

LIFE

Who needs 300 guests when you can have 35? Why smaller is better for weddings and other parties, pandemic or no pandemic

Intimate is the buzzword of these less cautious times. Summer 2021 was all about keeping things micro because of strict COVID-19 regulations. But with capacity limits lifted in event spaces in Ontario, people are going micro by choice.

Dec. 3, 2021   



Maddy Elmaleh and her family pose in front of their house on her bat mitzvah day. Her parents chose to have three events, keeping numbers down for each and tailoring them to guests' preferences.

ELLIOT SYLMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

By Shawna Cohen Special to the Star

When it comes to weddings as COVID-19 restrictions loosen, bigger is not necessarily better.

At least, that's the case for Natalie Faught and Adam Melnick. When the couple got engaged in Azores, Portugal, in September 2021, they knew they would want a wedding that reflects their distinct personalities. They're opting for a three-part celebration, spread out over a year. Hamilton-based Faught, 35, says she's looking forward to gathering again with family after a two-year hiatus.

The festivities will kick off in September 2022 with a five-person ceremony in Tofino, B.C. Two friends will act as witnesses, along with Faught's 16-year-old son.

"We're both avid hikers and outdoorsy, and we wanted to get married by the ocean," said Faught, who works in conservation. A week later, they'll be joined by 31 immediate family members for an "official" ceremony at

Toronto City Hall, followed by a celebratory meal. Finally, the couple is planning a bigger party for 100 or so of their closest friends and family, though the timing is to be determined.

“It depends on COVID, maybe a year from the actual wedding,” said Faught. “That was an ‘a-ha’ moment for me, realizing that the celebration doesn’t need to be a one-day affair or crammed into 12 hours. It’s more about accommodating a large family but still keeping it intimate.”

Faught and Melnick represent a growing number of couples wanting to pare down one main event and keep the party going with a series of micro-gatherings. The fad is spreading to bar and bat mitzvahs, communions, milestone birthdays and more.

Toronto wedding and event planner Candace Zwicker says the current trend in parties is to go small scale. “People are choosing to have mini-events where they can still have everything they want in terms of flowers, custom menus, decor ... but the experience is so much more intimate and special,” she said.

Intimate is the buzzword of these less cautious times. When it comes to life cycle events, summer 2021 was all about keeping things micro because of strict COVID-19 regulations. We weren’t permitted to host 300-person extravaganzas, opting instead for smaller events spread out over a week or even a single weekend. Guest lists were cut like never before. People were hosting 15 family members for a low-key brunch, followed by an alcohol- and DJ-fuelled nighttime party for their core friend group.

In early October, however, Ontario lifted its COVID-19 capacity limits for event spaces (so long as physical distancing is maintained). Party hopefuls are finally free to throw blowout celebrations with numbers in the hundreds. And yet, they’re going micro — *by choice*. As Zwicker explained, “People are realizing they no longer need peripheral guests. With a smaller group, you get to really enjoy your guests rather than making your way around a room of hundreds.”

Scaling down lessens the pressure of the hosts schmoozing with every guest. Additionally, guests are made to feel like VIPs when the numbers are low. Often, they’re treated to experiential events suited to their specific tastes and interests.

This type of customized approach was certainly the case for Amy and Jason Elmaleh. For their daughter Maddy’s bat mitzvah in August 2020 — the relatively early days of the pandemic — the Toronto couple intended to host 150 to 200 guests for a long-weekend celebration at an overnight summer camp in Utterson, Ont., about two hours north of Toronto. Those plans fell to the wayside as camps were cancelled altogether that summer. Instead, the family got creative and threw three back-to-back events in a single day, all under a tent in their backyard.

First up was Maddy’s bat mitzvah ceremony, followed by brunch with 35 immediate family members.

“We have a very close family and so the nicest part to me was that every person there got to play a part in the service,” said Amy. While they were disappointed not to be able to host a festival-like weekend at overnight camp

— Maddy’s “happy place” — the morning brought with it some unexpected benefits. “I’m so grateful we did it that way because it ended up being so intimate, warm and special, more so than had we had it up at camp.”

While the family posed out front for photos, the tent was turned over to a group of school friends. Soon after, 10 girls showed up for lunch and got going on their favourite activities, including a sweatshirt tie-dye session and a dessert cooking challenge. A few hours later, the bat mitzvah girl bid farewell to this tight-knit crew and welcomed 10 camp friends for a movie night under the stars, replete with bean bag chairs, cotton candy, popcorn and a slew of other treats.

“The nicest part for Maddy was that she got to spend time with everybody. I loved having it at our home and something about it being on her birthday felt so special. At the end of the day, the most important people in our lives were all here,” said Amy.

For their older son’s bar mitzvah in 2018, long before COVID, the couple had 350 guests at a synagogue. Now, as they plan for their younger son Jared’s bar mitzvah in March 2022, they’re working out how to go micro once again — this time by choice rather than necessity. “Now that I’ve done (Maddy’s), I’d like to be able to keep Jared’s nice and intimate. We’re leaning toward a spring party in the backyard. I just want to make it fun and all about him,” Amy said.

Twin brothers Jian and Page Magen have been running a private events and entertainment company, Magen Boys Entertainment, since 1999. They’re involved in more micro-events than ever before and believe the trend is here to stay.

“People were unilaterally forced to (go small) because they weren’t allowed the numbers or access to venues. It’s not something they were necessarily looking to do but, in the end, we’re reinventing things for the better. It’s about conversations and connections and not about the showiness ... We’re bringing events back to the heart and purpose of it all,” said Jian.

For example, gamification is a big part of events today, Jian said, because it’s inclusive, fresh and COVID-friendly: “It’s an authentic experience that still excites and entertains people and makes them smile.”

Their company has been creating different trivia games, including a “How well do you know the bride and groom” game show and a virtual “Spin the Wheel” that has each table involved via buzzers. “Interestingly, things were getting excessive anyway (in the events industry). The environmental components to some of these events and the wastage and excess ...” said Jian. “We’re going back to basics. Rather than pushing forward with this bigger and better mentality, we’re thinking small but mighty.”

Even pre-pandemic, many would-be hosts were searching for ways to take the pressure off. In their new book “The New Wedding Book: A Guide to Ditching all the Rules,” Michelle Bilodeau and Karen Cleveland walk readers through ways to eliminate outdated customs and plan their dream wedding in a way that’s meaningful to them.

“Most of our research was done prior to the pandemic and most couples were totally relieved that they weren’t going to have a big, lavish affair they found overwhelming, expensive or inauthentic,” said Cleveland. “As far as weddings go, the pandemic has been a blessing in disguise because it has given them an out. They can have a small wedding without offending anyone.”

The authors interviewed a range of people about their big day, including a couple living in Berlin who simply rented out their favourite restaurant for a 60-person dinner party and served Czech and Jamaican food representative of their backgrounds (the night ended with a dance party). That was during the “before” times. Now, as pandemic regulations are slowly but surely being lifted, this type of intimate and out-of-the-box thinking is here to stay.

“Weddings have become so performative and over the top. The bride has to fit a certain esthetic and personality ... There’s a room full of people where you know only 50 to 75 per cent of guests,” said Bilodeau. “Luckily, pre-pandemic and with the current pandemic, it’s really about getting back to authenticity: how couples are as individuals and how they want to be as a team. They’re getting married with their nearest and dearest; it takes the pressure off.”

[REPORT AN ERROR](#)

[JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS](#)

[ABOUT THE STAR](#)
