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## 'Modest' Bathing Suits Make a Splash: Leggings, Sleeves, 'Skorts'

Swimwear dives into new market, offering more coverage



Two models in modest swimwear made by Undercover Waterwear, a Brooklyn-based company started by an Orthodox woman and her two daughters. *PHOTO: MORRIS ANTEBI/UNDERCOVER WATERWEAR*

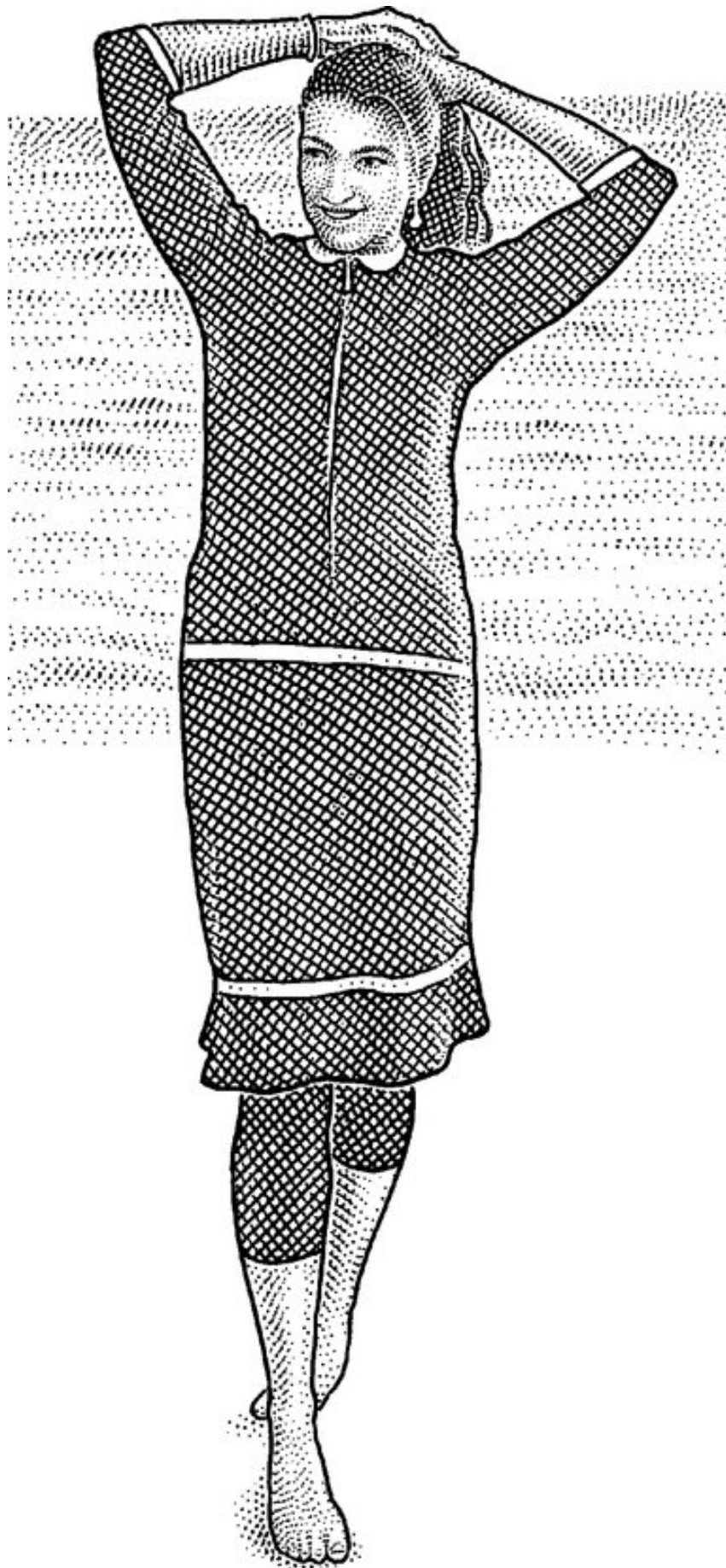
By **LUCETTE LAGNADO**

Updated July 23, 2015 9:56 p.m. ET

WEST ORANGE, N.J.—When Deborah Nixon heads to her local pool in her swimsuit—a pair of long black leggings and a matching short-sleeved top like surfers wear—she gets compliments and admiring glances, at least from other women.

“It is the New Sexy,” says Ms. Nixon. The 58-year-old, who has abandoned her conventional one-piece bathing suit in favor of the more elaborate get-up, is convinced she looks and feels better with less of her showing.

A whole lot less.



An Aqua Modesta suit

Ms. Nixon, a former nurse and retired captain in the U.S. Public Health Service, is a fan of so-called modest swimsuits. This increasingly popular style of beachwear is a far cry—and for some women a welcome relief—from the skimpy bikinis and bare-all Brazilian bottoms that have dominated beach fashions.

“When you get older, you don’t want that much exposed,” says Ms. Nixon, who says she also likes the sun protection her swim outfit provides.

She purchased her suit from HydroChic, one of several online purveyors of modest swimwear that have sprung up in recent years in a competitive cottage industry. Like several others in the business, HydroChic, based in New Rochelle, N.Y., was started by Orthodox Jewish women looking for suitable beachwear in a community where women follow strict dress codes.

Orthodox women typically cover their arms and legs, presenting a conundrum for a trip to the beach. Sara Wolf, HydroChic’s co-founder, said she got the idea for the swim line at the Jersey Shore, where she spotted Orthodox women walking in the

sand in ankle-length jean skirts. She found herself thinking about how her own friends wore oversized T-shirts and baggy men's shorts to the beach.

"There really wasn't much out there," Ms. Wolf says.

With no formal fashion training, she and a friend decided to create a line of modest swimwear with a sportier look, akin to what joggers, surfers and divers wear. "You want to look normal, not like you fell out of the sky," she says.

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### Swimsuit Fashions Over the Years »

Beachwear for women has gone through all kinds of waves.



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While Ms. Wolf and others set out to cater to a niche market, many are finding a much broader customer base. Women of other faiths who also prefer modesty, along with older and plus-size women who don't like how they look in a traditional bathing suit, are fans of the new beach wear. Younger women worried about sun exposure have also become clients.

In turn, some companies have broadened their offerings, venturing into the less modest, even slightly risqué realm.

Rachel Tabbouche, her sister and her mother started Undercover Waterwear to cater to religious Jewish women. But as the Brooklyn-based company has flourished, there has been a growing desire to capture a wider market, and some generational tension about

how far to go.

The mother, Susan Esses, 66, is all for pushing the envelope to broaden the brand's appeal.

Her daughters are more hesitant.

Last year, Ms. Esses' latest creation, the Bandeau, triggered a family crisis. Ms. Esses arrived at a Miami swimwear show with a sample she hadn't shown her daughters: a strapless bikini top made of a shiny, clingy fabric in a green reptile print, with a matching mini swim skirt.

Ms. Tabbouche says she and her sister Melissa Chehebar, 44, were livid. "It looked like a unibra. We were like, 'you have got to be kidding.'" The offending item was yanked off the rack. The Bandeau was dead.

To this day, Ms. Esses insists it was "adorable." Ms. Tabbouche, 32, says, "my mom and I have a different idea of what is adorable."

Still, the firm has been dipping its toes into slightly more daring waters, with short sleeves and mini swim skirts.

These were on display at Town Shop, a lingerie and swimwear stalwart in Manhattan, a couple of feet from hot-selling Brazilian string bikinis.

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recent day, Ms. Tabbouche arrived at the store lugging a suitcase stuffed with the latest collection. Her mother at her side, she unveiled a “maxi” swim dress that went past the ankle and swimming skirts that graze the knee. Then, she showed off a short-sleeved swim top with a zipper in the front.

“But is it kosher?” Town Shop owner Danny Koch deadpanned.

Mr. Koch, a fourth-generation owner, was an early fan. He says the suits fill a void in the swimwear market.

They do for Danta Bolin, who readily admits, “I don’t have the prettiest thighs in the world.” For years, Ms. Bolin, who is in her early 50s, searched for adequate bathing suits. Finally, she ventured out to her favorite Texas water park in a HydroChic outfit: Bermuda-length swim shorts and a three-quarter sleeve top.

Ms. Bolin said she still remembers admiring comments from lifeguards who loved her surfer look: “They thought I was the coolest.” She has never looked back.

Now transplanted to upstate New York, Ms. Bolin has a new set of fans: devout Christian women living nearby, who regularly ask her where she found her swim gear. She says her preferred get-up has nothing to do with religion: “It doesn’t expose parts of me that don’t need to be exposed.”

Regine Tessone, a Brooklyn resident who started a firm called Aqua Modesta, used her training at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology to design her line, which she bills as “the original Kosher swimwear.” They go beyond one or two pieces into the realm of four and even five—including a long skirt with a set of capri pants sewn in, a top with sleeves that cover the elbows, a swim bra, and an optional matching swim cap.

Ms. Tessone says she is sticking to her core market, Orthodox women, and that means nothing sleeveless or even with short sleeves.

HydroChic’s Ms. Wolf has a different perspective. Her website has been urging women to “take a walk on the wild side”—at least by wearing prints. She is already offering tank tops and a “skort”—shorts hidden beneath a skirt. “I am not the modesty police,” she says.

As for Ms. Nixon, she is already eyeing her next purchase: A jaunty, and deeply modest, swim skirt with leggings. That is fine with her husband, Max. Even covered up, he says, “her curves are beautiful.”

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