

Choosing the right place for a celebration

LORRI BENEDIK

"When pulling together a once-in-a-lifetime event such as an engagement party, wedding, bar mitzvah or corporate product launch, there are no second chances; one cannot afford to make mistakes," says Adam Bultz, co-president of C3 Events.

"The three Cs in our company name stand for concept, creation and coordination," he said, explaining that each of his contracts begins with an in-depth needs assessment. "With a staff of 12, we can be involved from Day 1 and on site until your last guest leaves."

Choosing the right venue is critical. "There are many beautiful hotels in Montreal, all of which host special events," Bultz said. "However, aside from small enhancements, hotel decor is pretty much already in place.

"If an individual wants something completely different, there are blank-canvas locations which we can help conceive and create, in sync with the client's vision." Examples include the Montreal Science Centre, Marché Bonsecours, museums, warehouses and unique choices such as car dealerships and parking garages. Bultz said that parks and other city-run locales are options, but have strict guidelines, added fees and require permits.

It helps to have an event planner on board who knows how to navigate the system. Not long ago, Bultz and his team at C3 organized a huge event at a local film studio: Mel's Cité du Cinéma. Sets were created in honour of films including *The Aviator*, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and

The Mummy. Throughout the evening, thousands of attendees meandered in and out of several distinct areas, each with its own mood-altering decor.

Rita Wong has worked in event planning for 10 years and, three years ago, launched her own firm, Rita Wong Events. She agrees with Bultz, to a great extent, but adds that some hotels, like downtown Montreal's Le Windsor and Old Montreal's Hotel Nelligan feature enormous rooms that are blank slates which can be transformed into pretty much whatever the client desires.

"These days, people often express a wish to break away from tradition for a completely different feel to their special event," Wong said. "One of the nicest compliments I received recently was that a wedding I had planned felt more like a fun night out."

Some couples reject the standard wedding structure and are going for something more casual these days, she said, in some cases even doing away with a sit-down dinner in favour of bite-size morsels of food offered up on trays, cocktail-style.

"Of course, every detail is still deliberately and meticulously planned, but there is a suggestion of impulsiveness. I guess one could call it planned spontaneity."

Another current trend, Wong said, is to hold a special event in a cool night club like Club Opera, on Ste. Catherine St. and the Main, or in a world-class eatery such as Ristorante Bice on Sherbrooke St. W. The advantage to choosing one of these venues is that the decor, lighting and



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Rita Wong Events last fall arranged this wedding reception venue at the Hotel Nelligan in Old Montreal.

sound systems are already in place. This is a huge money saver when compared to blank-slate locations which often require furniture, lighting and audio equipment rentals and set-ups.

In 2007, when journalist/writer Natalie Karneef began researching venues for her 2009 wedding, she had a pretty clear vision of what she wanted.

"Having an outdoor element was really important," she said, "and I knew I did not want my guests travelling by car between the ceremony and reception."

Karneef and her fiancé, Tony Asimakopoulos, examined numerous locations, including the Darling Foundry Art Centre, La Tundra Hall (Expo 67's Canadian pavilion) on Île Notre Dame, and several Montreal art galleries. Although these locations were beautiful, none felt just right. Then, for her springtime birthday, Natalie and Tony found themselves sugaring off at la Sucrierie de la Montagne, on Rigaud Mountain, off-island to the west.

It was love at first sight.

"Everything about the place was so real," Karneef said. "It was a combination of the country setting, the old log structures, the simple, hearty menu and, most importantly, the accommodating nature of owner Pierre

Useful tips when selecting a venue:

Network with friends and acquaintances, soliciting recommendations for locations.

One-stop shops, such as hotels or reception halls, may be money-savers as they can provide everything from tables and chairs to linen and table settings.

Daytime, weekday or off-season bookings are often less costly.

Don't forget to ask if there are other events planned for the same day and time.

When considering a venue, ask to see pictures of previous events to help get creative juices flowing.

Get a written contract from the space provider, outlining the exact agreement and including any add-ons such as use of electricity, coat check, and other fees.

Find out how long before the event you'll have access to the space, for decorating.

Hire an event planner; the cost is quickly recouped because of industry savvy and supplier discounts. A good planner will also help you stay on budget by guiding clients to appropriate venues and service providers they know to be reliable.

LORRI BENEDIK, WITH INPUT FROM ADAM BULTZ, RITA WONG AND NATALIE KARNEEF

Faucher's team — especially the personable Sucrierie manager, Jean Bellefeuille, who patiently took care of every detail."

In September 2009, Natalie and Tony were married outdoors in the Sucrierie's mini village, under an arch built by their friends. Later, their 225 guests dined on split-pea soup, roast

chicken, vegetables and mouth-watering sugar pie.

"Although the day was intense for us, and a bit of a blur, it was pretty laid-back," Karneef said. "We actually had a lot of fun on our perfect day, which has since come to be known, affectionately, as our Big Fat Sugar Shack Wedding."