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For this casual rehearsal dinner on the island of Nantucket, about six dozen of the bride and groom's nearest and dearest gathered for an evening of games, conversation, and a lobster feast.

Get the Party Started

With a little planning and a whole lot of love, the day before your wedding can be the (second) happiest day of your life. Here's how to create an inspired and unforgettable rehearsal celebration.

TEXT BY CARA SULLIVAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY MILLIE HOLLOMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

First things first. How will you kick off your wedding celebration? Do you want to throw a rehearsal dinner, a welcome party, or some combination of the two? "Traditionally, welcome parties indicate that all guests are invited, whereas rehearsal dinners are reserved for the wedding party and close family members," says Lyndsey Hamilton, owner of Lyndsey Hamilton Events in New York City. While most couples opt for one or the other, some spread out the merriment for an extra day and host separate pre-parties—an all-inclusive welcome fête two nights before the wedding, and a private dinner following the rehearsal on

the wedding's eve. The choice is entirely yours, but if you're tying the knot in a far-flung locale or most of your guests are out-of-towners, etiquette would dictate that you somehow include everyone. If you don't have the desire or the budget to throw an additional large-scale event, don't worry: There are low-key ways to include lots of guests. "Share an intimate meal with attendants and family at a restaurant with a large bar, then invite out-of-town guests to join you for a drink after dinner," says Katie Jayne Sprengle, owner of Jayne Weddings & Events in Chicago. Read on for more rehearsal-day strategy.

All Your Favorites (from left): The hosts provided their guests with local treats and even customized Frisbees to encourage friendly competition. The lighthouse made the party location easy to find. Tie on the bibs—messy foods like lobster and barbecue are a safer pick when the dress code is casual.



Make It “So You”

You’ve injected bits of yourselves into every detail of the wedding, and pre-parties should be similarly personal. But you can also loosen up—a lot. “This is a great opportunity to incorporate less formal interests,” says Sheena Kalso, owner of the Invisible Hostess in Seattle. To get creative, consider these themes.

Your honeymoon. “Plan dinner around the location of your upcoming trip,” suggests Kalso. Jetting off to Hawaii? Go wild with a luau theme, complete with an island-casual dress code, a hula performance, and a pig roast.

Your passions. “I planned one rehearsal dinner where we took the guests fly-fishing, and another where we celebrated the bride’s love for Taylor Swift with karaoke,” says Kathy Goodman, owner of Well Rehearsed in San Francisco. “This is the ideal time to highlight the little quirky things that don’t make it into the wedding plan.”

Food. There’s no shortage of culinary themes, but planners report that barbecues and clambakes are among the

most requested. “Barbecue is big in many regions of the country, so it’s always a hit,” says Hamilton. And while everyone loves a beachside clambake, landlocked versions can be a blast, too. “Ask your caterer to serve lobsters, mussels, steamed clams, corn, and potatoes in individual mesh bags,” says Bethany Scalise, co-owner of Shindig Events & Catering in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

Booze. “If you have an affinity for whiskey culture, invite everyone to join you at a distillery,” says Kalso. Beer fans can head to a you-brew establishment to craft beer together. Wine lovers might treat loved ones to a pairing menu, or hold a blind tasting: Offer a prize—such as your favorite bottle of vino—for the winner.

Break the Ice

Try these tips to ramp up the fun while putting friends and family who may not know one another at ease.

Serve the meal family-style. “This is the best way to get people talking,” says Sprenkle. “Passing items around and chatting will have everyone feeling as relaxed as they would at Sunday dinner.”

Keep them busy. No one wants to sit quietly next to a stranger for three hours. Instead, get everyone up and moving (and, presumably, talking) with unexpected activities. “Try cornhole toss games, croquet, or even tarot-card readings,” suggests Hamilton. If you have a competitive crowd,

WORK THE PALETTE

To keep the pre-parties and the wedding cohesive, no matter how different the events may be, use the same colors throughout. “If your bridesmaids are going to be walking down the aisle in peach, for example, opt for peach-hued napkins and accent flowers at the welcome party,” says Sprenkle.

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Bring It All Together

(from left): Drinks were served as partygoers chatted and the sun started to set. Family-style service and rustic touches like Mason jars helped set a relaxed tone. T-shirts printed with a custom logo—featuring crossed croquet mallets—celebrated the couple's love of games.



LOCATION IS EVERYTHING

If you're searching for a setting, don't rule out the wedding venue! Many are large enough to provide a variety of experiences. "The key is to use an entirely different part of the property," says Hamilton. "It'll give guests a feel of what's to come without spoiling the surprise."

WHO'S PAYING?

Traditionally, the groom's parents host the rehearsal dinner—but these days the bride's parents, both families, or even the couple themselves might foot the bill. "Just remember that the host should always be included in the planning," says Goodman. (This is a great chance to start making nice with your future mother-in-law.)

look no further than wedding bingo: "As guests arrive, hand out custom cards with specific descriptions on every square, such as 'The couple who just hiked Machu Picchu' or 'The woman who has never had coffee.' Tracking them down is a great way for everyone to get acquainted while having fun," says Goodman.

Play matchmaker. Not romantically—though many couples meet at weddings! "If your dinner has assigned seating, create place-setting cards that say things like, 'Dave, on your right, has a fascinating job,' or 'Kathryn, on your left, just moved here from Australia,'" says Scalise.

Toast With the Most

The rehearsal dinner tends to be the place for less formal, and sometimes more boisterous, speechmaking. And while there's a fine line between a great speech and a cringeworthy one, the party shouldn't turn into a roast.

Start early. There's a simple reason for this: The later the toasts, the more tipsy the toasters. Enough said.

Map out a plan. Some rehearsal dinners feature tons of speeches, others just one or two. Either way, "it's a good idea to choose speakers in advance so they will sound more prepared," says Sprenkle. Start with the hosts and add whomever you are comfortable with. Designate a relative or friend as emcee to keep things moving.

Skip the open mic. "Not only does it make



your guests feel obligated to say something (that you might not want them to say!), but it can easily spin out of control and last all night long," says Sprenkle.

Wrap It Up

All good things must end—hopefully early enough that everyone can still enjoy the wedding day. To make sure they do:

Be specific. "It's a good idea to designate a hard end time," says Kristin Newman, owner of Kristin Newman Designs in Charleston, South Carolina. And stick to it. If the invitation reads "9 P.M.—11 P.M.," start winding down at 10:30 so you're not short on beauty sleep.

Limit booze. "We suggest serving only beer, wine, and a signature cocktail or two at the rehearsal dinner," says Scalise.

Help them recover. "If a sensibly early evening isn't in the cards, consider sending the night owls back to their rooms with 'rest and rehydrate' kits filled with water, an eye mask, travel ibuprofen, and a Starbucks card," says Kalso.