

ceremony & reception

WELL REHEARSED

BEFORE THE BIG DAY,
HAVE A GOOD NIGHT.

A kickoff to the main event, the rehearsal dinner sets the tone for the most unforgettable day of your life. But this pre-wedding extravaganza is more than mere R&R following your practice session for the big day—often, it's the first time both sides of the family come together with the couple and their wedding party for mixing, mingling and merriment.

writer MAURI ELBEL ~ *photo* J. COGLIANDRO PHOTOGRAPHY



“The rehearsal dinner is like the final countdown to the big day,” says Houston wedding planner Sobi Qazi of Lion & Lamb Event Services. “It is a time of joy and celebration for both families. Enjoy this evening as individuals, for it will be the last moment before officially becoming one.”

We checked in with a few of Houston’s top wedding planners, and those at the helm of the city’s hottest rehearsal-dinner venues, to boil down the basics—and seek sensational design, cuisine and planning ideas—for the second most important night of your life.

THE LOWDOWN

Wondering what a rehearsal dinner entails? After a general run-through of the processional and recessional,

the rehearsal dinner presents the opportunity for a relaxed and intimate celebration with your closest guests. “Traditionally, the rehearsal dinner served as a great way for both families to meet and get to know each other,” says Qazi. However, as families have increasingly grown close prior to wedding festivities, the rehearsal dinner has become another celebration of the upcoming nuptials—an opportune time for undistracted moments spent with close family and friends.

BEST TIME

The rehearsal dinner typically is held directly after the ceremony rehearsal, says Allison C. Haworth, banquet sales manager for Maggiano’s Little Italy. The ideal time to host the rehearsal dinner is the night before your wedding,

according to wedding planner Ashley Fuentes of planning firm Event Solutions. “Your family and wedding party will be in wedding mode, so it is the time you can guarantee that the majority of them can attend,” she says.

“Because they will already be reserving the time off for your wedding, keeping the rehearsal dinner on the day before your wedding will allow them to maximize their time off from work to spend it with you.”

Nevertheless, some wedding planners see couples deciding to hold the rehearsal dinner a few days prior to the wedding to ensure ample time for relaxing and recovering before the big day.

WHO HOSTS

Traditionally, the groom’s family hosts the rehearsal dinner, but sometimes both



families split the costs, says Vinceanne Mandola, partner in popular rehearsal-dinner venue Grappino di Nino.

“With traditions continuously changing, we find many couples either pay for their rehearsal dinner themselves, or both sets of parents host the event together,” concurs Qazi.

TOAST TIME

Rehearsal dinner toasts are often a point of confusion, so here are some basic rules to follow as you raise your glass: Generally speaking, the welcome toast starts with the groom’s family, and the bride’s family can respond in kind, says Jo Ann Schwartz Woodward, owner of distinctive wedding-planning firm Schwartz & Woodward. The best man is next in line, and friends and family who wish to toast, share stories

and entertain the bride and groom, follow suit. Toasts to the bride and groom are given by the best man, maid of honor and the groom’s parents, notes Nicole Wilker, who heads up private parties at Brennan’s Houston.

In recent years, the “rules” have relaxed a bit and toasts have expanded to include siblings, cousins and childhood friends. At the conclusion of the dinner, a thank-you speech typically is given by the groom’s parents, if they have hosted the event.

INVITATION ETIQUETTE

“There is no rule that says you have to invite anyone and everyone to your rehearsal dinner,” says Fuentes. “That said, there are certainly people whom you should include. Your immediate families, your wedding party and their

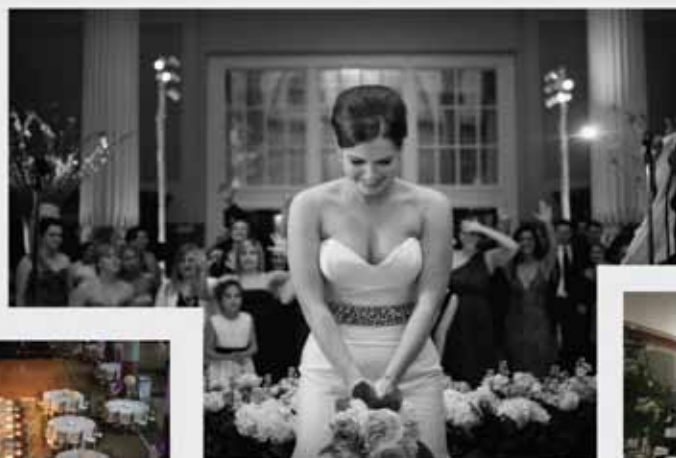
spouses, and in some cases out-of-town guests, are included, too.”

At the end of the day, Fuentes advises that the size of the guest list be based on budget. “If you cannot include your out-of-town guests in order to stay on budget, then offer them an alternative by providing them with a list of fun things to do around town.” Local shopping, restaurants, spas and golf are all great activities guests can take advantage of, and will help them turn your wedding into a mini-vacation.

THE DISH

When it comes to what’s for dinner, Houston’s hottest venues can whip up a customized menu to suit just about any desire or craving. Maggiano’s Haworth suggests a high-end, family-style menu featuring items like

SPECIAL EVENTS AT MINUTE MAID PARK



713.259.8800 | Astros.com/SpecialEvents | specialevents@astros.com

crab cakes, asiago-crusting shrimp, peppercorn-crusting sirloin and lobster cannelloni, or a classic family-style menu including “Mom’s” meat lasagna, stuffed mushrooms, rigatoni and chicken parmesan, for more casual affairs. Surefire crowd-pleasers? Haworth recommends butler-passed appetizers, handcrafted cocktails and a signature sweets table.

Whether you opt for fine dining or a laid-back scene, Brennan’s wows with everything from its tenderloin and jumbo lump-blue-crab cakes, to more casual alligator meat pies with red beans and rice. “We have been serving Texas Creole since the early 1950s and I must say, it has always been truly unique,” says Wilker.

Couples can show off their Southern roots at Ouisie’s Table with menu

options like shrimp-and-cheese grits, buffalo tenderloin, wild-boar dishes and chicken-fried steak, says Wafi Dinari, owner and managing partner.

“I feel it is important for the rehearsal dinner location and menu to reflect the personalities of the bride and groom,” says Donnette Hansen, owner of Rainbow Lodge—an ideal rehearsal-dinner venue for nature lovers of South Texas. If “deer lease” and “opening day” are familiar phrases in your family, Hansen assures you that you and your loved ones will feel right at home in this game-connoisseurs’ mecca. A few of the Rainbow Lodge’s more casual nibbles are fried oysters with caper tartar, wild game sausages, pheasant tinga tostadas and whole roasted suckling pig, while fancier options include a set menu of items such as pan-roasted sea

bass on fresh-corn-and-poblano risotto, bison medallions, lobster lollipops, and duck with olives and preserved lemon.

SIPPING PRETTY

Don’t overlook what’s being poured into the glasses being raised. “It all depends on what the bride and groom feel more comfortable with,” says Tatiana Escobar, catering manager for The Grove, ideally situated on the south end of Houston’s new 11.8-acre urban park, Discovery Green. “After all, it is a celebration for them. I usually recommend having a full bar, beer and wine, so that guests can select a drink of their choice.”

That being said, signature cocktails are all the rage for rehearsal dinners and weddings alike. At Brennan’s, the bride and groom can come into

PRIVATE | PICTURESQUE | PERFECT



Sugar Creek Country Club

From an intimate gathering for 20 to a lavish event of 400, day or night, nothing can compare to the southern charm, sophistication and outstanding service you receive at Sugar Land’s premier and private country club.

281.494.9131 | 420 Sugar Creek Blvd. | Sugar Land, TX 77478 | thesugarcreek.com

the restaurant ahead of time to sample signature drinks like the Blushing Bride. “Usually, if a signature cocktail is offered, the couple will limit the alcohol to the cocktail and a selection of wines, and forgo the full liquor bar,” says Wilker. “Most parents like this idea as well, so everyone can be rested and fresh for the big day.”

START EARLY

When it comes to planning a rehearsal dinner, don’t wait until the last minute. “So many couples wait to plan their rehearsal dinner because they are so focused on the rest of the wedding,” Fuentes says. “You have to remember that the rehearsal dinner will most likely be on a Friday night, which means the busiest time of day on one of the busiest days of the week for

restaurants and venues.”

Reserve your rehearsal dinner location within a month after securing your wedding venue and choose a centrally located venue near your wedding ceremony and hotel accommodations to make it convenient for visiting guests.

DON'T DUPLICATE

When selecting the menu for a rehearsal dinner, avoid repeating what will be served at the wedding, says Wilker. “It is important to not duplicate it or upstage it,” she notes. Some couples keep it fancy while others opt for a more relaxed rehearsal dinner since the following day is likely to be formal.


Claudia G. de Velasco, owner of A Day To Remember, echoes Wilker’s words. Remember that your wedding

and rehearsal dinner are not competitors, she says. “If your wedding is going to be a formal affair, don’t feel pressured to have a black-tie event for the rehearsal dinner. On the contrary, maybe go more relaxed and casual.”

The Grove offers a wide range of creative menus to suit just about every taste—from seated rehearsal dinners and stand-up cocktail receptions to buffet or family-style events. “We usually recommend not having any similar items to the wedding menu,” says Escobar. “That way each night can be memorable in its own way.”

And while it’s important to keep the rehearsal-dinner food and ambiance distinct from that of the wedding, that doesn’t mean the quality of the event should be less than exceptional.

THE ONLY THING WE OVERLOOK IS THE WATER


Hilton
Houston NASA Clear Lake

1.281.333.9300 | houstonnasaclearlake.hilton.com | 3000 NASA Pkwy | Houston, TX 77058