

Surprise, it's a wedding! Why some couples are rethinking the tradition

SHAWNA COHEN

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 54 MINUTES AGO



Amy Krofchick and Brad Shields's surprise nuptials in October, 2025, are part of a broader shift among couples rethinking the traditional wedding.

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It's a warm October evening and I'm balancing a glass of pinot grigio in one hand, ricotta crostini in the other, schmoozing with old high-school friends. We're among 100-plus guests gathered at a Toronto restaurant for a surprise 50th dinner party. The birthday girl, Amy Krofchick, is expected any minute.

Suddenly, someone shushes us and tells us to take our seats – she is about to walk in. We turn toward the entrance, excited but silent.

“Surprise!” comes a call from the other direction.

I turn my head. A curtain parts to reveal Krofchick in a white silk dress and veil, and her long-term partner, Brad Shields, in a black suit, standing beneath a chuppah (a traditional Jewish wedding canopy).

“We're getting married!” they shout in unison.

Jaws drop. A moment of confusion, then an eruption of “oh my gods.” Friends and family rush forward to hug them. I spot genuine smiles, a few tearful eyes.



Guests at Krofchick and Shields's wedding arrived expecting to celebrate a 50th birthday for Krofchick.

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Krofchick and Shields are part of a broader shift among couples rethinking the traditional wedding. So-called surprise weddings, where guests arrive expecting a birthday or casual get-together and instead witness a ceremony, are one way that change is playing out. Think of it as the no-anticipation wedding: an alternative to the endless planning and soaring budgets that define modern nuptials. For some couples, it's a way to avoid family expectations and drama; for others, it's about hosting something more intimate, with only the people who matter most.

More couples are planning weddings that feel personalized and less traditional, says sociologist Stephanie Coontz, director of research and public education at the Utah-based Council on Contemporary Families. Many of the rituals that once defined marriage were rooted in social and economic realities that don't hold the same meaning for modern couples (giving the bride away, for instance, symbolized transferring a woman from her father's authority to her

husband's).

“There’s no longer a cookie-cutter expectation of what a wedding has to be,” says Coontz, whose new book, *For Better and Worse: The Complicated Past and Challenging Future of Marriage*, is out in May. Couples are increasingly choosing formats that reflect their own values rather than tradition, she says. Her own wedding, in the early 90s, consisted of a potluck dinner and impromptu dance party in her home.





For modern couples, many of the traditions that defined weddings in the past no longer hold the same meaning.

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Then there's the desire to avoid the stress and spectacle of a traditional wedding, something Robb McDonald sees regularly. "One of the biggest reasons couples choose this is to avoid the drama," says McDonald, a Toronto-based officiant with All Seasons Weddings. "The planning, the seating arrangements, the cost ... it can all become overwhelming."

Surprise weddings, he adds, strip the experience back to its core: "When guests show up, there's no expectation. It brings it back to what a wedding should be – celebrating the couple and the connection they have with the people in the room."

For some couples, limiting costs is the main motivator (the average wedding now costing around \$30,000 to \$40,000, according to industry data (often more in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver). Budget was certainly a factor for Lauren Souch and Keith Torrie, who tied the knot this past fall. They invited friends and family to the Olde Stone Cottage Pub – a frequent haunt in their Scarborough neighbourhood – under the guise of a combined 40th birthday party. The 60-plus guests had no idea they'd be witnessing a marriage that very night.

“It’s astronomical to plan a big wedding,” says Souch, director of policy at the Canadian Real Estate Association, who estimates their total cost came in at under \$15,000 – with the biggest expenses being the restaurant buyout and photographer.



Krofchick celebrates with wedding guests.

515 PHOTO CO/SUPPLIED

The surprise format made it significantly cheaper and more low-key: “I did my makeup myself. I spent a couple hundred dollars on a simple linen dress and found a veil online. Keith wore a suit he already owned. We didn’t have a bridal party or pre-wedding events... We kept it affordable.”

The casual vibe only contributed to the fun. “There were gasps and cheers,” recalls Souch of the big reveal, which came during a birthday toast by Torrie. Post-ceremony, guests enjoyed drinks and a dinner buffet, along with music and dancing. “It felt exciting in the moment – like a proper wedding but with far less stress. I got to enjoy it more than if we had hosted it in a banquet hall.”

While Souch says the only downside was not having everyone there to celebrate – some out-of-towners, for example, opted not to fly in for what they thought was simply a birthday party – she doesn't regret the decision. "We've been together for seven years. We own a home together, we have busy careers and social lives. It felt silly to do a big, expensive wedding at this point in our lives."

For Krofchick, 50, and Shields, 53 – who between them have five children – the decision came after a spontaneous proposal. "We were at a concert and were just so happy," recalls Krofchick. "I remember thinking, I want this feeling forever. And then I said, 'You know what I want for my birthday? I want to get married.'"



Krofchick, Shields and their children. More couples are planning weddings that feel personalized and less traditional.

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They didn't tell a soul. "It became our little world," Krofchick says. "Planning it

was our gift to ourselves. No opinions, no pressure, just the two of us creating something that felt right.” The lack of expectations was part of the appeal. Having both been through major life events – Shields is divorced, Krofchick was widowed – neither felt compelled to have a traditional wedding.

“All of it – the cost, the family dynamics, the opinions. We’d both been there before. This time, we just wanted it to feel like us,” says Krofchick, whose wedding came in at around \$50,000, a figure she says would have been even higher had they followed a more conventional route (she bought her dress at Reformation, a ready-to-wear label rather than a traditional bridal boutique, and did the flowers herself).

The supposed birthday celebration was held at Nodo, an Italian restaurant in Toronto’s Liberty Village, which set a causal tone from the get-go. “We wanted people to just show up relaxed,” explains Krofchick, founder of Love-It-Forward, a platform that encourages and creates small acts of kindness – often through surprise gestures or shared experiences. “Let us feed you, give you drinks, be part of something joyful.”

When the curtain opened, everyone was crying, laughing and hugging. Krofchick says the mood was unlike any wedding she’d attended: “It didn’t feel formal. It didn’t feel staged. It felt like a party, like everyone was in it with us.”

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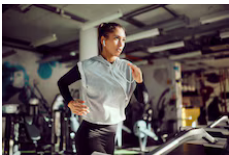
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