

COUPLES CAN BORROW ETHNIC WEDDING TRADITIONS

Brides in Eastern Pennsylvania are often influenced by various ethnic customs derived from our heritage as a melting pot blended from many parts of the globe. It helps to incorporate some of your ethnic traditions to make your wedding unique and to salute your heritage. Here are some of those customs:

JEWISH: Young Jewish women partake in a special bath called a *mikvah*, in which the elder women of the community participate. The bride-to-be is immersed several times in a special pool and recites a blessing for spiritual purification. In Jewish weddings, couples come together under the *chuppah*, a canopy that symbolizes the sanctuary of a new home and the spiritual haven the couple will share together. Male members of the congregation may hold up each corner of the *chuppah* during the ceremony. At the end of a Jewish ceremony, the groom crushes a glass under his foot as a remembrance of the fragility in life. The witnesses welcome the act with cheer of *Mazel Tov!* One of the most festive moments at a Jewish wedding is the celebrate *Horah*, or Chair Dance. Guests hoist up chairs holding the bride and groom and dance to the song *Hava Nagila*.

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX: In Russian Orthodox weddings, the liturgical music at the ceremony is sung by the priest. Russian Orthodox couples are crowned king and queen for a day. Witnesses hold silver and gold crowns above the couple's heads during the wedding ceremony. The priest leads the couple three times around the altar, after which the bride and groom drink from the same cup of wine to seal their commitment. At the reception, there is a bridal dance during which she wears a *babushka*, usually a gift from her mother or grandmother.

UKRAINIAN: The night before the wedding, there is a Parental Blessing called a *Blahoslevenya*, during which the parents of the couple bestow a blessing and convey their formal approval of the union. The couple may be presented with an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be displayed on the altar and later in their new home. The most solemn part of the wedding ceremony is the Crowning, which signifies the dawn of their new "kingdom," their home, to be ruled by the couple side by side and in partnership with God. At the reception, the newlyweds are welcomed with a traditional greeting of bread, salt, honey, and wine, symbolizing all of the elements necessary for a prosperous and happy life together. There is a master of ceremonies called a *Starosta* and a hostess, *Starostyna*. Another traditional is a round wedding bread known as *Korovay*, which dates back to pre-Christian times and symbolizes the sun as preserver of life. Today, it is a symbol of community support and trust, and is usually baked by the village women, or family friends. The wedding bread is encircled with a wreath of periwinkle, symbolizing love and purity, and the top is adorned with intricate dough ornaments such as birds, doves, and a tree-of-life. There is a traditional Bridal or Babushka Dance at the reception, where the bride bids farewell to her parents, family, and guests. She dances the last dance with her

father, and then guests crowd around them to prevent the groom from taking his new bride. Eventually, he breaks through the crowd and runs off with his new wife.

POLAND: In Poland, it is customary for onlookers to throw wheat and oats after the ceremony. The couple is greeted at the door of the reception hall with bread (*chleb*) and salt (*sol*), and sometimes a glass of vodka. The groom sprinkles the bread with the salt, and the newlyweds kiss the bread while the parents bless them, saying: “May you never lack it.” Bread is considered a gift of God, and salt comes from the earth and is a basic necessity of life. Traditionally, the first course at a wedding dinner is soup, and the second course is meat, chicken, or pork. In a traditional Polish wedding, the *Oczepiny* or “capping ceremony,” marks the moment when the bride becomes a married woman. The event takes place the evening of the wedding day, usually after the bride has danced with all the unmarried men. The best man signals the band, and the bride sits in a chair facing the guests. The maid of honor removes the bride’s wreath or veil and married women place a cap, a gift from her godmother, on her head. Customarily, the bride removes the cap twice; the third time the women place it on her head, she keeps it on, joining in more singing and dancing. Before *oczepiny*, the bride socializes and dances with her unmarried female friends, and after the ceremony, she joins the married women’s circle. The *Czepek* or Money Dance is a favorite in Poland, and has been adopted by many other nationalities. Guests must pay money to dance with the bride by pinning money to her clothing or placing it in special pouches. The music must be lively at a Polish wedding, with very few breaks.

ITALY: A bride and groom may find a ribbon tied on the church door, representing their coming union. After the ceremony, a pair of doves may be released and the couple’s car may be festooned with flowers. Bags of candy-coated almonds are used as favors at the reception to symbolize the union of bitter and sweet in life. In small Italian villages, the bride may walk the bride and the rest of the wedding party to the church, while in other villages he may wait at the church door. At the reception, Italian couples dance the Tarantella, a festive dance that increases with speed as it nears the end, leaving everyone breathless! A large part of any Italian festivity is the food, and weddings feature many courses, as well as the wedding cake. Local families of Italian descent often bake many cookies and pastries for the shower and/or the wedding reception, using traditional recipes. Italian weddings are joyous affairs with much dancing and festivity, and often feature a bridal dance during which guests give her money to place in a small satin bag.

IRELAND: Dancing is a central part of Irish weddings, where guests compete in contests to do the best jig. The winner takes the cake, literally—a miniature version of the wedding cake. In Ireland, the groom’s best lads will lift the groom up in a “jaunting chair,” and dance him around the room. Locally, Irish brides incorporate various symbols such as Irish lace, the Claddagh symbol and

Celtic knots, as well as Irish music for the ceremony and reception. Bagpipe music is also popular, both at the church and leading the couple into the reception. The bride often carries a special handkerchief which can be transformed into a bonnet for her first baby. Claddagh rings, featuring two hands of friendship clasping a heart for love below a crown symbolizing loyalty, are popular with Irish couples. A wedding party traditionally ends with the groom picking up and carrying off his bride, a playful reference to the ancient practice of mead-intoxicated men kidnapping the women they wanted to make their wives. Mead, in the modern form of Guinness, continues to be popular at Irish weddings.

GREECE: In Greece, a dowry (in the form of household items) is still a tradition. A potential groom must meet with the girl's parents and ask for her hand in marriage. The engagement rings also serve as wedding rings and are blessed twice. When the couple becomes officially engaged, the priest blesses the rings, which are worn on the left hand, until the wedding, when they are blessed again and changed to the right hand. During the ceremony, the couple is three times adorned with crowns (usually of white or gold, orange blossoms or twigs and vine wrapped in silver and gold paper) connected by a single strand of ribbon, signifying the union of the couple as well as the pair's "rule" over their household. The *Koumbaros*, traditionally the groom's godfather or a close male relative, serves as a sponsor, and invites the couple to walk around the altar table three times. He, the maid of honor, and the priest, also encircle the altar. Candied almonds are a favorite at wedding reception, distributed in cloth or tulle bags. There are two significant dances, beginning with the *Isaiah Dance*, performed by the bride and groom during the ceremony. The other is called the *Kaslamantiano*, performed in a circle during the reception. There is a Greek wedding tradition of musicians playing traditional songs while accompanying the groom to the church. Then, the musicians will go to the home of the bride and escort her to the ceremony. The tradition of *Nyphostoli* involves local girls setting up and decorating the household for the newly-married couple, using items from the dowry. Greek wedding receptions are lively, featuring traditional food, music, and dancing, and sometimes the breaking of dishes for good luck. Newlyweds often receive gifts during the reception, and some pin money to the bride's gown. A popular tradition is the baby-rolling on the bridal bed. Babies of friends and family are placed on the bed and gently rolled from side to side. The bed is strewn with rose petals, coins, and sugar-coated almonds to bring fertility and prosperity to the couple.

GERMANY: A German wedding celebration typically lasts for days, not just one afternoon or evening. The night before the wedding, there is an event called *Polterabend*, which involves smashing plates and china (but not glass) as a sign of good luck for the married couple. The idea is that these plates will be broken, but never the marriage. At the end of the fun, the future bride and groom must clean up the mess. In Germany, a big difference in the ceremony is that the couple proceed up the aisle together, without any attendants. Because

Germans are married a day or two before in a civil ceremony, they are already legally married before reaching the altar. Traditionally, the couple is showered with rice, an ancient symbol of fertility, as they leave the church. The reception is an all-night affair, beginning with cake, tortes, and coffee while the couple poses for wedding portraits. This is followed by dancing, a formal dinner, and more dancing to dawn. The receptions are fun parties featuring games, toasting, and plenty of beer. The couple's first dance is traditionally a waltz. Revelers play tricks on the couple, usually taking apart the bridal bed linens or filling their hotel room with balloons.

INDIA: Indian brides often wear gold-threaded saris on their wedding day. Hindu couples take the ceremonial Seven Steps, or *Saptha Padhi*, around a flame together. Each time they pass the flame they make specific promises to each other to enter into a nourishing household blessed with health, wealth, harmony, happiness, children, longevity, and life-long companionship. The bride's parents pour water through their hands into those of the bridal couple, symbolically extended their lineage. The night before the wedding, the bride is adorned with henna on her hands and feet, a custom designed to make her more beautiful.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN: African-American couples celebrate the beginning of their new life together by "jumping the broom," a custom practiced by Southern slaves who were unable to marry legally. The ceremony called for the groom to lay a broom on the ground with the bristles facing north. He'd then take his bride's hand and they would jump over it. The bride would turn the broom around so that the bristles faced south, then take her groom's hand and they would jump again. A similar custom of crossing sticks was practiced throughout Africa, Wales, and rural England. In addition to warding off back luck, the broom or sticks alluded to the vitality of trees and symbolized the beginning of married life.

EGYPT AND MOROCCO: For premarital preparation, brides immerse themselves in milk bath and remove body hair with a lemon-sugar recipe. Along with Muslim women in India, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, they are treated to full-body massages with coconut or olive oil, then professional henna artists paint their hands and feet with elaborate designs. This is believed to keep evil spirits at bay.

KOREA: Korean women have red dots painted on their cheeks and foreheads. Butterfly motifs decorate fans, screens, clothing, and furnishings of the young couple as symbols of everlasting love and beauty. The groom presents his future mother-in-law with a goose, an animal which mates for life, to symbolize his fidelity to his new bride. The bride's mother shows her acceptance by offering noodles to the goose. Modern Korean grooms present wooden geese to their new in-laws, and the term "feeding noodles to the goose" is a euphemism for getting married.

INDONESIA: Brides in Indonesia are beautified with patterns of white dots on their cheeks, noses, and foreheads.

CHINA: The day before her wedding, a Chinese bride takes a purifying herbal bath prepared with bamboo, pine, and artemisia, so that her married life will be long and prosperous. Chinese brides wear ornate red gowns, because the color is a symbol of good luck, vitality, and life. Instead of veils, they wear elaborate headdresses made of kingfisher feathers, pearls, and gilded silver. Couples participate in a tea ceremony. The sweet drink is made of special ingredients, which often have double meanings. There is a splendid array of food at the wedding banquet, most of it rich with symbolism. Red foods such as lobster, tuna, and pork are eaten for luck; noodles for long life, and chestnuts of many children.

JAPAN: Japanese brides wear kimonos with a white headdress. Brides traditionally fold 1001 origami cranes to decorate the wedding hall. Since cranes mate for life, the display of these good-luck birds symbolizes a thousand-fold wish for marital happiness. Shinto ceremonies unite the bride and groom with sake, “the drink of the gods.” In celebration of an old formal bond between two people, the bride and groom take turns drinking three sips from three different sake cups. Japanese couples will have a goose and gander join the wedding procession to bring good luck to their marriage. Some Japanese grooms break an egg with their bare foot during the ceremony. The raw yoke symbolizes fertility.

NIGERIA: American brides typically try to lose weight before the wedding day, but some African women spend weeks fattening up to be more voluptuous, fertile, and beautiful for their husbands. The bride wears bright, festive colors with bold geometric patterns.

NORWAY: Green is a favorite choice for Norwegian brides, although others consider it to be an unlucky color. Bridesmaids and single women at a Norwegian wedding will blindfold the bride for the Crown Dance, for a chance to wear the bride’s gold-and-silver headdress. Once the music begins, the bride tries to capture one of her single friends and crown her.