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Love for Sale

Six hundred happy brides—and lots of happy merchants—at Anna Maria Island's first wedding festival.

By Carol Tisch
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Okay, I admit it. I cried at a mock wedding. At the first annual Anna Maria Island Wedding Festival, Reverend Charlie's deep mellifluous voice, the Gulf-front Sandbar Restaurant setting, the spectacular sunset, and the beautiful young couple exchanging vows brought me to tears.



The wedding party at the sunset mock wedding at the Anna Maria Island Wedding Festival.

It didn't matter that before the ceremony, festival organizers told me the bride and groom, Susan and Mike Brinson (owners of Anna Maria Island Accommodations), had already been married by Rev. Charlie Shook (her dad) last June. Knowing he was the bride's father gave credence to his beaming smiles. I just loved the way he gave them their lines (sotto voce) and mouthed every word as the couple repeated them. It evoked tender images of a proud dad at his kid's first grade school play.

The crowd loved it, too. All 600 registrants, plus fiancés and families, toasted the couple with free champagne, followed by a drawing for \$15,000 in wedding-related prizes donated by the Anna Maria Island Wedding Merchants Network, sponsor of the event along with the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce. Future brides registered outside the chamber office, then hopped on a trolley to visit various vendors stationed at 15 designated spots spread over the length and breadth of the island. If you hit nine stops, you were eligible for the prize drawing. Clever! Registration opened at 9:00 a.m., said a chamber representative, and by 8:45, hundreds were already waiting on line. All 500 goody bags were soon gone – the event's success well beyond expectation.

I met a young couple from landlocked Lakeland who were overwhelmed by the possibility (and affordability) of a beachfront wedding; a pair from Bradenton who said they didn't have a proper wedding the first time around and were checking out possibilities for renewing their vows; and another couple who had been invited to the Brinson's

June wedding, were out of town at the time, and came to see the ceremony re-enacted at the festival. “Everything is the same: the bride’s gown, the bridal party, even the flower girl,” they said.

The brainchild of photographer Jack Elka, the festival is part of a marketing campaign to promote Anna Maria Island as the wedding capital of Florida and the beach wedding capital of the world. “We’re unique, the new Niagara Falls or Las Vegas as a wedding destination,” said Elka, “and next year the wedding festival will be a national event.” He credits the camaraderie and determination of island merchants to band together, even with their competitors, and work as a team.

Chris Tollette, a wedding planner with Sol Weddings, said the festival attracted future brides from as far away as Germany and England, and that destination weddings are important not just to the 30-plus local wedding merchants, but for tourism on the island in general. “Wedding guests will return for vacations once they have been exposed to the resorts and beaches here,” she explained. I, on the other hand, will return to Matt & Dom’s Pastry Café, my favorite stop on the wedding trail, where the young brothers are serving up wonderful petit fours and espresso and told me they were really psyched about building up their wedding cake business through exposure at the festival.



Jack Elka founder of the event, Rev. Jill Salazaar (ordained minister and wedding officiator), and Chris Tollette, wedding planner from Sol Wedding Consultants.

You can check out the vendors at www.amiweddings.com, and in the Anna Maria Island Wedding Guide, both produced by Jack Elka for the island’s weddings network. But you had to be there to experience the Sandbar’s brand new wedding pavilion, which owner Ed Chiles had decked out with reception tables and hors d’oeuvres for the event, and for exhibits by vendors from Anheuser Busch to local wedding chaplains. “Brides were so thrilled to get a feel for the venues, taste their future wedding cake, meet the photographers and ride the limos in a festival we opened to them,” Tollette said.

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