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A grouping of Venetian-glass vases (from three inches to six feet tall) filled with tulips, roses and orchids was the head-table centerpiece at a dinner created by Dallas designer Todd Fiscus.

how to plan
**A REHEARSAL
DINNER**

Top wedding pros share their expertise on whom to invite, what to serve and how to play nice with your future mother-in-law WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH JENKINS

IT'S THE PRELUDE TO THE BIG DAY, A CHANCE FOR FAMILIES TO MEET, STORIES TO BE told and glasses raised. Traditionally held the night before the wedding—and right after a run-through of the ceremony—the rehearsal dinner was intended as an intimate gathering for the bridal party and the couple's immediate families. But now it often includes all of the out-of-town guests and, for destination weddings, everyone invited to the nuptials. To help you plan this significant and personal celebration, we asked wedding pros from coast to coast for advice on ways to make the night eventful.

SET THE TONE

Before you begin thinking about the rehearsal dinner, iron out all the details of the wedding reception. “Decide on the location, look and feel of your wedding first,” says Sausalito, Calif., planner Laurie Arons, “so that you can pick a rehearsal-dinner site that complements it.” San Francisco event coordinator Kim Oliff, who planned actor Kevin Weisman's wedding, likes to create a different feeling each night: “If you want a sit-down dinner for the reception, have a family-style meal the night before.”

CHOOSE A HOST

Traditionally it was the responsibility of the groom's parents to host the rehearsal dinner. But today, explains Los Angeles event coordinator Julie Pryor, the old rules don't apply: “Many times couples pay for everything, or both families share the cost.” Soraya Jollon of Soraya Events in New York City adds that with divorced parents and

blended families, it's best to tackle the subject of cost head-on. If the groom's parents do want to host, the couple can offer to help plan the dinner, especially if the wedding is being held in the bride's hometown and the groom's parents are unfamiliar with the area. “Often the bride and groom will scout locations and narrow the list to a few places for the parents to choose from,” says Jessica Capshaw's wedding planner, Nicky Reinhard of David Reinhard Events in N.Y.C.

RELINQUISH CONTROL

When the groom's parents host, the bride should respect their budget and not interfere with their ideas for the evening. Jollon tells the brides she works with, “Your future mother-in-law is grappling with the issue of you becoming the most important woman in her son's life. Don't complicate things by fighting with her about the rehearsal dinner.”



TEXAS STEAK HOUSE

Clockwise from above: To ready a popular local restaurant for this rehearsal dinner, designer Todd Fiscus arranged the main dining room so that the head table was at one end facing long rows of guest tables. His staff set up a table with candles to welcome in the Jewish Sabbath. The bar featured a caviar-and-vodka station.





LONG ISLAND BEACH

Clockwise from above: Three-foot sparklers lit up the night at this rehearsal dinner, a clambake in Southampton organized by planner Jill Gordon. Guests sat in the sand and dined at low tables decorated with sunflowers. Fresh local lobster was served with clams, steamed corn and potatoes.



MAKE A LIST

N.Y.C. planner David Tutera, who oversaw Star Jones Reynolds's nuptials, says couples have two options when deciding whom to include: either everyone or just the bridal party and immediate family (though some couples also invite out-of-town guests). Who's considered immediate family? Planners agree that the parents, grandparents and siblings of the bride and groom must be invited, but they say aunts, uncles and cousins are not automatically included. Whatever rule is

used, it should be fair. If the hosts are the groom's parents and they elect to invite members of their extended family, says Santa Barbara event designer Scott Corridan, the bride's family should be able to include the same members from their side.

PICK A THEME

Consider using the location or your heritage to develop a theme for your rehearsal dinner. "We do lots of New England-style clambakes and lobster bakes," says Dover, N.H., planner Kate Parker. "Everyone puts on bibs, and

all the pressure is gone with the first lobster tail. Clambakes bring down people's guards." Kim Oliff says, "We planned an Italian night with accordion players and singing waiters, and food was passed around family-style."

INVITE THE OFFICIANT

Many planners recommend asking the person who is marrying you, such as your rabbi or priest, to attend. "Seven or eight times out of 10, he or she will decline," says Laurie Arons, who planned the wedding of Christy Turlington and Ed Burns, "but it's a nice

"A rehearsal dinner allows guests to bond before the ceremony."

—Scott Corridan



CALIFORNIA WINERY

Clockwise from above: All 41 guests at this dinner sat at one table on the grounds of the Schramsberg Vineyard in Calistoga, Calif. Cocktails were served in a redwood grove; planner Laurie Arons designed one area to resemble a French market with bowls of fresh fruit. Dahlias, lavender and hydrangeas in French pottery lined the dinner table.



“The wedding is the main event. The rehearsal dinner should complement it, not compete with it.”

—Soraya Jollon

gesture.” Also decide whether to include your flower girl and ring bearer at the dinner. Los Angeles planner Kara Keane, who orchestrated Pink and Carey Hart’s recent wedding, notes, “It’s such a nice memory for the kids to have.”

KEEP IT CASUAL

The trend is to forgo formality in favor of a more low-key, comfortable event. “I planned a rehearsal dinner at a barbecue restaurant with sawdust on the floor,” says Marcia Cross’s wedding planner, Julie Pryor. “It was lick-your-fingers kind of food.” Todd Fiscus of Todd Event Design in Dallas has planned many rehearsal dinners for which the attire is casual and men can wear sport coats. “We have a lot of clients who just want to have a fun night and enjoy Mexican food and margaritas,” he says.

WORK BACKWARD

Your rehearsal dinner should end no later than 11 P.M. to ensure that you and the groom get some beauty sleep. Therefore, planners suggest working backward to calculate when the dinner, and the rehearsal preceding the dinner, should begin. Most recommend

calling the rehearsal for 5 P.M., to allow for late arrivals and chitchat, plus 30 minutes to run through the ceremony. Allow ample time for all guests who attend the rehearsal to arrive at the dinner by 7 P.M., and factor in possible delays due to rush-hour traffic.

SERVE COCKTAILS

“Have a short cocktail hour,” suggests Robert Downey Jr.’s planner, Sofia Crokos of Sofia Crokos Events in New York City. “Make it 30 or 45 minutes long, with a few passed hors d’oeuvres.” Keep beverages simple too. East Hampton, N.Y., planner Jill Gordon suggests serving just sangria and beer.

PLAY MUSIC

Scott Corridan advises using live music that’s subtle. “You don’t want a nine-piece band,” he says, “but perhaps an acoustic guitar or a jazz combo.” Fiscus loves matching music and cuisine, for example by having a koto player at an Asian-theme dinner. If live music isn’t in the budget, simply pop in a CD or hook up your iPod to an audio system.

PLANNING



ARIZONA DESERT

Left, from top: For this outdoor dinner at El Pedregal in Scottsdale, Ariz., planner Amy Mancuso scattered river rocks around low centerpieces of cacti, aloe vera, other succulents and orange calla lilies. She strung white lights on mesquite trees for after-sunset mood lighting.



FLORIDA COUNTRY CLUB

Above, from top: N.Y.C. planners Ann David and Nicky Reinhard and florist Ron Wendt let the bride's Brazilian roots inspire them for this dinner in Vero Beach, Fla. Tables were dressed in magenta and chartreuse, with bamboo accessories and banks of orchids. A tambourine, drum or maraca decorated each place.



ASSIGN SEATING

To avoid chaos, says Laurie Arons, assign guests to specific tables. Phoenix planner Amy Mancuso, who coordinated Gena Lee Nolin's wedding, encourages mixing guests from different families so everyone can get to know one another before the ceremony.

CONTROL THE TOASTS

The host should get the party started with a welcome toast before the first course is served, says Scott Corridan. The other toasts should wait until after dessert to avoid

interfering with the waitstaff. And, says L.A. planner Michael Gapinski, who coordinated Christina Aguilera's wedding, if you fear that a member of the bridal party might make an inappropriate toast, talk to the person ahead of time. Appointing an emcee to manage the toasts and pass around the mike can also help keep the evening on track.

NIX THE BUBBLY

Don't feel you must serve champagne for the toasts. "Most people just take a sip, so it's not cost-effective," says

Carmen Electra's planner, Randie Pellegrini of Cordially Invited in L.A. "You can toast with whatever you're drinking."

DISH OUT DESSERT

Pellegrini likes serving desserts that are simple and fun, such as doughnuts, cupcakes and pies. Or set up a candy counter, pastry table or make-your-own-sundae station. If you have a small dinner, consider inviting all of your wedding guests for dessert or cocktails afterward, says planner Alan Dunn of Très L.A. —**additional reporting by Amanda Greene**

"The evening should be filled with beautiful testimonials from family."

—Michael Gapinski