

# *Setting the Mood*

By Rachel Joyce

*From soft and romantic to bright and fun, creating the right  
ambiance at your reception can make all the difference.*

Katie Oldeen was never the type of girl to have every detail of her wedding planned by age 12. So when her college romance with Ryan Mahoney evolved into a lifelong love, she was a self-proclaimed “blank slate” when it came to their reception. The couple wanted to draw friends and family into their story—a romance electrified by their mutual love for musician Ben Harper and a dreamy courtship in downtown Chicago —by creating a warm, inviting vibe. But where to start?

Elements such as linens, lighting and place settings can factor into the desired mood of a reception. Just as you wouldn't plan a clam bake the way you would a black-tie ball, you should carefully consider the overall ambiance you and your beloved want to set.

The Mahoneys ended up letting the characteristics of their venue, the Mendakota Country Club, guide the feel of their reception. “Considering your venue and its limitations should be the basis of all reception plans,” advises Shereè Bochenek at Après Party and Tent Rental. “The other components will fall in place naturally from that point.” For example, receptions at golf course country clubs can incorporate the surrounding beauty of lush greens and sunshine; ballrooms in historic landmarks can evoke a classic, formal feel; and outdoor pavilions can convey a casual, relaxed mood.



Photo courtesy of Shawn Plante of Instant Request Disc Jockey Entertainment

## **Lights, Color, Action**

Whether you're creating a formal or whimsical event for your guests, lighting and thoughtfully placed wall and ceiling dressings can help bring out the right atmosphere. Draping simple, white tulle with twinkle lights or deep, rich crimson silk on the walls or across the ceiling can create a dramatic affect and hide or accentuate the room's architecture, says Meagan Kochendorfer at Ambiance Wedding Consulting.

Rodney Davis, owner of Twin Cities-based Lutrec Catering, echoes those sentiments, emphasizing the importance of lighting. “Whenever possible place your light fixtures on dimmers, and replace the bulbs at your venue with low-wattage bulbs,” he says. If your venue doesn't offer those options he suggests turning off any bright lights and placing several floor lamps around the room as an alternative light source.

Although strands of tiny white lights are a popular way to bring warmth to a reception, Davis recommends brides add a unique spin. A wide variety of decorative strands in various shapes and sizes are available, he notes, which allows brides to personalize their lighting to enhance the ambiance, he says. Candles are another effective way to create a romantic and welcoming mood. Davis recommends using 10-hour votives; just make sure someone (perhaps the caterer) will take charge of replacing burnt-out candles throughout the celebration.

When Gretchen and Mike Chaplin threw their reception at the Minneapolis Depot, they worked with lighting designer Shawn Plante of Instant Request Disc Jockey Entertainment to bridge the classic, vintage-inspired ambiance of their dinner to a festive nightclub vibe for their dance. Hiring a professional lighting consultant is a growing trend in wedding planning that can lend dramatic effect to an event and help transition your guests through the different segments of your reception.

“With Shawn’s help we had our cocktail hour lit in soothing red, blue and green lighting and transitioned to dinner with golds and ambers that accented the Depot’s [19th century] architecture,” Chaplin says. To signal to their friends and family that it was time to party, the lighting became animated. “It was like I had two rooms instead of one,” she says.

Plante advises couples to make sure their venue has sufficient electrical requirements to meet their lighting needs; he suggests LED lights as an affordable, if less dramatic, alternative to achieve the ambiance you seek.

### **Top the Table**

Besides a great floral arrangement, tabletop items can heighten the wedding’s vibe. For example, large crystal–adorned centerpieces can work with flowers to spark romance at receptions with a classical theme. If it’s a winter wonderland you want, think about using deep reds with accents of white, says Kochendorfer. “Cylinder vases can be filled with beautiful glass balls or a rich red bouquet adorned with crystals. If it’s a clean, cool, contemporary feel you’re after, consider using sharp, crisp blues against smooth, glassy surfaces.” Davis suggests dressing up tabletops with colorful water carafes and glassware, which add warmth and grace, especially when illuminated by candlelight.

The Mahoneys reflected the natural beauty of their reception’s autumn-hued landscape with twigs, berries, leaves and candles strewn across the table. Handwritten lyrics from the couple’s favorite songs personalized the tables and drew guests into their love story.

Bochenek encourages couples to use handcrafted accents wherever possible, but warns brides to consider the time and effort needed to complete such a project when they might already be very busy. “Do-it-yourself does not always pay off emotionally or financially,” she cautions.

### **Surprise Encounters**

Remember that the reception extends beyond the reception hall, Kochendorfer says, which means taking into account other areas your guests will frequent such as the cloakrooms or restrooms.

Consider putting candles and flowers in the restrooms, and piping in soft background music. Supplying a basket of perfumes, soaps, breath mints, or hairspray so guests can freshen up is also a thoughtful touch. Jean Peine of Studio 6 Specialty Linen & Décor in Eden Prairie worked with one mother-of-the-bride who covered the stall doors with paper and provided baskets of crayons for guests to “graffiti” messages for the happy couple.

Your venue’s entryway can also offer an opportunity to set the mood, as Sharon Broscha points out. The facility rental manager for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Broscha notes, “We’ve had some people design a complete entrance experience with box hedges and floral, lining a ‘red carpet’ that’s actually white,” she says.

### **A Personal Affair**

Although many elements work together to define your reception’s ambiance, personal touches are the most memorable. It could be something as simple as elements that symbolize how you and your fiancé met, says Kochendorfer: “For instance, if you met at the beach, incorporate ocean colors of blue and sunshine yellow, sand buckets filled with starfish and seashells, and savory street-vendor cuisine.”

At each place setting, the Chaplins put programs that reflected the color scheme and design elements of their invitations. The program explained the couple’s history and relationship with each member of the wedding party. Adding elements that are important to you will help fully bring your guests into the experience, says Kochendorfer. “And when guests become part of the experience, they remember it.”