



Published on LIME.com (<http://www.lime.com>)

Nice Day for a Green Wedding

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Created Feb 2 2009 - 6:43pm

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If you'd asked me in college whether I would consider wearing a traditional white gown with a train to my future wedding, I would have arched my brow, put my hands on my hips, and scoffed, "You have got to be kidding." What planet- and self-respecting modern woman would be caught dead in white silk, taffeta and lace, symbols as they are of the whole odious wedding industrial complex? And who says I'll get married, anyway?

And then came Eric. Eric, with whom I converse in funny voices. Eric who is passionate about beets, reads E.F. Schumacher, hates shopping, and who asked me recently, with a straight face, if I'd be down for spending our wedding night in a chrome Airstream camper van (sorry, babe, but no). Eric is not the cheesy Ken-and-Barbie groom I pictured when I stuck my nose up at the idea of a capital-W Wedding; he's my best friend, a worthy partner, and when he popped the question, I thought, "glad you asked," and answered yes.

I've already found the dress (details of which are top-secret, although I will admit it's white with perhaps a teensy train). The real question now is how to do the deed, because while I've mellowed over the years, the wedding industry hasn't. The typical American wedding is a doozy for Mother Nature — multiple rounds of intricate dead tree invitations, guests flown in from all over the globe, exotic foods, rental cars, and an elaborate, expensive, ethically-suspect gown worn for a grand total of eight hours, tops.

It can seem like there's no such thing as a wedding without pomp, excess, and a cake taller than your flower girl. Isn't the phrase "green wedding" an oxymoron?

Actually, no. Lest we forget: there's always the original "green" wedding: throw on a cocktail dress, tie some cans from the blue bin to the back of your bike, and pedal down to the nearest courthouse. Then again, that sort of simplicity won't work for everyone (such as, for instance, your doily-crazed Aunt Bertha). As Grist's green sage Umbra Fisk puts it, "In the modern wedding context, it might be difficult for the family to feel happy or comfortable just having a simple event, which we might call the 'reduce' wedding."

Besides, weddings — gasp — can actually be quite fun to plan. After all, it's often a couple's first opportunity to declare their mutual values to the world — to share their spiritual beliefs, their passion for farm-fresh ingredients, their weakness for those cute old-fashioned blue Mason jars.

Thankfully, the wedding world is a lot wider than it used to be, and it's perfectly possible to have an all-out soiree that still sits right with your conscience. To help flesh out the possibilities, I've spoken with newlyweds in each of our cities to share a glimpse of what they've found on the matrimonial frontlines.

The Couple: Libbe & Ben Blain

The Challenge: Keeping It Real

The Location: The Farm at Judd Creek, Vashon Island, Washington

Given all the hype and expectations surrounding modern-day nuptials, Seattleites Libbe and Ben's vision for their wedding might sound darn near revolutionary. Says Libbe, who works at the IT help desk for Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's company Volken, "We just approached it like it was a huge party for our friends."

Their top two goals? It had to be fun, and it had to have good food. Ben's friends are real foodies, and besides, (Libbe again), "After reading [The Omnivore's Dilemma](#) [1] and everything — it would feel weird to give people corporate food. We decided, 'It's got to be food that represents our values.'"

So, they called up [organic](#) [1] and local-loving caterer [Herban Feast](#) [2], led by B.J. Duft. And, they searched for a venue that would be easily accessible but also rural. The Farm at Judd Creek, on Vashon Island, did the trick. It's managed by Karen Biondo, who also runs [K-Jo farm](#) [3] and is deeply involved in the Vashon community. Biondo humanely raises and slaughters her own chickens, and in fact raised a few chickens exclusively for Ben and Libbe; thankfully, their caterer was able to incorporate this extremely local meat into the menu.

Libbe saw these little touches as chances to communicate her and Ben's values to their guests. "Sometimes people turn their ethical radar off when they're planning their wedding," Libbe says. "We kind of felt the opposite. It was like, 'What better way or place or time to show people how we feel?'... We believe you can have great food without having it trucked in from South America, or having wedding favors that are plastic and made in China."

One of the ways they did this was by purchasing carbon offsets from the organization [Carbon Fund](#) [4] for their event. They explained their choice on their website: "Offsetting carbon emissions basically means that for every act surrounding our event that 'dirties' the air, we will put in a donation to organizations that create cleaner air."

For their wedding invitations, Libbe and Ben wanted to patronize a small business. They settled on [The Sherwood Press](#) [5], a letterpress based in Olympia, Washington that's been around since the '40s. "We loved the human element of it," says Libbe. "The fact that a hand had touched every one of them. That was really important to us."

Another big priority for Libbe and Ben was minimizing the amount of waste from their event. So, for their rehearsal dinner, they hosted a barbecue at a Seattle park, where Libbe's dad served sandwiches atop biodegradable plates. The only "trash" remaining after the event was put in bio bags and carted off to the county [compost](#) [5] pile.

For their actual wedding reception, Ben and Libbe utilized the services of a non-profit called [Sustainable Vashon](#) [6], which oversees the Trash-Free Bash Stash, a stockpile of clean, intact — yet whimsically mismatched — dishware that people can borrow for their events.

The Couple: Eliza & Adam Sarasohn
The Challenge: Doing it Our Way
The Location: Fort Mason, San Francisco, California

When Eliza, our very own editorial director, set out to marry Adam, a videogame producer at Ubisoft in San Francisco, the duo initially felt daunted.

“I had a very Hollywood-informed idea of what constituted a ‘wedding,’” says Eliza, “You know, *Father of the Bride*, *Steel Magnolias*, Julia Roberts saying ‘my colors are blush and bashful’. Imagining us gussied up like a bride and groom cake-topper just cracked me up.”

Realizing they could use a little backup, Adam and Eliza enlisted the assistance of local green event planner extraordinaire [Nelle Johnston](#) [7], of [ZahZoom Weddings and Parties](#) [8]. With Nelle’s expert advice and encyclopedic knowledge of Bay Area green businesses, the couple set about recreating wedding traditions in ways that felt meaningful to them. “Once I saw we could make it our own, I got just as crazy as any bride,” says Eliza. “Except instead of roses and wedding cakes, I was obsessing over recycled paper flowers and sourcing vintage hankies.”

The pair settled on a beloved local landmark, the [Officer’s Club at Fort Mason](#) [9], a serene slice of nature in the city with iconic views of the San Francisco Bay. Aimee Valentine, [The Green Makeup Artist](#) [10] who writes the [eco-beauty blog](#) [10] for LIME, gave Eliza a 100 percent all-natural wedding day makeover. With food a top priority, the couple hired [Springloaf Catering](#) [11] who concocted a stellar veg-heavy feast showcasing the Bay Area’s cornucopia of farm-fresh ingredients. And forwent the standard wedding cake in favor of Mexican chocolate and chai vegan cupcakes, whipped up by [Peace, Love and Cupcakes](#) [12], a new vegan dessert catering service started by former editorial assistant Andrea Manitsas.

Guests sipped California reds and Blueberry Lemonade Agave-sweetened cocktails made with [Veev](#) [13] acai liquor, among other selections from an all-organic bar.

But perhaps the most memorable touch (and Eliza’s favorite) was the invitation. Recognizing that even the most thoughtfully crafted invites would ultimately get tossed in the recycle bin (if you’re lucky), they decided to make theirs so unique, so irresistible, that guests would, hopefully, feel obliged to hang on to them. So they had a friend, local concert poster artist [Matt Leunig](#) [14], design a little comic book of their love story which they printed with soy ink on post-consumer recycled paper at [Greener Printer](#) [15] in Berkeley. The comic book resurfaced as the material florist Erin Rosenow of [Rosenow Floral](#) [16] painstakingly turned into boutonnieres for Adam and his groomsmen. Rosenow also recycled back issues of LIME’s sister publication [Common Ground](#) [17] into whimsical paper wreaths and playful bouquets in the shapes of Gerbera daisies and craspedia.

At the end of the night, guests departed with hemp tote bags from [Eco-Bags](#) [18] picturing a scene from the comic book and filled with local, organic goodies.

The Couple: Katrien Michiels & Mark Singer
The Challenge: Keeping it Simple
The Location: Promontory Point, Chicago, Illinois

Katrien Michaels and Mark Singer are financial planners. So when they decided to get married, they knew they didn't want a parade of excess. Perhaps it's Katrien's European background — she grew up in Belgium — but the couple's first priority was to eliminate unnecessary waste.

“Drinking beer out of anything plastic or paper is unheard of in Europe,” she says. So early on, they requested their caterer use absolutely no disposables (worth it, Katrien says, though it did cost extra).

What got the couple even more excited was the idea of hosting a wedding in a location that truly represented Chicago, a venue where their fee would “circle back” to their own community. Promontory Point [19], one of the gems of the Chicago Park District located right on the lakeshore, was a natural choice. “I liked the idea that first of all, it's cheaper,” says Katrien. “It's publicly provided, and it supports the city we live in. The Chicago Park District is a very well run part of the Chicago government.”

The couple held a simple outdoor ceremony, attended by about 100 guests, followed by a reception inside the site's rustic stone structure, which featured tables with white linens and simple lavender springs as centerpieces. Whether they knew it or not, Katrien and Mark were abiding by one of the clearest ways to reduce a wedding's impact: host the ceremony and the reception at the same site.

Anticipating the preponderance of rental cars that would be required for guests to reach the site from their hotel, the couple arranged for the Chicago trolley [20] to shuttle everyone at once — an immediate hit.

The couple's other big priority was to minimize their use of paper in issuing invitations. Their solution came from the company Valley Printing, which offers SealandSend invitations [21]. Made up of a single, foldable sheet of paper, it contained all the info usually dispersed through the many separate pieces of a formal invite.

The Couple: Daniela Gesundheit & Dan Goldman

The Challenge: Big Family, Little Footprints

The Location: Daniela's Grandparents' Home on the Beach

Daniela Gesundheit, singer/songwriter for the Toronto-based band Snowblink [22], has never understood cut flowers. “I find them kind of depressing,” she says. “They're cut and they're dying... the vital beauty of them only lasts a few hours.” So at Daniela's wedding to fellow musician Dan this April, the reception tables where bouquets usually sit will have potted succulents instead. “Plants living and growing are much more exciting to me — I feel more connected to that,” she says. “People will take them home, and they'll be around for years — it seems like to have the right metaphor.”

Another wedding staple that doesn't resonate with the couple is the cake, so they're going with pies instead, minus any refined sugar. “Who doesn't like pies?” asks Daniela. Unlike some of the sugary vegan cakes they tried, pies “will probably just need a little maple syrup or agave, and then the actual fruit.”

Dan and Daniela have been similarly thoughtful about the main course at the reception — they want it to be as organic, local and seasonal as possible. The caterer they're using — 21 West [23] — doesn't identify itself as “green,” but has been flexible and accommodating of the couple's requests. “Food is a big part of our life together,” Daniela says. “Food makes you feel a certain way when you eat it, so if we're having all these people together, we might as well have them feel good with the food we're

feeding them. And then there's the impact it makes on that scale.”

With a total of about 200 expected guests, the other major impact of the event will be all that travel required to get everyone to wedding site, Daniela's grandparents' home on the beach in LA. When Dan and Daniela's relationship was long-distance — with him in Toronto and her in the Bay Area — they contributed to a carbon fund to offset their frequent travel. For the wedding, they plan to donate money to an environmental organization whose work they admire: the [David Suzuki Foundation](#) [24]. They'll also offer a shuttle from a nearby motel to the site, eliminating as much auto travel as possible.

To help them coordinate with local vendors, since Dan and Daniela now both live in Toronto, the pair signed on with Angelica Weihs, of [Angelique Events](#) [25], an experienced green wedding planner in LA. Daniela says Angelica's been particularly helpful in communicating their [sustainability](#) [25]-first vision to the various vendors. “We've been in the middle of a vendor meeting, and starting to feel overwhelmed, and she'll just sweep in and say, here's the vision. Maybe you can show us something more like that.”

The Couple: Rachel & Christopher Clark

The Challenge: Something Old, Something New

The Location: The Garrison, Cold Spring, New York

Danielle Venokur, founder of the green event planning company [DVGreen](#) [26], emphasizes that green weddings don't have to hit people over the head with their message. “I'm more interested in having guests just walking in and saying, ‘Wow, it's beautiful.’” She says. “I'd rather they never know.”

When Danielle's cousin Rachel and her then fiancé Christopher Clark planned their all-vegan wedding at [The Garrison](#) [27] in Cold Spring, New York, they had a similar philosophy in mind. And while they knew they wanted a New York wedding, they “didn't want to have it in Manhattan,” says Rachel. “We wanted it to be more green — in terms of actual plants, not a concrete jungle.”

They also wanted the event to have what Rachel, a holistic health counselor for her own company, [Renew for a New You](#) [28], calls a “vintage, chic, eco feel.” When they visited The Garrison, they immediately felt it would be a perfect backdrop. While it's partially a country club — it's on a golf course — it's also a sort of garden wonderland, landscaped with organic flowers and a vegetable garden, which supplies the on-site restaurant. What's more, the sensibility of the staff matched Rachel and Christopher's values; while The Garrison restaurant had never catered a vegan wedding before, they were enthusiastic about the challenge. “The chef at the restaurant always uses local and seasonal — so that was an easy match-up,” Rachel says. “And in terms of green elements, [the Garrison was] really open to our ideas. The owners really believe in doing things in an eco-friendly way.”

To bring a sense of history and tradition to the affair, Rachel worked to bring heirlooms into the décor, such as the fabric from her mother's wedding dress, which held together her bridal bouquet, and the depression-era milk bottles and sugar bowls the couple had made into soy candles, to be used as table centerpieces. The tables were also brightened by bouquets of herbs, flowers, and berries, by florist [Stone Kelly](#) [29]. A final vintage-y touch was a series of old, weathered frames, which the couple collected from consignment stores, and filled with photos of themselves from their travels.

Andi McDaniel is a freelance writer and radio producer living in Berkeley, California. She plans to leave room in her wedding dress for lots of pie.

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Links:

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