

## Making Magical, Memorable Wedding Receptions



Rice is out, sparklers are in. Many receptions conclude with the bride and groom's grand exit amid hundreds of sparklers waved by their guests. Photo courtesy of Photography by Brea

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A great wedding reception is a treasured memory, and if it's well organized, brides, grooms and their guests will reflect on the celebration years later.

Sometimes, the great memory is in the venue. While many still have a traditional church wedding, some brides and grooms have their ceremonies in a banquet hall, at a restaurant, in a barn, at a park, on a beach or at a historic building. At these venues, guests enjoy not only the normal festivities but also the locale.

Waterfront weddings offer unique opportunities. Susan Hobbs, owner of Limelight Karaoke & DJ Services in Pasadena, recalled a recent wedding with colorful sky lanterns that were lit by the wedding couple and released over the water. Guests followed suit, sending their lamps soaring. "It was like in the movie 'Tangled,'" Hobbs said. "It was fun and really beautiful." Sky lanterns, or Chinese lanterns, are biodegradable miniature hot air balloons that are available in several colors. Guests often attach written wishes to the lanterns before sending them off.

At another waterfront wedding, Hobbs recalled, the guests added a romantic spark — literally. Each guest was provided with sparklers, and they formed a lighted aisle for the bride and groom's dramatic exit. Sparklers are popular at outdoor weddings. Sometimes guests wave the sparklers, adding pure magic to the bride and groom's first evening dance as husband and wife.

Hobbs laughed as she spoke about a barn wedding where curious calves in the field approached guests during the reception. Adventurous guests enjoy these weddings because they can explore both the farmhouse and the grounds. Disc jockey Johnnie Johnson of Diamond DeeJays once attended a fun, elegant wedding and reception on a steamboat.

Another way to entertain guests is through themed receptions. Susan Hobbs once provided services at a wedding where the bride and groom were big football fans. They included a pass-the-football hot tamale game during the reception. Hobbs recalled a reception near Halloween. For the first dance, the bride appeared with angel wings, and the groom had bat wings. A singer wearing a witch's hat sang "Old Black Magic."

Regardless of the venue or theme, photography is a big part of today's wedding entertainment. Laura Wiegmann, owner of Laura's Eyes Photography in Pasadena, does professional photography at weddings and other events. She provides custom-made photo books using the wedding colors and backdrops. Though brides and grooms still want professional photography, they usually invite their guests to join in, taking photos with cell phones.

Photo booths are the biggest hit at wedding receptions. "It's a big thing and really fun to do," Wiegmann said. Photo booths have evolved in the last few years. Today's version includes social media integration. After taking a photo, guests can access an iPad or Android device that allows them to post their photos directly to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or other social media platforms, or email the photos. They also get the old-fashioned Polaroid-type strips.

Chris Landing, owner of Maryland Photo Booths, said he uploads photos to Facebook so guests can tag themselves. "It's a great opportunity to provide interaction between all of your guests," Landing said.

The photo booths are now more sophisticated; they're open areas where DSLR cameras are set up with a backdrop. Landing offers a variety of backdrops to coordinate with the wedding colors and theme, and he designs a custom wedding logo. "It ties it all together," Landing said.

The advantage of an open photo shoot is that it entices other guests. They can watch the fun while they're eating, dancing or chatting, or they can even have fun and photobomb the shoot. "They see how much fun everyone is having, and it makes them want to join in," Landing said.

Landing also provides props, mustaches, superhero masks, Viking helmets and more. An attendant keeps the area neat, helps guests with their photos and posts photo strips in an album with a black background. Guests can then add notes with a silver pen for a keepsake.

Another popular option for weddings is a stogie bar. In an outdoor veranda-type area, guests can choose a cigar from a humidor, have a drink — most often whiskey — relax and talk.

"Even the bride enjoys it sometimes," said Jerry Jones, a customer service associate at Broadleaf Tobacco in Severna Park. If you're interested in creating that type of area, Jones suggests choosing a mild- to medium-tasting cigar. "You don't want to overpower people," Jones said, adding that the staff at Broadleaf Tobacco can help the bride and groom choose according to taste and budget.

Music is always a huge part of the wedding entertainment. For a twist, add karaoke. Some brides even sing while they're going down the aisle to meet the groom.

In fact, some wedding parties provide some of the musical entertainment. "Once, a bride and her brother did a pantomime to the song 'Paradise' by the Dashboard Light," said Johnson. And, sometimes, Johnson added, the whole bridal party will choreograph a special dance.

Line dances are still popular, but now, in addition to "The Electric Slide," there's "Booty Call" and "The Wobble." Though venues, themes and dress change, for the most part, tradition still reigns in wedding entertainment, Johnson said. The old-fashioned father-daughter, mother-son dances are still favorites, and moms and dads still cry. And Johnson doesn't think that's going to change anytime soon.