

Business booming for area wedding planners

By Gaya Gupta
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While microweddings had their moment in 2020, couples are celebrating with guest lists and parties larger than ever, according to Brittany Rice, director of weddings and special events at Colonial Williamsburg Resorts.

While many opted for an intimate, official ceremony last year, they planned a bigger reception for what they thought would be a post-pandemic world.

"The stress of the wedding is now done, they're married, and now they just want to celebrate," said Rice. "This may be the first time that all the family has gotten together since the pandemic, and so they're going, 'go big or go home.'"

One of these couples is Hannah and Justin Roberto, who celebrated their one-year wedding anniversary July 11.

When COVID persisted through the spring of 2020, they realized they would have to postpone their dreams of a big wedding. Among their immediate family and grandparents, they ended up having a "mini-mony" at the Williamsburg Winery on July 11, 2020, organized last-minute by their wedding planner, Jess Aiken, founder of The Wedding Co. of Williamsburg.

Aiken has seen her wedding inquiries triple since COVID restrictions eased up, and is fully booked for 2021 and almost fully booked for 2022.

In 2019, she booked 29 weddings, and would have had 38 in 2020 before the pandemic canceled all but nine. Now, only halfway through 2021, she estimates she will book at least 35 weddings in 2022 based on current inquiries — double the bookings she's used to having six months in advance.

Similarly, Rice has seen her lead volume, the number



Hannah and Justin Roberto celebrated their one-year wedding anniversary July 11 with a celebration at the Williamsburg Inn, after officially getting married a year prior in a "mini-mony" organized by wedding planner Jess Aiken. COURTESY OF LUKE AND ASHLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

of people interested in planning a wedding, skyrocket — some got engaged in 2020 but are looking to book way in advance for 2022, while others are scrambling to find another venue after their original plans fell through.

"I think people are realizing they need wedding planners," Aiken said. "After going through COVID, they don't want to do it by themselves. And so I'm finding people are more apt to hire a planner, they're more appreciative of what we do."

The Robertos say they can hardly imagine what it would've been like to re-plan their wedding ceremony — rebook their venue, caterers and more — amidst COVID. Luckily, all their original vendors were available on July 11 this year, so they were able to continue with their original wedding plans as a one-year anniversary celebration.

"I think it was a blessing in disguise. I mean, there are so many silver linings look-

ing back at it — we got to celebrate intimately with our family, which not a lot of people get to do. And then we got to still have our big party and celebrate with all of our friends," said Hannah Roberto. "So I think in a lot of ways, it worked out better than we could have asked for."

Rice has been in the events industry since 2007 and drew parallels between the financial recession of 2008 and the pandemic.

"What happened in 2008 is somewhat similar to what we saw happen at the beginning of the pandemic," she said. "So, things went back to a smaller scale, people were limiting their budgets, and things were being booked on the short term."

Mason jars, burlap and casual backyard barbecues found their popularity in 2008 weddings, likely in part because of financial constraints. But as the economy started to recover in 2012, larger, more intricate

weddings took over, culminating in 2020. Rice said the year would have been a record-high "banner year" for them in terms of the number of weddings they had planned, as well as in the size of the weddings and how elaborate they were.

When the pandemic hit, Aiken had to scramble to either push ahead and re-plan intimate ceremonies in 2020 or move plans to 2021. So in addition to the weddings she'd already started planning pre-COVID, her 2021 was now busy with additional rescheduled weddings. At Colonial Williamsburg Resorts, Rice found many couples booked out for 2021 pre-COVID as well, limiting their availability further.

Now, people are going back to trendy, fun, light-hearted celebrations, with many moving past the monogrammed COVID masks and hand-sanitizer wedding favors, said Rice.

"Everyone is just ready to have a massive party. Everybody wants that big wedding again," Rice said. "If someone was having the idea of having a large wedding prior, then they still want that, they're not willing to compromise and make it a smaller wedding if they don't have to."

And, after all they've seen in the past year, the advice either Rice or Aiken would give to newly engaged couples? Plan early.

"We are really pushing people to 2023 at this point, just because there's so little availability left for 2022," said Aiken. "It is booming right now. ... We are just at full capacity for our fall at this point in time for 2022."

Similarly, Rice found if you're looking at Colonial Williamsburg Resorts' prime dates, Saturdays in May, June or September through November, you'd want to book out a year in advance.

While the rise of the delta variant hasn't necessarily

caused wedding planning to come to the halt it did last year, wedding venues and caterers are now better equipped and prepared for the safety precautions that would come with a COVID-conscious wedding, added Rice.

"We know that if there were to be any restrictions put back into place, at least now we have a standard going forward," Rice said.

All celebrations, not just weddings, but anniversaries, birthdays, even end-of-life celebrations, don't seem like they're slowing down, according to Rice.

"As humans, we learned how valuable being with our loved ones, physical touch is, enjoying the simple things in life," said Rice. "I think people are realizing that tomorrow is never guaranteed. And so we need to celebrate today."

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