

Not Disney's

Fantasia

These home parties serve up sexy "unmentionables" just in time for Valentine's Day

By Deb Keiser

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On any given weekend, in almost any town around here, you'll find a group of women getting together at someone's home for an in-house evening of fun, demonstrations and party sales. It could be Tupperware, Party Lite, or Pampered Chef, but these days, it could just as well be Fantasia or Passion.

Passion? Fantasia? At these parties, which are more prolific than you might think, instead of plastic, votives or pots, it's lotions, lingerie and laughs that are served up. Not to mention, well, a few unmentionables, too.

These are parties for women only. No choice there at all — men are simply not allowed to attend, nor are children. The parties offer a discreet and private place to learn about and purchase "adult novelty items" in the comfort of a home environment.

Fantasia Home Parties, founded in 1984 by Rina Valan-Hudson, is celebrating its 20th year and is part of a burgeoning market.

"When I started this business, the only place to get items like these was an adult bookstore, and they were very intimidating environments," says Valan-Hudson. "Even though I was in my late 20s, I could not just walk into those places; instead, we would get a group of girlfriends and go in all at once, and still we would pace around outside for 10 minutes before going in."

"These parties are a chance for women to let their hair down, relax and say things they might not otherwise say over coffee," says the Poconos, Pa., resident. "This method is successful because it's about validation. You may realize you are not the only one who feels the way you do."

Dr. Michael Nuccitelli, executive director of SLS Wellness Center in Brewster, N.Y., concurs. He believes this type of party offers a healthy environment for women to discuss intimacy and sexuality.

"Although I don't know of any research to show this increases marital satisfaction," says the psychologist, "I do feel the whole idea of these parties is that they afford women a forum to talk about sexuality and its different aspects, using both conventional and nonconventional means."

"The communication that occurs during these parties is healthy. Women get together and instead of talking about candles or kitchenware, they talk about marital aids, which are also sexual aids. It's innocent, and it's in a healthy environment."

It's evidently an environment that women appreciate. Passion Parties, founded in 1994 and privately held, projects sales figures to be \$20 million for 2003. Fantasia, also a privately held company, does an annual \$3 million in sales with 200 sales representatives and more than 500 parties hosted each month.

Valan-Hudson feels the appeal, and success, is in the method. "This is the way women like to shop: socially, with their friends." Annual sales for the sensual products industry, according to Fantasia, are \$12.5 billion, so there are plenty of people out there buying.

These parties are likely to be taking place in, or at least near, your neighborhood. At least 50 to 60 Fantasia

parties take place each month in Connecticut. "It's a valid business and our representatives are making money, some even working at it full time," says Fantasia's founder. "We are one of the fastest growing companies in the industry."

Melisa Reichert, 27, is a Fantasia sales manager and independent consultant who has been very successful selling the product line. A resident of Danbury, she has been selling Fantasia products for a little more than two years and already has won several incentive trips.



Above from left, Shannon Haight, Courtney Silva, Terisa Licciardi, and Melissa Deluca have a laugh at the tiny-sized thong attachment to a nightgown during a Fantasia Home Party.

Right: Melisa Reichert of Fantasia Home Parties holds up one of the lingerie selections from the catalog during a recent party.



In one five-month period, she sold \$21,000 worth of products, which got her a trip to the Bahamas. For another period, her sales figures garnered her a cruise to Canada. She also was one of 40 who won a trip to Las Vegas.

As a relocation manager by day, she doesn't find it unusual at all to sell Fantasia by night. "I'm a corporate employee by day and a sex educator at night!" she laughs. "I like meeting new people, and every party is different," she says. "It makes me feel good when people say they've enjoyed my presentation, and I'm pleased that I can help women in their relationships."

Reichert was actually on the I-95 morning show in December as a Fantasia representative. How exactly do you talk about "unmentionables" on air, or even at the parties, for that matter? "I talk to people like I'm June Cleaver," she explains. "I don't use slang or anything like that; I use a professional manner. There is no talking dirty!" she says.

"But I do help the guests with their selection if they ask. In the beginning I may have worried, 'What are people going to think of me?' but the more parties I do, the more comfortable I feel."

"When I started this, my dad asked only one question, 'Can you get arrested for this?' and the answer is 'No!'"

While that may be true here, in Texas recently a woman was charged with criminal obscenity for selling products of this type. But it could be a case of semantics. In a CNN transcript, Jeffrey Toobin, CNN legal analyst, questions whether the illegality is due to an item being

sold as an "obscene device" as opposed to a "novelty item." Time will tell.

Nevertheless, "The parties are a lot of fun," says Reichert, who graduated from Becker College in Massachusetts with a sports management degree. She got started, like most consultants, as a Fantasia hostess.

At a recent party in Danbury, about 20 guests came together for an intergenerational evening. The evening began as a mild-mannered birthday party a daughter was throwing for her mother, and segued into the Fantasia segment after dinner was served.

It was the first time for some of the guests, but at least one had been to Fantasia parties before. "This isn't my first party," said Eileen of Danbury. "They are a lot more fun than Tupperware, and I found it was very educational and adventurous!"

The intimacy items were displayed on a low table in the living room; the lingerie was on a rack. When Reichert finally got the women's attention, they gathered round for the presentation. This was a raucous group, although whether due to the evening's celebration or the presence of Fantasia could not be determined.

Predictably, Reichert opened the presentation with some games. In one the women had to answer the question: If you were starring in an erotic film, what would your name be? The "birthday girl," who was 57, chose "Sugar." Other women picked Candy, Sassy and Diamond. The name that got the most laughs was "Kumquat."

Fantasia catalogs were then passed around, and the group was certainly having fun, particularly if the level of noise was any indication.

The wine alone could not have inspired such raucous joviality. Peels of laughter carried throughout the house. "Ladies, let's try to use our indoor voices," Reichert said several times.

The group, women from 21 up to 60, gathered in the living room. It was time to start passing around the merchandise. From the pheromone perfume and "body dew after-bath spray" to honey dust body powder (yes, it is edible), these products set the tone and got the ladies in the mood.

Lingerie was next — stockings, nighties, undies. Nothing more racy than typical mall fare, but there was one big difference here: the sizes. A normal woman could actually fit into these peignoirs. For most of the items, there were two choices, one-size (fits all) and queen. Since they're stretchy, it's possible an average-to-large woman might actually be able to wear them.

Some videos were passed around next, a board game (yes, a board game), love notes (to put in his lunch box?), massage oils, lubrication gels, and then the evenings' climax. Of that there was quite a selection, including an "ever-ready rabbit," which may mean something to those familiar with "Sex and the City." And the rest, dear reader, will certainly be left to your imagination.

The process of ordering is very discreet. Or at least, it can be. This group was very big on communicating.

At the party's end, many of the guests were comparing notes on just what they were going to purchase. However, the point is, ordering can be very discreet.

Although the presentation is completely open, all orders were taken in private to be shipped via UPS either to the to the hostess (\$2 charge), or directly to the guest's home (\$10). Orders are individually bagged for privacy.

For more information, contact Fantasia: 1-800-77-PARTY or www.fantasiahomeparties.com.

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