by Lori Eanes.

Soft and silky: Lounge to your heart's content

in form and function. My recent *tour-de-lingerie* brought me to some unforgettable items.

First, there's NuBra, a physics-defying brassiere which consists of adhesive cups that stick on and stay in place, designed for wear under backless, strapless outfits.

Next, I fell in love with the allegedly most comfortable, celebrity-endorsed panties created by a company called Hanky Panky, recently reviewed in the *Wall Street Journal*. They are made with stretchy lace, resulting in a brief that's a cross between a thong and a regular panty.

I experienced the glory of a luxurious pink cashmere robe that feels "like butter" when slipped on, and the glamour of a sumptuous silk gown that evokes images of 1940s screen sirens or Elizabeth Taylor in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

I was tempted by the sweetness of the lingerie-inspired date outfit—a gorgeous number created by the women of Beauty and Attitude. The store's mannequin dons a black lace skirt that would work as a full, flouncy slip, a knit camisole and a fabulous red wrap. Throw on a pair of sassy red shoes and you are ready for a night on the town.

I have tried on hundreds of foundation and frilly bras, with lace that lies flat, in colors wearable under the most conservative clothing that offer a sense of power and confidence no suit alone can conjure up.

### Happy Shopping

Shopping for lingerie used to be a lot like shopping for two of the most dreaded fashion must-haves—jeans and bathing suits. I might rather have a leg chopped off (would I look thinner?) than spend an inordinate amount of time in poorly lit dressing rooms, trying on multiple items of clothing that I can't believe will ever really make me look good.

But I recently learned that having a bra that fits well and is made with interesting textures and colors can be a treat—almost like a visit to the spa. Shopping for that bra can be spa-like, too—an experience of pleasure, not pain.

Julie Wolfrum, manager at Beauty and Attitude, turns the challenging task of bra-fitting into nothing less than a party. On some Friday and Saturday evenings, Wolfrum hosts a bra-fitting "happy hour," serving up glasses of wine and proper cup sizes at the same time. It's her job to help neophytes like me find the right fit and fall in love with the nicest bras.

I am now the proud owner of a gorgeous chocolate-brown lace Le Mystère bra. Yes, it's the most I have ever spent on a bra, but it certainly is both beautiful and comfortable—how I feel every time I wear it.

"Wearing the right bra makes all the difference in the world," says Wolfrum, as she hands me a cup of tea and a special cupcake

and a smile. Lounge to your heart's content in Millesia pajamas from A La Folie. Photo by Lori Eanes.

### How to Get the Proper Fit

(Thanks to [www.freshpair.com!](http://www.freshpair.com!))

Like the women they are designed to fit, bras come in many different sizes. Bras are sized using two measurements: the band, or the circumference of the chest just under the breasts, and the cup, or the size of the actual breasts. To get your bra size, you need a tape measure and it helps to have a mirror and a friend, or a lovely salesperson in a shop that specializes in lingerie.

First, to determine your band size, wrap a tape measure snugly around your chest, just under or at the crease beneath your breasts, flat against your back. You want the tape measure to be parallel to the floor. Record this measurement in inches.

For your proper band-size measurement, you need to be able to add. If the number is even, add 4 to get your band size. If the number is odd, add 5. For example: If you wrote down 32, add 4 and your band size will be 36. If it was 33, add 5 and your band size will be 38.

Next, determine your cup size. Wrap the tape measure around the fullest part of your breasts (at the nipple). Again, the tape measure should be straight, parallel to the floor and flat across your back. Record this measurement in inches. Take this number and subtract your band-size measurement from it.

For example, if your band measurement is 38, and your new measurement, from the fullest part of your breast, is 35, the

from the bakery upstairs. A poorly fitting bra is uncomfortable, unflattering and can be harmful to your breast tissue over time, she avers.

According to a study conducted by U.S.-based intimate apparel designer Wacoal, as well as noted by Oprah, eight out of 10 women are walking around wearing the wrong-sized bra. Wacoal makes Oprah's favorite bra, the Wacoal Slimline Seamless Minimizer.

The experts say there is also a slight difference between American and European bra sizing so it's important to check the "made-in" label before selecting a size. (See the handy step-by-step bra-fitting guide on page 20.)

While it clearly has a sensual purpose, lingerie isn't only about sex. I now know firsthand how empowering and supportive—in all senses of the word—the right lingerie can be. I have learned that proper fit is key, comfort is critical and women of all sizes and shapes have options.

These days when I buy lingerie, I buy it for me and for whatever my fickle concept of sexiness is at the moment. Maybe it's the Elle Macpherson power bra I'm wearing underneath my suit or those lovely lavender Crabtree & Evelyn pajamas I will don as soon as I get home to relax, or that ritzy number I have waiting for just the right moment. It's all lingerie and it's all about me. I

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*Mary Lee Shalvoy is a freelance writer living in the East Bay who, after finishing this article, is most likely out spending her hard-earned money on lingerie.*

difference is 3, and your cup size is "C." That would make your bra size a 38C.

See chart and more info at: [www.freshpair.com/sizing.html](http://www.freshpair.com/sizing.html)

### *Lingerie Lineup*

**A La Folie**, 1816 Fourth St., Berkeley, (510) 845-1616; [www.visitlafolie.com](http://www.visitlafolie.com).

**Beauty and Attitude**, 2116 Vine St., Berkeley, (510) 868-1790.

**Fiddlesticks**, 2524 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley, (510) 486-1800.

**Frederick's of Hollywood**: [www.fredericks.com](http://www.fredericks.com). (Use online store locator for closest retail outlets.)

**Victoria's Secret**, 5672 Bay St., Emeryville, (510) 547-5632; [www.victoriassecret.com](http://www.victoriassecret.com). (Use online store locator to find other Bay Area stores.)

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