

The PLANNER



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BRANDING YOUR DAY

The most memorable weddings are filled with personal touches that leave guests saying, "That party was so *them*." Here, industry pros share their tips for dreaming up and executing ideas that will make the day feel all your own.

TEXT BY LEIGH CRANDALL

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Find Your Look

First things first: What does it mean to “brand your day”? In a nutshell, it’s about finding signature visual elements that reflect your personalities and suit your venue, which will be referenced throughout your celebration—from the design of the save-the-dates to the reception décor.

Inspiration for your look can come from anywhere. At *Martha Stewart Weddings*, we’ve seen couples design



unique, memorable celebrations around a favorite blue-and-white china pattern, a love for bold stripes, or a shared passion for sailing. When you’re brainstorming your own brand, look to your shared interests for ideas. Stationer Cheree Berry asks her new clients to fill out a questionnaire reflecting on their travels, cultural heritage, and favorite music to get them thinking about common passions that could be translated into wedding ideas. “Once you’ve established some details of your life to highlight, you’ll be able to sprinkle winks and nods throughout your wedding,” she says.

Your wedding venue can also be a source of inspiration. “Look to

your location and the season as guides, and incorporate local touches,” says *Martha Stewart Weddings* style director Naomi deMañana. That might mean native flora and fauna or of-the-region architecture. “One recent wedding I liked had local flowers at the heart of it all—the welcome bag had floral-scented soap, the escort cards were paper flowers, there were similar live blooms on the table, and there were even hors d’oeuvres designed to look like mini potted flowers.”

This elegant repetition of a theme is the key to creating a branded wedding experience. Just be wary of veering into overly trendy territory. “Step back and think about what you’ll look back at in 20 years and love in terms of style, and let that be your focus,” says Naomi.

Build Your Brand

Once you’ve settled on signature touches, the next step is to decide where to incorporate them. “The save-the-date is a great place to start; you can play around with a theme, even if your actual wedding is more classic,” says

Berry. Get creative with the format—like lift-ticket-inspired save-the-dates for a mountain wedding, or cards shaped like mini records for music lovers. Or introduce a visual that hints at what guests can expect to see at the wedding. “If you have a custom crest or other artwork, start by showing an element of it on the save-the-date, then add to it on the invitation, then show it in its whole form in unexpected places on



THE DETAILS: Artwork and calligraphy by Stephanie Fishwick, price upon request, stephaniefishwick.com.

the day of,” says Berry. For example: One couple, who had a custom watercolor of the farm where they planned to marry, included just the barn on the save-the-date, then revealed the full painting on the invitation. “This way, guests are seeing something new each time,” says Berry.

The challenge of adding branded touches to the wedding day itself is doing so without getting too theme-y. To prevent that, Naomi suggests using the fun stuff at the fun times: The average couple wouldn’t have a balloon backdrop for their ceremony, but that could work well as a backdrop for a photo station. If you’ve built your day around a pattern, plan to have it pop up in lots of little places, like a tray liner, napkins, or table linens. Escort cards, guest books, and favors are other great spots to add a bit of whimsy. “Think about small, clever moments and you won’t have to go crazy with the theme to get the visual message across,” says Berry. “For instance, if you both love books, escort cards with famous quotes from authors are a cute, memorable idea.”

Pick a Lane

As with well-executed brands in the business world, the most successful branded weddings choose one strong overarching concept or narrative—and stick with it. “It can begin to feel like a children’s birthday party when there are too many ideas going on,” says calligrapher Stephanie Fishwick. Make design choices that feel organic to your style, venue, and vibe. If you’re still tempted by an idea that doesn’t naturally fit the concept of your day, you can always incorporate it into the welcome dinner or day-after brunch.

6 months before your wedding date is an ideal time to send save-the-date cards.



SHIRA SAYS

“When gathering mailing addresses for save-the-dates and invitations, put them into a spreadsheet and add a column for “gift received” and another for “thank-you-note status.” It’ll help you keep track of presents and whether you and your honey have sent back words of gratitude—as well as where to send them.”
—*Shira Savada, real weddings editor*

PETER ARDITO (SAVE-THE-DATE, CARD WITH BOW); STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON (SHIRA); ISTOCK (NAME TAGS); BRYAN GARDNER (RINGS)

TO-DO LIST: INSURING YOUR ENGAGEMENT RING

TEXT BY LEIGH CRANDALL

“Just like insuring your home or car, insuring your wedding and engagement rings offers peace of mind,” says Tina Hay, CEO of personal-finance company Napkin Finance. “Of course, nothing will replace the sentimental value of your original ring, but you can limit the financial toll of loss or damage by getting it insured as soon as possible.”

1. FIND OUT ITS VALUE

If you’re recently engaged, you can simply go with the price on the receipt. Most newly purchased engagement rings come with a gemological laboratory report, a valuation report or appraisal detailing the weight, quality, and certifications of the ring. If the diamond is more than half a carat, the jeweler or appraiser should also provide an independent appraisal report covering the four C’s (cut, color, carats, clarity) of the stone or confirming the existing laboratory report or appraisal. If you don’t know the value, you’ll need to have it appraised. “Look for an independent appraiser who has been certified by a reputable association, such as the National Association for Jewelry Appraisers,” says Hay.

2. PICK AN INSURANCE PROVIDER

One easy way to insure your ring is to add it to your existing homeowner’s or renter’s insurance policy. “Your

personal property limit may only cover jewelry up to a certain amount, though,” says Hay. “If that’s the case, you may be able to add a rider that specifically covers more expensive items.” Note that there is often a cap on coverage here, too. For more expensive rings, consider a personal-articles policy just for valuable jewelry. In either case, opt for a policy covering the replacement cost—and not a set cash payment—which will account for inflation. Be sure to ask about deductibles, what types of damage and losses are covered, and coverage while you’re traveling, and get information about the process of filing a claim and getting a replacement.

3. KEEP THE APPRAISAL CURRENT

Have your ring reappraised every two years to make sure your policy reflects the current market value. The goal is to be able to replace the full cost of the ring without overpaying for insurance premiums.



Should I or Shouldn’t I CHANGE MY NAME?

Something old or something new? With combinations and hyphenations, the decision to alter your name isn’t always a simple one. Four brides share what led to the decision to make (or not make) the change.

I Did

“I changed my name to mark the change in my status: getting married, forming my own family, and feeling more connected to my husband. I married in my mid-30s and had a well-established career, and I thought a lot about it. Would it impact my career? Would it hold me back? But I’ve never regretted changing my name. I like when people refer to my husband and me as ‘the Shermans.’ And I love telling telemarketers, ‘You’re looking for Amy Becker? She doesn’t live here anymore!’” —Amy B. Sherman, married to Lee Sidney Sherman

I Use Both

“When we got engaged and I started thinking about my name change, I planned to take his name and drop mine. Ultimately I changed my mind. I had been working for several years, and I was known in my industry by my maiden name. I wanted to add my husband’s name but not lose myself in our union, so I decided to use both. I’ve faced a few minor issues. For one, it’s a mouthful to say and spell. Also, our son just has ‘Lax’ as his last name, so I often just use ‘Lax’ in an unofficial capacity.” —Dara Keithley Lax, married to Joshua Lax

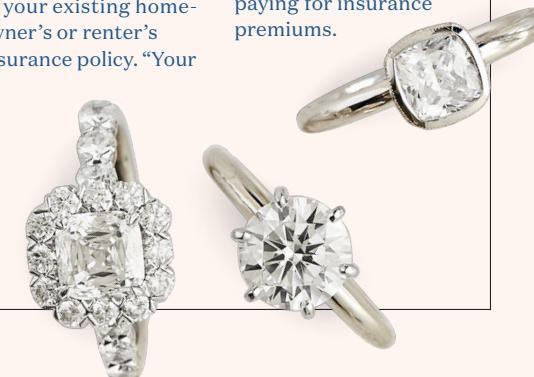
Visit marthastewartweddings.com/name-change for tips on the name-changing process.

I Didn’t

“For a while, I seriously considered ditching my middle name, which I never use, and taking my husband’s last name as my middle name. In part, I was lazy about the paperwork; but as much as I deeply love my husband and his family, my last name isn’t common. If I meet someone with the surname Kinsman, there’s a solid chance we’re related. We don’t have children, so that wasn’t a factor. We’re united in every other way—romantically, emotionally, financially, legally—so this just didn’t feel necessary.” —Kat Kinsman, married to Douglas Wagner

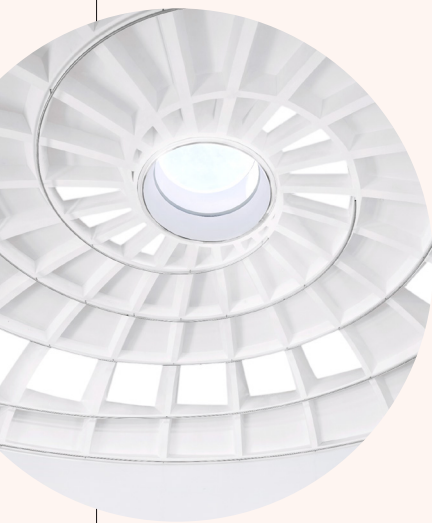
We Both Did

“We both loved the idea of a family name but were uncomfortable with the tradition of the wife taking the husband’s last name,” explains Summer, who changed her last name to a combination of her former last name, Smith, and her husband’s former last name, Silverman. “We preferred something that would reflect the Jewish heritage of our family. Gabe’s ancestors changed their name when they immigrated to the United States. There’s something that feels very American about choosing a new identity to reflect a new life.” —Summer Silversmith, married to Gabriel Silversmith



ARTFUL VENUES

From halls hung with works by the masters to minimalist spaces that shine on their own, these five new or revamped shrines to the arts are bound to make any wedding picture-perfect. **TEXT BY NIKKI RIDGWAY**



↑ Faena Forum

Miami

Opened at the end of 2016, Faena Forum is the hip new jewel in the Miami Beach Faena District's crown. The event space celebrates art, sculpture, dance, theater, carnival, and, occasionally, an unforgettable wedding. The forum can be configured to fit any size group, but for the most intimate ceremony, get married in the circle-shaped, rose-gold amphitheater, where you'll be surrounded (literally) by loved ones. Catering is done in-house, with support from the restaurants at next-door Faena Hotel—another art-filled spot where guests can sleep in Alan Faena-designed rooms and admire Damien Hirst's gilded mammoth sculpture on the beachfront grounds. **Top Tip:** Serve the rose-hued Faena Spritz (made with vodka, Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut, rose water, and hibiscus) for a pretty, fizzy signature cocktail.

THE DETAILS: Price for venue rental upon request, faena.com/miami-beach/venue/faena-forum.



↓ The Contemporary Austin

Austin, Texas

A modern-art museum in two parts, the Contemporary Austin offers weddings at both its Laguna Gloria site (which feels romantic and old-worldly) and the revamped Jones Center in downtown Austin, which underwent a \$3 million renovation in 2016. For storybook romance, opt for Laguna Gloria's Italian-style villa and formal gardens, with seating for 150 guests and views across Lake Austin. Or be one of the first couples to marry on the new roof deck of the Jones Center. With panoramic views of the city, it's an elegant backdrop for a modern, urban ceremony.

Top Tip: Host your after-party and have guests stay at Austin's newest hotel, South Congress, less than two miles from the Jones Center.

THE DETAILS: Venue rental from \$1,780, thecontemporaryaustin.org.

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Philadelphia

The "Rocky" pose atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art has long been a must-get shot for Philly couples. Now the museum offers the chance for couples to marry or have receptions there, too. The vast Great Stair Hall offers the grandest gatherings for groups of up to 300, with soaring ceilings and Augustus

Saint-Gaudens's 14-foot *Diana* statue front and center. For something less formal, the art deco Perelman Building has a private terrace and a skylighted atrium that doubles as a dance floor, while the separate Rodin Museum is best for small ceremonies, set up for alfresco dinners for up to 60 guests surrounded by sculptures by the French master. **Top tip:** For a local sweet treat, exclusive caterers Starr Events can organize an ice cream stand from Philly favorites Little Baby's Ice Cream.

THE DETAILS: Weddings and receptions from \$7,500, phila-museum.org.



↑ National Blues Museum

St. Louis

New to the Gateway City, this 23,000-square-foot ode to blues music—and St. Louis's role in it—is ideal for music-loving couples. For groups of up to 100, combine vows and cocktail hour in the long street side gallery space, then move to the light-flooded Lumière Place Legends Room for food by local grill masters like Sugarfire Smokehouse. And for the music? The museum staff is happy to recommend St. Louis blues group favorites like Marsha Evans and the Coalition and Boo Boo Davis. **Top tip:** For the ultimate memento of



the day, record your own blues album in the museum's studio.

THE DETAILS: Venue rental from \$3,000, nationalbluesmuseum.org.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

San Francisco

Say "I do" in the presence of Warhol, Flavin, and Matisse at SFMOMA—still the hottest culture ticket in the Bay Area since reopening in May 2016 after a three-year expansion. The six event spaces are available for evening celebrations, whether you want a huge banquet (400 for dinner) overlooking Richard Serra's *Sequence* in the Schwab Hall, or cocktail hour in the indoor/outdoor Sculpture Garden. Don't miss a couple's portrait by the Calder sculptures and group shots at the spectacular 30-foot-tall living wall on the Sculpture Terrace. **Top tip:** Treat your guests to a private viewing of the gallery floors—available for an extra fee—until 10 P.M.

THE DETAILS: Venue rental from \$14,000, sfmoma.org.



Everything You Never Knew You Needed to Know About **POSTAGE**

Thoughtfully selected postage can pretty up your invite envelopes and even celebrate places and things near and dear to you. Here's how to put your stamp on wedding correspondence.

TEXT BY LINDSAY GOLDENBERG JONES

STUCK ON YOU

Licking a lot of vintage stamps can be less than pleasant, and having a sponge and water around paper goods sounds precarious. Instead, the pros use glue. "Elmer's X-treme School Glue Stick is my preferred brand, though any brand-name glue stick should work just fine," says Samantha Kramer of Etsy's Pack and Post. And never tape over postage—the post office will reject it.

HANDLE WITH CARE

To avoid getting those big, squiggly black lines across postage, consider hand-canceling. Instead of having your envelopes go through the typical machine that cancels your stamps, you can opt to have the post office hand-stamp smaller cancellation marks instead. Not every post office will hand-cancel, so stop by your local branch and ask if it offers it and if there is a fee.

THE ENVELOPE, PLEASE

Designer/calligrapher Ashley Meyers Combs of Brooklyn's Smash and Co. says the first step she takes when addressing her clients' envelopes is to arrange the postage. "I lay the stamps out on an envelope without adhering them and practice the longest name and address on the list to make sure everything fits well," says Combs. She then attaches the stamps after the ink has dried.

In 1693, letters were held in front of a candle to determine the postage rate. The less light that shone through, the more costly the rate. This was known as "candling."

Self-stick stamps weren't introduced until 1992.

By the Numbers

\$.49 Cost to mail a first-class envelope weighing less than one ounce.

\$.21 Cost for each additional ounce. It's also the price of the "nonmachinable" surcharge typically applied to square, oversize, or other unusually shaped envelopes that won't fit the standard postal-processing machine.

\$.70 Amount to budget per envelope for invitation suites with enclosures, like response cards and accommodations info. Remember to put the appropriately priced stamp on each RSVP card.

\$.34 Cost to mail a postcard—a budget-friendly option for save-the-dates.

\$1.15 Cost of a Global Forever stamp, if you're mailing invitations internationally.

If you're not sure what stamps to pick, here are three ways to make your postage look its prettiest, from Liz Tannehill Cook of Etsy's Vintage Postage Shop.

1. If you have dark envelopes, use light- or soft-colored stamps. Alternatively, if you have light envelopes, try more color and contrast.
2. Not great with putting colors together? Go monochromatic. This will almost always create a professional look.
3. Use a Forever stamp and add just one or two coordinating vintage stamps—you get a great look, and it will cost so much less.

Our favorite vintage-stamp sources:

Etsy
Champion Stamps
eBay

The first Forever stamp, with its image of the Liberty Bell, was issued in 2007.

IT'S VINTAGE

Vintage stamps come in many different denominations (especially smaller versions). But they still have to equal the amount of postage you would need today. So when it comes to vintage stamps, the higher the denomination you can find, the better. "It's impossible to fit 49 cents or more of postage on an envelope using only three-to-five-cent stamps," says vintage-stamp collector Randy Lyttle of eBay store FarmerRandy83. Plan to include at least one 29-cent-or-higher stamp for each envelope. Look for sheets rather than individual stamps, and buy only "mint" or "unused." Vintage stamps can often cost two to three times their face value, especially ones from in-demand series, like the vintage "LOVE" stamps. Be sure to check seller reviews before you buy from any shop or website, and confirm the stamps are still valid, either through the seller or sites like *stamp.org*. And while you can use a random assortment of vintage stamps on your invites, it's a nice touch to choose a theme that has personal significance. Samantha Kramer suggests couples choose postage that showcases their story together. "Highlight elements from your home states, or an author you both love," she says.

THE 411: SEATING CHARTS

Like solving puzzles? Then this is the job for you. Getting it right will mean happy wedding guests who'll spend the evening chatting away. Claudia Hanlin of the Wedding Library, in New York City, shares her tips. **TEXT BY CLAIRE SULLIVAN**

Pick your tables Round tables provide more flexibility with last-minute seating changes (because it's easier to squeeze in a chair), but be sure not to make tables too large, as that will hinder guests' ability to chat with one another. "Aim for the sweet spot of eight people per table," Hanlin suggests. Long, rectangular tables allow more people to be seated at each, a great solution for couples with large families or a big wedding party—though guests will still only be able to chat easily with those across and on either side of them.

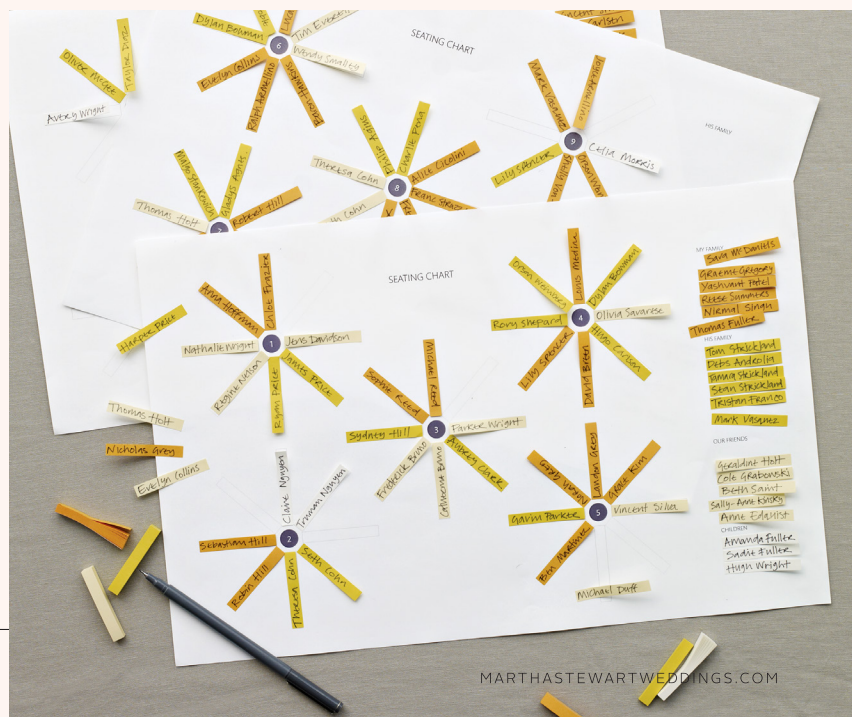
Make space When factoring in how many tables your venue can accommodate, don't forget that guests (and servers) will need enough room to move between them. "When the table is set, the seats of the chairs should be kissing the linen, not pushed all the way under," says Hanlin. This way, you'll ensure guests can be a comfortable distance from the table when they're seated.

Seat yourself first As the most important guests at the party, you and your spouse-to-be should decide where you'll sit first. Sweetheart tables for two will isolate you from the rest of the group. Instead, place yourself with family or your wedding party, depending on your preference (or family politics). Hanlin suggests considering a large head table to accommodate the bridal party, their plus-ones, and close family.

Group your guests Next, begin breaking down your guest list into groups of people with something in common, Hanlin says. Some groups will come together naturally: Seat your first cousins, college friends, and coworkers at tables together. Delegate to your parents, too. They are best suited to match the couples and individuals they added to your guest list. Also consider playing with personalities. "If you have a hilarious single guy friend, put him at a table with college friends who are fun too," Hanlin suggests. As for guests without a plus-one, "do a little matchmaking if you can," but avoid a singles-only table. Instead, mix them in with couples who have similar interests for the best conversation.

Stage the room Once your tables are grouped, decide where to situate them in the space. "Think about sight lines," Hanlin says. "The bride and groom should be in the center of the room, with their backs to as few guests as possible." If close family members or the bridal party are not at your table, situate them nearby. Place grandparents away from speakers, and reserve tables near them for a younger crowd instead—they're more likely to hit the dance floor.

Is it worth it? Yes. "Seating charts are a lot of work, but they take away guests' uncertainty about where to sit, as well as the stress of reserving seats for themselves and their dates," Hanlin says.



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MY FAVORITE
5

SONGS TO FILL THE DANCE FLOOR

When creating a reception-music mix, California-based DJ Austin Hendrix crafts his playlist to suit the crowd. But there are some tunes that never fail, regardless of who's on the dance floor. Here are his favorite foolproof jams.

"I Wanna Dance With Somebody," performed by Whitney Houston

"It's all in the title," Hendrix says. Whitney Houston is a classic for a reason, and when that familiar chorus starts, everyone—from your flower girl to your great-aunt—will wanna dance with somebody, too.

"Shout," by the Isley Brothers

The beauty of "Shout" is its simplicity: It's popular without being a cliché. "No matter what time of the night it's played, there will be a mass migration to the dance floor," Hendrix says.

"Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'," by Michael Jackson

No reception is complete without a song from the King of Pop. This one boasts a beat that will make everyone dance and sing along, especially the "mama se mama sa mama coo sa" chant at the end. As a bonus, "that same phrase sampled a cappella also mixes perfectly into the next song," says Hendrix.

"Let's Go Crazy," by Prince Prince appeals to rock and pop lovers from any generation. And any song that begins with "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..." is destined to make reception crowds wild.

"Uptown Funk," performed by Mark Ronson featuring Bruno Mars

"A great producer, a great singer, big horns, and a catchy hook that appeals to all ages," Hendrix says.
— Laura Miller

JOHNNY MILLER (SEATING CHART); RAYMOND HOM (SINGLE COCKTAIL)



RAISING THE BAR

While catering companies can certainly supply the ingredients for signature cocktails (and bartenders can mix them), cocktail companies dive way deeper into the world of libations, creating bespoke sips tailored to you and your celebration—a great fit for folks who love a well-mixed drink. **TEXT BY AMY PREISER**

Top cocktail companies kick things off with a meeting that feels a bit like you're on *The Newlywed Game*: What's your favorite dessert? Where did you meet? What's the father of the bride's favorite Scotch? That's how they build the foundation of creating a hyperspecific-to-you experience. Engaged in Italy? Expect Tuscan wines. Milkshake-obsessed? Look for a creamy cocktail. "A real expert isn't someone who forces his opinion on you," says Talmadge Lowe of L.A.'s Pharmacie. "It's your wedding and your vision—we're here to guide, not enforce."

Mixologists also track trends so they can continue pushing the envelope, offering wedding guests something new and unexpected. Adam McVay of Holy Water, in London, works with a forager for events to suss out local flavors—from mugwort to nettles—for a highly customized experience, in both taste and aesthetics.

Many mixology teams also craft the event's "arc," as Josh Rosenthal of national company the Grand Bevy puts it. While you can rely on a standard bar to have a consistent supply of drinks, Rosenthal and his team come up with a plan for the

beginning, the middle, and an end for each wedding—for instance, a special twist on the Champagne toast; a roving bar cart serving a custom cocktail that complements guests' meals; then a special drink to kick off the dancing portion.

Finally, cocktail companies will keep things looking as good as they taste, overseeing all aspects of beverage service, from specialty glassware to the staff's attire. Lowe's team regularly dresses in classic bartender attire (think thin black ties and crisp white shirts), while McVay outfits his in whatever themed garb best suits the wedding.

WHAT YOU'LL BE DRINKING THIS YEAR

Some of our experts name-checked mezcal, with its smoky complexity, as one to watch in 2017. In addition, Lowe has his eye on Cognac and brandy, thanks in part to the latter's popping up in the budget-friendly—i.e., \$20-something—price range. Rosenthal recommends Japanese rice whiskey for an easily balanced cocktail spirit, while McVay is a fan of gin infused with an herb or botanical that's native to your wedding locale. (Elderflower is a biggie in many of the weddings he works with in London.)



The Completely Unscientific Signature-Cocktail Name Generator

Skip the "Meant to Be-lyni" and create a custom name that'll get guests talking. Choose a word from each column—and feel free to mix and match until it sounds like "the one." You'll know it when you hear it.

COLUMN ONE

- WORD TO DESCRIBE YOUR FIRST DATE
- SEASON YOU'RE GETTING MARRIED IN
- STYLE OF YOUR WEDDING DRESS
- LOCATION OF FIRST DATE (STREET NAME)
- METAL OF YOUR ENGAGEMENT RING

COLUMN TWO

- CITY YOU FELL IN LOVE IN
- ACTIVITY YOU LOVE TO DO TOGETHER
- PET'S NAME (OR PET NAME!)
- QUALITY YOU FIRST NOTICED IN YOUR FIANCÉ(E)
- THE FIRST FLOWER YOUR FIANCÉ(E) GAVE YOU

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