

A Tiny Scrap Of Fabric Wins A Huge Following

Hanky Panky's Model 4811 Is a Thong Unto Itself; 'It's Like Lace Butter'

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Supermodel Cindy Crawford has purchased 4811, her publicist confirms. Manhattan boutique La Petite Coquette says actress Julianne Moore bought 4811 "in a rainbow of colors" earlier this year. It's the top-seller in its category at Trousseau in Chicago among working women. "I can't get customers to try anything else," says owner Christy Horton.

For the last decade and a half, a little-known company called Hanky Panky has thrived making a \$15 lace thong known simply by its style number, 4811. In the cutthroat world of lingerie sales, that is no small thing.

What gives? Well, the undergarment itself does. "It's really, really soft and super-stretchy, so it doesn't dig into you like all the other brands," Ms. Horton says. "We call it our starter thong."

Thongs are the biggest thing to hit underwear in the last 20 years. They accounted for one-quarter of the entire \$2.6 billion panty market last year, according to NPD Group, a marketing information company in Port Washington, N.Y. Once the domain of a daring few, thongs have gone mainstream. You can buy them at Wal-Mart for \$1.50.



Front-and-back views of Hanky Panky's 4811 lace thong

Hanky Panky has just a tiny share of the thong market. But even among women who favor fancy Italian and French brands -- Cosabella, Argentovivo, Lise Charmel -- the made-in-the-USA 4811 has a cult following.

"It's like lace butter," says Joni Wheat, a 33-year-old personal shopper in Chicago. Ms. Wheat, who thinks nothing of dropping \$100 or more on high-end European bra-and-underwear sets, figures she owns about 30 thongs in model 4811. Adds Lauren Martin, a 35-year-old Manhattan psychotherapist who spends most of her workday seated: "I have full hips and have tried all the fancy \$200 sets, but I

can never wear the panties." These days, she says Hanky Panky's lace thong is her only underwear.

Based in a Manhattan loft, Hanky Panky is led by its two 57-year-old founders, Gale Epstein and Lida Orzeck. Friends from their college days in the 1960s, the two teamed up as business partners in the late '70s after Ms. Epstein gave Ms. Orzeck a panty and bra set she designed using handkerchiefs as a 30th-birthday present.

"It was a very significant gift," says Ms. Orzeck, who has a Ph.D. in social psychology from Columbia University and was working as a researcher. "I thought the underwear was the cutest thing," she says.

Ms. Epstein was working at a sweater company. During lunch hours and at night, they began to cook up a new lingerie venture. Since they lived in the same apartment building, they had "stairwell summits" in the dim lighting between floors to discuss marketing, production and occasionally mull over designs. The next day, Ms. Epstein would flesh out new samples of artsy camisoles, bikini pants and petticoats. Ms. Orzeck sold them to big-name department stores, including Lord & Taylor and Macy's, that were hungry for new talent. Hanky Panky broke even its first year, the founders say.

The seeds of 4811 were sown in 1978 when Ms. Epstein, inspired by Rio sunbathers in revealing bikinis, designed Hanky Panky's first G-string. She and Ms. Orzeck felt U.S. women were ready for something more liberating than common underwear. This time around, the same department stores balked, insisting such garments were better suited for Frederick's of Hollywood. "They hadn't caught up to the sexual revolution yet," Ms. Orzeck says of the retailers.



Gale Epstein

But timing was on Hanky Panky's side. A generation of working women, weary of dressing like the boys, would soon become eager for something to make them feel feminine underneath. And as they began slipping into more-fitted suits for the office, they sought to avoid visible panty lines. Hanky Panky's chieftains seized on the thong as a palatable compromise between the rather extreme G-string and a regular panty.

Being women gave them an edge: They didn't need to call in a model to test designs, says Ms. Epstein, who attended New York's Parsons School of Design. Instead, she personally tested every sample herself, taking garments home and wearing them for an evening, occasionally soliciting her boyfriend's opinion. Hanky Panky launched its first mainstream thong in 1986, and Ms. Epstein kept fiddling until she arrived at what would become the company's ultimate cash cow three years later. They adopted the style number 4811 and sold 5,000 pairs the first year.

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The secret to 4811 lies in the careful calibration of the garment, which weighs a mere half-ounce, about as much as four cloves of garlic. To keep costs down, Ms. Epstein wanted to design a one-size thong that would fit most women, and she knew stretch lace was a particularly forgiving material. So she scoured New York manufacturers until she found a fabric with the perfect "modulus" -- or elasticity -- for the crucial hip band. It used enough spandex to stretch but not so much as to bind bare skin.

For the front and back Vs, she fretted over the fabric's so-called "hand": its pliability, how it draped, where it pulled and puckered. She insisted on a 100% cotton gusset (industry parlance for crotch lining) and tinkered until the depth of the lining sat just so. The final key ingredient was a thin line of super-soft lace around the thong's edge. That can trigger production headaches because sometimes the lace shrinks in width when dyed and becomes more difficult for the sewing machine to accept.

The result: "It lays flat on you," says Rebecca Apsan, the owner of La Petite Coquette, which carries some 85 different thong brands. She has given away samples of the 4811 to reluctant thong customers to teach them that not all thongs rub the wrong way.

Meantime, persnickety fashion publications also have opined on the curious comfort of various Hanky Panky thongs: "My favorite!" said one test-driver of 4811 for In Style's February 2002 issue. "The Hanky Panky thong revolutionized the thong market," says Hope Greenberg, fashion director for Lucky magazine, which commends the 4811 in its current (June) issue. "They did an amazing thing by creating a thong that looks really pretty and is amazingly comfortable."



Lida Orzeck

Last year, sales of 4811 climbed to 250,000 pieces, and accounted for nearly 10% of Hanky Panky's \$10 million in revenue from lingerie, sportswear and sleepwear.

Ms. Epstein not long ago returned to the drawing board to whip up a new low-rise thong to wear with the hip-hugging pants now in vogue. "It wasn't a matter of just lowering the garment," she explains patiently. "You had to make it wider in the hips, and it had to not shift to the front or back."

After trying on endless samples in the office with her low-rise jeans, readjusting the depth of the band's V, and slimming down the front and back triangles until the garment shed one-eighth of an ounce, she finally got the new thong to fit. Its style number is 4911.

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