

Something Old and Something New, Something Borrowed and Something... *Queer?* Current Trends as seen by Today's Wedding Professionals

by Sarah Benoit, RWN Staff
expo event coordinator

When the words "gay and lesbian tradition" are uttered a variety of things come to mind: drag shows, pride festivals, YMCA, Madonna, San Francisco, White Parties, brunch on Sunday, feminist poetry readings, Stonewall. But, to have a gay wedding, do you need to walk down the aisle to Barbra Streisand or use the rainbow as your color scheme? Are lesbians required to hear the echoes of Melissa Etheridge's *Come To My Window* during their ceremony and does the butch always buy the fem a diamond? I think not! GLBT traditions are as diverse and dynamic as the community itself. Queers come in all shapes, sizes, religious backgrounds, schools of thought, races, genders and classes. They are old and young, liberal and conservative, rich and poor and born everywhere in the world. Our heritage is identical to that of all humanity and our own traditions are evolving from a melting pot of queer experience that spans both time and space.

As Americans moved into the twenty-first century and same-sex marriage into the forefront of the political landscape, the GLBT community has been further challenged to define and understand how family and cultural traditions fit into the queer scene. Marriage is not only a legal partnership, romantic notion and spiritual vow, but also a personal and social definition. One of the first things to remember when planning a same-sex marriage is that it is a same-sex marriage. No matter how many age-old traditions you invoke, in America there is something culturally unconventional about two men or two women getting hitched. In the future, this perspective will surely fade away, but for now the fact that a wedding is "gay" or "lesbian" will, no doubt, in some way set it apart from the norm. However, rather than feeling frustrated and boxed in, consider it a doorway to a more authentic and personally inspired affair.

In addition, GLBT weddings often do not have some of the traditional stress and expectations associated with straight weddings. For example: Bridezilla or the controlling mothers-in-law. Chances are, if a couple is out of the closet, family members have already learned to respect them for who they are; otherwise they wouldn't be participating in the planning or choosing to attend the event. The fact that GLBT people are still considered "different" can be disappointing at times, but it is also what makes our experience in the world unique. Although we may not partake

in all the rights heterosexuals do, our sexual orientation does give us a valid reason to break away from standard wedding protocol. This can be liberating once a couple realizes they are free to create a ceremony that suits their own style, beliefs, taste and personalities.


If There Is Anyone Here Who Objects To This Union... *Shh, Don't Ask! Don't Tell!*

One of the most difficult parts of planning a same-sex wedding is deciding how to tell the family. Of course it is easier if you have a family that is accepting, but many couples face the discrimination of family members who tolerate gay and lesbian lifestyles, but do not support marriage equality. Just because a person doesn't disown a family member for being gay doesn't mean they respect GLBT relationships or believe that they are natural and beautiful. It certainly doesn't ensure they want to celebrate such a relationship and support a public statement of that relationship's ongoing commitment by participating in a marriage ceremony.

Wedding consultant Bernadette Smith, owner of It's About Time in Boston, Massachusetts, specializes in same-sex wedding planning and sees these situations all the time in her work. "Many couples are out in general," states Smith. "The difficulty ends up being more about how the family is going to handle the idea of a wedding." Smith has witnessed this stress play out in many scenarios. "I have seen couples who were afraid to invite their parents, couples who invite everyone but one partner's mother and couples who have to decide whether or not to invite family members who signed petitions to ban same-sex marriage." She adds, "It is hard to watch a client cry and tell me 'I am picking out this beautiful dress and my mother will never see me in it.'"

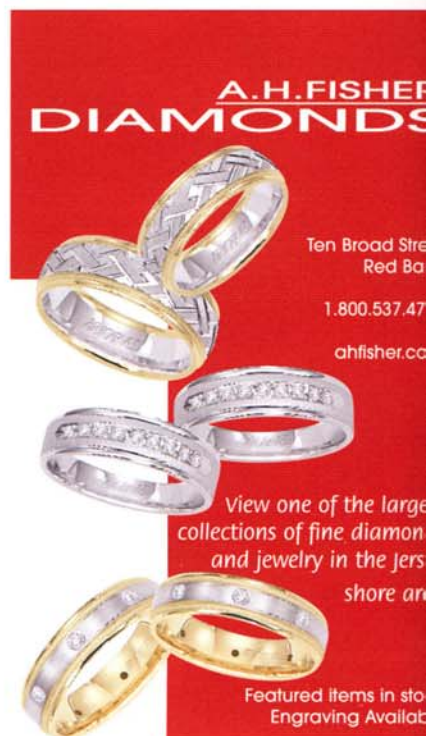
It is this aspect of same-sex ceremonies that Smith feels a lot of straight wedding coordinators don't understand. "Heterosexual couples don't have the added pressure of coming out to wedding vendors during the planning stages, and this also can be very stressful for some people," says Smith. "I come out on behalf of couples to the vendors ahead of time so they know they are working with GLBT-friendly professionals. But the one thing I can't do for a couple is deal with their family, but I will handle everything else," Smith continues.

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