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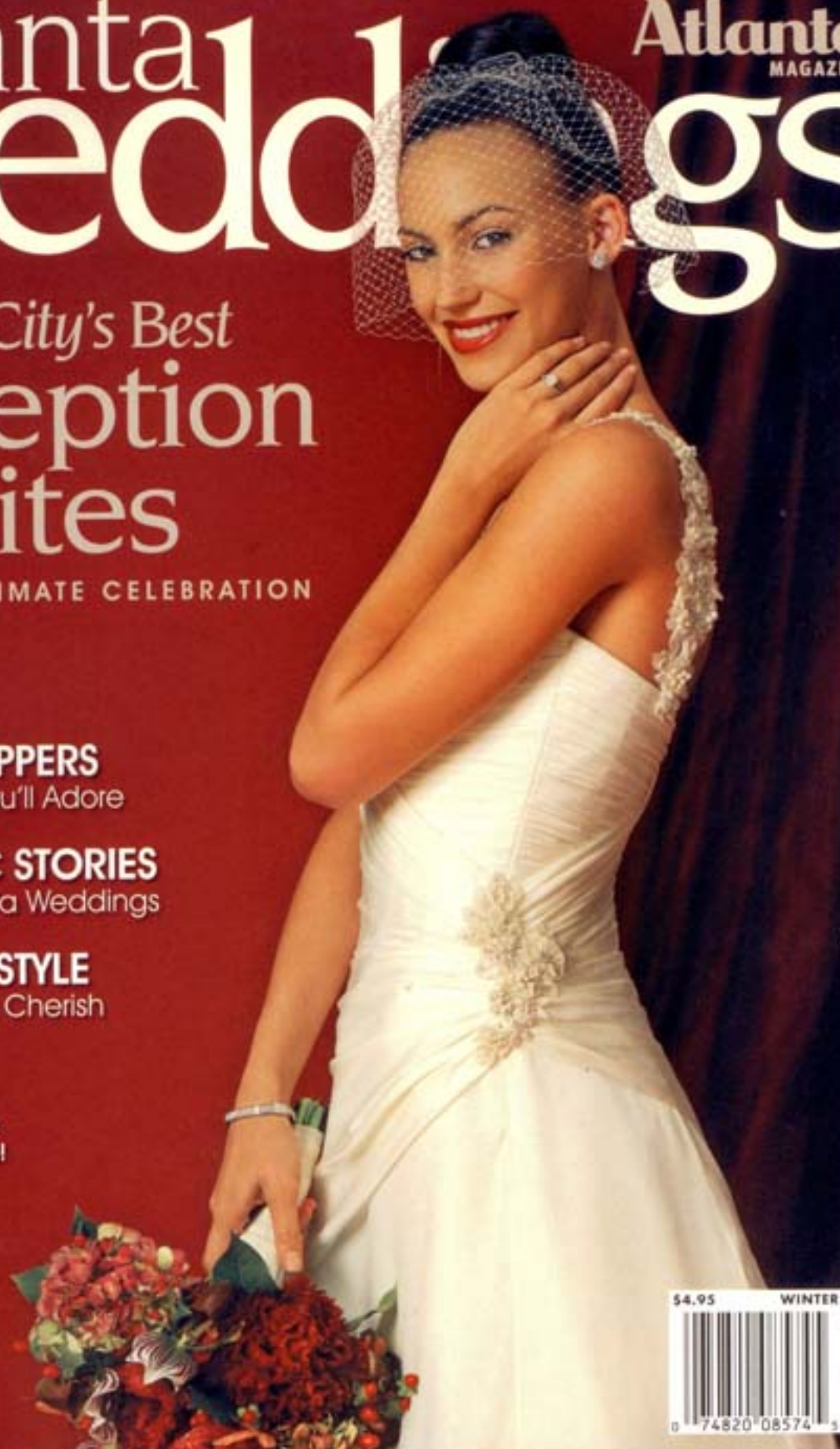
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Lessons on Linen

Lavish linens create luxury at home every day

By Wendy Huston

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVE PELOSI
STYLING BY GLORIA S. HAYNES

Imagine awakening nestled in the softest Egyptian cotton sheets, stepping out of the shower onto a cloud of the finest Italian-milled cotton, brushing off beads of water with a Turkish terry towel, and wrapping yourself in a silky bamboo robe before starting your busy day. Those indulgent moments aren't just reserved for spas and hotels; newlyweds who register wisely can experience luxury at home daily. "Linen is just one of the little luxuries we can do for ourselves that we don't have to share with the outside world," says CeCe Easter, owner of luxury linen boutique Belle Chambre. "It's important in this very hectic world that we pamper ourselves and make a haven where we can get away."

Create a Haven

Although a fine fabric spun from flax fibers is called linen, we refer to sheets, towels, and table coverings collectively as household linens. For a complete set in your home, think about registering for everything from napkins and placemats to dish towels and aprons, bath mats and robes, bedsheets and guest towels. Most stores will provide a checklist so you know how many sets to request and to make sure you won't forget anything.

As a young girl, Marie Bensing treasured the linens her grandmother bought her family because it was one of the few luxuries they could afford. Now the store manager for the French linen and home boutique Yves Delorme, which designs and mills its own linens, Bensing says her passion for linens came from cherishing their soft feel, knowing she could

Top to bottom: Laurier ecru boudoir pillow, \$155, from Yves Delorme with Yves Delorme boudoir pillow insert. Amarganett aqua/brown standard sham, \$90, from Belle Chambre with Belle Chambre standard pillow. Calvin Klein satin rib white standard sham, \$100, from Bloomingdale's with Ralph Lauren Estate standard pillow, \$190, from Macy's. Tundra blue/green standard sham, \$190, from Yves Delorme with Yves Delorme down standard pillow, \$130. Dakota pique Euro sham in poplin seafoam with applique border, price upon request, from Lioraine Linens with Collection 59 Fair European square pillow, \$159.99, from Bloomingdale's. See resources on page 114.



have nice things even if her family wasn't wealthy. And because strong, well-made fabrics get better with wear—requiring fewer sets—she believes everyone can and should have quality linens. “They’re practical and lovely,” she says.

In addition to improving with use, some linens also help create a healthy environment in your home. Organic linens, for example, are free from chemicals and are, by nature, antimicrobial and mildew-resistant. “They are the healthiest, and they provide the healthiest sleep,” says Antje Kingma, founder and co-owner of Eco-Bella, which specializes in organic home and body products.

The Fibers of Your Home

Learning about the details of high-quality linens will help you choose the right pieces for your home. The fiber used and the way the fiber is processed to make linens are the most important factors in determining quality. The best fibers are cotton and linen, and the highest quality types of cotton are Egyptian

and Pima cottons. Egyptian cotton is intrinsically a stronger and softer fiber than others because it is a longer fiber, which also makes it very lustrous because there are fewer breaks before the next fiber begins, explains Jane Scott Hodges, owner of Leontine Linens. Pima cotton is also a long fiber that can be woven into silky, luxurious cotton linen. Other fibers, such as silk and linen, are often combined with cotton to create blends, but products made from one fiber (e.g., 100 percent Egyptian cotton) are considered the best products.

The most common fibers used in organic products are cotton, bamboo, modal (from beech wood), and kapok (from the seeds of a kapok tree). These fibers remain natural and bear the organic label when they are grown in soil free from pesticides, resulting in fibers without chemical residue. These chemical-free

Left to right: Iris Vase fingertip towel, \$24, from Yves Delorme. Linen thistle guest towel, price upon request, from Leontine Linens. Lulu Malouk flamenco dots guest towel, \$20, from Belle Chambre. See resources on page 114.



Soaps, \$11 each, from Belle Chambre. Cabochon white bath mat, \$55, from Belle Chambre. Style & Co. popcorn bath mat, \$35, from Macy's. Eden avocado guest mat, \$38, from Yves Delorme. See resources on page 114.

fibers yield soft and long-lasting linens, according to Kingma. "Organic is the purest way to grow and process [the fibers]," she says. "And the feel is so amazing. Organic linens are the softest, and they're really beautiful."

Fibers have different feels, or hand, depending on what process was used to create the yarn binding the fibers. A carded yarn is stripped of only a small percentage of uneven fibers, creating a coarse feeling, while more uneven fibers and impurities are removed from combed yarn for a more luxurious finish.

And don't be fooled by thread count. Thread count is a measure of how many threads are in one square inch of fabric, but a higher thread count doesn't necessarily mean a better sheet, the experts

say. "A good fiber is a thicker thread, so you don't need as many threads," explains Cathy Walls, owner of Bella Italia. "A lower thread count of a higher fiber is going to be better than a higher thread count of a lower fiber." The weave also plays a role. In a sateen, or shiny satin weave, for example, a higher thread count makes it a thicker sheet. In a percale, which is a tighter weave with no sheen, a higher thread count makes it finer, thinner, and lighter.

Read labels carefully and beware of blends or synthetic fibers like polyester, which have a rough hand. When buying organic, make sure the product is made from 100 percent organic fiber. "Even if a label says organic, look at the fiber content," Kingma warns. "Some