

Your Day

YOUR WAY

Run-of-the-mill or one-of-a-kind? An unforgettable wedding is a matter of personal touch

BY ELENA DONOVAN MAUER

Most weddings have the same basic recipe: happy couple, wedding party, ceremony, reception, food, cake and so on. But it's what you do with those ingredients that can really make your big day stand out from the rest.

The best way to plan an unforgettable wedding is to let your personality and your groom's shine through wherever you can. "Each bride is special and unique, so her wedding and all the aspects surrounding it should be as well," says Debbie Elias of Elias Events. She and other wedding experts are in the business of creating memorable events—and they know that customization is the way to go. "We make it their own, always," says Julie Nunn Martin of I DO! Wedding & Event Design, with

locations in Houston and San Francisco. To help you do the same, we probed the pros for their top tips on personalizing your once-in-a-lifetime wedding.

THE CEREMONY

How you two say “I do” depends on

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what forms of expression are most meaningful to you. You can write your own vows, incorporate special

readings or passages from scripture, or play your favorite songs. Exactly how unconventional you can go probably will depend on your venue’s flexibility. In some places of worship, you might only be able to choose from a few standard readings. Be sure to ask your officiant what you can customize and what’s off limits.

For inspiration, look to your heritage and its wedding customs. Whether it’s a family tradition or an ancient rite you may have come across in a book, a special ritual can add an extra layer of emotional resonance to your ceremony. Perhaps you choose to have your hands bound together with string in an Irish handfasting ceremony, or you wear beautiful Indian-style fresh flower garlands. “I recently had a couple do a German tradition I’d never heard of before,” says Nunn Martin. “They took scissors and cut a heart shape into a sheet. When they came up the aisle, they ran through the heart together.”

When you can, find ways for your friends and family members to get involved in the ceremony. “One couple met in Tibet,” says Nunn Martin. “They had a Tibetan prayer wheel. Guests took turns spinning the wheel and saying a silent prayer for the couple and their marriage. It was one of the most beautiful, touching moments I’ve ever seen.”

THE WEDDING PARTY

It’s certainly customary for a bride to choose her closest female family members and friends to be bridesmaids, and for the groom to assemble a wedding party of his favorite guys. But don’t be afraid to deviate from the traditional to recognize the most important people in your life. “Having a man as a ‘bridesmaid’ and a woman

“I Do” ...

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as a 'groomsman' can speak to the important relationship between you and a close friend of the opposite sex," says Elias. So if someone you love isn't necessarily the expected wedding party member, don't be afraid to include him or her! Some brides even choose parents or grandparents

Use professional lighting to play up the personal details you've so painstakingly planned.

to be in the wedding party if they're particularly close.

Even your furry friends can get in

on the action. "Including dogs as ring bearers is becoming more popular," says Jo Ann Woodward of Schwartz & Woodward. "Many couples feel that their pets are truly family members. We've had them wear floral collars and custom-made tuxes!"

THE LOCATION

"Sometimes picking your venue can be a means of personal expression," says Messina. "One couple had a cocktail reception at an art gallery to really show their love of art and food." A ballroom wedding might be a popular choice, but remember that a wedding can take place almost anywhere: a museum, a historic home, your favorite restaurant—even your own backyard!

THE DECOR

When guests walk into the reception area, you'll want them to see more than just pretty flowers—but rather a reflection of you and your groom. For great, personalized decor ideas, Woodward suggests not only looking in your favorite wedding magazines, but also looking to your passions and your own personal taste. "Look in your own homes and your parents'," she says. If you have a Colonial-style house, you might want to choose crisp linens in primary colors. Maybe you pride yourself on the gorgeous Japanese maple trees in your yard, and you want to use some pretty branches in your centerpieces.

The pros emphasize that lighting is one of the most important decor elements. Use it to play up the personal details you've so painstakingly planned. "Lighting really makes the wedding," says Nunn Martin. "You might want to pin-spot those details you spent so much time creating, or



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add a romantic feeling with candlelight. You don't have to go crazy with the lighting—just a few elements really help." Add to the personalization by having your initials projected onto the wall or the dance floor using a gobo spotlight, suggests Woodward.

Small touches are just as important as grand displays. "We love to display grandparents' and parents' wedding photos at the guest-book table," says Woodward. Elias personalizes the table numbers and centerpieces using the bride and groom's favorite pastimes. "I did wine bottles instead of numbered signs because the couple were wine connoisseurs," she says. "Another couple used pieces from their favorite childhood board games as neat, innovative centerpieces."

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THE FLAVORS

Delight all your guests' senses—including their sense of taste! You don't have to be tied to the same dishes your chef has whipped up for others' weddings. "One bride gave the chef the recipe for risotto that's been passed down in her family for years," says Nunn Martin. "He was able to create something for them that they loved and that reminded them of many past holidays. It was a nice gesture."

Your birthplace or profession also might inspire the menu. A Russian and Southern couple served up caviar and Russian vodka with a dinner of chicken, okra and mashed potatoes. "Another couple's family owned pie shops, so for dessert they had pie stations," says Nunn Martin. "Guests had hot pie à la mode!"

Remember that wedding cake is traditional, but not necessary. You can serve up personalized sweets in addition to the cake—or instead

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of it. Woodward advises offering an ice cream sundae buffet with monogrammed bowls. One of Nunn Martin's brides had sweets shipped from her hometown of New Orleans especially for the wedding.

The wedding cake itself can be customized in many ways. If your groom brought you roses on your first date, ask your baker to replicate the blooms in sugar to decorate your confection. Have a cake topper made to resemble your pet kittens or your favorite cartoon characters. You can even customize the flavors. Love mint chocolate-chip ice cream? Serve chocolate-chip cake with chocolate-peppermint filling. Perhaps you can pay tribute to your Hawaiian honeymoon by using pineapple and coconut flavors in your cake. "Cakes can be frosted in traditional white but have lots of surprises once they're cut," says Woodward.

THE ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment options go much farther than DJs and bands. "We love to incorporate some sort of entertainment for about 10 to 15 minutes that's unexpected," says Nunn Martin. This could include having a bagpiper lead guests from the cocktail hour into the ballroom for dinner, or having the marching band from the groom's alma mater perform the school's fight song. "It's something that guests love and is a reflection of the bride and groom."

Of course, you'll want to have your band or DJ play some of your favorite tunes. Also remember that you, the couple, can add to the entertainment by learning some dance moves to perform during your first dance. Really give some thought about how your personality can shine through during the dance—there's no rule that says

WEDDING SERVICES

this important dance has to be slow and swaying.

If you want to showcase your romance, learn a beautiful waltz set to a song with love-centric lyrics. Do you share a love of country music? Choreograph a playful line dance to perform. The dance will make a beautiful video moment, and guests will get a sense of who you are and what you love.

THE FAVORS

As the night ends, many brides and grooms send guests home with a token to remind them of the evening and thank them for sharing in the day. Woodward and Elias say that personalized candles and CDs of the couple's favorite songs are popular choices. If there's a charitable cause that's close to your hearts you might want to make a donation in guests' names and provide them with a card that explains why this gift is so important to you. You can also send guests home with your favorite midnight snack—"Taquitos to go!" says Woodward.

If you plan a day that's personalized from beginning to end, you're sure to leave guests feeling good. "The couple's hope is that at the end of the evening, when they are departing, their guests will say, 'Wow, that was so them!'" says Woodward. The best way to know you've made a memorable impression on your beloved friends and family? "Smiles," says Elias. "Everyone smiles."

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