

A one-of-a-kind wedding

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For the rehearsal dinner before her wedding in the Napa Valley last September, Christina Lowris had her heart set on a hoedown. A hotel setting would have sufficed, but the marketing executive from New York had invited friends and family from the East Coast, and a cowboy theme, to her way of thinking, offered the quintessential California country experience.

With wedding planner Laurie Arons of San Francisco, Lowris toured one barn after another, with little success. One was too close to the road, another was too dirty. Another was too manicured, and the next too small for her 200 guests.

They had almost given up when they got to Durham Ranch in Calistoga. It was large, private and well appointed, with an industrial-chic barn that could double as a dining room. They booked it, and had the Ponderosa party of their lives. On arrival, guests were presented with cowboy hats and bandannas to wear. Tables were named after old TV Westerns. Waiters proffered deviled eggs, ribs, fried chicken - and freshly grilled s'mores for dessert.

"I love kooky things. I love kitsch," said Lowris. "I wanted to create more of an experience than being in a hotel and going into a room for dinner. With a lot of weddings, you feel like you're in a beautiful place, but there's a wedding tomorrow, and another the next day. This felt one of a kind."

In the quest to find unique wedding venues, many engaged couples turn to guidebooks, the Internet or relatives with a beautiful home and grounds. But for those in search of unusual and exclusive locations, some are turning, as Arons and Lowris did, to a new Bay Area service, Mint Locations of Sausalito, which offers private luxury homes for rent.

The company was founded in 2006 by Cindi Osborn, a former TV producer with an art history background and an eye for stylish digs. She works with about 50 private homes from west Marin to Napa Valley to the Oakland hills, the sort featured in Architectural Digest or Elle Decor, and owned by architects, interior designers and socialites. Site rental fees range from \$4,000 to \$40,000. Wedding planners, caterers, lighting, portable toilets and parking valets are extra.

Mint's locations include Olive Oaks near Sebastopol, where the home is decorated in a shabby-chic style with gardens suited for a spring wedding; The Standard in Sonoma, a modern home with floor-to-ceiling industrial glass windows overlooking the vines of Carneros, suited for a hipster couple; Mariposa, a vintage home in Healdsburg with a European feel and a barn, gardens and butterfly habitat to boot; and Paradise, a neo-Palladian villa with tree house and pool house above the Russian River.

For the eco-chic, Osborn suggests Margarido, a platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) home in the Oakland hills, and Green Haus in the Mission District, which is powered by a windmill in the home's courtyard.

Lowris used Mint's suggestions not only for the rehearsal dinner but for her wedding reception, too, which was held at another Wine Country property called Black Swan Lake. A stately home set the backdrop for the reception on a tented tennis court. Cocktails were served at the edge of a small lake surrounded by willow trees.

"There are a lot of properties I pass on that I call junior mints," Osborn said. "The ones in my portfolio are mint. You walk in and everything comes together. You've walked into a stage, and it's a place that brings your ideas to life."

That's why Osborn, 45, considers herself a sort of matchmaker. "You don't have to be a friend of the Kennedys to get into an estate," she said.

With steep site rental fees, the service is not a perfect fit for every pocketbook, Osborn acknowledged.

"Private homes are a bit more expensive than going to someplace like a winery that is set up with catering, wine, bathrooms and lighting," she said. They're set up to be a wedding factory. Mine are not."

There are other ways to find a unique venue: ask an event planner. Robert Fountain, owner of his own event design company (often hired for San Francisco Symphony and Opera gala-night dinner decor), has put together weddings at venues that have one life by day and another at night, such as the Hamlin Mansion, a 1901 Italian Baroque building in Pacific Heights. On weekdays, it's a school. On weekends, it's rented out for parties. Fountain has also directed brides to Sova Gardens, a country house with tavern and outdoor gardens near Sebastopol, and planned a commitment ceremony at Foreign Cinema restaurant in the Mission. (The couple rented the restaurant on a Sunday night.)

But the newest setting for his clients is closer to home: his own studio in SoMa.

The industrial warehouse space, with room for 100 seated dinner guests, has its advantages. It can be transformed into any sort of look, from modern to conservative to drippingly ornate, depending on the couple's fancy. Previously, he charged \$5,000 for a weekend night. In a nod to the economy, he now charges \$2,500 to rent the space - and provides sound, lights, and tables and chairs.

Free spirits bent on adventure can always put on scuba gear to exchange vows underwater, say "I do" in a hot-air balloon or get hitched on a working farm, as long as they don't mind a little discomfort (or in the case of a farm, sidestepping cow dung or swatting mosquitoes).

But for a seaside setting without surf, spray or sand, the Aquarium of the Bay, near San Francisco's Pier 39, is a nontraditional option. Not everyone wants to exchange vows with sharks swimming overhead or treat their tuxedoed guests to a touch pool, but it was the perfect setting for Gretchen Szabat, a Los Angeles veterinarian, and her husband, Joshua deBlank, a Web developer, who wed in January 2008.

The couple met in Australia, where he grew up and where she attended veterinary school. A unique spot

or even an elopement was at the top of her list. The bridegroom simply wanted a large wedding.

"The destination wedding was our compromise," she said of the decision to marry at the aquarium. "Everyone thought it was one of the coolest weddings they'd ever been to."

The upstairs Farallon room, at 1,600 square feet, can accommodate 120 seated dinner guests and runs \$500 an hour. Kristin Saulsbury, the aquarium's private events coordinator, has noticed an uptick in business as the economy has faltered. "We've had more interest lately," she said. She was unsure why but theorized that people are thinking more creatively when it comes to spending less on special occasions.

One suggestion for brides- and grooms-to-be: Keep the guest list to a minimum, and not purely for the sake of the purse strings.

"Getting married in the aquarium's tunnel sounds great," she said, "but it's better for a small wedding due to lack of space in the tube."--

Resources

Cindi Osborn, Mint Locations, 428 Turney St. , Sausalito; (415) 671-9091; www.mintlocations.com.

Laurie Arons, Laurie Arons Special Events, 1850 Union St., Suite 2, San Francisco; (415) 332-0600; www.lauriearons.com; www.lauriearons.blogspot.com.

Robert Fountain, 80 Missouri St. San Francisco; (415) 934-6767; www.robertfountain.com; www.rf-80.com.

Aquarium of the Bay, The Embarcadero at Beach Street; Kristin Saulsbury; 415-623 5326; www.aquariumofthebay.com.

E-mail Carolyne Zinko at czinko@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/06/07/CMAT179GHB.DTL>

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