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SPRING/SUMMER 2022

Your guide
to planning a
beautiful
**LANCASTER
COUNTY
WEDDING**

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ON THE COVER



Ashley and Ronnie Perry on their wedding day in 2021 at the Christiana horse farm owned by Ronnie's grandparents.

See page 14.

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INS

and outs

CHECK OUT THE LATEST IN LANCASTER COUNTY WEDDING TRENDS

BY MARGARET GATES

Some wedding trends gain traction on social media. Others might get their start on fashion runways. Several of today's biggest wedding trends arose from circumstance, namely COVID-19. And local planners say some of those pandemic-driven trends are likely to stick around.


Amy Lukens, a lead planner with the Lancaster firm Simple Soiree, loves to watch the latest wedding trends, but she says couples shouldn't feel tied to them.

"Trends are great, and they're fun to add in little elements, but whatever is important to them, do it," she says. "It's ultimately about them and that commitment they are making to each other for the rest of their lives."



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNIE SHARP PHOTOGRAPHY

More couples are making four-legged family part of their wedding day.



Here's a look at what's trending
and what's not in local weddings:

IN:

MICROWEDDINGS

Small weddings had their niche before the pandemic, but COVID-19 made them a necessity. Now, it looks like they're here to stay for a while.

"I feel like a lot of people are finding that they actually like them better," says Gillian McSherry, owner of Events by Gillian & Co. "There are some couples that don't like being the center of attention."

Many local venues offer microwedding packages that allow couples to have condensed versions of a traditional wedding at discounted prices, with fewer guests and a shorter time period.

Michelle Hare, director of marketing, and Jaime Weinfeld, venue specialist, both with the catering and events company JDK Group, say they're seeing both ends of the spectrum, with some couples opting for intimate weddings and others celebrating with as many people as they possibly can.

"The amount of more intimate weddings is definitely higher than what we've seen before. I think they're here to stay," Hare says. "It's not seen as out of the norm to have an intimate wedding anymore."

Some couples view smaller weddings as an opportunity to save money, while others are putting the savings from a guest list under 50 back into the event with "over the top" details, Lukens says.

INTERACTIVE DESIGN ELEMENTS

Those over-the-top details might include features like a photo wall with a neon sign displaying the couple's names or a saying that holds meaning for them, Weinfeld and Hare say. Or it might be an interactive seating chart. Sure, you can stick with a simple table full of place cards to direct guests to their seats, but what about a more show-stopping display? Consider a wall of filled champagne flutes or shot glasses, each labeled with a guest's name and seating assignment. It's a fun way for guests to find their place and have a

drink all at once.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES

PERSONAL TOUCHES

Along with ditching large, lavish affairs for more intimate weddings, couples are also becoming more intentional, Lukens says.

“Couples are really bringing in more of who they are as a couple, who they are as individuals, their experiences together,” she says.

Lukens notes one local couple whose 2021 wedding — from vintage postcards to handpainted wooden table markers — was a celebration of their love for the outdoors and time spent touring national parks. (See featured wedding on [page 8](#).)

And JDK Group has one wedding in the works where the groom, an artist, plans to draw a portrait of each guest on their place cards, creating individual keepsakes.

Favors are getting more personal, too, Weinfeld says. Instead of trinkets and candy, guests might leave with a bottle of wine made by the couple, or a treat made by grandma that holds a special place in family tradition. Those items also may

find their way into welcome bags. (See [page 22](#)).

“They’re really making the wedding day about their story and not just what’s in a magazine and what they think is pretty,” Hare says.

While the wedding day took the lead on the personalization trend, other activities may be following suit, such as the bridal shower.

BOHO

The soft, earthy, free-spirited feel of boho style is getting bigger and bigger for weddings, McSherry says.

“The one thing that’s fun with boho is you can make anything boho,” she says.

The style is often characterized by a mix of colors, textures and patterns with an emphasis on nature. Some popular elements include pampas grass; ceramics and terracotta textures; burnt brown, amber and orange colors; fun dresses with features like bolder lace and Aztec prints; and dried florals.

McSherry says more couples are opting for

dried florals, and not just for their boho aesthetic. With proper care, dried flowers can last a long time, so they’re more like a keepsake than fresh flowers. (Check out one couple’s Lancaster County wedding with a boho vibe on [page 14](#)).

BABY’S BREATH

Speaking of flowers, this blast from the past is making a comeback. While the delicate blooms fit perfectly with the boho and cottagecore styles, as well as the popular Regency-era looks inspired by the Netflix series “Bridgerton,” they really work with any wedding theme, Lukens says — and not just as an accent or a filler.

“It’s a surprising thing, but we’re really seeing a lot more of it,” she says “It’s a fairly inexpensive floral, so you can use a lot of it. You can color it. You can leave it white. You can do those really big, massive installation pieces and it’s still a wow factor.”



Neon signs are a popular backdrop for wedding reception photos.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANNIE SHARP PHOTOGRAPHY

BOLD COLORS

Wedding colors were stuck in neutral for the past few years, but bolder colors are now reemerging. While neutrals will never really go out of style, look for richer colors and jewel tones in everything from dresses, shoes and decor to florals, cake design and photo backdrops.

TWO-PIECE OUTFITS

Traditional wedding dresses are making way for two-piece bridal gowns and bridesmaids' outfits that offer mix-and-match options, says Lukens, who is also a fan of another bridal fashion Otrend — pantsuits.

"It's a little fun twist," she says, "especially at a smaller ceremony. ... You're still getting that dress-up feel."

Kelly Milligan, a planner with Stylish Occasions Wedding and Event Planning, says she is also seeing more modern wedding dresses, with sheer sleeves, pearls and embroidery added to veils and accessories.

DINNER STATIONS

Along with the continued popularity of food trucks, some couples are passing on the

Ashley and Blaine Smith built this champagne wall that doubled as a seating chart for their summer 2021 wedding at Historic Ashland in Wrightsville.

buffet-style or served meal in favor of dinner stations, McSherry says, noting it's yet another way to bring out the couple's personalities.

"They're making it more fun and more appealing to the eye and looking really good to the point that you have got to have it," she says.

Displays often include favorites of the bride and groom, such as tacos and margaritas, a mashed potato bar, pasta station or burger station, or even a wood-fired pizza oven.

PRIVATE LAST DANCE

Couples are getting a little extra alone time with this growing trend, Milligan says. At the end of the night, the DJ or band will ask everyone except the happy couple to leave the reception, giving the bride and groom a moment to soak it all in, just the two of them.

"I typically see this as a meaningful slow song, but I could see it being upbeat and fun with the right couple as well," Milligan says.

When couples opt for a private dance, Milligan typically suggests giving them a send-off with sparklers or bubbles afterward. That way, she says, the guests are occupied getting their bubbles or sparklers, rather than lingering around watching the last dance.

"Then, as soon as you're dancing and the party is officially over, you get a grand send-off!"

COLD SPARKLERS

Lukens believes these safer, more versatile versions of traditional sparklers are on the cusp of a trend for those dramatic wedding exits.

Cold sparklers operate with an electrical box and the push of a button, using a high-tech chemical reaction to produce the sparkler effect with cold fallout. You won't get hurt touching them and you can use them indoors.

DOGS

Along with photographer, florist and caterer, you can add dog handler to the list of must-have wedding vendors — at least if Fido is going to be part of the big day. McSherry is seeing more couples incorporating their dogs

into ceremonies as dog of honor, ring bearer or flower girl. Some local services specialize in wedding day dog handling, sending furry friends down the aisle and caring for them during the reception.

"You hire them, bring your dog the day of the wedding and they are your dog's babysitter," she says.

(For tips on incorporating pets into your big day, see [page 12](#)).

OUT:

BIG WEDDING CAKES

Along with microweddings, some statement pieces associated with the wedding, including bouquets and cakes, are getting smaller too, experts say.

"I have seen a lot of couples getting small cakes to cut at their reception and then other desserts of their choice to serve to the guests,"

Milligan says.

"A new trend I have been seeing to replace the cake tradition is a champagne tower. So fun!"

MASON JARS AND BURLAP

This mainstay of the farmhouse wedding is past its prime, Lukens says.

"For the moment it was here, we appreciated it and we enjoyed it, but it had its day," she says.

That doesn't mean the farmhouse aesthetic is over, she says. There are other ways to bring that feel to a wedding, including crates, wood signs and log pieces.

For a more elevated farmhouse look, consider greens and white florals, cream-colored pillar candles in cylinder vases and even burlap-colored linens.



Jacquelyn and Benjamin Horning

LOCATION OF CEREMONY AND RECEPTION:
HISTORIC ROCK FORD

APRIL 22, 2021

“After we had been dating for a little while we decided to try and reach at least one national park each year

around our anniversary,” Jacquelyn says. “The first year we were together (2018) we went to Glacier National Park in Montana. Our second year together we went to Yosemite National Park in California, and Ben proposed on a hike to Mirror Lake. Since then, we were able to make it to Shenandoah (on our original wedding date, that we postponed due to COVID) and we ended up honeymooning in Wyoming where we got to visit Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

Did you have a theme?

Yes, we did! We focused on national parks, mountains and stargazing.

“I think the theme was a natural choice for us, because parks have been such a wonderful part of our relationship.

We bonded over planning our adventures and were able to share the experience of seeing some of the most incredible natural landmarks. The parks have always left us feeling grateful, privileged, bewildered and in awe, and I felt like our wedding should capture some of those same feelings.

“I also wanted our day to truly reflect the two of us, and I wanted unique touches that you may not have seen at another wedding. So, we incorporated national parks wherever we could. I designed our entire invitation suite with photos we took on film in Yosemite. I collected vintage stamps that celebrated nature and parks (including a Yosemite stamp from the 1930s). Our tables were named after parks and the names were painted on little mountains that we stained and painted ourselves. We collected vintage park postcards to display at each table. We had stargazing maps (because we got to stargaze in Yosemite and see the Milky Way). We had compasses as favors, and most of our decorations were in some way related to an experience we shared in a park (including a 4-by-4 painting by local artist Ashley Benedict of the spot where Ben proposed in Yosemite).”



PHOTOGRAPHER:

RACHEL RUHL PHOTOGRAPHY

FLORIST: **FULTON STREET FLORA**

CATERER: **MOUNTAIN**

LAUREL CATERING

BEAUTY: **STUDIO 8**

WEDDING PLANNER:

SIMPLE SOIREE



Benjamin + Jacquelyn

Benjamin + Jacquelyn
Thursday, April 22nd, 2022
Five O'clock in the Evening
Dinner, Ceremony and Reception to follow



UNDER THIS SKY
Our Story Began
JACQUELYN & BENJAMIN
LANCASTER, PA | 04.22.2022



What was the biggest challenge in planning your wedding day?

"I'm sure it's no surprise that my answer is COVID-19. Originally, we had planned to tie the knot in October 2020 (on the Harvest Moon, as that is another special part of our relationship). But in order to allow for the safest environment and to allow as many people to be vaccinated as possible, we postponed to April 2021. We joke about how it feels like we planned two full weddings. I had to redo our entire invitation suite, change venues, change dates with all our vendors, tackle shifts in our wedding party, swap fall colors for spring colors, etc. It was a crazy and strange experience to try and balance the excitement of getting married with the fear and sadness surrounding COVID."

Would you change anything?

"Do I wish that COVID-19 had never happened and that we wouldn't have had to face so much stress in our planning, sure, but ultimately our day was perfect. We have the most supportive friends and family, and they truly made our day more incredible than we could have imagined."





What advice do you have for newly engaged couples?

“It truly helps to remember that you should make choices that reflect you as a couple, your union and the things that bring you joy. Whatever your choices are, your friends and family should always be beside you as long as you’re happy!”



SAY **Yes** TO THE **PETS**

Want to include 4-legged family members in your special day?

Add dog handler to your wedding vendor list

BY MARGARET GATES

When Kristen Richards-Sollenberger and Brenton Sollenberger married at The Inn at

Pinetown in Leola last summer, they were determined to include one very special guest — Willow, their 4-year-old Australian shepherd/border collie mix.

“We have had her since she was 3 months,” Richards-Sollenberger says in an email. “We couldn’t imagine having photographs and memories made without Willow at our wedding! She is such a light in our lives.”

The Lancaster couple didn’t want to burden any of their guests with the task of transporting Willow to and from the venue, so they enlisted the help of Going Mutts Pet Services, a Lancaster-based dog walking and overnight pet care business that recently

added wedding day handling to its menu of services.

The Sollenbergers gave Going Mutts owner Lauren Bollinger a precise time frame for when Willow should arrive for photos.

“It was perfect timing and Lauren helped make our day extra special without us really having to have any concern for our pup,” Richards-Sollenberger says. “She picked her up, brought her to the venue, and when she returned her home, she spent some time with Willow afterwards.”

About half of American households own pets, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and spending in the pet care industry has skyrocketed in recent years. It’s no wonder dog handlers are finding their way onto couple’s must-have wedding day vendor lists.

A recent WeddingWire survey found that 49% of newly engaged couples have a pet together and 91% of pet owners include their pet in their wedding day in some way.

“Around here in Lancaster, or central Pennsylvania specifically, there are a few vendors who specialize in dog handling or dog sitting,” says Gillian McSherry, owner of Events by Gillian & Co. “For some people that is their life and their babies, and they’re just incorporating them in (their wedding day) as well. It’s another vendor for the wedding day. It allows them to not worry about their dog and for the dog to be part of it.”

Bollinger saw a new opportunity for her business a few years ago when a dog-walking client asked for wedding day help. She knew of a few companies in the tri-state area that offered wedding services for dog owners, but soon realized there was a need in the Lancaster County area, too.

In a case of unfortunate timing, Going Mutts launched its Fur-Ever Wedding Services just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. With the subsequent spate of wedding cancellations, their bookings went to the dogs.

Going Mutts relaunched its wedding services in spring 2021 and has seen a significant increase in bookings for 2022, Bollinger says.

“Many couples I have chatted with want to include their pups on their special day, but they don’t know where to start to make that happen,” Bollinger says in an email. “They aren’t aware that businesses like mine even offer this type of service.”

For couples like the Sollenbergers who want to include their dog in their special day, the person they would most likely ask for help would either be in the wedding or attending as a guest, Bollinger says. Professional vendors ensure the dog is well cared for and that loved ones don’t have to miss any part of the ceremony or reception because the dog needs attention or requires transportation home.

Going Mutts offers a variety of packages that they will customize for a couple’s unique wedding day situation. Services might include



Kristen Richards-Sollenberger and Brenton Sollenberger captured a wedding day moment with their dog, Willow, with the help of a Lancaster-based pet service.

Should you, **or** shouldn't you?

PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIANNA ELIZABETH PHOTOGRAPHY

taking the dog to the groomer, transporting the dog to and from the venue, handing the dog off to a member of the wedding party, and managing the dog for photos.

For cases where Fido will not be part of the day's festivities, they offer a Stay n' Play package in the couple's home that includes several hours of walks, potty breaks, playtime, belly rubs and snuggles.

Going Mutts also offers engagement photo session handling and honeymoon pet sitting packages.

Making your dog part of the day

Dogs can play several roles in their humans' big day, Bollinger says. Couples often request that a member of the wedding party or the parents of the bride and groom walk their dogs down the aisle. They can also serve as ring bearers.

"If you have a super friendly but relaxed dog, they could act as a greeter to help ushers direct guest foot traffic," Bollinger says, "of course, with a chaperone waiting in the wings in case the dog gets antsy."

Some couples simply opt for photo participation, getting a few shots of themselves with their four-legged family member.

The Sollenbergers chose that option for Willow, who Richards-Sollenberger describes as an affectionate and loving "Velcro dog."

Willow also has a weakness for water, and The Inn at Pinetown sits along a creek.

"She can never pass up the chance to go for a swim, so we didn't want to take too many risks on our day," she says. "We wanted to make sure she could have a few special moments with us but not get too overstimulated from all that was happening for an extended period of time."

It all depends on the couple and the dog — and the venue.

First and foremost, make sure you have a dog-friendly venue, Bollinger says. Not every venue welcomes pets. If you're planning an outdoor wedding, you'll likely need an indoor alternative in the event of rain. Check to see if your dog is welcome at that location as well.

Second, know your pet. If your dog has social or separation anxiety or gets easily startled or triggered, don't force it, Bollinger says.

For dogs that get easily overwhelmed, it's best to make an appearance, have a few photos, then return to the comfort of home, she says.

"Others are social butterflies and can stay to work the room during the reception, oftentimes trying to sneak some appetizers," she says.

While some dogs might be able to party the night away with mom and dad, Going Mutts recommends that dogs leave the festivities before the main course to avoid too much begging with those irresistible puppy dog eyes.

I DO *Featured Wedding*

Ronnie and Ashley Perry

May 22, 2021

LOCATION OF CEREMONY AND RECEPTION:
Sylmar Farms, Christiana



Why did you choose that location?

It is the horse farm owned by Ronnie's wonderful grandparents, Betsy Houghton and the late Ronald Houghton," Ashley says. "This is the same place we got engaged!"



How did you include your dog in your wedding day?

“They say to include all of your favorite people in your wedding day, so we couldn’t imagine not including one of the most important parts of our everyday life. Diesel (our dog) is so easygoing and friendly with a huge smile that we knew he would be the perfect addition to our ceremony. He was our ring bearer, but without the rings.”



What was the biggest challenge planning your wedding?

“For us personally, there was some difficulty we encountered planning a wedding during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was always a fear that restrictions could change any moment while putting together our plans and would cause us to take steps back in the planning process. Small things such as limits of guests to a bridal shower venue, different regulations for serving wedding meals, etc. Each change we encountered worked out wonderfully in the end and we would encourage anyone to just remember why you are having a wedding in the first place, and details will fall into place.”



PHOTOGRAPHER: REBEKAH VIOLA PHOTOGRAPHY
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Would you do anything differently?

“Absolutely not. We had the most perfect day that we felt represented our marriage and our lifestyle. We were so happy to have had an outdoor wedding during this pandemic to allow for the maximum amount of guests as they are each so important to us.”

Do you have any advice for newly engaged couples?

“Soak in each minute of your wedding day from the morning you wake up to the moment you go to bed. Allow yourself to be fully present with the loved ones around you because you’ll never get to repeat the day all over again. The best way to relive the day in the months/years to come is by hiring a photographer and videographer to capture the day for you.”

GALAXY OF LOVE

'STAR WARS'

FANS PLAN OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD WEDDINGS

BY REBECCA LOGAN • FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE



Photo courtesy of Creative Interpretations Photography

Courtney Sullivan knew how stressful nuptials can get, what with all the preparation and pressure for perfection.

So here was her wedding day plan: “How could I be in anything but a good mood if I’m wearing R2-D2 shoes?” she says.

Sullivan walked down the aisle then waltzed around her wedding reception at Lancaster’s Cork Factory Hotel with a pair of hand-painted, high-heeled droids peeking out from under her gown.

She and her now husband, Austin, joined the larger-than-you-might-suspect ranks of couples who have mixed some “Star Wars” with their celebrations.

“It was actually my idea,” says Courtney, who knew almost nothing about “Star Wars” before dating Austin, a longtime devotee. They together binge-watched the trilogies and say they bonded over the flicks.

“I think now Courtney’s a bigger ‘Star Wars’ fan than I am,” he says. “That’s my own doing.”

Austin and his groomsmen wore “Star Wars” socks and boutonnieres featuring heads from “Star Wars” Pez dispensers. As the reception went on, the bride switched out those heels for more comfortable droid sneakers. Tables were assigned names of fictional planets.

Courtney, an e-commerce coordinator for a health-focused food company, and Austin, who works in sales for a print and design service, say they strived to keep the touches tasteful and not overbearing at their 2018 wedding. They say their parents made it clear they didn’t want to walk into the reception and feel like they were at Comic-Con.

The bride says her parents especially kept asking at first, “Why ‘Star Wars?’” But by the time the wedding arrived they had embraced the theme and even surprised the newlyweds with lightsabers during their entrance.

This past November, guests at a wedding at Drumore Estate in Pequea witnessed a full-on lightsaber arch.

Photo courtesy of Creative Interpretations Photography



Photo courtesy of Soul Focus Media



Six months before that, newlyweds Michelle and Michael Ambrose busted out lightsabers inside Bube's Brewery in Mount Joy. They also walked down a personalized runner that said: "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away"

"My husband is die-hard 'Star Wars.' I'm not. But to me I was like, 'That is a part of him,' ..." Michelle says. "I told him we could absolutely do 'Star Wars' as long as it was not tacky. So I thought, if we're doing that, my bouquet holder has to be a lightsaber."

She did veto yellow lettering on that runner. Yellow would have clashed with their colors. So they went with black and white.

The Ambroses, who live near Allentown, had a DIY Death Star at the reception into which guests could slip cards. They found the instructions online.

"We actually spent months making this at home. We did it what ... five times? The sixth one was finally right," she says. "You had to use a beach ball. It was crazy. But it worked out."

A photographer with Creative Interpretations Photography shot their wedding at Bube's. A different Creative Interpretations photographer, Paul Joseph Lorio III, who owns the Harrisburg-based company, says he typically works one or two "Star Wars" weddings each year and has in his portfolio pictures of an R2-D2 ring bearer.

He's more familiar with the "Star Wars" franchise than "Harry Potter" but says he plans to brush up on the latter during a Florida resort trip because wizards are hot in the current wedding rotation. He once shot a "Back to the Future" wedding complete with DeLorean, skateboards and blaring "Power of Love."

Roughly 36% of 2022 couples are opting for a wedding theme, according to 3,309 of them surveyed for the online wedding registry site Zola.

For some that's "Star Wars" or "Harry Potter." Other top franchises being incorporated are "Lord of the Rings" and Marvel, says Amanda Shur, a senior associate at Zola.

"We've also found that 'celestial' wedding themes are trending upwards this year, which can be an easy way to incorporate more subtle nods to 'Star Wars,'" she says.



Photo courtesy of Creative Interpretations Photography

The degree to which couples incorporate that faraway galaxy varies. Some of the

surveyed couples said they are giving it only nods through music or subtle décor. “Others have said they’re opting for bolder elements like lightsaber fights as reception entertainment,” she says.

Etsy is awash in “Star Wars”-related wedding options. It’s where Sullivan found her shoes and Ambrose the lightsaber hilt for her flowers.

Also for sale on the platform is a pair of sterling silver or white gold rings from Outpost515, owned by Troy Fasig of Lebanon. In a reference to a classic Han Solo and Leia Organa moment, one ring says, “I love you” and the other says, “I know.”

The words and the wedding dates engraved inside are written in a “Star Wars” language called Aurebesh, says

Fasig, who even shipped a pair to France.

“Han and Leia are just one of those couples we all aspire to,” Fasig says. “The very prim and proper princess and the scoundrel.”

Speaking of that descriptor, Disney’s official “Star Wars” Twitter account announced on Valentine’s Day: “You’re invited to Han and Leia’s wedding in the upcoming novel, ‘Star Wars: The Princess and the Scoundrel.’”



Photo courtesy of Troy Fasig

That caused a bit of backlash among some fans who enjoyed an older book about the couple’s nuptials, which came out before Disney bought the franchise. The new novel is due out in August and reportedly involves a honeymoon on Halcyon, a luxury vessel that’s central to the new Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser experience at Walt Disney World Resort.

Speaking in February, Fasig himself was gearing up for his own wedding. His fiancée had a fitting coming up at a Lititz bridal boutique. He was putting final touches on her ring. It’s not one of the ones he sells on Etsy.

“Mad About Me” by Figrin D’an and the Modal Nodes – a.k.a. the Cantina song – will play during cocktail hour at Fasig’s wedding, he says.

“Beyond that, we don’t really have anything (“Star Wars”) planned. It’s going to be more traditional in feel with very minor nerdy touches,” Fasig adds. “We’re getting married at a planetarium, so we figured that was enough science for our family.”

Sometimes the wedding dates engraved on the Outpost515 rings are May 4, a date with an obvious appeal to the “Star Wars” crowd.

May 4, 2023 – a Thursday – is already booked at Riverdale Manor on the Conestoga River in Lancaster.

Owner Maureen Raezer says she understands “Star Wars” will be involved in that wedding, though she won’t know until next year whether that means tiny touches or a full-blown theme.



Photos courtesy of Emily Grace Photo

Previous page: Michael and Michelle Ambrose included a “Star Wars”- themed runner and lightsabers in their 2021 wedding at Bube’s Brewery. Far right: R2-D2 was the surprise guest at a reception for a Denmark couple who married in Pennsylvania.



May 4, 2024 was — at least as of February — still available at Riverdale. Heads up for wedding planners: May 4 falls on a Saturday that year.

"I'm sure as the years go on that's going to be a hot date for a lot of people," says Emily Wilcox, owner of Emily Grace Photo in Elizabethtown.

She herself is a huge "Star Wars" fan and wears the Rebel Alliance symbol around her neck every day. Wilcox thinks, however, that it's largely a happy coincidence that she's been hired to work several "Star Wars" weddings.

Her favorite themed touch thus far was a life-size R2-D2 who took to the dance floor courtesy of a man operating him from behind a screen.

That was at the reception for a couple who live in Denmark, where they work for Lego, but opted to have the wedding close to family in Pennsylvania, she says.

Their digital photo album includes pictures of the bride seemingly lifting her husband off the ground in very Vader-like fashion.

"We would count to three, he would jump and my assistant would flail the train of her dress and then run and get out of the shot," Wilcox says. "It took a team effort to get that."

The bride did make up for the whole Jedi death grip business by surprising her husband with that life-size R2-D2.

"The guests loved it. Everyone stood up and just like lost their minds," she says. "Even I did a little bit. You know he's not real, but it feels like that character is there."

Any hobby or interest can be made into a theme, Wilcox says.

"I've heard the 'Game of Thrones' theme song several times as the aisle song ...," she says. "I've heard the 'Jurassic Park' theme song as the aisle song."

"But I think 'Star Wars' has a little edge on all of those because it is multigenerational," she adds. "If anything's going to be a repeat theme, it's going to be 'Star Wars.'"



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Welcome **IN A BAG**

Greet overnight guests with some pleasing and practical tokens of appreciation

BY MARGARET GATES

Planning a Lancaster County wedding? If you're expecting a lot of out-of-town guests, welcome bags are a nice touch — and these little tokens of thanks can be as simple or as elaborate as you like.

For guests who are staying in a hotel for the weekend, welcome bags are a way to offer them essential information, a little bit of fun and an introduction to Lancaster County.

"Welcome bags can be a great addition to your wedding and are accommodating for almost any budget," says Kelly Milligan, a planner with Stylish Occasions Wedding and Event Planning.

Says Amy Lukens, a lead planner with Simple Soiree: "Welcome bags are an absolute essential."

Not sure where to start? Here are some must-haves and some suggestions from local wedding planners:

the ESSENTIALS

- An itinerary that includes a welcome and a schedule of events, along with locations, times and any details about transportation.
- A map and brochures for places guests may want to visit close to their hotel.

- A list of local events and activities, along with favorite restaurants to check out if the guests will be staying for the weekend. If possible, include a personal note about the places you suggest.

the CONTAINER

LOW BUDGET: Little brown bag tied with ribbon. Stamp it with a logo or something meaningful to the couple.

HIGHER BUDGET: Canvas tote bag customized with the couple's names and wedding date.

the CONTENTS

LOW BUDGET: Bottle of water and a hangover kit with mints and a little something for headaches and heartburn.

A LITTLE EXTRA: Add small bottles of hand sanitizer or sunscreen from the dollar store or mini bags of snacks, candy bars or sticks of gum purchased in bulk at a warehouse store.

EVEN MORE: Add labeled snacks, like "Joey's favorite salty snack" or "Sam's favorite sweet treat." Or give guests a taste of Lancaster County with locally made treats and snacks. Think whoopie pies, jams, tea or coffee, Wilbur buds, Sturgis pretzels, a little bottle of Seasons olive oil, airplane-size bottles of Deerfoot wine with custom labels featuring the couple's logo and wedding colors, or even a small gift card or drink voucher to a local pub or bar.

BIG BUDGET: Add individual bottles of custom-made alcohol, custom-labeled water bottles, and swag-bag items like socks, blankets, custom cups and personalized chocolates featuring the couple's initials.



MONEY IS NO OBJECT: Turn the welcome bag into an experience, suggests Jaime Weinfeld, venue specialist for JDK Group. Create picnic baskets for guests with some of the couple's favorite picnic snacks and beverages. Maybe add a deck of cards and a fun game to play.

Include a scavenger hunt that leads guests to experience meaningful local spots, like having coffee at the café where the wedding couple had their first date.

The more you can personalize within your budget the better, Milligan suggests, whether it's including guests' names on the bags or including items personal to the couple inside.

Welcome bags don't need to break the bank but whether they are simple or elaborate, keep them intentional, Lukens says.

"How do you want guests to feel when they get that bag?"



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DON'T ~~BREAK~~ THE BANK



Planning your wedding budget? Know what to expect and ways you can save

KARYL CARMIGNANI
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

Getting married is likely to be one of the most expensive days of your life. While some couples might opt for an abbreviated celebration going straight from courtship to courthouse or an economical elopement event, most couples lean in for the full monty wedding experience. Orchestrating a picturesque venue, blooming flowers, delicious cake, proper attire, food for guests, reception entertainment and, of course, a well-photographed affair runs into thousands of dollars. But there are ways to reel in the cost and avoid beginning your married life up to your eyelashes in debt.

According to The Wedding Report, a research company that tracks consumer wedding trends, the average cost of a wedding in Pennsylvania was just over \$23,000 in 2020. However, costs vary across the state, and in Lancaster County, couples spent an average of \$28,444 in 2020, down from \$33,600 in 2019, the report found. Many factors come into play with a wedding's bottom line. If there are budget constraints, couples should decide on their "must-haves" and jettison the less important — and costly — details.

Guest list

One major cost impact is the number of guests. Keeping the guest list to immediate family and a few friends makes for an intimate gathering, though it risks offending college chums, cubical pals and sweet neighbors.

Microweddings, which grew in popularity by necessity during the pandemic, are nuptial gatherings with fewer than 50 guests. They still offer the special, celebratory feel, just on a smaller scale.

Numerous Lancaster County venues offer microwedding packages, including Acorn Farms in Mount Joy, where a microwedding for the couple and 28 guests costs \$3,850 on many Saturdays during the year and \$3,299 for Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays, says owner Phil Landis says. That price includes the venue, use of the bridal suite, hors d'oeuvres, linens, beverages, sales tax and service charges. It also includes a bartender, but couples must BYOB. A premium reception for 75 during peak season is \$7,500, Landis says.

But if a micro event doesn't cover your A-listers, note that most weddings have fewer than 200 guests. In 2021, the average guest count was 105, a significant increase from just 66 guests in 2020, according to The Knot. The study revealed a wedding guest

trend heading toward the pre-pandemic sweet spot of 131 guests.

Landis likes to remind couples that the 200 guests they expect often ends up being closer to 120.

"In reality, you're going to be surprised how many people say they're not going to come," he says. That's been especially true the past two years.

The per-person cost for food and beverages can add up quickly. At Acorn Farms, the cost per additional guest for a premium reception is about \$43, Landis says. Depending on the venue, you could pay even more. That might make it easier to nix your acupuncturist and dog walker from your special day.

If you must shrink your guest list, Allory Melhorn, owner of the Mount Joy venue Melhorn Manor, offers these tips: Limit "plus-ones" to guests who are married or who have had "significant others" for a long period of time, and nix people you haven't seen in the past year, unless they are important to you.

"It is THEIR wedding," Melhorn writes in an email, "which ultimately means if they do not want to invite a certain person or group of people, they should not feel obligated to do so."

Invitations

Of course, the guests have to be invited, and that first impression on the invitation will set the tone for the big day. If paying a calligrapher to dash off the details of your wedding on deckle-edged linen paper is not in the cards, you — or a talented designer friend — may be able to make your own stylish, legible invitations on cardstock to save some green. Using RSVP postcards is another way to save on envelopes and postage.

Or consider an online invitation and RSVP to save on postage and paper, suggests Diana Everhart Hanna, owner and lead wedding planner for Planned Perfection in Lancaster.

“Often times the response from guests is quicker since they just need to click on a link instead of dropping off something in a mailbox,” she says.

Just don’t resort to an invitation text. Seriously.

Venue to remember

An elegant wedding venue can gobble up nearly half of the budget if you’re not careful. Fortunately, Lancaster County is blessed with a wide range of indoor/outdoor venues. From shabby chic barns to historic manors and mansions to stained glass churches, the sky is literally the limit. Rentable spaces in the area range from \$6,000 to \$10,000, according to The Knot.

To save some cash, Landis suggests looking for a venue that incorporates catering in its package. Some venues include items like tables, chairs, linens, décor items, fire pits and yard games in their packages, Melhorn says. Others do not. Make sure you understand what is not included in the price of a venue so you can calculate those add-ons into your budget.

Ask if there’s a discount for a mid-week event. Certain months may also be cheaper than the height of the wedding season.

Another option to consider is using your best friend’s backyard after lawn mowing day. You can ask. Or really get creative and explore the 121 state parks in Pennsylvania to find that perfect romantic setting. Weddings are permitted in state parks for a small fee, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, and many have pavilions available for rent with advance notice and

pre-approval from the park office. Mother Nature never looked better!

Picture this

You’ll be gazing at your wedding photos for years to come, so make sure the photographer is skilled, reliable, artistic, and dialed into you and your chosen one. In Lancaster County, wedding photo packages range from around \$2,000 to \$5,000 and beyond, according to The Knot. Remember, you’re not just paying for wedding day photography, but hours of planning beforehand and hours of editing and creating galleries afterward, writes Deb Kepiro, owner of Annie Sharp Photography in Strasburg, in an email.

Just make sure you “click” with your photographer. Check out websites, interview photographers, look at portfolios, read the small print, see what’s included, and follow your instincts.

And make sure your photographer is insured, Kepiro says.

For couples on a strict budget, knowing a photographer’s price points upfront can save everyone time, she says. While she doesn’t suggest asking for a discount, she does urge couples to be honest about their budget. Sometimes photographers can create custom packages, especially if the wedding falls at a slow time in their schedule or if it’s an appealing venue where they’ve never photographed before.

“Always ask to see a gallery from a previous wedding,” Kepiro says. “While a new photographer can be great and less expensive, you don’t want to be caught with someone that is in any way overselling their skill set.

“As I always say, at the end of the day, the food will be eaten, the flowers will die, the music will end, but the photos will always remain.”

Yes to the dress

Wedding dresses can be pricy. But many brides can explore cost-effective elegance by wearing a relative’s “used” dress and just getting it altered for the perfect fit. Catching a good sale at a department store might work, too. Exploring vintage clothing shops for a unique and beautiful gown is another option.

Prices of new wedding gowns can vary widely. Tiffany Rupert, owner of Tiffany’s Bridal Boutique in Stevens, tells

brides-to-be to expect to pay somewhere between \$1,500 and \$1,800. It all depends on the brands the store carries and the style of dress.

“You always have to figure anything with lace and beading and detail, typically the price goes up,” Rupert says. She also advises brides not to rely solely on Pinterest and to keep their budget in mind. “When you’re ready to start buying your dress, call around to the different salons and ask what their price range is before going in.”

The selection at Tiffany’s Bridal Boutique starts around \$1,000, she says, so the shop may not be a good fit for someone whose budget is much smaller. But it never hurts to ask. Tiffany’s and other bridal shops sometimes will sell dresses off the rack at a cheaper price, especially if they are discontinued styles, she says. Don’t forget to add the cost of alterations to your budget, too.

“A dress, even if it’s ordered in your size, is not a perfect fit,” Rupert says.

That cost can vary as well, she says, depending on the level of detail on the dress and the person doing the alterations.

“A good tailor is just like a photographer,” Rupert says. “They’re going to charge you based on their experience and expertise.”

Don’t fake the cake

Yet another signature component to a wedding is the almighty decorative and delicious cake. Many bakeries offer complimentary tasting of their offerings — you’ll soon discover if you’re buttercream or fondant people — and require at least two months’ notice during their busy times. A basic, two-tier, buttercream cake that feeds about 50 guests starts at around \$300, says Tan’a Highfield, cake manager at Cake & Cup in Lititz. She sees a growing trend where the couple will purchase a much smaller cake for the traditional bride-and-groom cake cutting, one that would feed about 10 people for \$60. Then they offer cupcake trees, doughnut walls or some other dessert for the rest of the guests.

“It’s not really all cake anymore,” Highland says.

There are many ways to “trim the fat” from a wedding day budget — every couple has their priorities. Sticking to a budget is an exercise in cooperation and compromise, just like marriage.

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