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# VOICES



## *Boundless Love*

Matrimony Amidst  
a Global Pandemic

## *How Sweet It Is*

Chef Marla Mae Harvey,  
Made by Marla Mae

Out & About at

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## January 2022



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Photo Contributed by Marla Mae Harvey



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Photo by Kerry Boyle | Golden Orchid Photography



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Photo by Taylor Sherman

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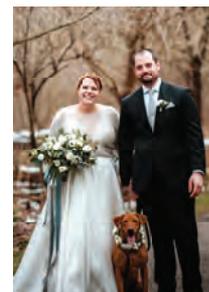
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#### On the Cover

Stephanie Walker and Zack Palmer with their dog, Tormund, on the day of their 'micro-wedding' on December 31, 2020.

Photo by Stephanie Whiting | Whiting Photography

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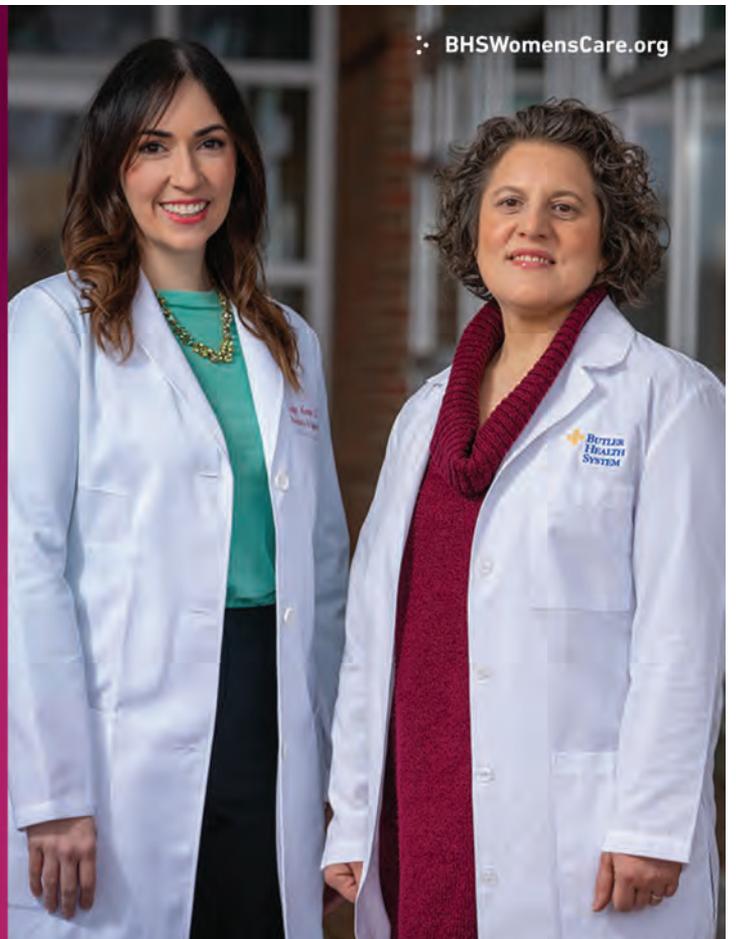
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# Lasting Moments

After another year for the record books, it's hard to believe that 2022 is here. In 2021, some days have felt like a time-loop of 2020 twice-over and, other days, a movie played in fast-forward. This past year has combined hope for our future with the lingering effects of a global pandemic, making for a peculiar 365 days.

During what we all know now as the 'new normal,' I've noticed something special in that many of us cherish the time we have surrounded by others or doing things we love much, much more. There's something especially exquisite about an occasion that you wish could last forever. Being so immersed in a moment in time that the world stops

around you and you are surrounded by genuine happiness — those are the moments we live for, and those are the memories we will always hold closely.

So, it only seems fitting that we kick off the new year in celebration of life's "Lasting Moments" through a sentiment-filled bridal edition. After two years of people being limited in their abilities to express love for one another, we are excited to share the romances of individuals throughout the region who made their vows during the pandemic. Their stories are moving and heartwarming, expressing the bittersweet taste of marrying during COVID-19.

And with hope on the horizon, I, too, am excited to live out many lasting

moments in 2022. Plus, with a number of my nearest and dearest friends tying the knot themselves, I look forward to celebrating the joys that come from being surrounded by love.

Let us all ring in 2022 in pleasant reverie and a passion to make the most of what the year may bring!

*Wishing you a safe, healthy and prosperous new year,*

Taylor Sherman,  
Valley Voices Editor

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What a yummy [December] issue! I always look forward to each publication.

*Liz Bolster, Greenville*

I most enjoyed "What's Poppin'?" It's nice to know that Jason [Yohman] uses only all-natural ingredients and Ohio-grown popcorn. Angela's cover photo is ideal!

*Roberta McFarland, Wheatland*

I like learning about all of the restaurants in our area and what they have on their menus.

*Rosemarie Michael, Mercer*

I enjoyed reading about Ciancis' "Legacy of Love."

*Lynne Bresnahan, Transfer*

I most enjoyed the local businesses featured, including: The Bent Fork, Cucina di Cianci's and Jason's Marvelous Popcorn. I also enjoyed the recipes.

*Janet Thiel, Hermitage*

I enjoyed reading "Traditions Around the Dinner Table." I hope that younger generations will continue to keep their family's traditions.

*Laura Murphy, Sharon*

I enjoyed reading the story on Cucina di Cianci's. I worked with Cam years ago.

*Sue Kendall, Fredonia*

I enjoyed the Community Views section this year, and especially appreciated the Veterans Day parade feature.

*Rosemary Lozier, Sharpsville*

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# Leanna Mayberry

Owner,  
William J's Emporium

By Taylor Sherman



Metro Creative

**L**eanna Mayberry of Greenville has a knack for creating beautiful floral arrangements for any occasion. And at her floral shop, William J's Emporium, you will find just that — Leanna's special touch in every piece that leaves her door.

"I have always been interested in owning my own business and had several different ideas over the years, but it was when I was working for a local flower shop 25 years ago when I felt there was an opportunity to provide additional services in the floral industry to my hometown community," the owner shared.

"I grew up in Greenville and spent a few years in San Francisco, California after high school graduation," Leanna said. "I returned home and graduated from Grove City College. I worked in a variety of positions including retail, medical and banking until I opened my shop. I have never experienced a dull moment being a business owner, wife and mother of three."

At William J's Emporium, customers can expect stunning arrangements, plus a number of gifts to make occasions extra special. "Additional gift items that I offer in the store have changed over the years and trends come and go, but the core business of arranging beautiful floral designs has remained constant," said Leanna.

"I have been very fortunate that, even through times of economical uncertainty, my business has steadily grown over the last 23 years," she continued. **V**

William J's Emporium is located at  
331 Main Street, Greenville.

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## Q&A

### **What has been the biggest reward in your career?**

The most rewarding aspect of my career has been when I am able to make someone happy or even able to provide comfort with something that I have created. Every design I create is personal and done to the best of my ability.

### **What has been the biggest challenge?**

The biggest challenges have also been some of the most recent ones that I have faced. Supply chain issues are making my job very challenging. Fortunately, customers have been very understanding and I feel very appreciative of that.

### **Where do you find inspiration for your arrangements?**

Inspiration can come from anywhere with floral arranging. It may be the container I'm using, a particular variety of flower that I have procured, or even colors in a ribbon. Inspiration can also stem from the person sending or receiving the final product and their vision of what they would like.

### **Which season is your favorite?**

I truly love each season as it comes. The seasonal changes in western Pennsylvania are one of the many reasons I love living here.

### **How do you enjoy spending your free time?**

I enjoy spending my free time reading, taking walks and spending time with family and friends.

### **What is something few people know about you?**

Few people know that I have a degree in Elementary and Music Education.

### **What do you most enjoy about our region?**

I enjoy the beauty of our region. I love discovering a dirt road that is surrounded by natural beauty and maybe even crossing an old iron or, yes, even wooden bridge.

### **How do you define success?**

The definition of success for me is found in my long-standing customers that have become friends and their continued support of my efforts.

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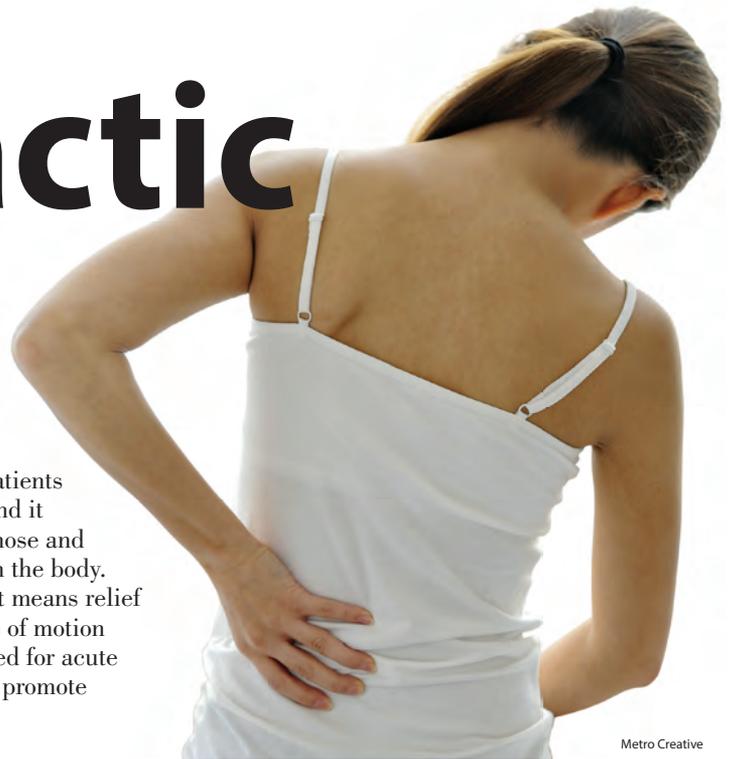


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*In the Right Adjustment*

# Chiropractic Care

By Dr. David A. Hunkus



Metro Creative

**C**hiropractors don't just perform spinal adjustments or treat patients for acute pain. Chiropractic care is for patients of all ages, and it helps with a wide range of health issues. Chiropractors diagnose and treat conditions affecting the bones, joints, ligaments and nerves in the body.

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promotes recovery, improves immune response, can provide you with more energy and may improve your mood. A chiropractor primes your body to function at its best.

**You will move better.** Whether it is a chronic problem like back pain or arthritis, an old sports injury, or new discomfort from a recent accident or injury, pain can keep you from moving freely and comfortably.

**You move more.** Less pain, better range of motion, and feeling better in

general means that there's less holding you back from living a healthy, active lifestyle.

**You will live better.** Chiropractic care doesn't start when you enter the chiropractor's office and end when you leave. The chiropractors at Hunkus Chiropractic in Girard do not prepare their patients for a lifetime of treatment. Instead, they meet with you to determine your needs, learn your health history, and establish a chiropractic plan that is right for you.

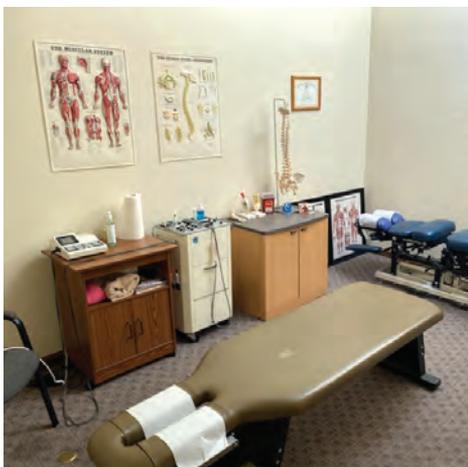
Chiropractors equip you to make healthy lifestyle changes that promote better overall health and wellness. A chiropractic lifestyle is about being proactive with your health, and making positive choices to prevent health problems before they happen. Chiropractors provide patient education about things like diet, nutrition and exercise. ▼

Hunkus Family Chiropractic & Fitness is located at 798 East Liberty Street, Girard, Ohio. Information: 330.545.8900 or visit [hunkusfamilychiropracticandfitness.com](http://hunkusfamilychiropracticandfitness.com).

Photo Contributed by Hunkus Family Chiropractic & Fitness

### Dr. David A. Hunkus

*Dr. David A. Hunkus graduated from The National University of Health Sciences in Chicago, Illinois with a bachelor's degree in Human Anatomy and as a Chiropractic Physician. He is certified in sports injuries, specializes in treatment for auto injuries with certification from the Spine Research Institute of San Diego and has certification in Accident Reconstruction from Texas A&M University. Hunkus Chiropractic and Fitness, located in Girard, Ohio, provides chiropractic care for all of northeast Ohio and western Pennsylvania.*



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# When You Know Food, *You Do the Best Food*

## Food Network Winner Makes the Most of Creative Talent

By Beckie Erwin

**C**hef Marla Mae Harvey is happiest in her kitchen, with hard work and determination baked into every one of her treats.

The former area resident from Brookfield and Sharon got her start working in food science for a chocolate and ice cream company in Pittsburgh. After more than four years in menu development for six locations, she lost that job in April 2020 due to COVID.

“I was scared, didn’t know how I was going to pay rent, make money, or do anything, really, because everything was shutting down,” she said. “Since so many bakeries were also shutting down due to COVID, I had a couple of friends ask me to make some cakes for some home birthday celebrations. I used to make the occasional cake on the side here and there but nothing like how it is now.”

With a background in culinary science and having earned two degrees in the field, Marla has been involved in the food industry since she was 18 years old. She didn’t see herself owning her own baking business but says life often has other plans.

“Basically, my business started because more and more people were ordering from me,” she said. “It was either move forward with this or stop altogether, so I decided to move forward.”

It wasn’t easy.

“I had to go to some trainings to get my food handling license and also get my LLC,” she explained. “I needed to figure out my target audience and decide what kind of treats to offer. It’s a lot of work to start your own business. I do all of the social media, the marketing, the finances, the menus, the photoshoots, the baking, etc. I normally work seven days a week.”

It’s all been worth it, though, because, “I’m finally able to do things the way I want,” she said.

him on the show,” she said. “My initial thought was ‘no,’ because going on national television and having millions of people watch you bake is scary to think about!”

“But, of course, I told him ‘yes.’ From there, we had to try out, do interviews, and complete several other steps. Daniel had previously done a cookie challenge on Food Network and was asked to do the gingerbread show. He needed a baking assistant, which is where I came in.”

“The show had us go head to head with two other teams using the same set up. Our episode was the Holiday Lights Show. We had to incorporate working lights into our display and it had to be 90 percent edible,” she explained.

The episode itself is titled, *Holiday Baking Championship: Gingerbread Showdown*, season one, episode three.

“It was so nerve-wracking,” Marla said. “The structure was four feet wide and 24 inches high, held together with royal icing or chocolate. We created a Christmas greenhouse display. I also had a baking

twist halfway through the show where I had to incorporate a baked element into our display and have the judges taste my desserts. I made tres leches croquembouches that look like little trees.”



Photo by Marla Mae Harvey

One of her more exciting achievements was competing on — and winning — Food Network’s gingerbread house challenge.

“I was asked by an old coworker of mine, Daniel Wilson, to participate with

“

Basically, my business started because more and more people were ordering from me. It was either move forward with this or stop altogether, so I decided to move forward.

– *Marla Mae Harvey*

”



# Taste Test!

How sweet it is for Marla Mae to share a sampling of one of her own culinary creations — an ooey-goey cookie! Try out your own version of a Made by Marla Mae specialty: brown butter sea salt chocolate chip cookies.

## Brown Butter Sea Salt Chocolate Chip Cookies

### Ingredients:

2 sticks or 1 cup (8 ounces) unsalted butter  
2¼ cups (288 grams) all-purpose flour  
¼ teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
¾ cup (96 grams) granulated sugar  
¾ cup (96 grams) dark brown sugar  
1 large egg, room temperature

1-2 teaspoons vanilla  
12 ounces chocolate chips\*  
flakey salt

**\*Note:** You can use literally any chocolate you want. I've used chocolate wafers, but you can use white chocolate, semi-sweet, a mixture of everything; it doesn't matter — just make it how you like!

### Directions:

Preheat oven to 375° F. Cut butter into smaller pieces so that it melts faster. Place butter in a small saucepan and heat on medium-high. The butter will melt fast so don't walk away yet! Let the butter cook. You'll start to see the foam, and you can hear it. I listened to this podcast about how you can tell certain foods are done just from the smell and sounds and it's true! Cook butter until you start to smell a nutty smell (it kind of smells like roasted pecans.) Carefully take your pan and swirl it gently to get the butter mixed so it browns evenly. Once the foam starts to disappear and you can see the color change to amber, pull it from the heat immediately. Let start to cool while you gather the rest of your ingredients.

Combine all dry ingredients in a separate bowl except the two sugars. Let the butter cool for about 20 minutes. It's hot oil so it's going to need some time. Take the butter and transfer it to a metal bowl; it can be a mixer bowl too! Then add both sugars to the butter and mix until incorporated. If the butter is around room temperature, add your egg and mix. If your butter is still hot, it will scramble the egg. Start to incorporate the dry ingredients and mix. If you're using a KitchenAid, use the paddle attachment to mix your dough. If not, a hand whisk or a spatula work fine too. They just take a little longer.

Once you have everything combined, add your chocolate. You can add pecans, walnuts or any kind of nut to this, but I would take out some of the chocolate because it can get a little too busy. Once everything is mixed and you have a homogenous mixture, start prepping the dough to be baked.

Take a sheet tray with parchment and form your dough balls. You can use an ice cream scooper, but I would suggest you keep them around 1 to 2 large tablespoons. Keep each cookie around two inches apart on the tray. I usually do them at about 2 tablespoons and I'm able to fit 12 per half sheet tray. I flatten mine (just a little!) and sprinkle flakey salt on top. I like to freeze my dough for about 10 to 15 minutes before baking, but you don't have to. Bake for 8 to 10 minutes or 12 to 15 minutes max, depending on if you like them soft or crispy. I usually do mine for about 10 to 12 minutes so the middle is still slightly soft, but 8 minutes if you like them gooey.

Then let them cool, or not, and enjoy!



Photo by Marla Mae Hätvey

In the end, the pair won the competition and had to keep that news to themselves for seven months. “You can imagine how hard it is to keep something like that a secret from everyone you know, but winning the show sure put an extra pep in my step,” she said.

Even with that amazing win, she feels most fortunate that her road has been made less rocky by friends, family and professional contacts being by her side along the way. “I’ve been lucky that everyone has been so supportive,” she said. “It means more than anything.”

Marla’s favorite project was raising money for Bakers Against Racism, which donated to non-profit organizations. “I decided I wanted to be able to help as many people as I could and baked these cute little cookies shaped like cats,” she said. “Every cent raised was donated to various charitable movements. It was great to see so many people coming together and helping in different ways. All I know is food so I wanted to be able to use what I know to help bring awareness and raise money for a cause.”

Marla’s baked goods can be ordered online at [madebymarlamae.com](http://madebymarlamae.com). For now, she is located in Pittsburgh and offers only pick-up service. She hopes as she grows her business, she can offer more services.

“I’ve worked really hard to be where I am right now,” she said. “I love that people trust me enough to make their visions come true.”

Her advice for people wanting to take a chance and start their own business is simple: Don’t give up on what you love.

“You have to start somewhere and you learn as you go. If I’d given up, I wouldn’t have been able to push myself to be on Food Network — and win! Life gets crazy sometimes but one thing that was always there for me was food. There’s so much to learn about food and it’s amazing how it can bring people together.” ▼

Information: Visit [madebymarlamae.com](http://madebymarlamae.com) or find @madebymarlamae Instagram.

Photos Contributed by Marla Mae Harvey



Beckie Erwin

*Beckie Erwin lives in Hermitage with her husband, Shaun, and their two pups, Jasper and Baxter.*



Photo by  
Ashley Stein Photography

# Making the Most of Bridesmaids' Duties

# Bride Squad

By Stephanie Stratis



It is such an honor to be asked to stand by the bride at her wedding. It is also really important to talk about the roles of the bridesmaids from beginning to end. The main role for a bridesmaid is to support the bride on all accounts, from picking a wedding gown and bridesmaid dresses to planning events such as the engagement party, bridal shower and bachelorette party. Here are some top tips for bridesmaids to know as her duty to the bride:

- It is a time and financial commitment. Many girls are so excited

to be in the wedding but do not realize the costs that come a long with it. Bridesmaids should understand that when you say 'yes' to being in a wedding, you will have multiple things you need to prepare for. For example: the engagement party and a gift, the bridal shower and a gift, the bachelorette party and a gift, a wedding gift, the bridesmaid dress, shoes, hair and makeup.

- You're there to provide complete support to the bride. We see it all the time where the bride gets frustrated through the process of planning a

wedding. Her ladies are there to help her along the way and should not add additional stress. As bridesmaids, be okay with whatever the bride's vision is for her wedding. Know when to say things and when not to say things. The bride has enough going on, she doesn't need to hear complaining about the dress because it's not your style, or where she wants to have her bachelorette party. Each lady in the party will have her time to plan her own wedding, so be respectful of what the bride wants — it's her day, not yours.

### Bridesmaids' duties leading up to the big day:

- Going shopping with the bride for her wedding gown. Don't be opinionated at the appointment! Give your opinion in a kind way. Remember: she needs all positive vibes when picking out her dress.
- Helping pick out bridesmaid dresses. Whether the bride picks them out for you or you are allowed to select one, go with the flow. If the bride likes it, don't fight her on it. Again, it is her vision!
- Helping with the bridal shower. You may need to help set up and run the bridal shower. Take pictures, write the 'thank you' list and decorate. Some bridal parties also pay towards the event.
- Planning the bachelorette party. This is something that bridesmaids should do on their own as a group. Usually, the maid of honor takes the lead and everyone helps out. This is the last hurrah for the bride, so make it special! Talk with the bride to see what her favorite things are or where she would like to have it.
- On wedding day, everyone usually gets together in the morning for hair and makeup. Try to keep the bride calm since she will have lots of butterflies! Maybe grab her a coffee or mimosa. Just get ready to celebrate your best friend and her new hubby. You may want to bring a steamer to touch up the bride's dress. Also make sure someone is designated to do her dress bustle.

Overall, enjoy the process and support the bride! ▼

Stephanie Leigh Bridal is located at 920 North State Street, Girard, Ohio.

Information: 330.545.8500 or visit [stephanieleighbridal.com](http://stephanieleighbridal.com).

Photo Contributed by Stephanie Leigh Bridal. All wedding and bridesmaids dresses pictured were purchased at Stephanie Leigh Bridal.



### Stephanie Stratis

*Stephanie Stratis is the daughter to the owner of the Stephanie Leigh Bridal and serves as store manager, where she has been running the store for more than 10 years.*



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# Groomsmen 101: By His Side

By Chere Tota



**S**o you've been asked to be a groomsman or best man... Often selected from a group of close friends or relatives, the groom usually hand selects his best man and groomsmen from those nearest and dearest to him. It is an honor to be chosen as a special person of whom the groom wants standing by his side on one of the biggest days of his life.

Responsibilities of the groomsmen vary depending on what the couple wants, but think of the groomsmen as the guy's version of the bride's girl gang. Groomsmen provide emotional and practical support to the groom, from steadying his nerves on the big day to helping him choose the look for himself and his men.

As a groomsman, don't let traditional duties hold you back. Groomsmen can help with any duties that take pressure off the groom. You are helping one of your friends plan and enjoy his special day, a day that can often be stressful and nerve-racking. There are quite a lot of tasks for groomsmen to carry out in this fun role, all of which will help the day go smoothly.

## **Pre-wedding day groomsmen duties may include:**

- Helping plan the wedding venue, bachelor party, rehearsal dinner, travel accommodations and bookings.
- Helping the groom/couple in choosing the men's outfits.
- Attending pre-wedding events like the engagement party, couple's shower, bachelor party and rehearsal (if you are local).
- Choosing the groom's gift in collaboration with all the groomsmen.



**Wedding day duties may include:**

- Serving as ushers and helping guests find their seats.
- Participating in the wedding processional, which marks the beginning of the ceremony. Depending on the couples choice, the men may walk down the aisle alone or accompanying bridesmaids.
- Toasting the couple and giving an accompanying speech is typically the best man's job. However, it is perfectly fine for any of the groomsmen to offer a toast and a speech to give the couple his best regards.
- Helping the gals in decorating the getaway car.
- Sticking around to help clean up or break down.



Last but not least, the role of the groomsmen is to have fun! If you can keep everything semi-organized and the groom calm while still enjoying this exciting day in his life, then you have succeeded in your role as a groomsman. At the end of the day, a wedding is a joyous occasion, so make the most of this special time! ▼

Shenango Valley Tuxedo and Suits is located at 3651 East State Street, Hermitage.

Information: 724.342.3043

Photos Contributed by Shenango Valley Tuxedo and Suits



**Chere Tota**

*With years in the formalwear business, and 16 years locally, Chere Tota, owner/partner of Shenango Valley Tuxedo and Suits, has enjoyed working with many local weddings throughout the Valley. Men's fashion has really changed substantially over the years and the choices and colors available to men now is amazing! Shenango Valley Tuxedo and Suits represents many different markets in the industry and specializes in customizing your unique look with you.*

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# Boundless Love

## Matrimony Amidst a Global Pandemic

By Taylor Sherman

COVID-19 has changed the wedding plans of couples all across the globe eager to exchange vows and symbolize their unending love for one another.

For some, even amidst a challenging and scary time, their boundless love has grown stronger than ever.

And in sickness and health, their love has stood the trials of a global pandemic.



# Brandon and Marissa Ross

Photography by Kerry Boyle | Golden Orchid Photography

Brandon and Marissa Ross's love story begins on the baseball field. It was summer 2016 and Marissa, a Pittsburgh native, moved to Ohio for the summer to complete a marketing and promotions internship for the Mahoning Valley Scrappers in Niles, Ohio. "I learned about the Scrappers at a job fair at my school, Point Park University, in Pittsburgh," Marissa said.

Meanwhile, in Girard, Ohio, Brandon was looking to fulfill his internship requirements for school, too. "I needed an additional three credits to graduate on time and spending the summer on a baseball field as an internship course sounded better than math," Brandon said.

That summer, Brandon and Marissa met, and their love for one another grew. It continued to grow, and in 2018, after moving in together, Brandon planned to propose.

"We got engaged all the way back in December of 2018, so it's been a long journey," Brandon said. "For my proposal, since it was our first Christmas living together, I got a ring case that looked like a Christmas ornament. I hid that ornament on the tree weeks before. Marissa had no idea. One night, I picked the ornament off of the tree and proposed. It was an emotional moment for both of us! She couldn't believe that the ornament was sitting on the tree just five feet in front of her for weeks."

Right after their engagement, "Wedding planning began immediately," said Marissa. "My mom really stepped into the role of 'wedding planner.' We started to look at vendors, venues and possible color schemes. It was a really exciting time to start



thinking about ideas. It wasn't long after the engagement that we set the wedding date of June 20, 2020."

But, in early 2020, the world changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Brandon and Marissa knew that their wedding plans would no longer be the same.

"Around March of 2020 was when we started to question whether we would be able to safely have the party we wanted to have. To be proactive, we decided that we were going to postpone the wedding immediately because the thought of not knowing what tomorrow or next week would look like was more stressful than the idea of having to cancel or postpone the wedding entirely. We decided to move our date to December 5, 2020. This seemed like a really certain date in my opinion because previous outbreaks had come and gone within a few months. Nobody could have predicted that December would be the very peak of COVID cases," Brandon recalled.

"I'm not going to lie, the planning

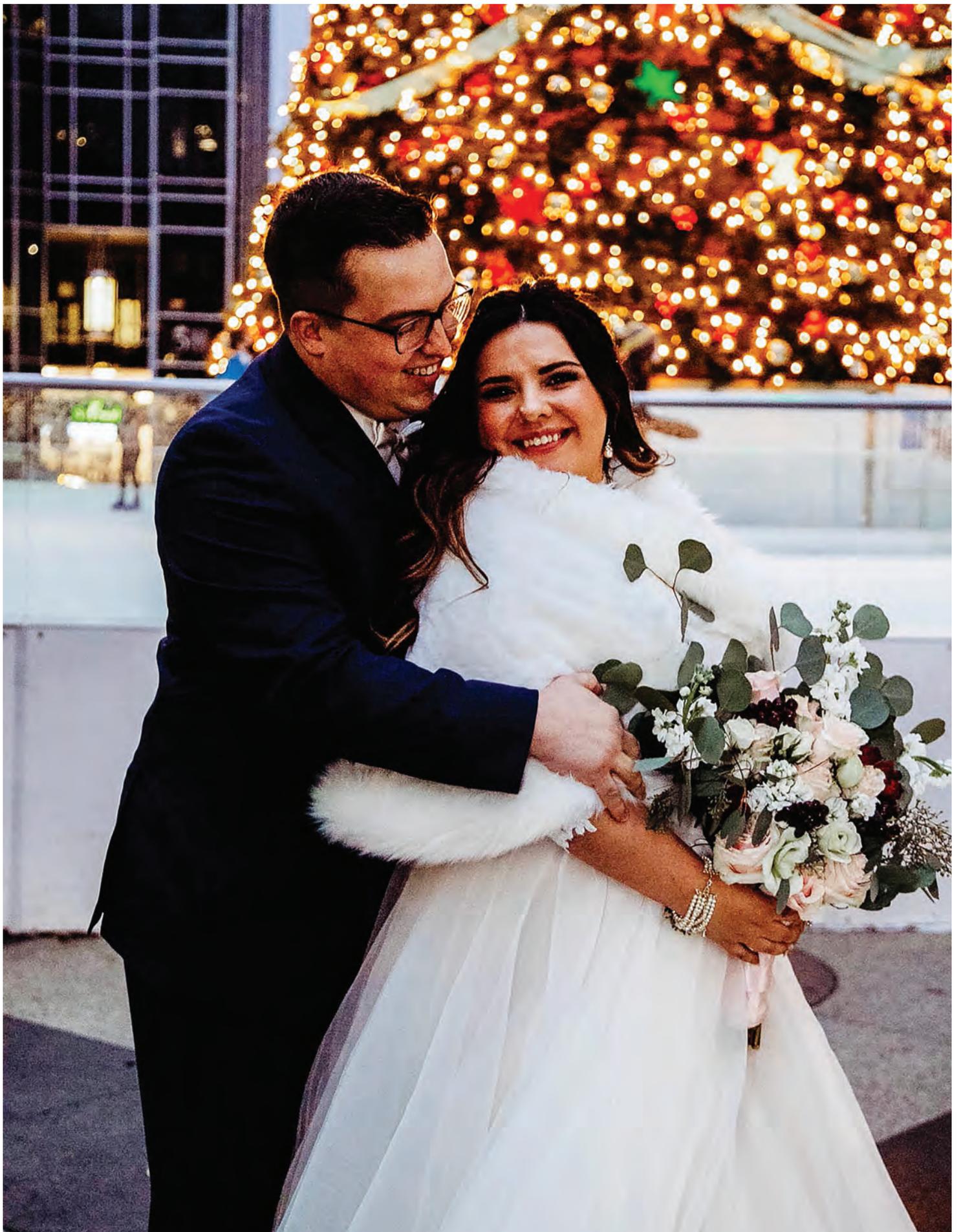
process was extremely stressful," Marissa said of the changed wedding plans. "Weddings by themselves can be a stressful time, but then you add a pandemic to the mix, it creates a whole new level of stress. Safety of others was our most important priority above all else!"

She added, "As December was coming around, things just didn't feel right about moving forward with this new wedding. We didn't want to have to cancel or postpone again. Since we had our hearts set on getting married in 2020, we decided to go on with

the wedding. Unfortunately, we had to notify our list of 200 guests that, due to COVID, we could not have the wedding celebration on December 5th as it was originally intended. We told them this with the promise that we may be able to celebrate with them one day hopefully."

After two years as an engaged couple, Marissa and Brandon wed on December 5, 2020. "After going through the stress and tears of not knowing when we could actually get married, it meant the world to us to actually be able to do just that...get married!" Marissa shared.

"The wedding day itself was amazing. We were just so happy to finally get married. It felt like a weight had been lifted off our shoulders. It was an extremely small ceremony at the church where my grandparents got married 70 years prior. It felt like the perfect way to honor them since they both have passed away. It made the day so much more special," Marissa continued. "Our dogs Beck and Beau were in our wedding as the flower dog



and ring dog. Our dogs mean the world to us, so being able to have them participate in our special day was so amazing.”

For the safety of their family and friends, the ceremony was kept small, but Brandon and Marissa offered the ability for those they hold close to watch the ceremony online. “Most of my family had to watch the wedding on Facebook Live,” Brandon said. “I am thankful that social media got to keep us connected to our family and friends who couldn’t be there in person for our special day.”

Despite the many uncertainties and modifications made by Marissa and Brandon throughout their planning process, the couple agrees that they wouldn’t change their story or wedding. “[Our wedding] was vastly different, but I wouldn’t change it for the world. I believe sometimes with big weddings, the true purpose gets lost. A wedding is about the love you have for each other. Our wedding was 100% that,” Marissa said.

Brandon agreed, adding, “Getting actually married officially was so special for me and for that moment, it made me forget about all the stress leading up to it.”

A day full of love, Marissa and Brandon were even surprised with a special moment that they will always remember: “One of the most special moments of the night was when we had a small dinner in downtown Pittsburgh with less than 10 people. After we were done eating, the waitress said there was a surprise. She handed me the black bill folder and I opened it up to find a note. A gentleman paid for the entire party’s bill for the night. Food, drinks — all of it. Everyone instantly had tears. This is something I will never forget and will tell my future kids. It was a fairy tale,” Marissa said.

After exchanging their nuptials, Marissa and Brandon reached another hurdle — a postponed honeymoon.



“The honeymoon was another thing that got changed plenty of times!” Marissa said.

“We originally had Spain booked, but unfortunately that had to be canceled because of the pandemic. Then Tennessee — canceled. We ended up doing a ‘mini-moon’ to Hocking Hills.

For our one year anniversary, we did a big trip to Estes Park, Colorado. We plan on going on a true official trip for our five year anniversary. We are looking at Australia!”

And just as they had promised, Marissa and Brandon delivered on a celebration when deemed safe. “One of the things we were adamant on was eventually having a casual party with some of our closest friends and family, just to celebrate our marriage with them

finally,” said Brandon. “So, here comes attempt number three at a ‘real reception’! It was held on November 27, 2021. This time, we called it a ‘Happily Ever After-Party’ with casual dress attire. It had all the feelings of a real reception: food, a DJ, beverages, a photo booth, speeches, friends and family. It was everything we’d hoped for from the beginning. It was better than a reception though because I hate dressing up, (and if you got a glimpse into the evening, it looked more like a really fun party the way everyone was dressed). It felt amazing to finally celebrate our marriage with our friends and family.”

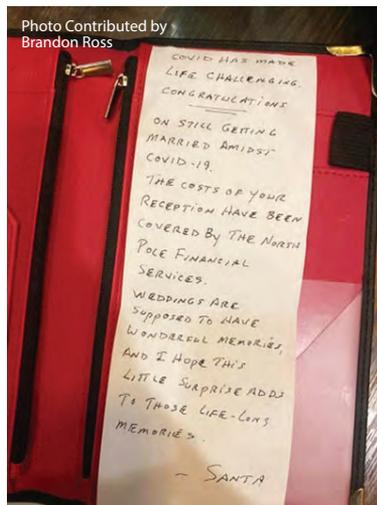
Now, one year into their marriage, Brandon and Marissa are living in wedded bliss. “It is hard to believe that it has already been a year!” Marissa said. “Married life has been great. I love having an adventure partner and someone to always laugh with.”

Brandon agreed, “Married life is fantastic. We share a lot of common interests, so we can just talk for hours and laugh. I think that’s one of the things I love most about our relationship.”

As the Rosses enter their second year of marriage, Marissa and Brandon agree that sharing memories

together is most important. “I look forward to the many more years of adventures with Brandon! I can’t wait to see what is in store for us as we grow older,” Marissa said.

“I’m looking forward to many more special moments and experiences with Marissa. And no more wedding parties because it’s finally finished for good!” Brandon said.



Photos Contributed by Brandon Ross

# Stephanie Walker and Zack Palmer

Photography by Stephanie Whitling | Whitling Photography

“Zack and I met during our freshman year at Allegheny College in Meadville, in our entry-level French class,” Stephanie Walker shared of the couple’s early years. “We happened to sit next to each other because we were both late on our first day of class. We were friendly toward one another and were often partners for group exercises. Then, things got more serious in our sophomore year. For class, we went to ‘French Table’ once a week, where we’d eat lunch while speaking French. I remember one of our first conversations was about football. We bonded over our dislike for the New England Patriots, but were sad to learn that our favorite teams were not the same. I am a [Pittsburgh] Steelers fan and Zack is a [Dallas] Cowboys fan.”

Stephanie continued, “We started leaving class together and Zack would walk me to calculus. Eventually I learned that he didn’t need to go that way for his next class, but wanted to walk and talk with me. (Spoiler alert: This is later the spot where he proposed.)”

Connected via Facebook, Stephanie decided to send Zack a message. “The week of a French exam, I wrote him a message where I gave him my number and asked if he could text me about a question I had for the test. My then-roommate (and now bridesmaid) Bailey helped me draft the question and, later on, many responses. He texted me the same day and I quickly had to come up with a question to ask. He and I continued texting and started French study sessions in addition to our daily walks. A week or so later, Zack asked me to dinner and a movie. I said yes. He even pulled the ‘stretch and put his arm around me’ move — which, looking back, is the most Zack move ever. About two weeks later he asked me to



be his girlfriend and now nine years later we are married,” she said.

After college, Stephanie and Zack moved to Pittsburgh and continued their education and careers, respectively.

“We had been dating for almost seven years, and it was abundantly clear that we were going to spend our lives together,” said Zack. “Steph met a woman at her old job who had a beautiful 1950s-era diamond engagement ring. Steph took a picture of the ring and gave it to her mother, and told her that she wanted a ring that looked similar. Fortunately, Steph’s mother was able to find the ring in March 2019. I bought the ring, hid it away inside the pocket of a jacket in my apartment, and went about planning a surprise engagement. I wanted it to be somewhere that was special to the both of us. It was not until late May of that same year that I found my opportunity.”

Zack wanted to propose to Stephanie where they met — at Allegheny College. “I needed some sort of pretext as to why we were driving an hour and half away on a Sunday morning without

tipping her off or making her suspicious. I contacted our friend from college, Taylor. They had been planning to get together for brunch anyway, so I asked Taylor to suggest meeting in Meadville,” Zack said.

“On June 2, 2019, we made preparations to drive up to Meadville. Part of our cover story was that Taylor was coming from a baptism and would be dressed up. I followed the advice of a colleague, who advised that Steph would be happy after the fact if she was dressed up. I suggested that we dress up to match our friend and that Steph should wear a dress. In a stroke of coincidental luck, she had also painted her nails the night before.” (‘Steph here: I totally had no idea — this was 100% luck!’)

“We parked on Allegheny’s campus,” Zack continued. “As we began walking through campus, Steph took a metaphorical walk down memory lane. One of the locations she pointed out was the spot where I had first asked her out.”

From the academic building where they met to the route they walked together, memories of their college years flooded back. “The first picture of Zack and me is from those first few weeks as a couple when he legitimately swept me off my feet to save my new boots from getting super muddy while leaving my door. My bridesmaid Jen was the one that snapped the picture,” Stephanie said of one of their fond memories.

Meanwhile, the couple’s friend was working behind the scenes to secure Zack’s final details. “I had asked Taylor to bring flowers and champagne; I could not think of a way that I could bring those without being suspicious. These celebratory objects were waiting near the entrance to a building near the location where I planned on proposing.”

“As we were walking to meet Taylor, Steph noticed the flowers and commented on someone having a lucky day. Seeing these flowers triggered Steph’s suspicions, and she realized that there was something going on besides brunch with a friend. She asked me why I was acting unusually, and I grabbed her by the hand and led her to the spot where I first asked her out. I asked her to choose the spot where that event had taken place.”

Zack continued, “Once she had selected the spot, I dropped to one knee and asked her to make me the luckiest man in the world. Now, in this situation, there are two words one can say: yes or no. Of those two, the first one that Steph said was ‘no’. Now, she was not denying my proposal. She was so excited she could not say more than one or two words at a time, and her ‘no’ was supposed to be the first word of the sentence, ‘No, this cannot be happening right now!’ With a little prodding from our camerawoman, Steph answered in the affirmative! Steph regained the ability to speak in complete sentences 30 minutes after the proposal.”

After the proposal, Stephanie and Zack planned a longer engagement. “I am not a fan of wedding planning, so even though we got engaged in June 2019, I didn’t start planning until March 2020, with the plan of a summer 2021 wedding,” Stephanie said. “I used a lot of the extra time from the first few weeks of quarantine for planning. At that point I didn’t think for a second that I would be moving my wedding due to COVID; I figured even summer 2020 weddings were safe.”

“At first, [our planning process] was pretty similar to how it would normally go since I started at the start of COVID. People weren’t expecting not to be able to run things as they normally would after we got past the original two-week shutdown,” said Stephanie.

“The biggest difference was that we couldn’t see venues or visit caterers in-person like we normally would. To this day I have still not seen our wedding venue in-person. However, the couple that runs it was sweet and gave us a thorough virtual walk-through. I also tried on all my dresses after ordering them in the mail. It was hard because I was also quarantined apart from my mom because she is immune compromised, so she couldn’t really be

with me to try them on inside. However, this turned out to be fun as I would do Zoom try-ons with my family and bridesmaids or find creative ways to try them in the backyard. I am hoping I can try dresses on in the spring just to get the experience,” Stephanie continued.

“

We wanted to have fun celebrating with our friends and family. With the reality of our wedding getting pushed to 2022, we realized we didn’t want to wait.

– Stephanie Walker

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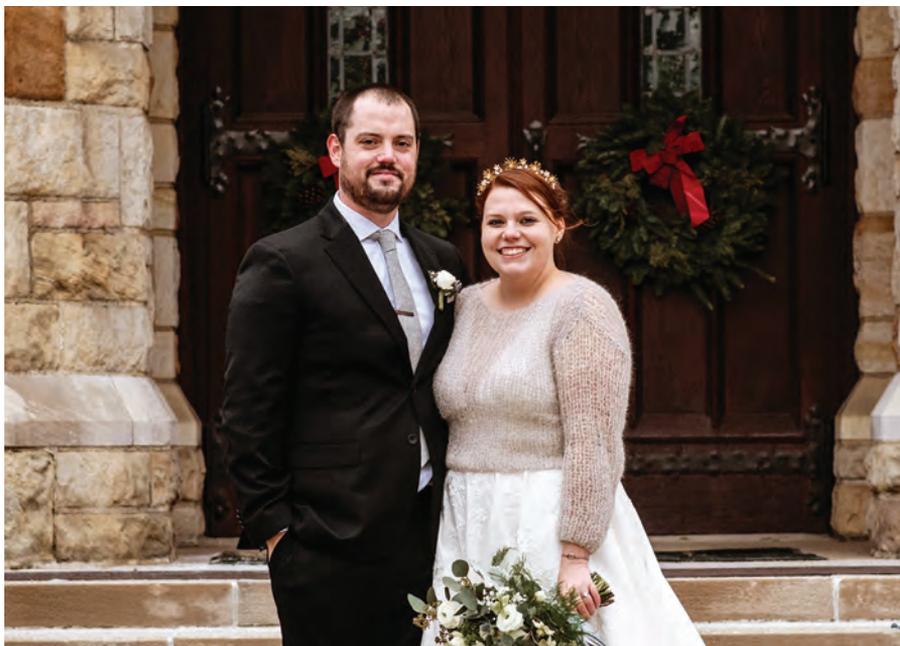
For the safety of their families and guests, Stephanie and Zack postponed their summer wedding. “We have several family members who are immune compromised and others who are elderly or have underlying conditions that make COVID very scary for them. So, in October/ November 2020, we realized that things were not

looking great and that even with the promise of vaccines soon, we had to face the reality that we might need to push our wedding another year,” Stephanie said. “We didn’t want to worry about risking our families’ and friends’ health and knew we would not be able to not worry about it on our big day. We wanted to have fun celebrating with our friends and family. With the reality of our wedding getting pushed to 2022, we realized we didn’t want to wait.”

Stephanie continued, “Everyone had hard times in 2020 and we know we were very lucky and privileged in getting to keep our jobs and stay safe, but we thought it would be something happy to celebrate during a time when things were pretty rough in the world. We were also ready to be married — even being at home together so much, it made us closer and even more sure that we wanted to be together forever. I also loved the idea of a winter wedding, but Zack is a teacher, so a summer wedding just makes more sense, but if we were doing a ‘micro-wedding,’ a winter one would be feasible. From there we decided that New Year’s Eve seemed like a good date. We didn’t really have a good reason, it just felt right.”

And the feeling was right, indeed. On December 31, 2020, Stephanie and Zack got married in front of their immediate family in Stephanie’s childhood church in Pittsburgh.

“The morning of [our wedding] was pretty crazy for me. I did my own hair



and makeup and was trying to steam out my dress. My sister saved the day and spent hours steaming it. She got ready quickly herself. Seriously — I did her hair and she did her makeup in less than 15 minutes,” Stephanie recalled.

Zack and Stephanie got special permission for a deacon — her second grade teacher’s husband and his coworker — to marry the couple.

“The ceremony was a lot different due to COVID, but it didn’t feel like it since I was so excited I barely even noticed,” said Stephanie. “Everyone but Zack and I were masked in the church. I was quarantined with my family for Christmas and Zack with his so we hadn’t physically been near each other in three weeks until we met at the altar and had our first kiss as husband and wife.”

Stephanie and Zack were also appreciative of the opportunity to work with a vendor who they had scheduled for their initial wedding date: “I already had a photographer I had picked out for our summer wedding, so I asked if she was available to take photos at a small ceremony and at a local park. She was available and was absolutely amazing. The photographer was so great with our timeline that allowed me to get pictures with my family before the ceremony. She also took photos with everyone spaced out, but she was so good, it just looks like a style choice. She also went with us to our favorite park where our dog, Tormund, met us for pictures. We ran around in the woods and took pictures. My dress and his suit got muddy and there was more than one muddy dog print on us before we were done. It just felt so authentic to who we are and since it was just our families there, it felt so intimate.”

After their photo shoot, Stephanie and Zack’s parents surprised them with gifts — including wedding cake and drinks — for their mini-moon. “It was perfect and the cake was the best cake I’ve ever had. My aunt is also a graphic designer and so, even though we didn’t have official invitations, she made one for the wedding, so we always have that memory. We cannot thank our families



Photo Contributed by Stephanie Walker

enough for everything they did for us to make the day so special,” Stephanie said.

“Despite everything that was going on in the world, we found a way to do what made us happy,” Zack said.

Stephanie agreed: “[Our wedding] was vastly different from the original plan, but it was more of a bonus wedding, as we are still planning on having a big party with our family and friends in summer 2022. We never thought we would be doing this in the way we did, but honestly, I can’t imagine it going any differently now.”

What meant the most to Stephanie during her wedding was the intimate moment she, Zack and their dog shared in the park. “I think being in Frick Park with Zack and Tormund was the best part, because it’s ‘our place’ and means so much to us. It’s something that wouldn’t have been possible with our ‘big wedding.’ Our favorite thing to do as a couple is hike through the woods with our dog and this showcased us in our happy place.”

Zack and Stephanie look forward to sharing their love for one another in July 2022, where the couple plans to pull out all the stops. “For our ‘big wedding’ we are planning to go into all-out party mode. We will have a photo booth, a huge cookie table and cupcakes from a bakery in our college town. We are going to do personal vows with our freshman year roommates as our officiants. We have been so separated physically from our family and friends that we are excited to get everyone together to dance and talk and celebrate. Zack and I are so grateful for our many family and friends who

celebrated us and our love along the way and a big party just seems like the best time,” Stephanie said.

“We look forward to celebrating with them and taking a more traditional honeymoon after the wedding,” Zack added.

For Stephanie, she is excited to add to her wedding memories: “I am most looking forward to getting to have the events that we missed out on with our micro-wedding. We didn’t do a first dance or a father daughter

dance. We didn’t get to listen to toasts, get ready with our wedding party — just a bunch of little memories I would really love to have,” she said.

One year into their marriage, Zack and Stephanie make every moment count. “Steph and I have been together for more than nine years, so we have had a long time to build our relationship into what it is today. For us, getting married was an affirmation for the relationship we have built and the life we plan on building together. I love being married to someone who has such passion and commitment to the people that are important to her,” Zack shared.

“I love being married to Zack,” Stephanie added. “[Married life] doesn’t feel too much different because we have been together so long that it just felt like this is always how we have been and are supposed to be. But I do feel more settled, and it was much easier for the paperwork when we bought a house.”

Stephanie continued, “My favorite thing about Zack is that he is the most supportive man I know. If he wasn’t my husband he would be my best friend; he helps me through any hard day or struggle and keeps me smiling with bad puns and yummy food.”

Together, Stephanie and Zack most enjoy traveling and exploring the world, and have plans to celebrate their honeymoon in Greece and Croatia in the upcoming year. “I am looking forward to emerging from the pandemic and getting to experience and explore the world with my wife,” Zack said. ▀

Photos Contributed by Stephanie Walker





Metro Creative

## The Ultimate Guide to Making Your Wedding Day Special

*Content Courtesy of Metro Creative | Compiled by Taylor Sherman*

### ***Congratulations on your engagement!***

What an exciting time — love is in the air and wedding bells are ringing. Before you jump right in to replicate your Pinterest-inspired day, start with an organization method so that the details don't bog you down. Planning your wedding day should be memorable and fun, not stressful or a chore. So, after embracing your time as a new fiancé or fiancée, find inspiration to make your planning the most stress-free with these helpful tips!

And remember: *there is no rush*. Your wedding day is one to remember, and taking the time you need to relieve stress-induced deadlines will make your nuptials all the more special in the long-run. Once you find your organization method, take the time you need to plan the special day of your dreams just as you've always dreamt it!

# Wedding Cheer in Just One Year

## Stay on Track with a Wedding Timeline

Wedding planning involves many moving pieces that ultimately need to come together on the big day. Planning is typically a months-long process, and adhering to certain monthly benchmarks can help couples stay on course.

Brides magazine offers that the perfect engagement period is 12 to 14 months, which affords ample time to get organized and work with vendors. From one year-out to the day-of, find suggestions from a timeline set for couples preparing to say “I do.”



### 12 Months Out

At the start of the planning process, establish your budget, hire a wedding planner if

you choose, select the wedding party, pick a date and begin to assemble a cursory guest list. This also is a great time to begin touring venues to get a feel for potential ceremony and reception locales.

### Bridal Bliss Within Budget - Securing Your Savings to Make Your Day Memorable

A wedding is likely the most costly party couples will ever throw. According to The Knot's 2019 Real Weddings Study, the average cost of a wedding in 2019 was \$33,900. There are many costs associated with weddings, some are predictable, while others are unexpected.

Investopedia says the vast majority of couples budget too little for their weddings and end up spending more than they had planned. Various strategies can make it easier to save for a wedding and avoid a post-wedding financial hardship.

**Get Informed.** It is impossible to budget for a wedding and ultimately save without knowledge of what services and items cost in the region where you live. A wedding in New York City will be expensive, while a wedding in Mississippi will cost a lot less,

indicates SuperMoney's guide to wedding costs. Conduct research and find out what various wedding vendors charge for common services. This will paint a vivid picture of what a wedding may cost in your area.

**Tie down your budget.** Once you have gathered estimates, you can then figure out a financial goal. This is when you can also determine where to rein in spending and where you might want to splurge. If having a video memory of the wedding is not a top priority, you may opt to skip videography services. If you have a special flower that you like, you may want to budget more for the bloom even if it isn't in season.

**Set up a dedicated savings account.** One of the easiest ways to save for big-ticket items like a wedding, home purchase or other financial goals is to use an automatic savings account that may be available through your bank or employer. An automatic savings plan will pull a set amount from a personal checking account into a savings account through auto-draft. The bride and groom can link individual checking accounts to one savings account to contribute jointly.

**Avoid overspending.** An analysis of your spending habits will likely reveal areas where you can scale back so you can devote more funds to wedding savings. Do you need a takeout coffee in the morning or can you brew a pot at home? Might you be able to scale back on streaming services? Do you feel comfortable buying less expensive store brand groceries over name brands? Small cost savings can quickly add up.

**Add up gifts.** Factor in deduction of expenses that other people will commit to covering for wedding expenses, but only if you have concrete confirmation. A parent may host the rehearsal dinner. One's relative may offer to pass down an antique wedding gown to wear. But rather than simply removing these gifts from your savings calculations, keep them as a safety net to put toward unforeseen expenses.

### Saying “I Do” at Your Dream Venue

A couple's wedding day is typically broken into two parts: first the ceremony and the reception to follow soon after. Depending on couples' preferences and religious beliefs,

ceremonies may take place at a house of worship or another location that is separate from the reception venue. In some instances, couples may choose one location for both the ceremony and the party to follow.

Wedding venues are where the bulk of the day will unfold, and couples can consider these tips to find a venue that suits their needs.

**Consider your theme and wedding style.** Most couples know which sentiments they want to convey during their weddings. The venue should match the theme so the entire wedding will feel connected to the space. Zeroing in on the wedding style helps narrow down potential venue options.

**Assess your budget.** A couple may find what seems to be the perfect venue, only to realize that the cost of the space doesn't fit their budget. Ampersand Travel says the venue accounts for the most significant wedding expense, at an average cost of \$9,000. Finding a venue that will maximize dollars spent involves looking at what is included. Rentals for chairs, linens, lighting, a dance floor and other extras can quickly add up. Couples should have a set limit that they are willing to spend on the venue and let that dictate the location.

**Location availability.** September and October are the most popular months to get married, so venues book quickly during that time of year. Those who have their hearts set on specific days will have to begin their search earlier than couples with no attachment to a particular date. Concessions may need to be made if a certain date is a must.

**Estimate the size of your guest list.** Price, date and style will factor into wedding venues, but the number of guests is also a major consideration. A trendy restaurant may seem like the perfect locale, but it must be able to accommodate everyone on the guest list. Couples should sit down with their families and come up with a list of potential guests and look for a venue that can accommodate everyone.

Couples also should visit potential venues in person to see which, if any, details might be missing from online or magazine advertisements. A host of factors, including accessibility, should be considered when looking for a venue.



## 11 Months Out

Now is the time to get a firm handle on the theme and scope of the wedding. Start picking wedding colors and overall design. Also, interview and hire vendors, such as photographers, bands and videographers. These vendors tend to book up quickly as wedding season draws near, so it's never too early to book them.



## 10 Months Out

This is a good time to start shopping for a wedding gown because it might take some trial and error to find the perfect dress. You also can start shopping for wedding party attire at this time. Check with formalwear vendors to see how long it will take for the gowns to arrive in the shop for alterations. If you haven't already done so, be sure to book the wedding venue.



## 8 Months Out

Reception halls may have their own schedules, but you should think about setting your menu at this time, including deciding if you will host a seated dinner, a buffet or something else.

Eight months out also is a good time to finalize the guest list and send save-the-date cards. This also is a good time to visit stores to create registry gift lists.

## Share the News: Preparing Guests for the Big Celebration

Guests liven up the party and help make the celebration even more memorable. According to The Knot's 2019 Real Weddings Study, the average wedding in the United States hosts 131 people. Data indicates this number has been slowly decreasing over the years, after the average wedding size reached an all-time high of 153 in 2007. No matter how big or how small the guest list, keeping guests informed on what is happening regarding the upcoming nuptials is a courtesy couples can provide. Couples can explore various avenues for keeping guests informed

and ensuring they'll be able to take part in the festivities.

### Save-the-Date Announcement.

Save-the-date announcements have become an increasingly popular component of wedding planning. Instead of waiting on the wedding invitation, which traditionally arrives one or two months prior to the wedding, save-the-date cards provide guests with an advanced advertisement of the celebration to come. According to the photo and invitation specialists at Shutterfly, it's customary to send save-the-date notes around six months before the wedding. For a destination wedding, which will require extra travel plans, an eight- to 12-month advance can be helpful.

Save-the-date cards generally have basic information, including the wedding date and the venue. Many will feature a photo of the couple as well. If you're planning on sending save-the-date announcements, coordinate with your photographer to have a photo taken exclusively for these cards.

**Wedding Website.** Couples are increasingly embracing technology as they plan their weddings. Brides magazine states that, during the typical 12- to 15-month engagement period, 48 percent of couples will launch a wedding website. A wedding website is a versatile tool that can help answer questions that guests may have. The website can spell out specifics, including dress code, whether children are invited, the names of wedding party participants, overnight accommodations, transportation providers and even restaurants near the hotel for a quick bite between ceremony and reception.

## Making the List — Wedding Guest Etiquette

Couples need to carefully consider which guests will be extended the option to bring a "plus one" to the wedding.

Making a guest list is seldom an easy task. Couples often find that many people are worthy of an invitation, which can make creating a guest list tricky for those with budgets in mind.

According to data from the online wedding resource The Knot, the average wedding catering cost per guest is roughly \$70. However, catering costs will vary depending on the reception

venue, the number of guests, the foods chosen and the region of the country where the wedding takes place.

When creating guest lists, couples may wonder if they have to offer all guests the option of bringing a "plus one" to the occasion. As with other wedding day etiquette questions, the plus one concept is not set in stone.

**Any guest who is married.** It's typically standard to invite a couple as a whole to the wedding, even if you've never met the spouse. This often comes up when inviting work friends, according to Vogue magazine. Even if you have never interacted with a coworker's spouse, etiquette dictates that all married guests be allowed to bring their spouses along.

**Any guest who is engaged or is in a serious long-term relationship.** It can be challenging to know the relationship status of everyone who will be invited to the wedding, but chances are you'll have a good idea of those people closest to you. Include a plus one for guests who are engaged or in long-term relationships.

**Consider guests who may not know others.** Weddings often are times when childhood friends reconnect, or people who haven't seen each other in a while come together. If there's a good chance someone who is single and is invited to the wedding may not know anyone else there except the couple, extend a plus one as a courtesy.

**Include the wedding party.** All members of the wedding party should be offered the option of bringing a date to the wedding.



## 6 Months Out

Meet with potential florists and other vendors, like transportation companies and hotels, to secure arrangements. Your

place of worship also may require certain classes or preparatory meetings, so be sure to inquire.

Meet with a makeup and hair stylist and book a trial. Choose attire for groomsmen and give them a deadline for fittings and orders. If you will not be getting married in a place of worship, hire an officiant at this time.



## 4 Months Out

Grooms traditionally arrange the honeymoon, so this is a time to get travel plans in order. If you need passports, you should secure them as early as possible, and no later than four months prior to the wedding to ensure processing times. Book cake tastings and order the cake if it is not part of the venue food and beverage package. If you haven't already done so, the bride should have an initial gown fitting, and wedding invitations should be ordered at this time.

## Newly Wedded Bliss: Planning for an Ideal Honeymoon

Many couples who are planning to get married have lived together during the engagement period or even longer. A Pew Research Center study found that about two-thirds of married adults who lived with their spouses before they were married say they saw cohabitation as a step toward marriage. According to Brandon Gaille Small Business & Marketing Advice, 65 percent of couples who get married live together at some point before their weddings. Individuals who live together must outfit their homes with furniture and other essentials, including kitchen supplies. That means that couples may already own traditional wedding registry gifts like kitchen and bath items and accessories. Brides and grooms-to-be may think creatively when registering for gifts if they already have many of the items found on traditional registries. Honeymoon registries can be great ways for couples who already own household items to simplify the process of gift-giving for their wedding guests.



## 2 Months Out

Secure your wedding license and buy wedding party gifts and wedding favors. Address and mail the wedding invitations.

Undergo a second gown fitting and work with the seamstress for the final fitting date just before the wedding. Finalize any song selections with the DJ or band.

Anywhere from two months to two weeks out, guests can expect to

celebrate the bride during her bridal shower. Family and friends may also gather to celebrate the bride and groom during bachelorette or bachelor parties.

## Celebrating Before the Big Bash: Hosting Safe and Affordable Bachelor and Bachelorette Parties

Weddings can be expensive. Various sources estimate the average cost of weddings is anywhere from \$26,000 to \$31,000. Couples and their parents may bear the brunt of wedding expenses, but those who have accepted a role in the wedding party also can expect their share of expenses.

Taking into account gifts, wardrobes, makeup, bridal showers and travel, including getting to and from the bachelor or bachelorette party, bridal party members are on the hook for a lot of money when their friends or family members tie the knot. Many men and women like to travel for their bachelor or bachelorette parties, and cost-conscious bridal party members may be concerned about how expensive such parties can be. Pulling out all the stops can be exciting, but there is no guarantee that these types of parties will be more enjoyable than simpler soirées.

Taking steps to control costs can help cost-conscious couples and their friends. The following are some affordable ideas that can be fun for all involved:

**Bar or winery crawl.** Partygoers typically want to enjoy a night out on the town, and traveling from one establishment to another can be a fun way to do just that. Everyone invited can set themselves apart with a signature item like a hat or T shirt and make the rounds.

**Attend a group event.** Group events include sporting events, concerts, theater shows or a night at a comedy club. Research discounted tickets for large groups.

**Belt out the tunes.** Open mic nights at restaurants, bars and other establishments around town may make for a fun way for friends to share a few laughs together. Participants need not be professional singers to join in on the festivities.

**Camp out.** Get in touch with nature by enjoying a camping trip, complete with a campfire and s'mores. Spending time in the wilderness can restore focus and let stress melt away.

**Dinner party.** Hire a chef to visit your house and prepare a meal for guests. Serve a signature cocktail and let the conversation flow.



## 1 Month Out

Wedding days can be hectic. In fact, many couples note after tying the knot that their wedding days were so busy that the ceremonies and receptions were over before they knew it.

Creating a wedding day schedule can seem like a daunting task. Couples tend to have lots of things to do before saying "I do," and organizing everything so ceremonies begin on time can seem as puzzling as a brain teaser. But certain scheduling strategies can help couples ensure they look their best and make it to the altar on time.

**Start with the ceremony.** Couples can establish a framework for their wedding day schedule by working back from the ceremony. Once the ceremony time is set, couples who plan to take photos before their ceremonies can then work with their photographers to determine how much time they will need for photos and where they want to take the photos. Bridal parties may need transportation to the photo session, so determining when and where to take photos before the ceremony gives couples an idea of when to arrange for pickup.

**Make lunch arrangements.** Some couples choose to tie the knot and host their receptions at the same venue. In such instances, if brides are getting their hair and makeup done at the venue, ask the venue representative if lunch can be provided to the bridal party. Some venues may include small lunch buffets in their reception costs, while others might charge extra. Confirm the availability and costs, and if it's unavailable or too expensive, then arrange for lunch to be delivered. Either way, couples should not skip lunch, as it may be their only chance to eat until after the ceremony.

**Distribute your schedule to one another and the bridal party.** Once the wedding day schedule has been

## 12

## Wedding Tricks Add Ease to Planning and Fun

Brides and grooms understandably feel a deal of stress when planning their weddings. But, planning a wedding can be even more fun than it is stressful, especially for couples who employ a few tricks of the wedding planning trade.

**1. Fake the cake.** Save some money by asking the bakery cake artist to decorate a foam-tiered “mock” cake for pictures and display, and serve guests from an inexpensive sheet cake in the kitchen.

**2. Use labels.** Once the guest list is finalized, create a database of guests’ addresses. Print out two sets of labels, one for addressing invitations and the other to address thank-you cards.

**3. Utilize RSVP tricks.** Number the back of RSVP cards and correspond the numbers to the guest list. If a response is illegible, refer to the number to figure it out.

**4. Embrace inexpensive decor.** Dollar stores and craft stores are great places to find inexpensive decorative items. Empty wine bottles can be painted or glazed to serve as vases. Candle lanterns can be picked up at low cost at many retailers.

**5. Create an email address.** To have all of the wedding-related details in one place, create a separate email address exclusively for wedding correspondence.

**6. Use veil weights.** Veil weights can be sewn into veils to prevent fly-aways during outdoor ceremonies or photoshoots.

**7. Keep bugs at bay.** For outdoor weddings, spray chair and reception table legs with insect repellent. Dryer sheets also can be tucked into inconspicuous spots to keep bugs away.

**8. Save money on favors.** Unless the favor is something to eat or something especially practical, you may consider skipping the favors altogether, as many guests tend to forget to take them home anyway.

**9. Use page markers for seating.** Use multicolored, self-sticking page markers to create easy seating arrangements. Each color can represent a category: His, Hers, Friends, Work.

**10. Make a photo clothesline.** A clever and inexpensive idea is to pin photos of the couple to a string, cataloguing how they met and their time together leading up to the wedding.

**11. Use loose flower centerpieces.** Loose flowers in a vase are easier to sort and transport home for guests who want a memento. Make precut butcher’s paper or cellophane available to make bouquets.

**12. Stock up on string lights.** Lights can be wrapped around trees outdoors, strung indoors around windows or draped along buffet tables to create a romantic ambiance.

Weddings can be expensive and stressful; therefore, couples can use all the tips they can to corral their expenses and tame their nerves.

devised, couples should share it with each other and their wedding parties. Grooms’ wedding day to-do lists might not be as extensive as brides’, but grooms should still be kept in the loop regarding the schedule so they can help if anyone has questions or if something goes awry. Sharing the schedule with the wedding party decreases the chances of someone being late or missing an appointment.

Couples can solve the riddle of scheduling their wedding days by working backwards and asking their vendors to cooperate in laying out the day’s events.

## “We couldn’t have said ‘I Do’ without you!”: Thanking Guests with Wedding Favors

Wedding favors have changed, and in many cases, for the better. Favors have evolved from inexpensive trinkets purchased in bulk to more personalized mementos that guests can cherish.

Today’s couples are interested in customizing their weddings and offering guests something meaningful, or at the very least, edible, so that favors don’t immediately get relegated to the trash can.

According to Heather Jones of Wente Vineyards in California, favors have moved from “goodie bags” toward items that are experimental and fun. Wedding planners from across the country offer these wedding favor trends that couples may want to incorporate into their own celebrations.

**Welcome bags.** Welcome bags have replaced traditional favor trinkets at some weddings. Many weddings have become multi-day events that ask guests traveling from out of town to attend a wedding weekend. To help greet them and make their experience memorable, couples may fill a gift bag with items guests can use or enjoy during their stay — like a bottle of locally sourced maple syrup or handmade soap from a nearby shopkeeper.

**Charitable donations.** Some couples feel that favors are wasteful and would rather set aside a portion of their wedding budgets toward giving back. In such situations, a donation to charity in guests’ names can be the way to go. Guests can vote on two favorite charities advertised on a special table at the wedding reception. The one with the most votes will get the proceeds.

**Late-night snacks.** After a night of celebrating, some guests may want the festivities to continue, but may need some extra sustenance to make it through a few more hours. Some couples are eschewing traditional favors in lieu of making room for extra food or beverage expenses that can include after-party treats. These may run the gamut from wood-fired pizzas to food truck vendors to extra desserts. A take-home option also may be given, such as fresh beignets, cookies or even a personalized bottle of wine. Even if the food and drink is not consumed right away, there’s a good chance it will hit the spot when guests return to their hotel rooms.



## Two Weeks Out

The final details of the big day will occur in the last weeks before the wedding. Buy all the small accessories and items, undergo final fittings and check in with all vendors for final payments and to ensure they are on schedule. Notify the reception hall of the final guest count.



## Day Of

The time has come! Enjoy every minute, celebrate your love and cherish your special day. **V**

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spaghetti with crispy mushrooms

# ‘Where Food is Love’ Leo’s Ristorante

Story and Photography by Taylor Sherman

Leo’s Ristorante & Banquet Center in Warren, Ohio is known as a place “where food is love.” From the warm, hospitable staff to a menu filled with the most delectable Italian cuisine, there’s no denying that the tagline is true.



A place for people to gather for a good meal or for guests to celebrate showers, receptions and other gatherings in the banquet center, Leo’s Ristorante offers it all. So, when my friend (and bride-to-be!) Emily and I planned to meet for dinner this winter, Leo’s Ristorante proved to be a perfect fit.

Just a 20-minute drive from Sharon, we were warmly greeted upon entering the Warren restaurant. After being seated and without delay, we were welcomed with cold glasses of water and warm, crusty bread. The atmosphere and service is reminiscent of visiting a family member — inviting and full of hospitality.

Once we ordered our drinks, Emily and I scanned the menu and specials. Leo’s Ristorante features a variety of Italian dishes with a menu that rotates by season to utilize the freshest ingredients. From Italian classics like

sautéed beans and greens, pizzas, braciolo and pasta to upscale dishes and specials like a grilled tuna panini, pappardelle with braised beef and seafood linguini, options are aplenty.

We started with an order of crispy rice balls called arancini. These bite-sized balls of arborio rice are filled with cheese before being breaded and fried to golden perfection. Served atop a smooth tomato sauce, these arancini had a perfectly crisp exterior and a fluffy, cheesy interior.

Next up was a delectable roasted beet salad that paired some of winter’s most vibrant flavors on one plate. The salad featured arugula and shaved fennel with winter citrus like grapefruit, roasted beets and goat cheese croquettes with a light citrus vinaigrette. Light and refreshing, each flavor was amplified by the complementary ingredients on the plate. The crispy goat cheese croquettes

were a spectacular addition and provided a creamy bite to the crisp arugula and fennel.

Entrée options provide something for everyone, from poultry to beef, seafood and vegetarian options. Emily selected a classic, chicken parmigiana. Served with a starter of wedding soup, this cup of the Italian favorite was good for the soul. Plus, it was perfectly suited for our bridal-inspired meal, though, wedding soup doesn’t get its name for the exchanging of vows — rather, it comes from the phrase ‘minestra maritata’ or ‘married soup.’ ‘Marriage’ references the marrying of each ingredient.

The entrée arrived with a hearty portion of spaghetti and tomato sauce and a huge breaded chicken cutlet with plenty of melty provolone cheese. The tomato sauce and al dente spaghetti tasted just like Sunday dinner and the chicken cutlet was succulent and



wedding soup



chicken parmigiana



arancini



roasted beet salad



side salad

cheesy. Always a great meal option, this dish was so generous in its portion size that there was plenty to enjoy the next day.

I selected spaghetti with crispy mushrooms. This heaping bowl of spaghetti combined both roasted and sautéed mushrooms with caramelized onions, kale and Italian caciocava cheese. I was wowed by this spectacular dish — the creamy sauce and mushrooms created the ultimate umami while the kale provided a light but tender crunch. The onions were perfectly caramelized and offered a mildly sweet flavor. A comforting combination, I, too, was grateful for the opportunity to enjoy my leftovers the next day and simply cannot wait to enjoy this dish again during another visit.

Much like Grandma's house, you won't leave hungry. Despite enjoying our dishes to the fullest, our to-go containers were filled to the brim with the delicious remains of our meal.



warm panettone  
bread pudding

A peek at the dessert menu made selecting our sweet finale nearly impossible. Options included “Tiramisu with a Twist,” Gina’s chocolate hazelnut layer cake, a warm brownie sundae and more. It was a tough choice, but narrowed down between warm panettone bread pudding and a slice of classic cheesecake with poached winter fruits, we decided on the bread pudding.

This beautifully presented bread pudding, served with crème anglaise and a caramel sauce, was warm and full of flavor. With every bite, the Italian sweet bread’s tastes of citrus, raisins and nuts shined through, while the crème anglaise and caramel sauce added a silky finish. This dessert was truly divine.

From start to finish, the experience at Leo’s Ristorante was one to remember. “Where food is love,” Leo’s Ristorante’s passion to provide the region with a culinary experience is unmatched. ▼

Leo’s Ristorante is located at  
7042 East Market Street, Warren, Ohio.

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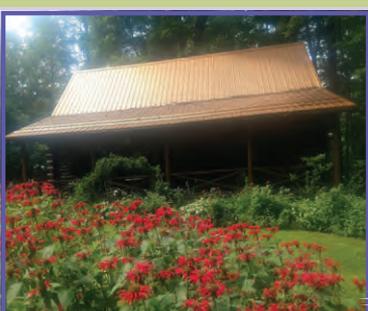
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# A *Toast* to the *Newlyweds!*

*Recipes and Photography by Taylor Sherman*

It's wedding day, so let's raise a toast — literally! Cocktail hour typically provides guests with libations and small hors d'oeuvres after the ceremony and before the reception while the bridal party takes photos. These small bites, often served on trays carried throughout the reception hall, can be mild to wild — crudités, cheese and crackers, shrimp cocktail and more — large enough to enjoy but small enough to finish in two to three bites.

Both elegant and easy, mini toasts and crostini are an ideal cocktail hour choice!

---

## Whipped Ricotta Crostini

### Ingredients:

- 1 French baguette
- 1 (15-ounce) container ricotta cheese  
(or try this recipe with your own homemade ricotta!)
- optional: grape tomatoes, berries and/or roasted red peppers, for serving
- olive oil
- salt and pepper, to taste

### Directions:

Warm French baguette and slice on a bias. One baguette should yield 20 to 25 slices. Drizzle olive oil atop each baguette slice and toast until golden brown.

Whip your ricotta. Add ricotta cheese and ½ teaspoon salt to a food processor. Blitz to combine. Run processor on high and slowly pour in olive oil (1 tablespoon at a time) until ricotta becomes smooth and fluffy. Taste and season to your liking. Once whipped, add to a piping bag or zip-top bag and refrigerate until ready to assemble.

Blister your tomatoes. Add a touch of olive oil to a pan and heat on medium-high. Once oil is hot, add tomatoes and allow to cook for 1 to 2 minutes. Once tomatoes begin to blister, toss to evenly cook.

In the final minutes of cooking time, add seasonings of your choice like salt, pepper and garlic. Take off heat and stir in fresh herbs like basil or parsley.

Assemble. Arrange toasted crostini on a serving platter. Pipe whipped ricotta on each crostini and top with a variety of toppings. These easy and affordable crostini look beautiful and taste delicious!

### Dress Them Up!

Once you've created your fluffy whipped ricotta base, top each crostini with your favorite flavor combinations. Some ideas include:

- flaky sea salt, local honey and cinnamon
- freshly cracked peppercorn medley and olive oil
- blistered grape tomatoes, basil and balsamic reduction
- roasted red peppers and olive tapenade
- fresh berries and mint



**Pictured:** Whipped ricotta crostini topped with: Himalayan pink salt and a freshly cracked pepper medley, blistered grape tomatoes and fresh parsley, local honey and cinnamon.

# Mini Avocado Toasts

## Ingredients:

- 1 loaf sourdough bread, baguette or crackers
- 3 to 4 ripe avocados
- salt and pepper, to taste
- optional: seasonings, fresh vegetables, etc., for serving

## Directions:

Prepare your base. Whether toasting sourdough bread, a sliced baguette or using a crunchy cracker, prep your base to make assembly easy.

Slice your avocado. An easy way to make your avocado look elegant is to slice and fan. Cut each avocado in half and remove the pit. Peel off the skin (you want your avocado halves to look smooth!) On a cutting board, place avocado half cut-side down. Using a sharp knife, slice avocado thinly from top to bottom. Slice as thin as possible, as thinner slices are more pliable. Once sliced, place fingers on the avocado and press forward with light pressure to separate slices. Once slices are on their side, arrange in uniform order.

Place toast over top of fanned avocado and cut around edges so that avocado is the same size as toast. Run knife under avocado and flip. Gather the remaining avocado and mash. These toasts will be just as pretty! Squeeze fresh lemon juice over avocado and top with your choice of toppings.

## Dress Them Up!

Avocado toast is a trendy dish, and thanks to restaurateurs and Pinterest creators who add their own spin, there are endless ways to dress it up. When topping your mini toasts, remember that hors d'oeuvres should be eaten in two to three bites. So, even though the perfect fried egg is great for your breakfast toast, consider topping with ingredients that are mess-free. Some ideas include:

- everything bagel seasoning (sea salt, dried onion, dried garlic, poppy seeds, sesame seeds, black sesame seeds)
- green goddess seasoning (dried chives, dill, basil, parsley, garlic, onion, celery, salt, pepper) and lemon zest
- red pepper flakes and honey
- crumbled feta cheese, salt and pepper, arugula, olive oil
- crumbled goat cheese and sliced strawberries
- blistered cherry tomatoes, fresh basil, salt and pepper



**Pictured:** Mini avocado toasts topped with: everything bagel seasoning and lemon juice; green goddess seasoning, red pepper flakes, Himalayan pink salt, crumbled feta cheese and olive oil.

# Grilled Cheese and Tomato Soup Shooters

## Ingredients:

- whole grain bread
- sliced cheese (cheddar, gruyere and Swiss make for great grilled cheese)
- butter
- tomato soup (I prefer creamy tomato bisque with fresh basil for this recipe)

## Directions:

Prepare sandwiches. Preheat oven to 450°F. Butter one side of each slice of whole grain bread. Assemble cheese sandwiches and layer on a greased baking sheet. Bake for 12 minutes, flipping halfway. These sandwiches come out golden brown and ultra cheesy with no fuss! Slice diagonally twice, leaving 4 grilled cheese wedges.

## Assembly:

Pour warmed tomato soup or bisque into mini cocktail glasses. Using a cocktail pick, top with a mini gherkin or manzanilla olive. Pierce grilled cheese wedge and place atop soup. Try to avoid dipping the sandwich into the soup so that the bread does not become soggy for guests. Garnish with fresh basil or parsley, shredded cheddar cheese or freshly cracked black pepper. ▼



# Community Views

To submit your photos from a recent event, please email [info@valley-voices.com](mailto:info@valley-voices.com).



## Holiday Spirit

The City of Sharon celebrated the holidays with plenty of decorations provided by Sharon Beautification Commission, business owners, and other volunteers who hung items on light poles and helped decorate the city's Christmas tree! Also assisting them was the Mercer County IPP group.

Photo Contributed



## Honoring the Sharon Restaurant Community

The City of Sharon recognized the Sharon restaurant community during the City's Tree Lighting ceremony in Beautiful Downtown Sharon on Small Business Saturday, November 28. Restaurant representatives lighting the cherub's torch and tree include: Laura Ackley of Donna's Diner; Joseph Altener and wife Kristine Altener of Haitian Sensation; Mike Lewis of Hangry's and Jen Krezeczowski of LuLu Beans Cafe who was represented by LuLu Beans Manager Kasey Dales. Also included in the ceremony were the Sharon High School Chamber Choir, West Hill Ministries kids and Santa Claus and his elf who came in on a City of Sharon fire truck.

Photos Contributed



## Small Business Saturday Ribbon Cutting:

The City of Sharon celebrated its annual Small Business Saturday event in November, kicking it off with a ribbon-cutting on State Street Bridge in Sharon. Besides the City of Sharon, organizations represented at the kick-off ceremony included Penn State Shenango; The Primary Health Network; Cycle Life Studio; ACT Sharpsville; and Representative Mark Longietti along with city leaders. The ribbon-cutting was provided by the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Photo Contributed



## A Parade of Lights

The City of Hermitage's 23rd annual Holiday Light Parade filled the city with lots of holiday cheer in late November 2021.

After being cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19, the 2021 parade was extra special, featuring 72 participants and attracting spectators from all over the region.

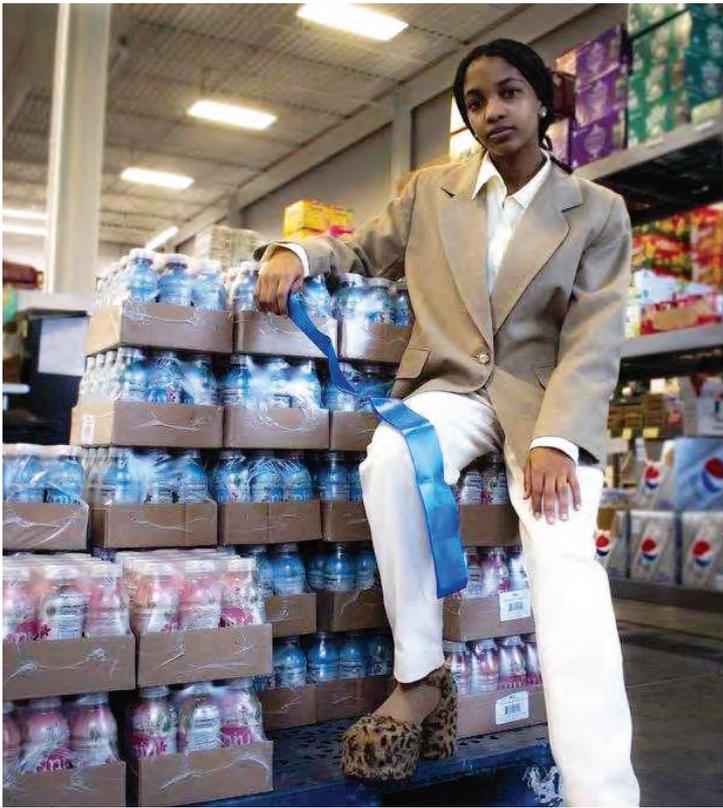
Photos by Tom Palko



## Shopping Small, Supporting Local

Small businesses and local shoppers from all over the region gathered on Saturday, November 27, 2021, to celebrate Small Business Saturday. From Hermitage, Sharon and Greenville to Hubbard, Ohio, shoppers crossed items off their holiday lists while supporting local merchants.

Photos by Beckie Erwin



### NIU by Talls Ribbon Cutting

A special ribbon cutting was held in November 2021 to celebrate the new partnership between NIU by Talls LLC - Tropical Beverages and Dean Natural Vending at their HQ in Lindenpointe business park in Hermitage. Officials in attendance included: Mercer County Commissioner Scott Boyd; Melinda Gosser from Senator Michele Brooks' office; representatives from the City of Hermitage including Gary Hinkson, Gary Gulla and Hermitage Commissioner Louis Squatrito; PNDC CEO Rod Wilt with the ribbon cutting provided by the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce. Pictured is NIU by Talls CEO Cynthia Torrence, a senior at Hickory High School.

Photo by Jonathan Parry | Contributed



### Tiger Techs

The Sharon Robotics Team competed in Pittsburgh November 2021. At the competition, the Orange Team placed second and the Black Team placed fifth!

Photo Contributed by Bob Fiscus | Contributed



### Frosty Fun

Sponsored by Conneaut Lake Community Development Committee, the Winter Ice House Festival was hosted in Conneaut Lake in early December 2021. The festival was chock-full of winter fun, including ice carving sculptures, an ice slide, entertainment, raffles, food and beverages, caroling and more.

Photos by Taylor Sherman

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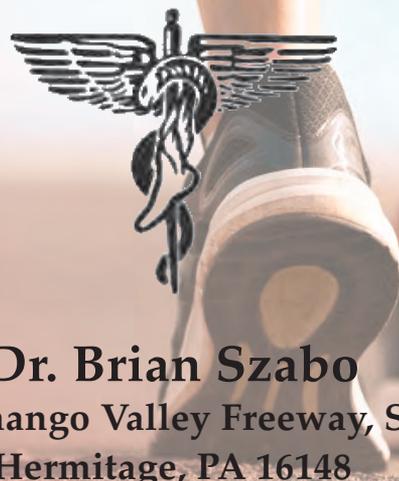
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Responses may be used in a future publication of Valley Voices.

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considered ineligible. Winner may be contacted by phone or email. Any unclaimed prize(s)  
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Any prize(s) awarded to an eligible winner(s) are not transferable, redeemable for cash or  
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What would you like to see more of? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What did you enjoy most in this issue? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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Entries must be received by 1-10-2022.

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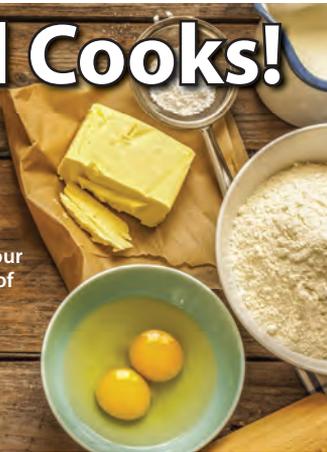
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## Calling All Cooks!

Are you known for your signature family favorite dinner or a party-pleasing appetizer? Do you know someone who makes the best meatballs or the most decadent chocolate cake? Tell us more!

Valley Voices is looking for recipes from our readers to consider for upcoming issues of the magazine. To enter, submit a recipe (plus a photo - recommended) to:

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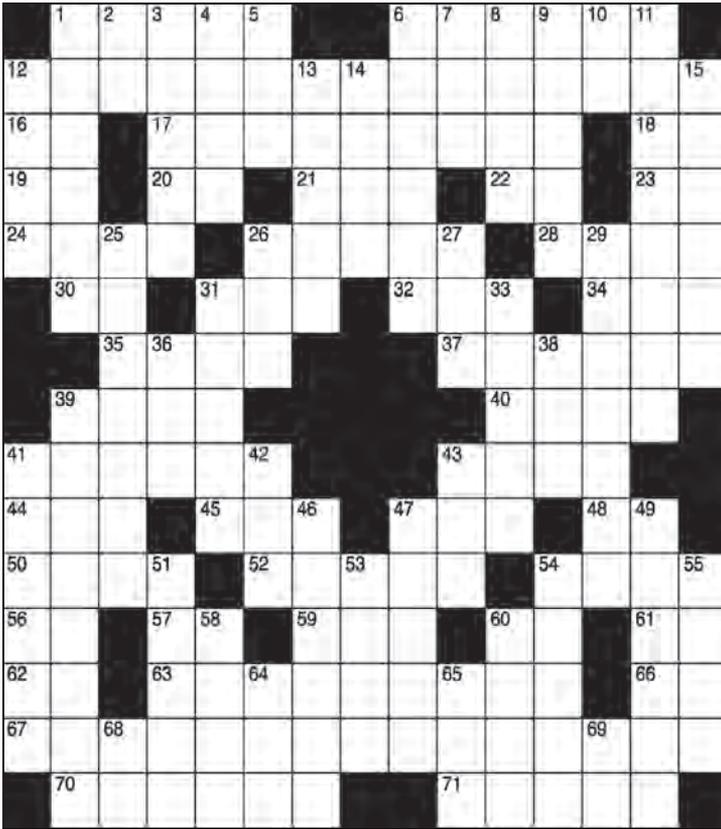
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**CLUES ACROSS**

- 1. Struck firmly
- 6. Shirt part
- 12. Nevertheless
- 16. Article
- 17. Adornment
- 18. Educator's helper
- 19. Healthcare pro
- 20. Atomic number 28
- 21. Extinct flightless bird
- 22. Mystic syllable
- 23. College sports decision maker (abbr.)
- 24. Edible mushrooms
- 26. Venerable English monk
- 28. Surrounded by
- 30. Forming fractional numbers from 4 onwards
- 31. Eastern France river
- 32. Short cry or yelp
- 34. Brew
- 35. Ornamental box
- 37. In a way, surfaced
- 39. Attired
- 40. Peculation
- 41. Netted
- 43. It shows you paid (abbr.)
- 44. Payroll firm
- 45. Antidiuretic hormone
- 47. Japanese classical theater
- 48. The first two
- 50. Ancient burial chamber
- 52. Type of card
- 54. Expression of sorrow or pity
- 56. Hectoliter
- 57. Morning
- 59. NYC subway dweller
- 60. Law enforcement
- 61. Sodium
- 62. Elevated subway
- 63. Facility where wild animals are kept
- 66. Integrated circuit
- 67. Seaman's tool
- 70. Drink to
- 71. Small group

**CLUES DOWN**

- 1. Poem
- 2. Everest is one (abbr.)
- 3. Olympic legend Jesse
- 4. Portable tent
- 5. When you hope to get there
- 6. Unwavering
- 7. Back muscle
- 8. Within
- 9. Excessive fluid accumulation in tissues
- 10. Six
- 11. Involved as a necessary part
- 12. 2002 Liotta, Patric film
- 13. Living thing
- 14. Type of gin
- 15. Moved around in pursuit of fun
- 25. Makes light bulbs
- 26. Story of one's life
- 27. Small island in a river
- 29. A type of bliss
- 31. Genus of large herons
- 33. A way to make dry
- 36. One's grandmother
- 38. Vocal style
- 39. Pronunciation mark
- 41. American Indian chief or leader
- 42. Insecticide
- 43. Go bad
- 46. Capital of Zimbabwe
- 47. Polish river
- 49. Cast out
- 51. People of India and Sri Lanka
- 53. Cleaning fabrics
- 54. Very skilled
- 55. Pouches
- 58. Restaurant must-have
- 60. Native Americans from Arizona
- 64. Remaining after all deductions
- 65. Fleece
- 68. Dorm official
- 69. It cools your home

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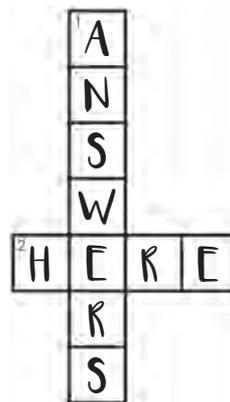
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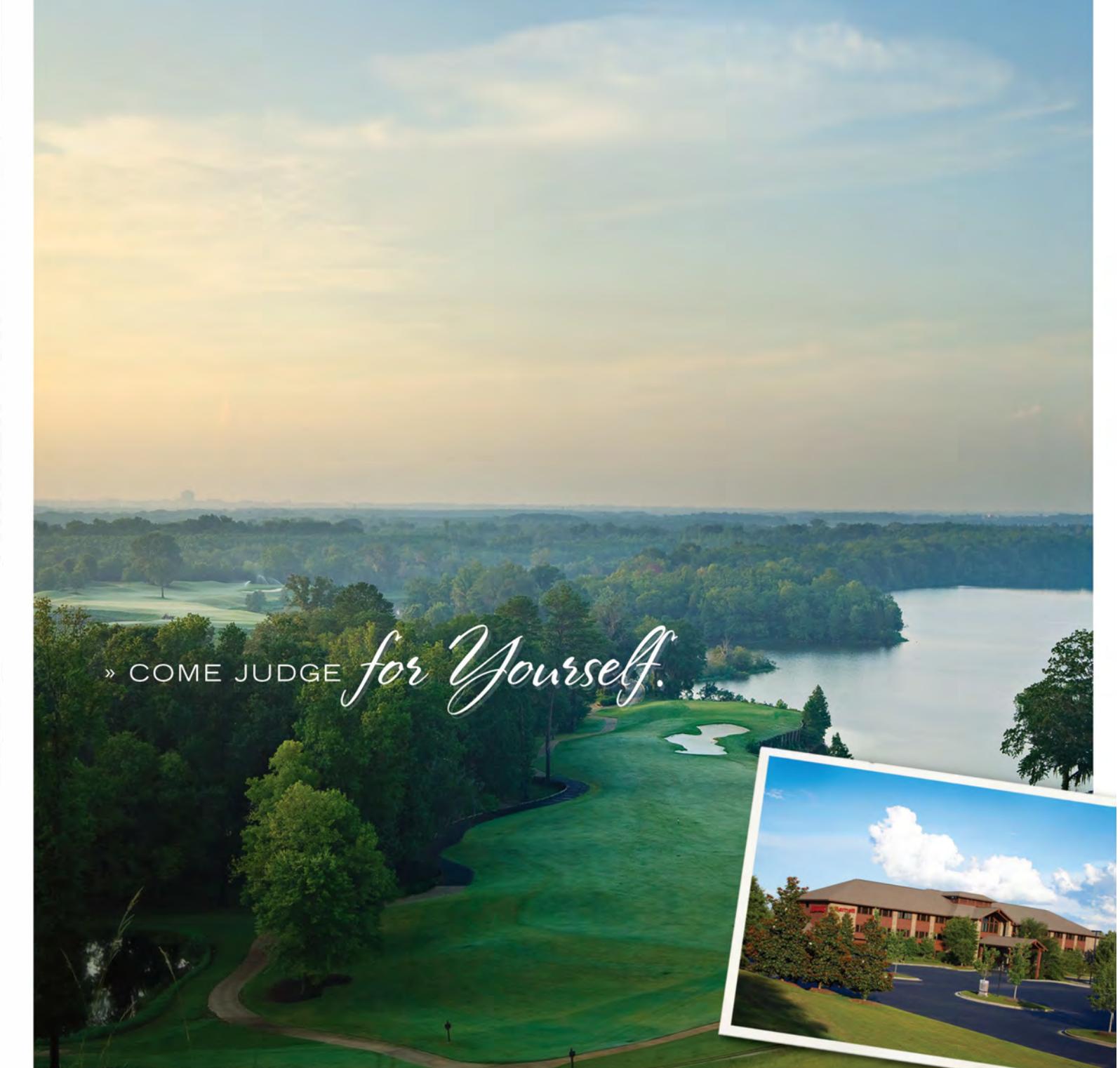
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