

A rehearsal dinner is often a small celebration, but you can also throw open the doors and turn it into a big welcome party, as Hanna and Bret did at Seattle's Chihuly Garden and Glass.



Ask Martha

Wedding wisdom and practical solutions for all your pressing questions

Q: *Whom should we invite to our rehearsal dinner?* —Chandler, via email

A: Since the rehearsal itself is a must-attend for anyone involved in the ceremony (it gives everyone a chance to walk through their roles and make sure they know their responsibilities), it's standard to invite them all to the dinner afterward. This includes the officiant, readers, the wedding party (flower girls and ring bearers included!), and all their spouses or dates. It's also courteous to invite your close family members. And since the dinner is usually held the day or evening before the wedding, many couples extend the invitation to anyone coming in from out of town as well. But the guest list is ultimately up to whoever is hosting the party, whether that's the groom's parents (which is

traditional), both families, or the couple themselves. Budget and venue size can dictate how many people are included. "Rehearsal dinners are often held in a small, intimate setting," says planner Debi Lily of A Perfect Event, in Chicago. "For those looking to host a larger group, a welcome party can be held after the rehearsal dinner or in its place." It doesn't necessarily require a full dinner menu—often just cocktails and appetizers or desserts are served—so it's easier to open a welcome party up to a wider guest list.

Q: *What is a groom's cake, and do we need one?* —Emily, via email

A: A groom's cake is a less conventional cake—usually smaller than the wedding cake—served at the reception or the rehearsal dinner. The idea can be traced back to the 17th century, when there was a tradition of serving two cakes—one for the bride, and one in a different form for the groom. The latter was a dense fruitcake that was usually given to guests in slices to be taken home. Sometimes the slices would be placed under the recipients' pillows for good luck.

While this custom has fallen by the wayside, the groom's cake lives on—and is a particularly proud southern wedding tradition. "Couples typically ask for a design that will express something unique to themselves, or something the groom loves," says Sean Dehan of Austin, Texas-based Sweet Treats Bakery. The sky's the limit: We've seen cakes shaped like golf clubs, dinosaurs, and castles.

It's certainly not mandatory to serve a groom's cake, but it can make for a memorable addition to dessert, as well as a nice alternative to the wedding cake. Chocolate is a common choice, but any flavor goes. "I've even seen an oversize peanut-butter cup served as a nod to the groom's favorite candy," says D.C.-based wedding planner Kim Newton. The cake also presents a great opportunity for the groom to get involved in the wedding-planning process (after all, cake tasting is hard to refuse!). To check out some of the best—and wildest—groom's cakes we've seen over the years, visit our gallery at marthastewartweddings.com/grooms-cakes.

Q: *The church where we plan to wed only offers 11 A.M. and 2 P.M. ceremonies, but I don't want my reception to start before 5 P.M. How can I manage my guests in the meantime?* —Anne, via email

A: Scheduling a sizable break between ceremony and reception can be logistically complicated, but it's doable. Make a plan with your guests' comfort in mind—particularly the elderly and those from out of town. If the ceremony and reception locations are near each other and a hotel where your guests are staying, that makes things easier. Guests can enjoy some downtime, or you can serve refreshments informally at the hotel. You can also give guests a list of local offerings, or arrange a group activity: "Plan a tour of the area to show off your favorite places around town," suggests Colorado-based planner Virgina Edelson of Bluebird Productions. Of course, there's a bright side to having that extra

time: You'll get your post-ceremony photos done and won't miss cocktail hour!

Q: *How do I choose a wedding planner?* —Ellie, via email

A: Hiring a planner is one of the biggest, and most personal, decisions you'll make in the months leading up to your wedding. The first thing to do is decide which kind of planner you need. The main categories are:

- **Classic planner:** She or he will orchestrate the entire planning process and ensure an organized wedding week-end. This will include hiring vendors and acting as the point person for them every step of the way. Expect to pay around 10 percent of your total wedding budget for this service.

- **Event designer:** This pro may fit the bill if you're the organized type who isn't intimidated by logistics but would

like some guidance on color palette, décor, and other aesthetic decisions. She or he usually has an artistic background and will focus on the overall look of your day, and may have a team of regular vendors who can bring that cohesive vision to life. Costs vary, because event designers are often hired to work alongside a full-service planner; some do both jobs, or simply provide guidance for a couple who are doing much of the planning themselves.

- **Month-of (or even day-of) planner:** This type of planner comes in only near the end of the process to focus on orchestrating big-day logistics. "This person will alleviate some of the leg-work, giving the couple the option to plan the parts they enjoy and skip the

tasks they may not love so much," says Los Angeles-based event planner Beth Helmstetter.

To make your choice, you have to consider your time, your budget, how clear your vision is for the design of the day, and how hands-on you're willing to get to pull off a seamless celebration.

"I always use the contractor analogy," says real weddings editor Shira Savada. "You can renovate a house by yourself, but a contractor comes in handy. A lot of behind-the-scenes wedding stuff is best handled by the pros."

As you meet candidates, remember that personality matters—a lot. "Your wedding planner is a big part of the team and ultimately serves as your eyes and ears on the day," says Helmstetter. "Ask yourself if you trust him or her to make decisions you would make, and if you trust that person to manage the team properly."

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—BETH HELMSTETTER OF BETH HELMSTETTER EVENTS