

'Don't hold your guests captive and forget the flowers' - meet Ireland's first wedding doula

Your big day should be among the happiest days of your life, but too often the stresses attached to the big event can take over, writes Kirsty Blake Knox. Step in wedding doula, Anne Gill...



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Anne Gill: 'No one has to get married any more - you are doing this because you want to'

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Weddings are meant to be fun. But sometimes it can be hard to remember that, what with all the seating charts, future in-laws squabbling, and bridesmaids throwing strops.

It can turn the most blissed out and Zen individual into a stress cadet or, whisper it, bridezilla. But now help is at hand thanks to Ireland's first ever wedding doula.



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It's not about what you spend: The cost of canapés can stack up

Yes, you read that right. Most of us are familiar with regular old doulas. Traditionally employed by pregnant women, they mop your brow, squeeze your hand, and tell you everything is going to be hunky-dory when you're eight hours into hard labour and cursing like a sailor.

If a doula can put your mind at ease in that scenario, then it makes sense they'd be a dab hand at eradicating the stress of a wedding/help you decide between steak and salmon.

Anne Gill, who was born in Connecticut and now lives in Dublin, became a wedding doula almost by accident.

Caught in the middle of a white wedding flurry - organising her own big day and attending a spate of pals' ceremonies - she started writing down notes on how to navigate her way through this rite of passage.

"It became a workbook and I passed it on to my friends and family, and they in turn started passing it on to their friends," she explains.

Soon she wrote down the 'Wedding Doula Manifesto', advising couples on how avoid the "insane wedding industry machine".

She and her business partner Charlotte Kerr (a trained psychotherapist) want people to pause and reconnect with their wedding at an emotional level. In this way, they differ from your traditional wedding planner.

"We are more focused on why you are doing this, and who is it for? No one has to get married anymore - you are doing this because you want to," says Anne.

"It's good to remind people of that and remind them that they don't have to get sucked into the spiral of handmade bunting and fancy seat covers."

Couples planning on tying the knot can download a copy of the Wedding Doula Workbook for €50 from their website or if you want a little more coaching, Anne and Charlotte offer consultations to newly engaged couples face-to-face or via Skype.

This package includes a bespoke workbook offering tailored advice to use throughout the engagement. For example, the best way to tell your devout mother-in-law that you won't be getting hitched in a Church.

One of the most stressful components of organising a wedding is managing expectations for the day. Add in to that equation money, and things can quickly become explosive. "This is the start of your new family, and that's exciting but really overwhelming," Anne explains. "It's often the first time a couple have had to manage a budget together. Money is so emotional, especially when it comes to weddings."

If family members are generous enough to offer financial support, Anne advises directing their monies towards something tangible rather than chucking it 'in a pot'.

The benefit of this is twofold. It's satisfying for the person giving you the cash - it allows them to stake a claim in the wedding ("I paid for the falcon ring bearer!"). It will also prevent them from feeling like they have a free license to comment on everything else to do with the wedding.

You should also be considerate of your guest's experience. Two of Anne's biggest bugbears are wedding photography and speeches.

"It can really kill the momentum of the day," she says. "It's important to have photographs to share with family and friends but do you need hundreds of them?"

"Also people have travelled to celebrate your love, and then you're MIA for three hours. It's a wedding day, not a photoshoot! Ask yourself which would I prefer to be doing today - posing in a meadow for hours, or drinking Champagne with your friends?"

When it comes to speeches, Anne advises keeping it short and sweet. "Don't hold your guests captive - make speeches early in the night, thank people for coming, and keep it under five minutes."

Staggering the speeches over the course of a meal forces guests to adhere to a schedule, and that can get boring. she says.

And what of the cost? Weddings have become so expensive in recent years - the average cost is €31,000 but some couples are spending up to €75,000.

To avoid going into financial ruin, don't plan too far out, she advises. "If you want to get married in a castle, in Kerry, in June and the waitlist is two years out, book it. And then forget about it. Don't start planning the practicalities until you're six months out. If you start planning earlier, you'll start incrementally spending more. Never take a loan out for a wedding. Some of the best weddings I've been to were the simplest. All anyone wants when they are invited to a wedding is to watch you say incredibly moving and important things to the person you love."

At the end of the day, Anne says "a wedding is a day to have the people you care about most stand up and support you in this huge life decision. That is what weddings are about."

So what are the golden rules then? Read on:

The Wedding Doula Manifesto

Don't Let A Photographer/Videographer Take Up All Your Party Time

Definitely take some formal photos of the bride and groom alone, a few shots with immediate family and parents, and then be done. Have a #hashtag so everyone can post on Instagram. Your favourite photos will always be the candid ones.

Don't Let The Venue Dictate The Terms

It's your party. Make it about you as a couple. Party like you want to.

Don't Hold Your Guests Captive

Let your guests party at their own pace, and facilitate times for casual exits from the party. Keep photoshoots and speeches as snappy as you can.

It Is Not About How Much You Spend

It is a privilege to be invited to watch a couple you care about take their vows. To get a few glasses of Champagne and maybe some food afterwards is an added bonus. It does not have to be more than that. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

No One Remembers Your Flowers

Spend your hard-earned money on what guests will notice most: food, drinks, and music.

Free Drinks

A certain number of free drinks, or an option for free drinks - at least for the first part of the reception - is classy and will certainly add to the Best Party Ever vibes.

A Good DJ Is Worth Every Penny

A band is great but nothing can beat listening to a Beyoncé sung by Beyoncé. DJs can read a room and cater for all ages. They are also less costly than a band.

If You Have Fun, Your Guests Will Too

It's simple, but true. The couple has all the power on the day. Everyone will take their cue from you.

It's Actually All About One Moment

Your wedding ceremony is the most important part. It is a unique opportunity to show your community who you are as a couple.

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 Giddy on Champagne and goodwill, the newly-engaged build five-star castles in the sky. Stock image

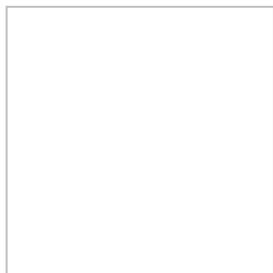
Katie Byrne: 'The six wedding dilemmas that every couple encounters'

Katie Byrne TV presenter Gráinne Seoige voiced an all-too-common dilemma when she admitted that she and fiancé Leon Jordaan agonised over the location for their upcoming wedding.



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