Washing Their Hands Of the Last Frontier; In the Kitchens of Many Immigrants, Dishwasher Is a Permanent Turnoff

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Body

A couple of months ago, in the privacy of his Reston townhouse, Alan Chien made a final break from cultural tradition, a guilt-filled decision he has yet to share with his parents.

He used his dishwasher. He knows his parents will not understand.

"They don't believe in it," said Chien, 35, an engineer who emigrated with his family from Taiwan when he was a toddler. "Just because they never used it, I never used it, so it was just a mysterious thing to me."

In many immigrant homes, the automatic dishwasher is the last frontier. Long after new arrivals pick up football, learn the intricacies of the multiplex and the DMV and develop a taste for pizza, they resist the dishwasher. Some joke that not using the appliance is one of the truest signs of immigrant heritage, whether they hail from Africa, Latin America, Asia or Eastern Europe.

If they have a dishwasher -- and many do, because it is standard equipment in most homes -- it becomes a glorified dish rack, a Tupperware storage cabinet or a snack-food bin. It's never turned on.

Officials at appliance companies have noticed: Sears doesn't even highlight the appliances in its ads in Spanish-language media.

It's a quirk in the assimilation process that baffles social scientists. "It's really striking," said Donna Gabaccia, who studies immigration and culinary history at the University of Minnesota. In the home, "technology is generally embraced by women. Certainly in terms of technology, their homes don't look that much different from Middle American homes."

Gabaccia said one explanation could be that immigrants can absorb only so much change. The dishwasher is a U.S. invention that is rare in most countries, even among the upper-middle class.

Chien, too, has a hard time explaining dishwasher guilt. Chien, whose younger sister goaded him into breaking his "mental block" on the matter, marvels over how the appliance scrubs off caked-on food. But he isn't sure whether he will keep using it.

"I still have the sense that it's kind of a waste of electricity," he said. "It's odd. We buy American clothes; we use the oven; we use the stove; but, somehow, that appliance. . . ."

Graciela Andres laments that her daughter, son-in-law and three grandchildren have abandoned ***washing*** by ***hand***. "They do it the American way -- they put everything in the ***wash*** machine, no matter if it's a little spoon," said Andres, who emigrated from Bolivia in 1981.

She does not disdain her family's washer and dryer, microwave, heavy-duty mixer, DVD player or computers. But the ***dishwasher***?

"I think if I ***wash*** by my ***hands***, I do a better job," said Andres, 65, of Germantown. "We have to fill up the ***dishwasher***. If you do it by ***hand***, it gets clean right away."

Her daughter, Grace Rivera-Oven, says she cannot afford not to use it. Her five-cycle, stainless-steel Kenmore allows her to spend more time shuttling her children to baseball and soccer, serving on community boards and freelance writing.

As a teenager, she got a friend to teach her how to operate the ***dishwasher*** -- "She was white; I figured she knew how." Before her mother got home from work, she would run a load.

These days, she can use the ***dishwasher*** anytime she wants. Even so, she feels as if she's missing something. That's why every Saturday morning, she does the breakfast dishes by ***hand*** with her 10-year-old daughter, Amalia.

"We just gossip, gossip," said Rivera-Oven, 35. "I just ***wash*** them, and she dries. It just reminds me of when I was her age. I did them with my mother. Oh, I loved the drying."

Her mother chimes in, stirred by the memory. "Oh, yes, I remember when she would dry and I would check," Andres said, pretending to rub a glass between her fingers. "Squeak, squeak, squeak."

Kitchen historians speculate that the ***dishwasher*** lies at the heart of what it means to be a family. ***Dishwashers*** began appearing in ***many*** middle-class American households in the late 1960s and 1970s, about the time that ***many*** women began entering the workforce. A decade later, the microwave came along. The family dinner hour disappeared. It's been downhill from there.

"When people ate dinner together, they also cleaned up together," said Vicki Matranga, a ***kitchen*** historian and designer for the Illinois-based International Housewares Association. "Americans now want convenience. The ***kitchen*** is a showplace where you heat up your food in the microwave."

Outside the United States, Canada and Western Europe, ***dishwashers*** are uncommon. In most countries, people cannot afford them; if they could, then they already have maids, who can do the dishes by ***hand***.

A 2004 economics report from the government of India noted that a growing middle class had pushed up sales of clothes washers, refrigerators and small appliances by 20 percent a year. ***Dishwashers***, however, were a "negligible market."

In tech-crazed South Korea, ***many*** families boast refrigerators with built-in TV screens and a cooler that regulates the temperature especially for jars of kimchi, the spicy pickled cabbage -- but no ***dishwasher***.

At Sears, officials do not make much of an effort to market ***dishwashers*** to ***immigrants***. The company's Kenmore Elite TurboZone was touted in mainstream media, but Spanish-language newspapers and magazines ran only general ads about appliances.

Anecdotal evidence from Sears associates and customers suggests that Latinos care far more about cooktops than ***dishwashers***, said Tina Settecase, vice president of home appliances.

"We're very careful about not changing our Hispanic customers," she said. "We're just trying to identify what the Hispanic customer wants and supply it."

But Mike McDermott, general manager of merchandising at General Electric, wonders whether more information about ***dishwashers*** might make a difference.

Like other appliance-makers, GE extols the ***dishwashers***' energy efficiency. The U.S. Department of Energy agrees, citing findings that ***dishwashers***, with a full load, use half as much water as ***washing*** by ***hand***. Statistics from the D.C.-based Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers show that using the ***dishwasher*** six times a week costs $49 a year, a little more than the refrigerator.

"Where there isn't a ***dishwasher*** in a home, we need to understand why it's not there," McDermott said, "and what are some of the tools we can use to educate the consumer."

He will not have any luck with Douglas Lee's family. His American roots stretch back to 1963, when his grandparents emigrated from China. In three generations, nobody has used as ***dishwasher***.

Lee, 22, of Springfield said he does not understand the appeal.

"Do you have to ***wash*** it beforehand to rinse it off? And if you ***wash*** it beforehand, why do you even need to use it?" asked Lee, a program manager for the ***Washington***-based Organization of Chinese Americans. "I see a lot of my white friends doing it. I'm like: Oh, well, whatever. I guess I can't judge them on how they clean their dishes."

Bernie Fischer, a self-described "typical white guy" who grew up in Baltimore, knows all the benefits of the ***dishwasher***. His parents had been so attached to theirs that they used it even though the ***wash*** cycle caused the lights to dim in their aging house.

But these days, his ***dishwasher*** is simply a drying rack. It was his wife's idea. Mary Ngo is a Vietnamese American.

"Mary's kind of set in her ways," said Fischer, 29, a soft-spoken Columbia psychiatrist.

"I just don't see the practicality of using the ***dishwasher***," explained Ngo, 28, a job trainer born and raised in Montgomery County.

But she does let her husband turn on the appliance every two weeks -- to clean it, not the dishes.

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