Fun With Favors

Great interactive gifts for guests BY ERIKA RASMUSSON JANES

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TODAY'S WEDDING FAVORS RUN THE GAMUT FROM simple—a chocolate or a tin of mints at a guest's place setting—to extraordinary, like full-sized bottles of pricey wine or celeb-worthy gift bags.

But if you want to wow your guests with favors that will fly off the tables, consider giving them a say in what they get. How? By creating interactive favor buffets. (Think of it as a Build-A-Bear Workshop for wedding favors: You provide the basic elements of a favor and let your guests give it their own personal twist.)

Interactive favors are "a fantastic way to create a vibe," says Kristin Banta of Kristin Banta Weddings & Special Events in Los Angeles. "They give guests another opportunity to do something fun." Because of that, the concept is gaining favor with couples, says wedding planner Tina LaMorte of Oh So Fabulous in Maywood, NJ, who has created build-your-own-favor buffets with both candy and pastries. "Wedding favors don't have to be boring or something you'll stuff in a drawer and never use," she says. "People like the interactive element; it's nice to be able to pick what you want, and it makes guests feel like they're a part of the wedding."

There are a few things to keep in mind, and first is the cost. Interactive favors "definitely can be more expensive," says Banta. "There are always exceptions, but when choices are given to guests, and you have to [offer more items], then you'll run into more cost. But there can also be more impact."

Another consideration: How simple is the favor for your guests to create? "It has to be like an assembly line," LaMorte explains. Take the candy-buffet concept: "It has to be, 'Here's the bag, here's the candy, here's the scoop,'" she says. "Give guests one easy way to do it; otherwise, they'll be standing in line all night." That means making sure everything is clearly labeled, and that the packaging is pretty and personalized, but »

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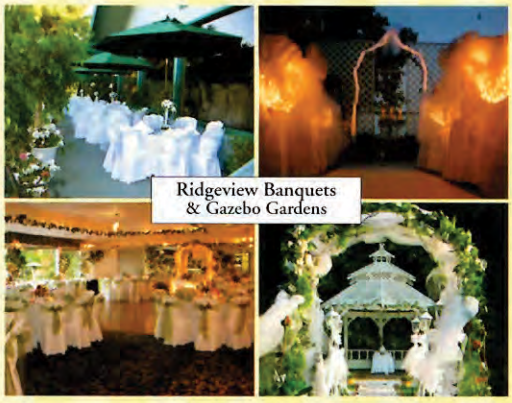

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simple. Colorful Chinese take-out containers, bakery boxes with lids or simple paper or cellophane bags that can be sealed with cute monogram stickers are good choices; decorative touches like ribbons, while fun, will hold up your guests and create bottlenecks. "Nothing is more disheartening than someone saying, 'Oh, I heard that the candy buffet was fantastic, but I never got a chance to go through it,'" Banta says.

Finally, make sure the idea doesn't require more space than you have available to dedicate to it, or create a big mess. A dip-your-own-strawberry station, for example, may not be the best choice for an elegant black-tie wedding.

Ultimately, your goal should be to find something that fits your and your groom's personalities (as well as your event) and that looks lush and appealing to your guests. Here are some standout interactive ideas to consider:

candy bars

Your guests will feel like kids in a candy store (literally!) when you present them with a favor-buffet table filled with nothing but decadent sweet shoppe–worthy treats. LaMorte designed a candy bar entirely in green for one couple's wedding; she filled clear glass jars, bowls and vases that she bought at IKEA with everything from green M&Ms and green gummy candy to green-and-white swirled lollipops and sticks of green rock candy. Guests went through the buffet, loading their favorites into white tin-tie bags; when they were done, the bags were sealed with stickers that were adorned with the couple's monogram and a simple message: *Enjoy*! "People went nuts," LaMorte says. "They really loved it." Banta had one of her couples request a candy bar that was comprised entirely of old-fashioned "nostalgia" candy (like swizzle sticks, Necco Wafers and wax candy bottles) that reminded them of their childhoods.

bakery buffet

In a different twist on the candy bar idea, LaMorte recently planned a baked goods favor buffet for a wedding. Guests were given pastry boxes that they could fill with their choice of sweets, including doughnuts, a variety of cookies and rugelach. »

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beauty bounty

If you want your guests to feel pampered at your party, consider providing a favor buffet filled with bath products like miniature soaps, bath salts and bath beads, and tiny bottles of scented lotion. Give your guests pretty sinamay bags to scoop everything into. To make this idea appeal to your male guests, include some guy-friendly products in the mix, like shaving cream, mint lip balm, unscented hand cream and mini tins of toothpicks or breath mints.

garden giveaways

Forget breakaway centerpieces—let your guests create their own bouquets to bring home at the end of the evening. Place a pretty, inexpensive glass vase at each guest's place setting; then lead them to a flower buffet filled with different kinds and colors of stems (you can cut costs by ordering the blooms directly from a wholesaler). Arrange the flowers by color, and make sure that each type of flower is labeled. Another twist on the concept: Offer burlap bags that guests can fill with different types of flower bulbs, herb seedlings or seed packets to take back to their own gardens.

strawberry fields forever

Give fresh fruit a fancy twist by creating a gourmet strawberry station. At one recent wedding, Banta created a waitstaff-manned strawberry bar where guests selected gorgeous, oversized berries from a big basket, and then had them infused with flavored liqueurs like Baileys Irish Cream or Frangelico and dipped in white, milk or dark chocolate. The berries were then placed on wax paper and tucked into personalized pastry boxes for guests to take home and enjoy. Having a waiter do the actual dipping means guests don't have to get messy to participate, Banta says, "but it's still customized and personalized in a way that marks the occasion." Another idea: Pre-dip strawberries and other fruit (such as dried apricots and pears) in a variety of chocolates and roll them in shredded coconut, chopped

pistachios or peanuts. Then let guests select their favorites.

picture this

Send your guests home with proof of how great your party was: Rent a photo booth (search online under "photo booth rentals" for vendors) so they can get strips of pictures; then provide them with a choice of tiny decorative frames or cardboard photo holders that have been customized with your wedding date, names, monogram or a fun message ("Thanks for making our wedding picture perfect!").

> "Interactive favors give guests another opportunity to do something fun"
>
> —Kristin Banta, California-based wedding planner

season's greetings

Give guests treats in the colors (and flavors) of the season. For a winter wedding, you might offer a variety of miniature ornaments for trimming Christmas trees that guests can select and take home in oversized stockings. Hosting a fall fete? Serve Halloween-themed goodies on your favor bar, or let guests choose from a variety of decorative mini gourds, pumpkins and Indian corn that they can carry home in burlap sacks.

coffee shop

Love java? Then fill several giant glass jars with a variety of whole beans—consider bold flavors like French roast, lighter "breakfast" blends and flavored and decaf selections—and let guests scoop their favorite into lined coffee-bean bags that have been adorned with personalized stickers. Then, give them a coffee scoop to go with it.

Whether you choose one of these options or come up with your own creative twist on the interactive favor concept, your guests will love having a say in the gift they take home—and you'll love knowing that they had a blast in the process of creating their own mementos. ■

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