

Irish Wedding Traditions



IRISH WEDDING TRADITIONS

There is one wedding Irish tradition that states: 'Marry in May and Rue The Day' while another states: 'Marry in April if you can, joy for maiden and for man'.

When I told my daughter about this Irish superstition, she changed her wedding date so that she'd be married in April!

What began as a search for Irish traditions and customs that she could incorporate into her celebration ended up as an incredible pile of notes that eventually took on a life of its own. Long after her wedding, I was still obsessed with delving into history and folklore, looking for everything I could find on how weddings were celebrated in Ireland long ago.

I am convinced that if couples make the effort, they can have a totally Irish celebration from beginning to end - even to the pre-wedding parties. There's one quaint custom where the groom was invited to the bride's house right before the wedding and they cooked a goose in his honor. It was called Aitin' the gander — it has to be where we get the expression 'his goose is cooked!' We threw one of these dinner parties for my daughter and everyone had a great time. (The apple-potato stuffing has become a family favorite!).

There are so many other traditions, customs and just an incredible amount of folklore to draw upon, that it would be remiss to be of Irish descent and not take advantage of all the possibilities. Here are just a few ideas culled from what eventually has become a 200-plus page book called 'The Traditional Irish Wedding' and it is now available in the United States and will be released in Ireland this spring. As complete as I could make it, the book covers attire, decor, menus, recipes, music, toasts, vows, and perhaps of most value, a resource listing that will help you find everything from Irish wedding gowns and tiaras to sheet music for a Celtic Mass.

Here are some more:

* **Bunratty Meade** is a honey wine that's served at the Bunratty Castle medieval banquet. It's from a recipe based on the oldest drink in Ireland and if you've never tasted it, it's well worth trying. In the old days, it was consumed at weddings because it was thought that it promoted virility. (If a baby was born nine months after the wedding, it was attributed to the mead!) Couples also drank it from special goblets for a full month following the wedding, which is supposedly where we get the word honeymoon. This was to protect the couple from the fairies coming to spirit the bride away.

* **Lucky horseshoe.** Irish brides used to carry a real horseshoe for good luck. (Turned up so the luck won't run out). You can get porcelain horseshoes which most Irish brides carry these days, or one made of fabric which is worn on the wrist.

* **Magic Hanky.** This charming custom involves having the bride carry a special hanky that with a few stitches can be turned into a christening bonnet for the first baby. With a couple of snips it can be turned back into a hanky that your child can carry on his/her wedding day.

* Make-up bells. The chime of bells is thought to keep evil spirits away, restore harmony if a couple is fighting, and also remind a couple of their wedding vows. Giving a bell as a gift has become an Irish tradition. You could also have your greeters hand out tiny bells to your guests to ring as you process. (You might want to let them know when they're supposed to be rung - perhaps mention it in your program along with an explanation of the custom). Guests could also ring their little bells at the reception in lieu of clinking glasses.

* Irish Dancers. Consider hiring a group of Irish dancers to hand out your programs before the ceremony. Dressed in their full regalia, it would add a wonderful touch of of pageantry and color. They could also dance at the reception later. We did this at my daughter's reception and it was a major hit.

* Music. There's so much wonderful Irish music available, you'll have no problems in finding appropriate selections for both the ceremony and the reception. The difficulty will be in deciding which pieces to play!

* Readings: My daughter had the following Irish wedding vow on the front of her program:

By the power that Christ brought from heaven, mayst thou love me. As the sun follows its course, mayst thou follow me. As light to the eye, as bread to the hungry, as joy to the heart, may thy presence be with me, oh one that I love, 'til death comes to part us asunder.

On the back of the program, she had this old Irish proverb: Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me and just be my friend.

* The Irish Wedding Song. Very popular at contemporary Irish weddings. We had two friends sing this at my daughter's reception while the newlyweds cut the cake. (Afterwards I thought we should have had the lyrics typed up and placed on the tables so that everyone could join in).

* Flowers. In the old days, many Irish brides wore a wreath of wildflowers in their hair; they also carried them in bouquets. For my daughter's wedding, our florist designed gorgeous bouquets that included a flower called Bells of Ireland. In Wales, brides carried live myrtle and gave a sprig to each bridesmaid which they planted. If it grew, the bridesmaid would marry within the year. If you're planning a more general Celtic celebration, this might be worth considering.

* Ancient custom: In the old days, couples ate salt and oatmeal at the beginning of their reception: Each of them took three mouthfuls as a protection against the power of the evil eye. Also, when a couple is dancing, the bride can't take both feet off the floor because the fairies will get the upper hand. Fairies love beautiful things and one of their favorites is a bride. There's many an Irish legend about brides being spirited away by the little people! For the same reason, it's bad luck for a bride to wear green. I've also heard that it's bad luck for anyone to wear green at an Irish wedding - but I think it really only applies to the bride. It's also bad luck for a bride or the groom to sing at their own wedding.

Portents and omens:

* A fine day meant good luck, especially if the sun shone on the bride. If you're a

Roman Catholic, one way to make certain that it won't rain is to put a statue of the Infant of Prague outside the church before your ceremony.

- * It was unlucky to marry on a Saturday.
- * Those who married in harvest would spend all their lives gathering
- * A man should always be the first to wish joy to the bride, never a woman
- * It was lucky to hear a cuckoo on the wedding morning, or to see three magpies
- * To meet a funeral on the road meant bad luck and if there was a funeral procession planned for that day, the wedding party always took a different road
- * The wedding party should always take the longest road home from the church
- * It was bad luck if a glass or cup were broken on the wedding day
- * A bride and groom should never wash their hands in the same sink at the same time—it's courting disaster if they do
- * It was said to be lucky if you married during a 'growing moon and a flowing tide'
- * When leaving the church, someone must throw an old shoe over the bride's head so she will have good luck
- * If the bride's mother-in-law breaks a piece of wedding cake on the bride's head as she enters the house after the ceremony, they will be friends for life.

Many other customs are interspersed throughout the book, e.g. (from the reception section) the top tier of your wedding cake should be an Irish whiskey cake which is saved for the christening of your first baby. I've also heard of another custom which just came to my attention and will be included in the next edition: a bottle of champagne is saved from the reception so that it can be used to 'wet the baby's head' at the christening.

In finally making this book a reality, my hope is that when he says to you 'would you like to be buried with my people', or you say to him 'would you like to hang your washing next to mine', you'll say yes, and then use the suggestions to help you plan an Irish celebration reflective of your roots and as romantic as your heritage.

And for all engaged couples and their families in the midst of pre-wedding chaos, I raise a parting glass: May all your joys be pure joy and all your pain champagne.

Sláinte!

Bridget Haggerty

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