

Wedding-Day-Dreaming

Pop the Question—and the Champagne Cork, too!

By Claire Pavlik Purgus

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“Pop the question” during the month of January when holiday magic still lingers and hope for new beginnings is yet ripe.

Although the fewest number of weddings occur in January than in any other month of the year, it seems appropriate to “pop the question” during this month when holiday magic still lingers and hope for new beginnings is yet ripe. To wed or not to wed, becomes the question. Pop it this month along with the champagne cork, when resolutions for the New Year—and a new life—are made.

If the answer is yes, if the decision to marry has been made, a wedding ceremony will likely take place. It will be among the estimated 2.4 million weddings held every year in recent history in the United States. With each wedding costing an average \$20,000, the wedding industry is big business, generating approximately \$50 billion in revenue each year.

No wonder weddings are such a serious topic. Since getting married these days demands such a major investment of money, energy and time (it’s not too early to start planning now for a wedding in 2008), the pressure is high to do it right. Not only is the wedding industry serious business that puts heavy strain on a bride- and groom-to-be, but a wedding, no matter how you look at it, is a serious commitment all way round.

My feeling is it’s too serious. Not the commitment part—which is weak like a wandering eye—but the wedding ceremony part and all its various accoutrements, from the prenuptial parties to the reception to the honeymoon. My intention, therefore, is to present a view of wedding ceremonies as fun and light-hearted, notwithstanding dignified; inexpensive—if that is at all possible and / or desirable; and last but not least, meaningful to those “tying the knot.”

The Proposal

The phrase “tying the knot” brings to mind the notion of ritual. In a symbolic way, rituals connect us to our ancestry and in turn, help make us feel connected to our family, community, and the world around us.

Ritual is indeed a critical ingredient to a meaningful wedding ceremony. Based on her many years corresponding with people all over the U.S., Judith Martin confirms this notion in her book *Miss Manners on (Painfully Proper) Weddings* (1995). Of all things associated with weddings, she declares, the one universal element not to be overlooked is ritual. She says the human spirit seems to *need* rituals as a way of marking momentous occasions and milestones. “Popping the question” and engagement rings are two such rituals that set the entire wedding ball spinning. It’s such a critical juncture—pregnant with tradition and symbolism—that

Kamy Wicoff chose to devote one-third of her nearly three-hundred-page book *I Do But I Don't* (2006) to the subject.

Since we generally credit the French Troubadours with having invented romance, perhaps it is they who initiated the tradition of the man on one knee asking for his woman's hand in marriage with the question: "Will you marry me?" In spite of contemporary woman's supposedly liberated status, and from what Kamy recounts in her book, "man on bended knee" may still be what many women want from their men when they're ready to have them propose. And not only is a man wise to get down on one knee, but he will do well to have the finest diamond engagement ring he can afford to proffer. According to Kamy, the engagement jewelry can't be anything but. Not earrings. Not a pendant or any other item of jewelry. It has to be a ring and it has to have a diamond (or at least something that looks like one). It's part of a ritual that rings true for many women, whether they cling to traditional values or think they don't.

I did say the engagement ring should be affordable. I found them on the Internet for as low as \$55 for a 14k gold two-tone heart ring and as high as \$54,600 for a Tiffany & Co. Schlumberger Two Bees Ring set with a Tiffany diamond in platinum and 18k gold highlights. Tiffany advertises diamond engagement rings for over \$1,000,000. According to Hallmark, platinum rings are the newest trend.

Diamonds are priced according to many factors, including "presence," described by Tiffany & Co. as precision of cut, symmetry and polish, as well as clarity, color and carat weight. A one-carat diamond from Tiffany & Co. costs between \$9,650 and \$38,000. Wear one of these rocks on your finger and watch yourself suddenly materialize into someone worthy of society's notice. In *I Do But I Don't*, Kamy tells of her friend Jessica who likened her own small $\frac{3}{4}$ -carat diamond engagement ring to having small breasts: when she took the time to notice female passersby, she found both their diamonds and bosoms to be inevitably larger than her own. That's okay—there are those who appreciate small breasts more than large ones. I'm not sure if the same applies to diamonds, however, though the dueling notions of modesty and ostentation come to mind.

The bigger the bling on your finger, the more attention you will likely attract and the more awe you will likely inspire; not all of it will be pleasant.

The Date and Location

Once the proposal has been made and the couple is betrothed, it's time to choose a date and location. While most suggest planning a wedding a year in advance of the date, it can also be done within a shorter period of time, say between six and eight months, depending on the size and complexity of the wedding. Many choose the summer and spring months to marry, with August topping the month for weddings according to Hallmark. Check beforehand that your venue and vendors will be available on the date you choose.

In addition to choosing a date for the wedding, a decision must be made about style. The media tells us, and so we believe, the wedding day is specifically "for the bride." It's *her* day. And typically, because her parents often pay for the occasion, she chooses what style of wedding ceremony she will have. Three styles reflect today's brides, says Hallmark. These are the "traditional princess bride" style straight from Disney's *Cinderella*; the "traditional independent bride" style that blends tradition with the bride's own style; and the "non-

traditional independent bride” style, often the style of choice for older or second-time brides. Adopt a wedding style that best fits you and your newly betrothed.

Not sure what marriage customs apply to your heritage? It’s never been easier to find out. Google “wedding traditions Celtic” to find information related to Celtic traditions, for example; Great Grandma will probably be able to give you more specific information related to your own family’s traditions and will likely tell a better story.

Because a marriage is such a momentous occasion, it should be decked with dignity and ceremony on the one hand and fun and jollity on the other.

Traditionally, wedding ceremonies are held in religious institutions, even by those who rarely attend services. Traditional locations abound—and they are glorious places. Most houses of worship boast ornate architectural details and lavish decoration; many are old and charming, a reminder of the many who have passed before us on their way up the aisle to the altar. These details, together with the grace inherent in such places, make for a perfect location to get married.

More and more, however, couples are choosing to hold their ceremonies in non-traditional locations. Do an Internet-search for “wacky weddings” or “extreme weddings” for a plethora of ideas. Here are a few worth mentioning:

- After you both say “I do,” share a “leap of faith” over Las Vegas and skydive your way back to Earth
- Exchange vows in a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon
- Take an Antarctic cruise to the North Pole and let the penguins bear witness to your special day
- Get hitched while drifting amongst the clouds in a hot air balloon
- Or under the rejuvenating spray of Niagara’s Bridal Veil Falls
- On horseback galloping along the shore or through a ravine
- Or at a slower pace in an old-fashioned horse-drawn carriage
- Or exchange vows in a sun-drenched meadow or garden teeming with flowers and fluttering butterflies (which you can buy, I might add, just for the occasion). (You can also buy doves for the same purpose.)

In *Destination Bride* (2006), Lisa Light tells us that based on a survey conducted by The Knot, “forty percent of couples in the United States are planning destination weddings.”

Here in New England and a little farther north we have an abundance of beautiful sites to choose from that include the mansions of Newport overlooking the sea; lighthouses on Block Island, Goat Island, Martha’s Vineyard, and Nantucket; the White and Green Mountains in New Hampshire and Vermont, respectively; and castles in Québec, to name only a few.

The Bridal Gown

Choosing a location for the ceremony is only one of the many decisions to make when planning a wedding. There is so much to plan for and organize it can often feel overwhelming.

I suspect shopping for a bridal gown is a great escape from the wedding-planning jitters and one of the most anticipated pre-ceremony activities. Wedding-dress dreams originate in childhood somewhere between the pages of a fairytale bedtime story, Walt Disney animations and playing dress up. Getting dressed up as a bride is akin to stepping into the glass slippers of Cinderella, into a fantasy shared not only by women, but often by their

mothers and their grooms-to-be, too, whose fantasies must be assuaged. What a responsibility!

So while shopping for a wedding dress is the next big event after the proposal and engagement ring, beware—you'll come face-to-face not with your true self, as so many bridal merchants promise, not with your "inner bride" as Kamy Wicoff calls it, but with a host of specters led by the ancient archetype of *all* brides and wives.

It's the dress. While the engagement ring can be overlooked, small as it is on the finger of the left hand, the dress is larger than life and replete with symbolism that harnesses women into the straits of both tradition and modernity. Put on "the dress" and you suddenly see yourself torn into opposing factions and reactions: at once clinging tearfully and illogically to all that's traditional and respectable in a bride-to-be and her forthcoming role as wife, as well as to all the female race has been fighting to overcome—the restrictions beset upon the feminine gender.

Yes, it's the dress. Created from yards and yards of exquisite fabrics and sheer lace, it's the ultimate packaging for the ultimate gift. A *white* dress, nonetheless, that publicly confirms the bride's virginal status—*what's that?!* Yet women continue to wear white dresses not only because of the irresistibly strong associations clinging to the white dress but because in a very real sense it relieves everyone of having to consider the bride's pre-marital sex life. Wear a color other than white and everyone's forced to question the bride-to-be's intent. Wear white or one of the many shades thereof such as diamond white or ivory and everyone is delightfully free to *ooh* and *aah* over the bride's beauty and put any thoughts of her sexual activity under wraps. Not that she mustn't look sexy. She must look like a virginal porno-queen, the kind of woman every man dreams of having for his very own.

An impossible dream? No! Even impossible dreams have price tags. While Vera Wang, considered by some as *the* wedding dress designer, doesn't indicate prices on her website, in 2000, Kamy Wicoff tells us the cheapest VW dress was \$1,700. That was probably the price for the label only. A visit to brides.com today reveals much higher prices for designer wedding gowns, from \$9,350 for an "Ivory Chantilly-lace top and corset with silk-gazar ball skirt" by Monique Lhuillier; to \$5,830 for "an off-white silk organza gown" with "shorn organza skirt" and "shirred bodice and streamers" by Alberta Ferretti; to \$3,250 for a "white silk-chiffon bias-cut gown with cowl neck and cowl back with crisscross lacing" by Amy Michelson.

Or, if you envision yourself like Katy Holmes and Tom Cruise, you can hire Giorgio Armani to design your wedding apparel. According to *InTouch Weekly* (November 27, 2007), theirs cost \$2 million.

The Veil

The veil is very much a part of the wedding dress. Made of soft nylon tulle—or ideally of old family heirloom lace—coming in various lengths, from flyaway (20") to cathedral (126") and in single, double or triple tiers, with edges cut (never rolled) and trimmed with faux pearls or diamond crystals, the bridal veil epitomizes the ancient notions of chastity and submission.

Without the veil, you might as well be wearing an ordinary ball gown, if there is such a thing. During the late nineteen fifties when Barbara Wilson wrote *The Bride's School Complete Book of Engagement and Wedding Etiquette* (1959) it was customary for the bride to wear the bridal veil (and headdress if she had one) throughout both the wedding ceremony and the reception afterwards.

Flowers

It goes without saying that flowers, with their naturally exquisite beauty of form, color and fragrance, are the mainstay of wedding decoration. Jo Gartin in her book *Jo Gartin's Weddings: An Inspiring Guide for the Stylish Bride* (2006) lists numerous opportunities to add flowers. She recommends splashy color in the bridal bouquet to contrast with the white of a wedding dress. Jo's suggestions include a cluster of black calla lilies wrapped in a cuff of diamond crystals, a loosely gathered posy of poppies in magenta and yellow, or a splendid bouquet of burgundy double-petal peonies. Two exceptionally fragrant varieties of peonies are M. Jules Elie, a lovely pink double variety, and the James Pillow, which is a double white with hints of pale pink. Orchids, orange blossoms, roses, gardenias and camellias are other favorites.

Besides the bridal bouquet, there are bouquets for the bridesmaids to consider; corsages, floral bracelets, floral hair accessories and wreaths for the women; boutonnieres for the men; and baskets of flower petals for the flower girls. Flowers at the entrance of the place of ceremony make a lovely gesture of welcome. If the ceremony will be held in a church or other house of worship, place flower décor at pew ends, on chairs and at the altar. At the reception, consider adorning the bar and dining tables with complimentary floral arrangements. Place florals in focal areas like a fireplace mantle or a fountain, or behind closed doors—in the restrooms, for example, or in guestrooms for stay-over guests.

The Wedding Cake

The wedding cake, originally called a bride cake, is a significant showpiece for the wedding and is closely connected to the bride. Historically, the wedding cake, or bread, is a symbol of fertility. In ancient Rome, a groom would take a bite of barley bread and break the remaining loaf over the top of his new bride's head, symbolizing the breaking of the bride's hymen and her fertility. When Roman bakers began baking barley cakes instead of bread, the tradition of throwing grain, also symbolizing fertility, turned into a one-way food fight with guests pelting the newly married couple with cake.

While no more made of barley—and no longer tossed at the newly married couple—wedding cakes are usually three-tiered melt-in-your-mouth concoctions of butter (or lemon) pound cake, fruit cake or any cake of your choice, spread with butter-cream frosting in a color that matches the bridal gown, and decorated with edible and non-edible confectionery.

According to Miss Manners, it is undesirable—abominable even—to “grind” wedding cake into your new husband's or wife's mouth at the reception party. She's seen cake and frosting clinging to the groom's beard and moustache and dropped into the bride's cleavage, games better left, perhaps, for the honeymoon!

Bon appetite—and may all your weddings be true ones!

Author's note: I wonder if the phrase “cold feet” is associated with “popping the question” in January.