

The Roots of Ritual

by Jessica Cagle

Rachel Mitrani, 25, doesn't consider herself for her live-in love, Ryan Penwell, 27, very traditional. The Eugene couple has been together for six years now and, she says, they already feel completely committed and pretty much married. But to make their families happy, they decided to have an actual wedding ceremony back east, where both of their clans live. Mitrani's mother has been planning the whole thing in New York for her daughter, who has been busy with school and work. Mitrani is co-owner of Conquering Lion Live Food, a raw food restaurant (inside of Cozmic Pizza) that makes gourmet meals out of uncooked vegetarian and organic ingredients.

Though much of the typical wedding hoopla is not Mitrani's style, she agreed to certain customs to appease the couple's more traditional families. The pair will have bridesmaids (his sisters) and a best man (her brother), as well as "a cheesy wedding band" playing at the reception. But Mitrani drew the line at wearing the expensive, custom wedding gown many brides choose to wear. Instead, she and Penwell opted for natural hemp clothing. "My family was worried that it wouldn't be fancy enough, but we're not very fancy people," she says.

Mitrani's simple dress is actually closer to the style worn by early brides. Most women wore their prettiest everyday dress for their wedding, regardless of the color. It took royalty to change this trend and inspire women to buy a special white dress for the occasion. In 1499, Anne of Brittany was the first to wear a white gown. Queen Victoria later made the practice even more popular when she wore white at her wedding instead of the customary silver for royals.

During the period named for the popular queen, a white gown came to symbolize purity and virginity. Before this Victorian invention, a white dress was considered a sign of wealth because only the rich could afford a dress that would be worn only once. With the limited hygiene standards of the masses, who could realistically get white clean enough to wear again?

Many such wedding traditions are carried on today in the Western world, though most brides and grooms follow them out of custom, rather than an understanding of where they come from or what they mean. Most of our tried and true matrimonial conventions come from the European Middle Ages and the time of the Roman Empire — times when the push for fertility and the warding off of evil spirits were both big motivators.

Thankfully, the reasons behind some wedding traditions have changed. During the 14th century, for example, European wedding-goers thought it good luck to have a piece of the bride's dress. (Brides were, after all, considered some mighty powerful symbols of fertility.) Throwing all good manners aside, guests would begin tearing the blushing bride's gown right off of her after the ceremony. To save herself from blushing all over, the bride began the custom of throwing her garter to the men in the crowd. Unfortunately, as happens at every wedding, some guests would become drunk and impatient. These rambunctious men would try to take the bride's garter off for themselves. The chivalrous groom soon learned to throw his bride's garter into the crowd to stave off any liberties from being taken. This left the bride free to throw her bouquet to the women in the crowd, who were pretty pushy themselves when it came to getting their hands on some fertility mojo.

Looking at many wedding customs, it becomes clear that marriage was all about makin' babies. The wedding cake, for example, started out as a cake made of wheat or barley. Romans back in the 1st century B.C. would break the cake over the bride's head as a symbol of, you guessed it, fertility. No one really knows if this means they broke the cake in the air over her head, or if they actually smacked her cranium with it — we just can't be sure. But we do know that the Romans figured the more cakes the better, and it became a tradition for guests to bring cakes and stack them as high as they could. The couple would then kiss over the tower of wheat or barley and if the cakes didn't topple, the pair was thought to have a lifetime of good luck.

So, how did we get from a stack of fecund wheat cakes to today's traditional three-tiered wedding cake? Simple. A French baker modeled a wedding cake on the shape of the spire of the oh-so-fitting Saint Bride's Church in London. And voila, it became a tradition to serve the frosted confection we all know and love. For good luck, guests have always shared at least a few crumbs, or a slab, of wedding cake.

Another wedding must also got its start as a fertility symbol: flowers. Flowers signified that a bride, like her bouquet, was in bloom. In most cultures, ancient brides carried strong-smelling herbs or flowers, as well as wearing them in their hair, to bring on fertility and to ward off evil spirits. The Victorians made an art of assigning meanings to particular flowers, such as love to red chrysanthemums or chastity to orange blossoms (those Victorians loved purity!). Some say that flowers were also used to mask the odor of the unwashed during the Middle Ages, when bathing wasn't so popular.

This may also explain why June has become such a popular matrimonial month.

Roses, some of the sweetest smelling flowers around, were thought to be at the height of their beauty in June, and it was hoped that they would make up for a smelly wedding party. Most Medieval folks took their annual bath in May, whether they needed it or not. If a bride wanted to wed while smelling her best, she married no later than a month after her soak in the tub — and she carried roses.

Today, most brides just pick their flowers for color or personal preference. For our Eugene girl, it was all about color. Rachel Mitrani asked her future father-in-law, who is a florist, to use any flowers he wanted, as long as he stuck to her color scheme of red, gold and green. The colors have special meaning for Mitrani and her fiancé, as they signify the couple's faith in Rastafari. "It was my small way of integrating something special to us into the wedding," Mitrani says.

When the newlyweds return home to Eugene, they plan to have a reception for their friends in town. It will be more of what they prefer, Mitrani says. And you can bet there won't be any cheesy music.

EW



NEWLYWEDS RYAN PENWELL AND RACHEL MITRANI

Tying the Knot

The best wedding I ever attended wasn't technically a wedding. It was a pagan hand-fasting ceremony held near the McKenzie River. When my Uncle John and his partner of three years, Roger, decided "to tie the knot," a phrase which actually comes from the hand-fasting ceremony's practice of binding the lovers' hands together in unity, they did it in front of 45 of their loved ones.

It was surely one of the most colorful processions that the Holiday Farm Resort in Rainbow, Ore., had ever seen. Led by a Reiki practitioner beating on

a drum and friend singing a Celtic processional song, the wedding party and all the guests, who went along with the couple's invitation to wear Carnavalesque attire and regalia, walked in velvet, capes, wings and masks over a wooden bridge onto a tiny island near one of the resort's hidden lakes.

An older female friend of the couple, known to embrace her position as a "crone," or woman of wisdom, officiated as the ceremony's high priestess. At the end of the ceremony, all of us formed a circle around John and Roger, who both wore crowns made of pewter and glass stones instead of the tradi-

tional wedding rings. The high priestess unraveled a piece of string from a ball of red yarn and gave it to John's mother, who, as the oldest female relative, held the respected position of family matriarch. She held the string and passed the ball to John. He took a piece of string and tossed the ball to Roger. They took turns tossing the ball of yarn to friends in the circle and back again, until a large web was formed. John and Roger stood in the middle of the red web and reminded us, their friends and family, that we were all part of their union.

—Jessica Cagle



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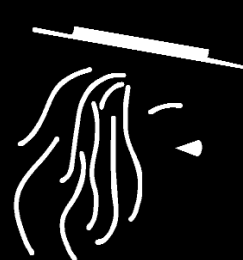
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