

'Bikini-Ready'? Who's Judging?

By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS

EVERY spring, as sure as cherry blossoms bloom, so does the notion that women should diet, exercise and even liposuction their way to bikini-ready bodies. Magazines like *Shape* and *Self* reinforce the idea that preparation is essential, with months-long bikini body countdowns (100-calorie snack tips included) and workout DVDs like "Bikini Ready Fast!" as if the beach reveal were a test on par with the MCAT and only a slacker would settle for a one-piece.

"It really sends the message that you're not worthy right now to put on a suit," said Malia Mills, a swimsuit designer whose brand's motto is "Love Thy Differences." Ms. Mills, 44, said shoppers often declare in one of her 10 stores: "I just wanted to see what you had. I'm coming back when I lose five pounds."



As our culture increasingly enshrines physical perfection, the bikini has come to inspire dread and awe. It wasn't always so. In the 1960s, when bellybutton-baring suits first became popular in America, "it was a youthful phenomenon definitely," said Sarah Kennedy, the author of "The Swimsuit: A History of Twentieth-Century Fashions." Then the high-fashion set and movie stars began to put on bikinis, and by the '70s, she said, the bikini was "worn by all ages."

And a few extra pounds didn't disqualify anyone, considering the fitness revolution was still roughly a decade away. (In the book there's a 1940s photograph of a fresh-faced still-brunet Marilyn Monroe looking smashing in a blue-and-white striped two-piece, a roll of pale flesh at her midsection.)

Back then, bikini preparation was starkly laissez-faire by today's grooming standards. In her recently published literary memoir, "Art and Madness," Anne Roiphe wrote that in 1965, she suspected that a suitor was into her because of, not in spite of, the "tufts of dark hair that stuck out of the top of my bikini."

But today it's assumed that only the lean, muscular, hairless and ab-defined will feel comfortable in a bikini. "It's become difficult to feel natural with a normal body," Ms. Kennedy said. "Fatism has taken over. It's O.K. to be mean to lumpy, lardy people. It's a sort of subtle intolerance towards people that's very bad."

Thanks to the ubiquity of cameras, wearing a bikini is now scary even for gorgeous celebrities. Remember how Jennifer Love Hewitt was pilloried in 2007 for the crime of wearing a bandeau without being a size 0? Helen Mirren was accused of having had surgery when she dared to flaunt her (taut, toned) 62-year-old stomach in a tomato-red bikini a year later.

"It's about everyone everywhere having a comment, and they are anonymous," said Gabrielle Reece, the former volleyball star and now a fitness guru, who has also been captured bare-stomached by the paparazzi. "The bathing suit is really a metaphor for all the ways we can approach a lot of things," she said. "Why would we punish ourselves when we don't have to? Why dread that?"

Nivea has a Goodbye Cellulite, Hello Bikini! Challenge, which prods women to slim down and buy its products. Nivea also sponsors the *Cosmopolitan* Magazine Bikini Bash, which last year involved 100 lithe dancers in blue-and-white ruffled bikinis tossing their hair violently to the Midi Mafia's song "Two-Piece" in front of 1,000 attendees at the Planet Hollywood resort in Las Vegas. The two male singers of "Two-Piece," fully clothed, belted, "You all look like models off the cover of *Cosmo*."

Amansala, a "bikini boot camp," in Ibiza, Spain, and Tulum, Mexico, sells six-night stays starting at \$1,875. "Our society definitely has a stigma of bikini readiness — my business thrives on that," said Melissa Perlman, an owner of the resort, which she said mostly attracts women in their 30s and 40s. "But at the same time, we send a different message that you don't have to be perfect. Feel good, take care of yourself, and looking good in a bikini will follow."

Would-be attendees often call ahead asking, "Do all the women look like those on your Web site?" (That is, easy on the eyes and the jiggle.) Ms. Perlman said she was considering starting "a program for larger women who don't want to be around women who look hot in their bikinis, but say, 'I want to do this.'"

On April 12, Dr. Elie Levine, a plastic surgeon, and his wife, Dr. Jody Levine, a dermatologist, hosted a bikini season prep event at their Manhattan practice to cater to the worried (19 women and one man showed up). The doctors' press release warned, "Summer is about revealing yourself and can be dreaded if your body is not ready," then went on to list tips such as "zap away embarrassing veins" or "boost bikini confidence with lipo for stubborn areas."

This month, when I visited the doctors, at the end of the interview, I hoisted my shirt, pointed to the crepey skin under my bellybutton, and grabbed a pinch of fat that wasn't there before childbirth, back in my triathlete days. The Levines' prescription: liposuction, a skin-tightening procedure, or a tummy tuck, which costs \$10,000, with a painful recovery.

It might just be cheaper to gain a fresh perspective. "If you feel your body is strong, and you're in good shape, you're halfway there," said Norma Kamali, 65, the designer of (among other things) modestly retro bathing suits, who now also has a wellness cafe in Manhattan. "You're not going to go out looking for surgery to fill up your breasts, you'll be satisfied and comfortable."

Not all women let the camera-phone-wielding bikini police (or their own self-criticism) stop them from enjoying a two-piece. Ms. Mills calls this type a "good-attitude girl."

"She is a phenomenon and totally inspiring," she said. "She is of any age, any body, she has a totally great attitude, because she has had a come-to-Jesus moment with her body."