



When planning weddings is your job, your own nuptials should be a piece of cake, right? Yes. And no. While Jennifer Zabinski, a partner at Claudia Hanlin's Wedding Library in New York City, knew where to find the best white tulips in town and which band had the jazziest sound, like all brides, she wanted to get the most bang for her buck. Having hands-on experience setting up swanky soirees certainly helped, but Zabinski still found she had a lot to learn when it came to her own wedding. Here, she shares insider info on planning an affair to remember.

The catering haul

Next to finding the right dress, no area of planning causes more angst than choosing the perfect site. The secret to finding a great spot? "Start early [a year in advance is standard] and comparison shop."

Once you've settled on a locale, you'll be planning with the on-site food director or hiring an outside caterer. Since Zabinski chose a site, the Metropolitan Club, with its own culinary staff, she had to work with their preset menu, but she negotiated for options that suited her taste. "Often club food is not the latest in haute cuisine," notes Zabinski. "If you want something more creative, like I did, you may have to find out the chef's comfort level and gingerly try to push him beyond that."

If you book a space that requires bringing in an outside caterer, you've got more

How a wedding pro used her prowess to plan the perfect party

the specialist

BY HILLARY QUINN

latitude. Rely on word of mouth and recommendations from recent brides, and interview each referral. Come armed with menu suggestions, including items you love and those you know are in season. "Have the caterer create a proposal around that," she suggests. A tasting is key (be prepared to pay a fee). "This is the best way to judge the chef's abilities and cooking style."

If the set menu isn't everything you'd hoped for, negotiate. "Sometimes, there's fluff built in—like the carving of a turkey or ham during the cocktail hour," explains Zabinski. "In my case, I wanted more elegant hors d'oeuvres, so I passed on the carving stations and used the money for a sushi and oyster bar." Often, this type of tinkering is more effective than bartering over price; many caterers are willing to customize the menu but not to lower the bottom line. "Rather than guaranteeing a specific number of guests, tell the caterer

you'd prefer to guarantee a dollar amount," adds Zabinski. "This way if your numbers drop, you can enhance your menu by adding something like caviar, instead of paying for one hundred and twenty people when only one hundred can make it."

INSIDER TIP: Get an itemized estimate and check for hard-to-spot add-on costs like bartender fees, charges for a sushi chef, and gratuity taxes, which are often built into the overall estimate.

Bar none

Wine and spirits add a festive fizz to any celebration, but they can also drive your costs through the roof if you don't set guidelines. "If you can't afford hard liquor, offer beer, wine, and mineral waters," advises Zabinski. Another option: asking for an inclusive price, which is a set fee for a guaranteed amount of beverages.

"Vendors often pad their beverage fees by opening extra bottles of wine willy-nilly," she explains. "So if you pay one price up front (Continued on page 124)

ABOVE: Wedding consultant Jennifer Zabinski found love in the city with Patrick McKee. BELOW: Vivid colors and acres of crystal create urban elegance.



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as opposed to a fee based on consumption, you will keep your costs down.” For her own wedding, Zabinski went the all-inclusive route. “It really saved me a lot of money,” she says. “When my sister got married, her beverage fee was based on consumption. It ended up costing more than the food.”

INSIDER TIP: Ask if you can bring in your own wine, and if there are any added costs. “The caterer might charge a corkage fee of ten dollars per bottle, but if you buy your wine in bulk at a good price, it’s worth it.” The downside: inconvenience. “You have to buy it, get it there, and pick up the extra at the end of the night.”

The big bloom

Florists’ prices vary wildly depending on whether you’re working with a mom-and-pop type retailer or a big-time floral designer. So it’s vital to get bids for the same general types of bouquets and arrangements from the get-go (ask what different shops charge for a bouquet of 20 red roses). Zabinski also recommends that you visit the shop and look at samples of their work. “It will tell you a lot,” she says.

Zabinski’s biggest challenge was finding centerpieces that blended her fiancé’s contemporary taste with her love of tradition. “I decided on a rich palette of classic flowers—scarlet and magenta peonies, black magic roses, mini calla lilies—placing them in clear cylinders,” she recalls. “Every table had a different size vase and flowers, which gave the room a hip look.”

INSIDER TIP: Don’t be afraid to ask for flowers that are out of season. “You can get peonies in December if you’re willing to pay,” says Zabinski. “They may not be as lush as they would be in May, but if that’s your favorite bloom, it can be done.”

Beat it

Few things create as much excitement at a wedding as live entertainment. Zabinski went for drama, with 12 violins and violas at the cocktail reception, a 15-piece band during dinner, and a dj for the after-party. Though your approach might not be as elaborate, your music should be outstanding. While referrals are great, the best way to judge a band is to see them play in person. Before hiring musicians, be sure to



No need to strike a pose. Jennifer and Patrick are caught in the act of being themselves.

nail down how many hours they’ll play and if the musicians expect to be fed. These and other details should be outlined in a binding contract, which also specifies things like the number of singers, length of breaks, and how many instruments will be played.

INSIDER TIP: Hiring a dj instead of a band isn’t just a smart budget option—it’s also wise if you have varied musical tastes, since a dj can spin a wide selection of songs while serving as master of ceremony.

Photo ops

Finding a photographer means meeting with a lot of pros and comparing their portfolios—and personalities. “I was photophobic,” confesses Zabinski, “so I needed someone who was going to make me feel comfortable in front of the camera. The person I ended up using had a gentle demeanor, which put me at ease.”

Once you’ve ironed out the creative details, determine exactly how many hours he will shoot. Most brides want photos of themselves dressing, right through to the cake cutting, which means at least an eight-hour day. Next, nail down what’s included in your deal. “If negatives aren’t part of the package, find out when they will be available and how much extra you will have to pay for them,” she says.

INSIDER TIP: Don’t hire a photographer who you’re having doubts about. “You’re trusting this person to capture memories that will last a lifetime,” says Zabinski. “Wait until you find the right one.” ■

SAY WHAT?

When wheeling and dealing in weddings, a little industry lingo comes in handy.

Corkage fee: Extra charge for opening and serving beverages that the restaurant or caterer has not provided.

Event designer: Professional who coordinates and designs the “look” of the wedding—especially flowers, lighting, tablesettings, and linens.

Head: Person or guest.

Load-in: Refers to the specific times vendors plan to drop off the flowers, band or lighting equipment, wedding cake, etc.

Overcharge: Price for additional costs. For example, what you would pay if a photographer shoots beyond the specified hours, or a band plays later than the original agreement.

Plus plus: Gratuity and tax.

Server-to-guest ratio: Number of waiters and table captains compared to number of guests. One waiter per 15 or 20 guests is standard; one per 10 is preferable.

Tableside choice: Menu choice offered by the waitstaff to seated guests.

Vendor: Supplier or provider of service (for example a florist, caterer, or band).