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THE BIG DAY'S *Big Night-Before*

A perfect rehearsal dinner complements, but never imitates, the main event

BY JEAN PICARD

Once just a simple gathering of the bride's and groom's immediate families and the bridal party, the rehearsal dinner has morphed into a major event rivaling the wedding itself. Traditionally hosted by the groom's parents, but sometimes by the bride and groom or the bride's parents, your rehearsal dinner can be as formal or as casual as you'd like—or as budget will allow.

Traditionally, the guest list for the rehearsal dinner includes the immediate family, the bridal party and their significant others, the parents of any children in the bridal party and the officiant and his or her spouse. Many couples also invite their out-of-town guests, which in some cases means that nearly everyone invited to the wedding is

invited to the rehearsal dinner (when everyone is invited to the rehearsal dinner, the event is more accurately called a "welcome dinner").

The rehearsal dinner venue often is selected for its proximity to the wedding location or the place where many guests will be staying. "We often have both the rehearsal dinner and the wedding here," says Mary Taube, senior catering sales manager at Hotel ICON.

"Planning a wedding is quite stressful, and some people find that having everything in one place is really nice," Taube notes, "especially when there are lots of out-of-town guests. Everyone can just settle in and relax for three or four days— have the rehearsal dinner, ceremony and reception,

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and day-after brunch right here where they're staying. Of course, we do something completely different, in a different space, perhaps the Loft or the Wine Vault, for the rehearsal dinner than for the reception. They choose different linens and decor and a completely different menu."

Choose a dinner location that fits the size of your group so that guests are neither crowded nor lost in a cavernous space. Carmelo Mauro, owner of Carmelo's Ristorante Italiano, has done rehearsal dinners for as few as 10 and for well over 100, but the usual range is 30 to 50 guests. "We have several private rooms to accommodate different size groups," he says.

If your reception venue is very traditional or Old-World opulent, you might consider a sleek and contemporary

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place for the rehearsal dinner. Cullen's Upscale American Grille is a dramatic and expansive space with several dining areas suited to groups large and small. Parties of no more than 12 guests might opt for Macy's Table, a glass-walled space floating high above the main dining room.

"One of the reasons people choose Cullen's is the versatility of our menu," says sales and event manager Aurora Perez. "Our chefs have worked all over the world and can do any type of cuisine. We do a lot of multicultural weddings where one culture is represented at the rehearsal dinner and another

at the ceremony and reception."

What advice does Perez give families organizing a rehearsal dinner? "First of all, do something completely opposite what you're doing for the reception. Second, make it representative of the couple." Whether it's a signature cocktail or table names based on where they will be honeymooning, Perez says, "Put the bride's and groom's personalities into every detail of the rehearsal dinner."

Those who like the idea of holding the rehearsal dinner at home, but perhaps not their own home, need look no further than the Hofheinz House, a beautifully renovated 1912 Craftsman. Recently restored by Barbara and Lance McKnight and home to Culinaire Catering, it can accommodate 40 to 70 in one space. "It's ideal



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for a rehearsal dinner, very intimate, warm and welcoming, just like being in someone's very nice home," says Barbara McKnight.

Recently working with a couple who could not agree on the menu, McKnight joked, "We're just going to have to do a 'his and hers' menu if you two can't agree." The couple loved the idea, and so the four-course meal consisted of two first courses, two soups, two main courses and two desserts!

Lester Childres, owner of the stationery and gift store The Pretty Penny, sees rehearsal dinners being planned, usually by the groom's parents, for an average of 50 guests. "Some hosts order printed invitations," says Childres, "but we also carry an extensive selection of theme papers for those who would like to print their own."

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She recommends the invitations be sent out a week or two after the wedding invitations are mailed.

Though some brides coordinate all the "wedding paper," the rehearsal dinner invitation need not match the wedding invitation. In fact, according to Childres, "More families are going really traditional for the wedding and doing something completely different for the rehearsal dinner. They will have a theme to match the cuisine, and they want it to be less formal than the wedding, relaxed so people can mingle and get to know each other before the big day."

An elegant dinner might be just the thing for an intimate group, but if everyone is invited to the rehearsal dinner you might want to make it casual so that it won't be a duplicate of the wedding.

"People choose Rio Ranch Restaurant for its casual ambience—the limestone fireplace and salvaged barn doors and what we call our Cowboy Cuisine," says catering manager Meredith Koltermann. "Not a chain, Rio Ranch offers guests something unique to Texas, unique to Houston."

Since the rehearsal dinner is supposed to help calm pre-wedding jitters and let everyone get acquainted before the big day, most couples prefer an informal event. The most important thing is not to have any of the same food that will be served at the wedding.

If the wedding reception will be indoors, you might opt for an outdoor rehearsal dinner—a backyard barbecue, clambake, or crab and crawfish boil. A Hawaiian luau or Mexican fiesta, particularly if you'll be honeymooning in Hawaii or Mexico, can kick off the wedding weekend in a casual and festive way. Chinese, Indian, Italian or other ethnic cuisine is a popular rehearsal dinner choice when it is not what's being served at the wedding.

Besides offering a different cuisine than the wedding menu, some hosts choose a different type of service. If the wedding meal will be plated, for instance, the rehearsal dinner is a buffet. Mauro notes, "If the buffet has five different dishes—poultry, seafood, beef, pasta and a vegetarian or vegan dish—there will be something to please everyone. Or the hosts can pre-select a menu of two to 16 items, the more the better, that guests will order from."

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According to Mauro, wine is offered at most rehearsal dinners but they are seeing an increasing interest in alcohol-free events. "A certain number now ask us to not offer or serve any alcohol, and not because of budget restraints," says Mauro, "but because of their personal beliefs or concerns."

There are two schools of thought when it comes to arranging the seating. One says seat guests with their favorite people so they can just relax and have a good time. The other approach is to mix everyone up so that both families can get better acquainted before the main event. You also can have it both ways, seating people from two different categories at each table so that everyone is with both familiar folks and new acquaintances. Table assignments make this careful

mixing possible, but place cards are rarely used.

While toasts and speeches are just a small part of the wedding reception and should be kept short and sweet, they are one of the main elements of the rehearsal dinner and can be expected to take a while. So, by all means, do them during dinner, rather than after. You might want to appoint a reliable friend to act as master of ceremonies and move things along.

If the groom's parents are hosting, the toasts and speeches may begin with a welcome speech by the groom's father. Or the bride and groom might

start things off by thanking the hosts, their parents and anyone else who has helped with the wedding. This also is a good time to introduce the bridal party. The bride's father is up next, followed by groomsmen, bridesmaids and anyone else who wishes to speak.

With the wedding the next day, it is best to end the rehearsal dinner at a reasonable hour. And, while blowing off steam and having fun are essential, keeping in mind the need to look and feel their best the next day, the bride and groom will want to be sure not to overindulge.

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