



fire & ice

Bold weddings
leave lasting
impressions



MADE IN HEAVEN

Award-winning planner produces event of a lifetime.

For event planner Harith Wickrema, president of Philadelphia-based Harith Productions, it was business as usual: listen to the client and keep the client happy.

In this case the "client" was his bride-to-be, Grace, and the goal: to give her a fairytale wedding of mythic proportions.

Harith Productions has won more than 40 nominations and awards from the industry's most significant international organizations. Its events are renowned for high quality, flawless execution, experiential effects and dramatic showmanship.

"They are great innovators," said Bill Corteron, general manager and vice president of conference services for Atlantis Paradise Island Resort in The Bahamas, site of the wedding.

Harith makes any party he touches "a memorable experience for his clients," Corteron added.

The international audience would be discerning. Among those in attendance would be sports and business jet-setters,

whom Harith met as clients but now are close friends.

Harith vowed the wedding would be a benchmark of best practices in event planning. "That's what we're striving for as a team, and I think we will not only achieve it but exceed," he said. "You be the judge."

That's how I came to be at Atlantis last November, witnessing the frenetic final production days of this ambitious effort, and marveling at Harith's boundless energy and unabashed love affair with his work. In my judgment, the occasion is destined to remain a glowing memory in the minds of everyone fortunate enough to witness it.

Big idea, little time

The food and its presentation excelled, but they were only two aspects of a production punctuated with fun and drama. "From the dynamic arrival of the bride to the stylish dessert presentation," each guest would be taken on "a sensory journey unlike any other," Harith promised. There would even be scent machines wafting jasmine fragrance and a lively Junkanoo dance performance.

Harith envisioned marrying "the lost

civilization of Atlantis with the ancient, rich cultural heritage of Sri-Lanka," his native country.

He imagined a universe "filled with energy, the beauty of the Caribbean, the spirit of two ancient civilizations and unparalleled experiences." The Temple of the Sun, represented by artwork in the hotel, would be a recurring decorative theme.

Enactment of this vast vision began only one month before the event. That's when Grace, Harith, and Harith's key designer Sean DeFreitas of Designs by Sean arrived to share their plans, motivate staff and scout locations.

Director and leading man Harith had his signature on every detail. However, he relied on the creativity of a large cast to realize his complicated concept – much of it in a matter of days.

Allure of Atlantis

Rolling out a billion-dollar expansion this year, the Kerzner International resort was already an awesome, ocean-themed playground, encompassing three interconnected hotel towers, a world-class casino and a 97-acre waterscape with more than 20-million gallons of fresh and saltwater lagoons, pools and habitats.

Home to the world's largest seaquarium, Atlantis showcases sea life through wall-sized windows opening onto restaurants and tunnels.

While the resort presents romantic vistas and rare conceptual possibilities, Harith also chose it, because "Atlantis is like family," he said, stressing that "relationships are the cornerstone" of his company's success.

Harith brought the first corporate business to Atlantis when it opened in 1995, and since then has produced more than 90 events there.

Fourteen senior executives, including the resort's senior vice president, attended the kick-off meeting. Their cooperation was critical, because Harith's concept demanded every resource of the resort and required bringing in special talent.

For the ceremony, Harith selected a spot never utilized as a wedding venue. "He thought of something that we had never thought of before," Corteron

admitted, "using the lagoon and bringing his bride across it with three underwater seamen."

Food fantasy

In his proposal, Executive Chef David Schmidt dubbed the event "The Wedding of the Year!" It would be a destination weekend for 80 guests, a handful for the resort, which boasts the largest convention facilities in the Caribbean and a new 12,200 square foot kitchen. Equipped at a cost of about \$2.7 million, the kitchen is capable of feeding 10,000 people simultaneously.

In terms of a catering and event planning achievement, however, the wedding promised to be huge.

Harith envisioned an "epicurean fantasy," a feast for the eyes and palate. Instead of the four waiters typically allocated for a group of his size, he requested 20 waiters, permitting synchronized service, a Harith hallmark, and the parading of the most dazzling dishes.

His clear direction made a tough assignment easier, says Schmidt. Among Harith's requests was the use of Sri-Lankan ingredients, including the rambutan fruit; an entrée trilogy combining meats and seafood, and a cake unlike any seen before.

Schmidt began by brainstorming with the culinary team: Mark Percival, vice president culinary operations; Paul Hayward, senior executive pastry chef and others. For Sri-Lankan background, they got help from Harith, drew on Schmidt's experience in the Middle East, which he says uses similar spices, and researched the Internet. They also took advantage of the resort's 35-restaurant empire, encompassing countless flavor profiles.



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Deanne Moskowitz, Catering Magazine Food Editor, admires customized micro-green salads cradled by rings of cucumber.



A masterful entrée of lavender-scented lamb tomahawk, peppered filet and a Bahamian lobster tail for garnish are arranged around a saffron-infused risotto cake.

True to its No. 1 core value, the kitchen went beyond satisfying customer expectations. The tasting, three days before the event, was an unqualified success. Harith proclaimed the food "edible art," and told the culinary team: "You blew us away!"

Fabulous fusion

The meal wedded tropical and Sri-Lankan elements, the latter mainly samplings at the beginning and end. Four-color menu cards poetically compared each course to the fabled abundance of Atlantis.

Silver stands fitted with votive cups recruited from one of the restaurants gave the appetizers an intriguing presentation. There were six tasting portions: Prawns with pineapple curry relish, tuna sashimi with candied ginger, roasted smoked salmon on grilled beets and pear, and lagoon-caught soft shell crab flanked by antipasti brochette and duck roll.

Sri-Lankan hors d'oeuvres, known as Short Eats, butlered before the ceremony, were provided by Harith's aunt. Among them were fish and beef cutlets, accompanied by a luscious signature drink of mango puree and vodka.

Auntie Theresa also contributed the recipe for milk rice, a wedding essential. It was served as tiny squares along with

other sweetmeats after dessert, and with gold-foil wrapped Sri-Lankan wedding cakes, actually bite-sized bon-bons of fruit cake and almond paste.

To customize a salad from the catering menu, a crisp pastry trident, like Neptune's, was added. It was suspended by a dot of cream cheese piped onto the plate, over a ring of cucumber overflowing with delicate Bahamian micro-greens.

The entrée was extraordinary in presentation and preparation. Arranged around a saffron-infused risotto cake were a lavender-scented lamb tomahawk, peppered filet of beef, and Bahamian lobster tail flaunting its fan tail as garnish. Seasoned and seared earlier in the day, the meats were oven-finished at the last moment for maximum juiciness.

To ensure optimum quality, Harith instructed waiters to carry the hot plates to the tables immediately, rather than waiting for full trays.

Spectacular sweets

Hayward's masterful sugar work packed the biggest visual wallop. One riveting sight was the rambutan/passion fruit sorbet palate-cleanser, resting on a sapphire-blue sugar rock with a flashing light inside.

The gigantic cake created for the cutting ceremony was a replica of famed artist Dale Chihuly's Temple of the Sun glasswork, a focal point of the resort's casino.

Hayward pronounced it the most time-consuming cake he'd ever made and said it required the most techniques. It was hand-carved, covered with buttercream and rolled fondant, airbrushed and crowned with a sugar ball that mimicked the original's red-orange, 2,300-tentacle sunburst. It took about six hours to make and weighed about 500 pounds.

But Harith wanted his guests to get individual desserts, not just a slice of cake—no matter how phenomenal. Hayward came up with stemmed-coral colored sugar goblets, standing 16-inches high, and topped with tiny three-tiered wedding cakes. The goblets were made by molding sugar "dominoes" and painstakingly stacking them using a blow torch. Leaping from each plate was an aqua-colored, molded-sugar dolphin, representing the marine refugees of Hurricane Katrina that reside at the resort.



Room for romance

It required rigorous planning and three days of non-stop effort by DeFreitas, his staff, and hotel personnel to transform the ballroom into an impossibly romantic dining room, seemingly set somewhere in South Asia.

The resort's heavy bowl-shaped lighting fixtures had disappeared and were replaced by crystal chandeliers dangling inside iridescent, semi-sheer golden shades.

The walls were obliterated by floor-to-ceiling fabric screens. Even the brilliantly patterned tropical carpeting was tamed to coordinate with a pale rose and gold color scheme.

Wandering through the room as it neared completion, staff and guests shook their heads and expressed amazement at the makeover. A bride whose banquet would be next door asked half-jokingly if she could switch rooms.

DeFreitas developed an ornate, elegant design. Decorative elements filled a 40-foot container. Shipping it by sea from his Dania, Fla. office was a wedding gift of Santi Gabino of Laser International Freight Transport, Miami. A full-time florist focused on the copious calla lilies, roses, and orchids.

Lending intimacy, tables were set inside gazebos, constructed from foam core covered with pin-tucked satin, embellished with gold lace and festooned with flowers. Spanning one wall, the bridal table was guarded by grand columns covered in gold fabric and tassels.

Centerpieces resembling wedding cakes consisted of square floral tiers.

They supported elephant statuettes and tall glass vases containing orchids.

Moiré tablecloths embroidered with gold ribbon matched chair slipcovers tied with rosettes pinned by gold broaches. Gold sparked the settings, starting with gold-rimmed chargers. The linens and chargers were among the gifts of Kelly Murphy, president of Panache Party Rentals in Pompano Beach, Fla.

DeFreitas also fashioned the silky vests the waiters wore, golden uniforms for the four "Atlantean warriors" who carried the bride from her barge to the beach, the canopy that shaded her and her paladin chair. His handiwork also included the belvedere, where the couple exchanged vows. It was formed entirely of white shells threaded onto wire.

Show business

Like a Radio City spectacle, this extravaganza required meticulous orchestration and follow-through. A full complement of staff attended the pre-convention meeting, where they fine-combed the five-page production schedule and addressed unresolved issues.

Walkie-talkies allowed the crew to stay in contact. Harith relinquished his hours before the ceremony to his Senior Director of Operations Matt Brown and Project Manager Allison Swank. Harith's final act was to rehearse the servers in the fine points of the waiter parades, lining them up by height before the bandstand and teaching them to walk and set down their plates to a count.



The logistical challenges of the vast property engendered some entertaining effects. To whisk guests to the reception, the bride and groom led a joyous procession, set to conch horn and drumbeat, past smiling onlookers, through the hallway and casino, to the curtained entryway of the ballroom.

Tweaking tradition

Harith's commitment to educate and entertain was evident during the ceremony. The Sri-Lankan traditions seemed fascinating, not befuddling, thanks to careful forethought.

One helpful touch was the printed program, which explained the meaning of the Sri-Lankan Poruwa ceremony and included a glossary of terms.

Officiating, Harith's uncle Jay Liyanage, who serves as Honorary Consul of Sri-Lanka to the United States, further clarified each aspect of the service. Since bride and groom are of different religious denominations, a brief non-denominational ceremony followed.

The lighting of the oil lamps, symbolically heralding the beginning of a new era; the haunting sounds of drumbeat and conch shell and the rousing gospel strains



of an eight-member Bahamian choir added to the sacred and sensual delights.

No detail was too small to ensure guest comfort. A rack was provided to hold their shoes when they took to the beach, and cold towels were dispensed after the hors d'oeuvres.

Seated on cushioned chairs, guest enjoyed a series of spellbinding surprises. Paramount among them was the arrival of the bride, regal in her champagne-

and-gold sari, as she was conveyed across the lagoon, lifted into her chair and set before her mother, who escorted her to the altar. As if ignited by the wedded couple's kiss, a panorama of golden fireworks filled the sky, providing a thrilling finish.

What was the cost of such an unstintingly opulent affair? "Less than you might expect," Harith noted. Many services and products were gifts from vendors and purveyors, who wanted to help and wouldn't accept money.

What's more, special touches were often clever, not costly. "Creativity doesn't have to be expensive," Harith observed.