

## OWNING THE FUTURE

# Weddings Took a Big Hit in 2020. Enter the Micro-Wedding.

As nuptials were canceled across the country, wedding planners have downscaled — and in some cases their new offerings will stick.



Gretchen Culver, right, the founder of Rocket Science Events and Minne Weddings, planned the June wedding for Catie Hawk, left, in Minneapolis. Credit...Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

**By Eilene Zimmerman**

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*This article is part of [Owning the Future](#), a series on how small businesses across the country have been affected by the pandemic.*

Of all the events altered by the coronavirus pandemic, among the most obvious were weddings. Traditional weddings often have dozens, if not hundreds, of guests and in most places during the pandemic, gatherings that size were not possible. But it was not

only the bride and groom who were affected — the wedding planner’s entire livelihood has also been on the line.

About 46 percent of couples use a wedding planner, according to a 2020 survey by the online magazine [Brides](#), and most are small, entrepreneurial outfits like [D’Concierge Weddings](#) in Houston. Darryl Moore, its founder and creative director, has been planning and executing weddings for more than a decade, most with guest counts from 175 to 500. Some of the traditional ethnic weddings he handles — Nigerian or Haitian ones, for example — can have as many as 1,000 guests.

Before the pandemic, D’Concierge planned about two weddings per month and gross revenue in 2019 topped \$400,000. By summer 2020, that number had dropped 50 percent. Mr. Moore had one full-time and three part-time employees to pay and worried that the business he had been building since 2007 would not survive.



The January wedding of Tequia Babineaux and M. Samuel Daffin, II, planned by D’Concierge Weddings, was scaled back in size because of the pandemic. Credit...Pharris Photos

As is custom with most wedding planners, D’Concierge clients sign a contract and if the couple breaks up or wants to cancel, they are still obligated to pay. Because of Covid, Mr. Moore was forced to become more flexible, and had many conversations with couples about their options, including postponing or making the wedding much, much smaller.

“A lot of couples were so knee-deep into the process they would have lost thousands of dollars if they canceled, because so much of the wedding had already been paid for,” he said.

Like D’Concierge, wedding planners around the country were forced to become more flexible during the pandemic, drilling down to the elements of a wedding couples felt were essential. That meant embracing the micro-wedding — a high-end affair with a much lower guest count — which kept many planners in business but usually generated less revenue.

D’Concierge’s path to micro-weddings began last June, when a couple whose families were already set to travel to Houston for their July 4 wedding, decided to change a weekend of events for 150 guests to a dinner for 25.



Darryl Moore, the founder and creative director of D’Concierge Weddings in Houston, is keeping the micro-wedding option for his business. “It kept me afloat during the pandemic, no question,” he said. Credit...Tomayia Colvin Photography



Mr. Moore transformed the couple's condo into a wedding venue. Guests sat at two long, candlelit tables lined with shimmering gold and black place settings, their centers filled with red roses. "We knocked it out of the park for them," Mr. Moore said. "And from there, the small weddings started."

Mr. Moore created a micro-wedding package, charging about 50 percent less than he usually would. Many of these took place at someone's home, often in their backyard. Without the micro-wedding option, clients that were early in the planning process would likely have canceled; newly engaged couples might not have sought D'Concierge's services at all. "It kept me afloat during the pandemic, no question," said Mr. Moore, who is keeping the offering permanently.



The Babineaux-Daffin wedding included information on pandemic protocols. Credit...Pharris Photos



The bride and groom started with a guest list of more than 200 people but reduced it to around 20. Credit...Pharris Photos

This kind of thinking is what prompted a group of five wedding planners based in different cities to form the [Small Wedding Society](#) in May 2020. One of those planners, Beth Bernstein, founder and creative director of [SQN Events](#) in Chicago, said the companies are part of an accountability group that have shared business ideas, pricing strategies and critiques of one another's work for many years. During the pandemic, those relationships took on a new urgency: They had weekly video calls and began

“We thought, why not give this a shot now, during the pandemic,” Ms. Bernstein recalled. “What could be the downside?”

Most of the planners had fairly large Instagram followings and launched their micro-wedding businesses on the same day for maximum effect. Ms. Bernstein, whose own micro-wedding offerings are packaged under the brand [Essential I Dos](#), said the initial interest came mostly from other wedding planners.

“We got calls from people saying, ‘This is a great idea, how can I do this?’” Ms. Bernstein said. That spurred the creation of the Small Wedding Society, including a website that currently lists 28 vendors who have met certain criteria, including a minimum of two years in business, a tax ID number and business insurance.



The wedding for Catie Hawk and Elliot Russell took place at Holden Room in Minneapolis. Credit...Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

[Rocket Science Events](#), founded in 2010 in Minneapolis, specializes in elaborate, imaginatively designed weddings held in nontraditional venues, like an airplane hangar or boxing gym. At the start of 2020, Gretchen Culver, its founder, had three part-time employees, a handful of independent contractors working events and revenue projected to be slightly below \$500,000. Then, the lockdown hit Minnesota.

“It was terrible for us,” she said. “All my weddings postponed and I waived the fee for changing a date. That meant, essentially, zero revenue for Rocket Science in 2020 and most of 2021.”

A few years before the pandemic, however, Ms. Culver began noticing that guest counts for many weddings were decreasing. Instead of 200 to 300 people at weddings, many clients wanted 100 or less. “I could sense priorities were shifting,” she said. “In the back of my head I’d been wondering if there was a way to make small weddings, with a smaller overall budget, work for my business.”

The pandemic offered an opportunity for her to find out. She consulted a planner in Birmingham, Ala., doing multiple micro-weddings a day and that conversation sparked a light-bulb moment for Ms. Culver. She created a separate business, [Minne Weddings](#), which offers highly stylized, all-inclusive wedding packages on Sundays.

Several time slots are available on each date for a 90-minute wedding that can accommodate up to 32 guests. The package includes the venue, rentals, décor, digital invitations, flowers, photos, videography, cake, sparkling wine and an officiant; prices range from \$5,000 to \$7,000. Couples booking the last slot of a particular day can pay to extend the wedding to three and a half hours and add extras like special dances, speeches and more food. Everything is done through the website; in most cases Ms. Culver doesn’t even meet the couple until the day of the wedding.



The Hawk-Russell wedding was small enough that everyone could sit at one large table. Credit...Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

Almost as soon as Minne Weddings started in April 2020, demand was strong. “In five months, it became a six-figure business,” said Ms. Culver, who was able to hire a full-time employee for it.

A May survey of engaged couples with set wedding dates conducted by [The Knot](#), an online wedding platform, found that 73 percent believed that the micro-wedding was “here to stay,” although just 5 percent of couples with summer weddings were inviting fewer than 25 guests.

This renewed confidence in larger gatherings “comes from a number of factors, including vaccine availability and a steady decline in Covid cases and hospitalizations,” said Lauren Kay, executive editor at The Knot. She added that many businesses that served the wedding industry and closed during the pandemic — such as venues, caterers and florists — had opened back up.

Ms. Culver noted that most of her customers are first-timers in their 20s and 30s, and those having second marriages and vow renewals. “We are getting requests weekly for dates in June and October of 2022, so I know this model is here to stay.”

[Clover Event Co.](#), based in Philadelphia, produces weddings focused around high-end décor and design. Typical guest counts are 150 to 200, and full-service planning packages cost about \$15,000. Caitlin Maloney Kuchemba, the owner and principal planner who started the business in 2015, employs two full-time planners and, before the pandemic hit, projected about \$500,000 in revenue in 2020.

After the shutdown, two-thirds of her clients postponed their weddings. She, too, scaled down, offering two packages: micro (under 25 guests) and intimate (under 50). (Like Mr. Moore of D’Concierge, she plans to continue those offerings.) Planning services for micro-weddings run \$3,500; intimate weddings are \$5,500.

“With a very small wedding, you aren’t paying for a 15-piece band, or you might decide to get married on a weeknight,” Ms. Kuchemba said. Clover planned and executed 20 weddings last year, which helped stem the business’ losses. At year’s end, with help from a Paycheck Protection Program loan, revenue was down only about \$37,000 from 2019.

Anna Price Olson, associate editorial director at Brides, agrees that micro-weddings are now a permanent part of the wedding landscape. “Covid taught us to basically reimagine everything, and with weddings that meant you could break the rules, invite who you really want, wear what you want,” she said. “It taught couples to embrace what feels right for them in this moment.”