

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

A popular diamond ring style features three stones meant to represent the past, present and future. A wedding ceremony at Houmas House Plantation and Gardens can express that same sentiment. The site's rich history and modern amenities serve as a grand backdrop for the promise of a lifetime.

GETTING HITCHED Located in Darrow, La., about 70 miles from New Orleans, Houmas House was opened as an entertainment venue in 2005 by its current owner Kevin Kelly. While it averages 100 nuptials a year, every ceremony is unique. "We don't say 'this is wedding package A' or 'wedding B,'" says Kelly. "We let anyone do anything they would like." (Only metal confetti and bubbles are banned for safety and environmental concerns.)

Historic plantations are becoming as rare as true love. "Between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, there were 240 major plantations," says Kelly. "Currently, there are 10." One of the South's oldest plantation estates, Houmas House's construction began in the 1770s. At its peak, it was the largest plantation holding in North and South America with 300,000 acres. Its sugar cane crop earned Houmas House the nickname of "Sugar Palace."

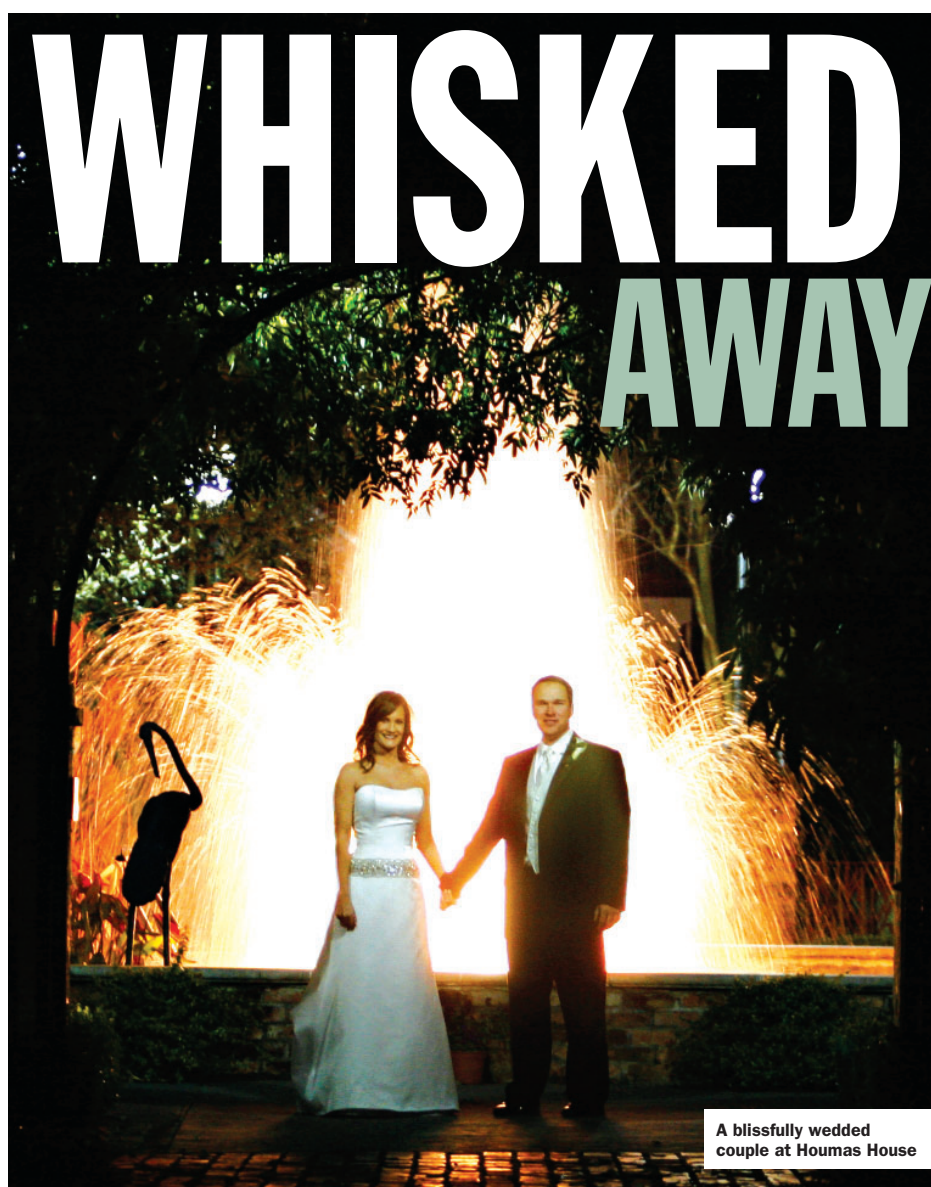
But its historic significance doesn't mean it's a stuffy museum now. "I treat this as a place to come, have fun and entertain lavishly," says Kelly. To demonstrate his philosophy, his grand opening event was comprised of four simultaneous parties, including a dog wedding. "Some people know how attached I am to my dogs," Kelly admits. "But the thought was that you could have a couple getting married out there on the front lawn; instead, we had Sam and Grace. It was a nice little publicity stunt with 2,000 people." Indeed, a wedding at Houmas House can be large or small, though most ceremonies range from 100 to 300 people.

The 38-acre property includes the historic mansion, 12 acres of manicured gardens and two pavilions (handy in the event of rain). While each is unique, many weddings do have common elements. Often the ceremony takes place on the front lawn, the receiving line winds through the house, cocktails are served

HOUMAS HOUSE PLANTATION AND GARDENS

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■ To talk about your wedding, reception or other special events at Houmas House, call Kevin Kelly at 504-628-6000.



A blissfully wedded couple at Houmas House

Louisiana's Houmas House Plantation and Gardens an idyllic wedding destination



Houmas House Plantation and Gardens

JAZZ IT UP

Capitalize on New Orleans' perennial Mardi Gras attitude as you close in on the big day. The historic French Quarter is intact, and most of New Orleans' tourism destinations are open. (In fact, before Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans area boasted 810 restaurants; today, there are 888.)

- **Welcome Party:** Once all of your guests have arrived for your destination wedding, get the gang together at any one of Dickie Brennan's fabulous restaurants: Bourbon House, Palace Café or Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse. All are well equipped to host your large or small group in style with scrumptious food, excellent service and generous pours of whatever beverage you prefer to be toasted with. Bourbon House: 504-522-0111, www.bourbonhouse.com; Palace Café: 504-523-1661, www.palacecafe.com; Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse: 504-522-2467, www.dickiebrennanssteakhouse.com.
- **Bachelor Party:** For his last night out as a single guy, the groom can party with his friends at Harrah's New Orleans Casino, where they'll find more than 2,100 slots and 100 tables with 10 different games. 504-533-6000. www.harrahs.com.
- **Bachelorette Party:** The bride and her BFFs can get pampered at Spa Aria, then head downstairs for a few spins around the famous revolving Carousel Bar at Hotel Monteleone. 504-523-3341. www.hotelmonteleone.com.

in the gardens, and dinner and dancing follow in one of the pavilions.

The onsite, award-winning Latil's Landing Restaurant can provide a selection from its menu of 14 appetizers and 22 entrées. Pricing is \$110 per person for weddings with a cocktail buffet reception, \$125 per person with a seated buffet reception, and \$140 per person with a full-service dinner reception (there is a minimum charge of \$1,000; prices include tax and gratuity).

"Basically, we have openings year-round, but if you want a popular month, you'll need to book a year ahead," recommends Kelly. "Destination weddings are always fun because everyone's in for the whole experience," he says. "Everyone is there to have a good time, and they really want to be there."

Houmas House is equipped to host the rehearsal dinner, wedding ceremony and reception. There's a honeymoon cottage available for the bride and groom. Guests typically lodge in New Orleans and are transported to Houmas House by bus or limousine. Kelly plans to build a hotel on the grounds, which will be convenient for weddings, as well as corporate events. The present arrangement has an advantage, however: The bride and groom can enjoy some privacy that first night together. **SP**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOUMAS HOUSE PLANTATION AND GARDENS