

Life

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LIVING

To Love, Honor and Save Money.

A tighter economy has couples creatively downsizing their big day

BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN

ON THE FINAL FRIDAY OF JUNE, KELLY Collins will marry Paul Hilcoff at the Nashoba Valley Winery in Bolton, Mass. After the ceremony in an orchard, the 60 guests will retire to the vineyard's restau-

rant, where they'll have a full sit-down meal complemented by wine and beer made on-site. All this will cost \$4,500, or \$1,500 less than it would on a Saturday. Rather than a wedding gown, Collins will wear a \$200 ivory bridesmaid dress. She has ordered wholesale flowers online for \$300 to make her

centerpieces and, for favors, apple-scented candles from a teachers' catalog at \$1.50 each. The couple made their own invitations with \$75 worth of materials. "We thought about what was most important," says Collins. "What wasn't, we did for cheaper—or we didn't do it." The final bill: \$9,000.

As economic indicators go, the cost of nuptials isn't a bad one to check—particularly in our party-obsessed culture—because it shows what people are willing to spend on nonessentials. According to the Wedding Report, a research firm

For Richer or For Poorer. Marriage is about love, not money, right? Five ways couples are keeping costs at bay on their wedding day



Wear a preowned gown. *Who'll know? Sample sales also yield cheap finds. Or have a crafty relative make it*



Trim the bar tab *by creating a signature cocktail to offer with beer and wine or by eliminating the champagne toast*



Homemade favors *like the biscotti and embossed gift boxes Pfisterer made can be both classy and personal*



Change the date *from Saturday night to daytime or to Friday or Sunday; Danny Craig and Heather Pfisterer saved 33%*



Make your invites, *as Kelly Collins did, above. Professional designs can cost thousands; DIY, just the price of paper*

a 33% discount at the Balboa Bay Club in Newport Beach, Calif., on the minimum amount they were required to spend on food and drinks. More than half of caterers and wedding planners in the NACE survey said they've seen an uptick in the number of Friday and Sunday marriages.

Expect creative menus and bar options at coming weddings as more couples aim to shave their bill; after all, food and drinks usually account for the biggest chunk of costs. More than 6 in 10 wedding professionals say their clients are buying less expensive meals than in the past. "As silly as it sounds, go with the chicken," says Daniel Briones, NACE president and director of catering at the Four Seasons Philadelphia. Shelley Harrington, who married Scott Barber on May 10 in Rochester, Mich., opted for chicken with Boursin cheese in a phyllo-dough wrapping plus a fish option. Both cost about \$20 a plate; steak would have been \$40. Few venues let couples stock their own bar, but limiting the open bar is a fine option for capping the caterer's markup on the booze. Annemarie Conte and Andy Kielich will serve beer and wine and maybe two types of liquor at their September wedding in Dingmans Ferry, Pa. "We can't cater to every whim," says Conte, "which was hard for me because you never want to feel inhospitable." Briones suggests nixing the bubbly: "Not everyone likes champagne. And [at toast time] most people are already going to have a drink in front of them anyway."

That is, the people who manage to secure an invite in the first place. Lorna Engler, who happens to be sewing her daughter Lara's wedding gown as well as six bridesmaid dresses, says they've been, ahem, discerning with the guest list for the October bash. "Do you really need to invite that person you haven't spoken to for three years?" she says. Some couples are also trimming the numbers in their wedding parties—Collins will have just one attendant—to escape the hidden costs of presents for bridesmaids and groomsmen.

The new urge to save green coincides with a fervor among couples to go green. Conte's engagement ring is a family heirloom—free of both cost and conflict. Conte and Kielich's caterer is a local farmer, so all the meat and seasonal produce will come straight from the source, without a middleman fee. They're decorating with trees rented from a nursery and wildflowers in lieu of cut blooms. Conte got her dress via eBay for \$250, saving \$750 off the original price. She did lots of research and was selective about each vendor they hired: "I don't want to work with people who will rip me off because I say the word *wedding*." That's a lovely vow in any economic climate. ■

that compiles stats on the wedding industry, the average cost of an American wedding rose to \$28,732 in 2007, as the festivities have grown increasingly elaborate and personalized. But for the first time in almost a decade, that number is forecast to drop slightly this year, to \$28,704. Nearly half of caterers and event planners surveyed by the National Association of Catering Executives (NACE) in March said they were seeing declines in wedding spending in response to the economic slowdown; 12% even reported wedding cancellations because of financial concerns.

Because planning for many of this year's weddings started long before gas and milk hit \$4 a gallon, some couples have had to scale back. "Every dollar counts," says Tammy Li, whose parents are helping fund her Aug. 30 wedding at the Madison Hotel in Morristown, N.J., as they struggle to sell their house. Li and fiancé Bernie Tang are tamping down costs simply by being flexible with the time.

"I had really wanted a night wedding," says Li, but it was hard to argue with the \$15,000 savings they'll get by holding it on Saturday afternoon. Moving the date can help too. Danny Craig and Heather Pfisterer say holding their wedding on a Sunday rather than a Saturday got them

Bargains That Can Cost You

David Wood, president of the Association of Bridal Consultants, warns of budget traps:

- 1. Not hiring a wedding planner.** *Having a pro at your side, whom you can hire just to negotiate contracts, can actually save money in the long run*
- 2. Hiring your mom.** *Don't make her bake the cake to save a few bucks—and risk not having one*
- 3. Using unvetted vendors.** *Stories abound of drunk or no-show DJs and photographers*
- 4. Picking remote locations.** *They're cheaper for a reason. One couple stranded 110 guests on a mountain road their buses couldn't navigate*