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## Wedding fest rings true

Anna Maria Island Sun News Story

By Cindy Lane and Tom Vaught | Sun staff writers



PHOTO/DARA CAUDILL  
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*Mary Brouwer and John Derussy, of St. Petersburg, won the festival's grand prize, a \$10,000 dream Island wedding.*

Ruth Zher and Tia Cuttin were strolling under the covered area behind the BeachHouse restaurant, where they were enjoying mimosas and looking at the vendor tables and getting information on the upcoming wedding between Tia and Ruth's son.

"This is a great idea," Ruth said of the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce Wedding Festival last Sunday. "We come on one day and meet all kinds of people face-to-face who we might be able to hire for the wedding."

An estimated 700 people turned out for the second annual Island-wide festival, roughly twice as many as last year.

Debbie Rivera was one of those vendors at the BeachHouse, where attendees were invited to enjoy a continental breakfast along with the mimosas at one of the most popular sites for beach weddings. Rivera is a event planner from Brandon.

"Florida is the fourth largest wedding destination in the country," she said. "I get calls from all around the country and I try to point them in the right direction. They all want a beach wedding."

Rivera said she has planned a lot of weddings for Anna Maria Island and she had praise for the attitude out here.

"The businesses work together to get the job done," she said, "This chamber (of commerce) has been particularly helpful."

Rivera said she loves what she does and she tells everyone she does it for more than the money.

"Everyone is so happy and the couple is so in love," she said. "I can't think of anything else I would rather do."

Rivera said she is also a relationships coach and she tries to give the couple some tips before they get married.

One of the booths at the BeachHouse featured music by More than Music, a company out of Sarasota that has worked the Island before.

"We do a lot of weddings here at the BeachHouse and the Sandbar," said J.B. Baxter, one of the DJs. "We do weddings all up the coast and along the barrier islands and this is one of the best for a beach wedding."

Steve Lebel, originally from Canada, and Mackenzie Loftus, originally from Chicago, were sitting on a bench outside the covered area. They now live in Ellenton.

"We're planning a wedding here on April 17," Loftus said. "This is where we had our first date."

"She didn't want a beach wedding, but I might," Lebel said. "I saw some people get married on the beach and they looked really happy."

Lebel said they are planning on a party of about 100 and half of them will be coming from out of town.

A huge crowd gathered in the parking lot of the Chamber of Commerce. More than a dozen vendors were there as volunteers signed up those who wanted to attend. Acqua Aveda Salon hosted a fashion show around noon with models of all ages walking the runway in everything from traditional dresses and men's wear to more tropical prints.

The crowd was shuttled efficiently from one end of the Island to the other via limousines and chartered trolleys. At one stop, Nicole Miller, of St. Petersburg, watched as Matt Schole, of Matt and Dom's, in Anna Maria, showed her cake designs on a laptop computer. She is the sales director of the Holiday Inn at the skyway.

"My catering director recommended I come to the festival," she said. "He said he had done an event here and he liked it. I love it here."

Amanda Fisk and Steve Goshea, of Lakewood Ranch, were engaged on New Year's Eve, and the festival gave them a head start on their April 2010 wedding.

They interviewed photographers and florists, and have so far agreed to walk down the sandy aisle barefoot, and dress the men in khaki pants and white shirts.

Stefanie Myers, of Orlando, and William Ogle, of Alabama, are planning a June 21 wedding on Anna Maria Island.

"I wanted to get married on the beach, and a friend found out (about the Island) on the Beach House Web site," Myers said, as the couple waited to watch the festival's mock wedding Sunday at sunset.

Myers plans to wear a formal but "beachy" gown, and the men will wear white linen slacks, tangerine shirts and Hawaiian leis. Like the three couples in the mock wedding, they also will go without shoes.

They'll have a Jehovah's Witness ceremony, and honeymoon on the Island and in St. Lucia.

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The couples are among more than 700 who attended the wedding festival, more than doubling the attendance from last year, said Caryn V. Hodge, marketing director for the Chiles Group. The number of vendors also doubled from 30 to 60, she added.

Guests watched the mock wedding of three couples at sunset at the Sandbar restaurant as if it was the real thing.

Comments flew as spectators saw Aimee Hayes pass by in her gown from Elaine's Bridal Boutique, with its single beaded and pearled strap down the middle of the back. Her "groom," Parrish Cuellar, sported a khaki jacket and slacks and a deep purple orchid.

The sparkling gown modeled by Kelly Flowers as she approached "groom" Pete Lass also won rave reviews as the sunset reflected in the sequins. Mike Sales and Billi Stuckert portrayed a casual couple exchanging vows under a latticework archway with pink bunting.

The reception culminated in a \$10,000 grand prize dream island wedding.

For Mary Brouwer and John Derussy. The St. Petersburg couple was vacationing on the Island and decided to join in the wedding festival after noticing the crowds – hard to miss with limousines ferrying participants up and down Gulf Drive all day.

"We couldn't have asked for a better day," said Theresa Camire of Elaine's Bridal Boutique, which supplied the wedding gowns. "Just beautiful."

Carmen Adair, of Polk County and a former Island resident, was talking with Billi Stukert, owner of Memories by Billi. Her son, Lyle Bagley, is getting married on the Island Nov. 28 and she was here with her daughter-in-law to be, Tiffany Deese.

"This is great," she said of the festival. "It will be great to have the wedding here where everyone should get married."

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