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## THE *little things*

SMALL WEDDING DETAILS CAN HAVE  
BIG EMOTIONAL IMPACT.

writer RINA CHANDARANA JOHN

Planning a wedding reception is a process that is full of big decisions: venue, florist, entertainment, photographer. But for all these hugely important choices, it is the small details, the personal gestures and sentimental touches, that make a wedding reception beautiful and meaningful for guests and couple alike.



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### BOOK 'EM

While the wedding guestbook is an enduring tradition, that doesn't mean your wedding guestbook has to be traditional in design. Planner Jennifer Brisman of Weddings New York suggests, in place of a standard sign-in book, "Have an urn or bowl and let guests leave little words of wisdom for the newlyweds. It is comical to see what people come up with." Guests can also sign their names directly on the urn.

Sobi Qazi of Houston-based Lion & Lamb Event Services suggests creating a red-carpet video guestbook, where guests can leave a recorded video message for the couple. "Guests feel as if they are attending a celebrity soiree," she says, adding that she has even created a personalized backdrop that includes the couple's monogram.

A truly unique—and practical—guestbook idea is to have a wooden bench made for guests to sign with their good wishes. After the wedding, the newlyweds can preserve the bench and have it for decor in their home or garden.

### LOVE SONG

Wedding consultant Jo Ann Schwartz Woodward of Houston's Schwartz & Woodward says it's always a delight for guests when a bride or groom puts her or his talents on display at the reception. "There was a bride singing to her groom and then he joined her to do a duet," she says of a recent wedding. "There was not a dry eye in the room."

The planner recalls yet another wedding where the couple played their favorite instruments at the reception. "They met in band and they both played the trumpet," she explains. "As a surprise for the parents and guests, I arranged for the couple to practice with the band and they played their trumpets at the reception."



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Sometimes family members can surprise the couple with their own special abilities. “A mother of the bride who had never sung in public before made arrangements to take singing lessons and sang to the bride and groom for their first dance,” Schwartz Woodward recounts. “It truly was a ‘wow’ moment.”

And don’t forget to have your MC, DJ or bandleader involve guests in your reception’s music selections. “I have seen bandleaders circulate during cocktails and start conversations to find out what guests’ favorite music is so that it can be added to the playlist,” says Brisman. “It makes people feel that the party was for them.”

As for speeches, impromptu toasts are more heartfelt than prepared ones, according to Brisman. “The MC can

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even go around and ask the guests questions, and this way they will speak from the heart.”

#### SWEET SENTIMENTS

Cakes are often the focal point at a reception. Qazi says cakes are a perfect way to help your guests learn more about your relationship. “We have had couples replicate a building, such as the UT Tower, where they first laid eyes on each other,” she says. “I have also seen a replica of a mechanic’s tool box as a groom’s cake, to represent the groom’s profession.”

Schwartz Woodard says she had one couple with a cake topper that represented them in a hot-air balloon. Think of a hobby or passion that you both enjoy and incorporate that as part of the topper. Or if the groom proposed on the beach, a cake topper could be some beautiful shells.

There also are plenty of Etsy shops featuring handmade or vintage cake toppers—nuzzling “lovebirds” are a favorite figure—that can be customized with the couple’s name or initials, and marriage date.

The continuing popularity of candy buffets and dessert tables is a testament to their universal appeal. After all, who can resist a chance to indulge in favorite childhood treats or sinfully decadent grown-up goodies? Coordinator Jung Lee of planning firm Fête in New York says she likes to introduce a customized candy bar that can be color coordinated or decorated based on a couple’s wedding theme.

#### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A little extra attention goes a long way when it comes to planning your wedding menu. Your cocktail hour, for instance, may feature favorite foods you have enjoyed individually or as a

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couple, whether they include comfort-food classics like macaroni-and-cheese or pigs-in-blankets, ethnic specialties like samosas or quesadillas, or mini versions of items inspired by your favorite restaurant menu.

Brisman also reminds couples to take note of vegetarian or vegan guests and ensure that they have a special entree served to them, so that they may savor the festivities right along with everyone else.

While food sets the mood, specialty drinks can help to tell the couple's love story. "One of my most recent weddings had a love-potion station, since the bride was a pharmacist and wanted to tie in those details," says Qazi. "We had arranged specialty drinks that had the color of the couple's theme."

Tracie Domino of Tracie Domino Events in Tampa, Fla., advises couples

to customize the cups their specialty drinks are served in. "Have them made with your wedding logo or your monogram," she suggests.

Wedding planner Cassandra Santor of Cassandra & Co. Weddings in Los Angeles notes that couples should make sure their favorite beverages are featured at the reception. "If you love sake, like a couple I worked with a few years back, perhaps you swap out those Champagne flutes for custom sake glasses for your toast," she says.

#### SWEETLY SEATED

In recent years, escort cards, which let guests know where they are to be seated, have gone from simple to spectacularly creative. Lee says she had one couple use a real lemon tree with the seating assignments written on little

black cards which were pinned to the individual lemons.

One of Qazi's couples attached small elephants to the escort cards to match the wedding's decor.

Proposals happen in the most unique places. "One groom had proposed in a hot-air balloon, so we had a beautiful photo of the sky with clouds enlarged and used as a backdrop," says Schwartz Woodward. The backdrop was placed near the entrance of the reception hall and paper hot-air-balloon escort cards were placed in alphabetical order on the backdrop for guests to find their names.

Special memories and hobbies can be incorporated into escort cards, as well. A love for sun and sand could be reflected in seashells or starfish with cards attached by pretty ribbons.



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Perhaps you favor a seasonal sentiment. If your wedding takes place during winter, for instance, cards can be attached to pine cones or shimmering paper snowflakes.

As for table numbers themselves, while wedding venues often provide standard versions, many wedding consultants are seeing couples opt to create their own.

Tables can be named after your favorite quotes, books, scripture or

places you've traveled together. You can even display little stories about yourselves that your guests may not be familiar with, or provide guests with cards asking what you two should do together as newlyweds on date nights, or where they'd suggest you take your next vacation.

Domino says a fun idea is to name tables after life milestones. "Name your table after significant years in your lives and display a photo of you and

your new spouse from that year," she notes—"even the ones with braces."

**PICTURE PERFECT**

"One of the most unique things that was done was when a bride took both her grandmothers' wedding dresses and her mother's wedding dress and had a photographer come and photograph her in the dresses," says Schwartz Woodward. "These pictures were featured at the wedding reception."



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#### TAKE HOME FAVORS

Jennifer Brisman suggests the photographer go around to each table to take pictures of the guests. Before the end of the night, the guests receive a print as a reception favor. “You realize the fun that you had then,” says Brisman.

Customized take-home treats are always a favorite with guests. Schwartz Woodward says one couple had a chocolate designer make white- and milk-chocolate trumpets, which were presented in monogrammed gold boxes.

Incorporating hobbies into your favors is a nice way for guests to know

more about you. Schwartz Woodward says one couple gave mini wine bottles away since they owned vineyards.

#### COMFORT ZONE

Thinking about the comfort and enjoyment of your guests is high on the wedding-planning priority list for planner Santor. “Seat the older guests further from the speakers, and keep your parents where they can easily see your first dance, the speeches and cake cutting,” she advises.

She also suggests thinking about the weather if the wedding is outdoors during the year’s chillier months. “Inexpensive pashminas in addition to properly placed heaters can make a big impact,” she says.

#### GET SOCIAL

Before an event is even over, some guests may have already posted updates on Twitter and Instagram. You and your groom can get in on the social-media fun by making your wedding more accessible to guests. “We have signs for guests to hashtag the couple on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and other social-media websites,” says Qazi.

#### NOTHING OVERLOOKED

From the moment they arrive at your wedding reception to the moment they depart, guests should feel immersed in the beauty and joy of your life’s most precious celebration. Which means no area should be overlooked—not even the restrooms. “A couple should always think about ways to make the restroom inviting and clean,” says Lee. This may include setting counters and even the tops of toilet tanks with candles or small floral arrangements, setting out touch-up toiletries and offering baskets of individually wrapped mints.

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