

# Even Less for Men to Think About

By Eric Wilson

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This may not be the best week to bring up a new trend in men's underwear, but basic briefs are having a comeback.

Anyone who has shopped for men's underwear in the last decade will understand the significance of this moment. For a while there, it seemed that among the racks of Calvin Klein's fluorescent orange briefs, varsity striped contraptions from 2(x)ist and those right-to-the-point leopard-print thongs from Papi, there was little room for old-fashioned tighty whiteys.

So it was big surprise to bump into an old friend at Macy's recently. Front and center in the Calvin Klein section was a plain vanilla style that had been discontinued more than four years ago, before underwear became so complicated.

The style is a basic bikini brief, a marvel of minimalism sold in a three-pack for \$24.50. It has the design distinction of a thin elastic waistband sewn into a tunnel of cotton, rather than one of those two-inch-wide billboards blaring the designer's name in a way that can be interpreted only as a dastardly scheme to achieve market domination via brand impressions made through the pornography and plumbing industries.

"A few years ago, brands started coming out with more and more collections and retiring them sooner," said Michael Kleinmann, the president of Freshpair, a 10-year-old online underwear retailer. "But when the economy started changing, they scaled it back."

Other companies are no longer going as deeply into what Mr. Kleinmann calls the fashion category, meaning underwear the color of Skittles. And multi-packs, which are seen as offering more value, have become popular during the recession, like those of Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger sold at Macy's. An Alfani five-pack crew-neck T-shirt (\$19.98) introduced at Macy's in November is outselling a three-pack (\$14.98) since the price per shirt is cheaper.

But at the same time, Mr. Kleinmann said, more expensive body-shaping styles for men, a new category of underwear designed to enhance certain body parts and minimize others, are taking off. So if history is repeated, those Calvin Klein bikini briefs may not be around forever. As a fellow shopper, who happily noted their return in a product review posted at Macys.com, wrote, "I am going to buy more just in case they phase out this great brief."

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