

Big weddings stage a comeback around Philly as COVID-19 recedes

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Business

The combination of seasonal outdoor weather, vaccinations, and reduced restrictions is good news for church bells — lifting the lid on guest lists and wedding sizes.



Christina and Patrick Szukics of Bella Vista, tied the knot in early May at River House at Odette's in New Hope in front of 125 guests. [Read more](#) Meghan Burke Photography

by Christine M. Johnson-Hall, For The Inquirer

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When COVID-19 shut down mostly everything, tremors shook the wedding industry. As pandemic restrictions closed many marriage license bureaus, houses of worship and halls, couples canceled, postponed, or drastically downsized their nuptials.

Safety requirements forced a retooling of food service, and put masks into the dress code. Brides still said yes to the dress, although mostly virtually. Pre-wedding COVID tests and microweddings became a thing.

But now, with vaccines on the rise and restrictions lifting, there's good news for those hoping to walk down the aisle, as well as for their families and the entire wedding industry.

“Big weddings are back,” declared Ron Gorodesky, founder and president of Refined Hospitality, which manages the River House at Odette's in New Hope and the Reeds at Shelter Haven, Stone Harbor, N.J.

Event specialist Lindsay Albert agreed, watching with wonder “the opening of the floodgates.”

“People are trying to go back to their original guest count. No one's going to take away the big wedding from someone who really wants it,” said Albert, who works with Catering by Design to put on weddings at the James A. Michener Museum in Doylestown.

David's Bridal, the national chain based in Conshohocken, spent much of the pandemic reinventing itself as a digital presence and is now reaping rewards as weddings reawaken. “We are seeing an absolute resurgence in the business around the event, the event planning, the excitement around the event, the venues,” said James Marcum, CEO of David's Bridals, in a recent interview. “Everything is opening up.”

Event planners and venues in Bucks County and at the Jersey Shore says that the combination of seasonal outdoor weather, a reduced virus risk, vaccinations, and fewer restrictions is good news for wedding bells — lifting the lid on guest lists and wedding sizes and stoking demand for inside venues.

The contrast from the last two years could not be greater. In 2019, Catering by Design at the Michener put on 25 to 30 weddings, Albert said.

The Michener held just three small weddings of 20 to 25 people from August through fall last year, representing a 90% decline, as capacity limits forced couples to slash guest lists.

The Michener's fountain-filled sculpture garden and dramatic glass panes overlooking stone walls once part of the old Bucks County Prison sat mostly quiet, but for the sound of *om*. In place of couples making vows were yogis doing socially distanced poses as closed studios graced the space with outdoor classes.

After the 2020 shutdown, Catering by Design pivoted to distribute food to various homeless shelters as part of Step Up to the Plate. That kept the business open and preserved some jobs. But persistent staff shortages are creating a challenge for many as events head back into full swing this summer.

Catering by Design and the Michener have 35 weddings on deck just for the rest of the year — more than double the 2019 pace — and are working to fully re-staff their party servers, offering jobs at as much as \$18 an hour jobs plus tips. Best COVID safety practices remain in place for staff, including mask, gloves, and CDC recommendations.

At HollyHedge Estate in New Hope, general manager Tim Luccaro was happy to return to a normal slate of three weddings a weekend by late May, one each Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

For a variety of reasons, the number of midweek weddings also increased at HollyHedge, with 10 a year now set compared with the usual two to three.

In a normal year, 115 couples will celebrate at HollyHedge's gardens and bank barn, with a capacity for 200. In 2020, that number fell to 35, with guests tallying below 100 because of restrictions. Weddings scheduled for January and February 2021 were canceled because of the surge in coronavirus cases.

HollyHedge was able to retain some of its long-term staff with assistance from the federal Paycheck Protection Program. The venue is starting to see progress in filling remaining jobs.

Luccaro said his staff will continue to wear masks and gloves. Event staff confers with the couple to set expectations for guests involving vaccinations, COVID tests, or temperature checks. "We defer to them on their comfort level."

Gorodesky, of Refined Hospitality, notes the continued popularity of outside wedding venues.

"What matters to clients now is that backup indoor plans for inclement weather can resume, allowing couples to feel comfortable planning for dates within the year again," he said.

River House at Odette's features a wedding space alongside the Delaware Canal with the Delaware River flowing a stone's throw away. Opened last fall, the site offers an open-concept ballroom and balconies and terraces overlooking the water.

A rundown of weddings at both the Reeds and River House shows the falloff last year and a big surge in bookings for 2021. Citing pandemic-related labor shortages and factors such as the price of cattle, Gorodesky acknowledged that event prices are trending higher.

"We do have a commitment to honoring the price points that are already contractually in place with our couples despite those variables," he noted. "That said, pricing will inevitably increase because of the impact the pandemic had on our industry."

Luccaro of HollyHedge agreed, saying prices are holding steady for now, but he projects that costs will rise by 5% to 10% in 2022 and beyond. "We have to pass on the cost of operating to the consumer at some point — and a year out is basically when we are able to pass on those costs."

Amid the wedding planning rebirth, another bright spot was David's Bridals, where apps and other tools enabled anxious brides to go forward — at least to select a dress and make other plans.

Digital tools such as chatbots that let brides ask questions helped keep wedding dreams moving toward reality, despite drastically limited circumstances.

Coming out of bankruptcy in 2019, David's Bridals ended up in a good position because it has its own vertical supply chain to get materials, said CEO Marcum.

"When COVID hit, we pulled in our wings, but did not stop innovating," Marcum said.

Stores shut down and employees were furloughed under COVID restrictions. But such offerings as 24/7 live support, free wedding planning websites, and look books with style choices have kept customers engaged.

This spring, David's is advertising on websites and posting on LinkedIn to hire staff for corporate jobs and full-time and part-time stylists across the country.

"Because of these digital tools, we are talking to about 70,000 brides who are making appointments in our stores," Marcum said. And Philadelphia is one of the highest-performing markets in the country. Marcum expects that weddings will be up as much as 30% over the normal run rate from June to year-end. Next spring is looking equally robust.

"We [jokingly] use the phrase 'love's not going away,'" Marcum said. "It's real."