

Football or the stock-market koans of Louis Rukeyser are just as apt to relax by whipping up some panna cotta. The 21st-century man cooks, cleans, decorates, and renovates, and his libido is fungible enough to adapt. Hence a new kind of pinup: Aphrodite for the age of the adjustable-rate mortgage. "It's really another sexual fantasy in disguise. Instead of sex in the bar, you have sex in the kitchen," says Betty Fussell, the author of a memoir about her own battles with June Cleaver-era domesticity, *My Kitchen Wars*. So what if the very concept is utterly detached from reality—why nitpick? "The guys want the fantasy that their sex kitten is also a home decorator?" Fussell says. "Dream on, honey child."

And maybe that's why the fantasy holds such sway over men these days: If they are cooking more, their wives and girlfriends are cooking less. Corporate careers devour free time for men and women alike, and those women who do stay at home are inclined to see the predicament as a gulag of drudgery and despair. The happy housewife, in 2006, has become as exotic as a Bond girl.

The *Wisteria Lane*-ing of chores isn't confined to television, either. The past couple of years has seen the vamping-up of everything from knitting (if

you don't believe me, check out the miniskirts and mesh tops on display in Ashley Paige's book *Sexy Little Knits*) to aprons. Yes, aprons. I always figured an apron was a consummate symbol of thankless toil, but then I clicked to the Web site of a company called Jessie Steele. There I found model housewives gleefully at work in bright Eisenhower-era kitchens, their aprons wrapped tight around their cocked hips, beckoning me with what appeared to be martinis. Instantly it all made sense. "Some men are still a little nervous about giving aprons to their wives," says Claire Steele, 29, a cofounder of the company. "There's a stigma attached, but I feel like it's lightening up. Guys at the trade shows go crazy over them. They see the aprons and they get this funny look on their faces." Sales have tripled in the past year alone, and the company now plans to branch out into pot holders.

Still, why would a guy feel that his yearning for any of these things is "better left private"? Because to think this way means that he's mulling over something that he can't actually blurt out: *A woman belongs in the kitchen*. She belongs there not because that would satisfy some crypto-paleo-conservative political agenda, not because she's deficient

in the workplace, and not because the dude is lazy. No, let's not be ridiculous. She belongs there because that's no longer what anyone expects, and men probably ought to have their expectations thwarted now and then. In the end, what's alluring and subversive about the image of a cheerful lass in an apron is not that she's playing a housewife per se, but that she appears to be... *enjoying* it. "Because of feminism," says Adam Byrd, "it's kind of taboo to want that."

It's even more taboo to suggest that it's anything other than a lunatic daydream. On the phone, Daisy Martinez talks about a dinner party she had the other night in Brooklyn. She had 25 people over, and she cooked them alcapurrias, which are yuca fritters stuffed with minced pork, along with guacamole and tostones and sauteed crab and grilled shrimp with a guava barbecue sauce and two butterflied legs of lamb and rice with pigeon peas and Catalan spinach tossed with pinenuts and raisins. When it was done, she says, "I grabbed the coldest, sweatiest beer that I could find, and that was it. I just sat back in my chair and smiled." Daisy doesn't actually purr when she says this, but she doesn't have to. ■