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GAY MARRIAGE: What Will It Mean For Us?

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P'town Businesses Ramp Up for Gay Marriage

FOR RICHER OR POORER

by Brenner Thomas

With the promise of wedding bells ringing all over town come May, local businesses have tuned their ears to a different, but inescapably related sound: the sweet cha-ching of the cash register.

Though the future of gay marriage in Massachusetts looks increasingly unsure after last week's decision by the legislature to amend the state constitution banning such unions (the first in a series of required steps), Provincetown restaurants, florists, jewelers, guest houses, churches—seemingly anyone with a potential service to offer—are nevertheless jumping headlong into the wedding industry.

And with good reason. Unless the Supreme Judicial Court agrees to stay their decision, gay marriages would be legal in the state at least until the scheduled 2006 referendum, leaving two full years for the development of a heretofore unrealized market. If heterosexual unions are any indication, that market is potentially massive. According to statistics by the Association of Wedding Professionals, the 2.34 million weddings performed in the U.S. each year generate a whopping 60 billions dollars. And that's not including the honeymoon. Though research on gay marriages and commitment ceremonies is scarce, the Rainbow Wedding Network, a gay and lesbian online registry, reports that gay couples spend an average of \$15,000 on a wedding. With such alluring figures, it's no wonder that one town official called gay marriage, "the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

Though May 17, the first day on which gay marriages can be

legally performed, is still six weeks away, Provincetown is already feeling the effects of its new cottage industry. For many local hoteliers, caterers and restaurateurs, reservations for the season are up. Dave Schermacher, who with his partner, Simon Homes, runs and manages a catering business, Ptown Parties, has as of late March booked 19 weddings, 75% of which are same sex marriages: a considerable jump from the seven they performed last year. The Surfside Hotel and Suites, managed by the Linchris Hotel Corporation, has a seen similar spike. General Manager Elaine Quigley expected a good season but was suprised to hear that her current July reservations are three times that of last year's. Similar scenarios are playing out all over town: the Pilgrim Monument has been agreed to twice as many receptions; Reverend Alison Hyder of the UU Meeting House has plans to officiate at 26 ceremonies to date, more than she did for all of 2003; and Cosmos Catering, owned and run by Laura Davis, has six times as many engagements on the books than this time last year. The hype surrounding gay marriage has proven to be nothing of the sort. Wedding-hungry couples are coming to Provincetown and they are coming en masse.

Provincetown Director of Tourism, Pat Fitzpatrick, isn't surprised by these figures. Her office, in conjunction with the Town Clerk, has borne the brunt of the sudden, nation-wide interest in Provincetown as a destination for gay weddings and honeymoons. On a given day, Pat fields about 20 calls and e-mails from curious couples who want to know everything about get-

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ting married in Provincetown. Can out-of-state couples obtain a license? Where can they host a reception? Order a cake? Hire a photographer? The steady stream of inquiries has prompted Town Hall to add a "Local Wedding Planning Services" page to their website. But the calls haven't slackened.



The Oxford House already has six wedding receptions and ceremonies, like the one pictured above, scheduled for this season. The guesthouse hosted no more than four last year.

While Provincetown seems a natural home for Massachusetts' gay wedding industry, the flurry of press since February, when the state Supreme Judicial Court backed its November ruling that denying marriage rights to same-sex couples was unconstitutional, has all but solidified P'town's place as the nation's gay wedding capital. Fitzpatrick reports that in the last few months some 57 publications, including the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, the *LA Times*, BBC Radio, CNN News and *Time* magazine, have written stories about Provincetown's burgeoning gay wedding industry. *Newsweek's* story, entitled "Gay Marriage: Touting the His-His Suite," postulated that town, in "readying for a tidal wave of gay and lesbian honeymooners," was set to become "the gay Niagara."

The analogy is an apt one. Since Ontario legalized gay marriage last June the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, the long-recognized honeymoon capital of North America, has enjoyed a modest spike in its wedding business. According to City Clerk Dean Iorfida, of the 1,112 marriages licenses issued in 2003, approximately 10% of those went to same sex couples. Reverend Karen Hansen of the Two Hearts Wedding Chapel reports similar figures. Twelve percent of the 800 weddings she

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officiated last year were same-sex unions. But the rate seems to be increasing. "I get more phone calls everyday," says Hansen. "It's increasingly madly." Niagara Falls merchants have followed suit, tapping into the gay marriage industry with wedding packages and honeymoons geared towards the gay and lesbian market.

But notably, upwards of 95% of the same-sex couples married in Niagara Falls hail from the United States, a surprising figure given that currently no state legally recognizes such unions. Reverend Hansen believes that the legality is secondary to many of the gay couples she has married. "It's that piece of paper," she suggests, "that validation of having been together for 20, 25 years."

From a financial aspect, this bodes well for gay marriage in Massachusetts where many potential husbands and wives reside in states where their license would not be recognized.

In Provincetown, despite the legislature's recent moves to ban gay unions, there are already almost as many gay marriages planned for this summer as there were performed in Niagara Falls all last year. In attempt to organize what local officials expect to be a very hectic day on May 17, the Clerk's office is scheduling license appointments. As of March 31, Assistant Town Clerk Aaron Leventman reports that the office has 45 appointments on the books for May 17 and a total of 80 for the summer: a considerable jump from the 19 they issued last year. But that figure doesn't include walk-ins, which many expect to be a significant number.

Truth be told there is no way to accurately forecast what will happen in town come May, especially considering the ever-shifting political situation. If Governor Romney can convince the state's Supreme Judicial Court to stay their decision, gay marriage in Provincetown won't be happening in town at all.

But as Rob Tosner, the Executive Director of the Provincetown Business Guild [PBG], a local gay and lesbian business organization, sees it, Provincetown merchants are still "cautiously optimistic." The PBG itself is taking considerable steps to help market Provincetown as *the* destination for gay honeymoons and weddings. The guild is planning a Couples Wedding the first weekend in June, a revamping of last year's Commitment Weekend, which will include a wedding expo and a group wedding ceremony. In addition to participating in another wedding expo in Cambridge next month, the organization has earmarked \$10,000 for advertising ventures specifically geared towards promoting town's wedding industry. Never before has the PBG allocated funds for a specific type advertising, a move that only demonstrates the guild's belief in gay marriage's potential impact on local economy.

Other businesses, lured by the promise of wedding dollars, have restructured or expanded their operations to better appeal to the marriage market. Ptown Parties is renting the former Licata's space, a development owner David Shermacher says

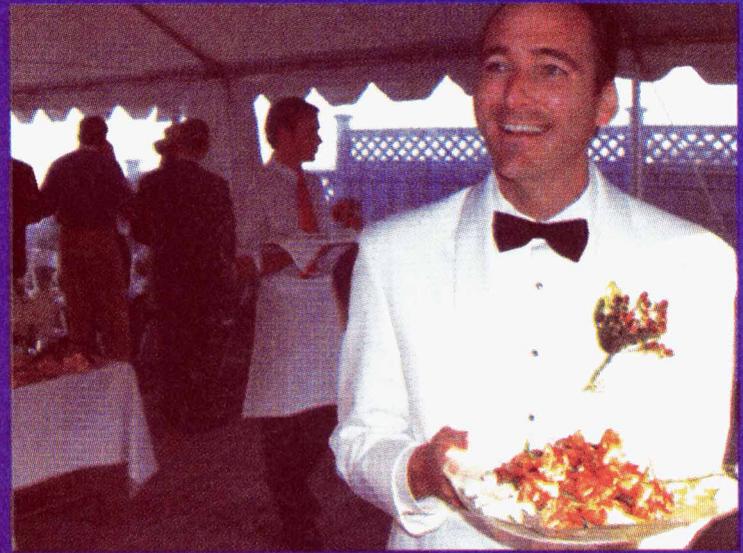
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wouldn't have happened "if [gay marriage] hadn't gone through." The caterer will use the tented patio room solely as a venue for parties and receptions while maintaining a restaurant operation in the main dining area.

Astrid Berg, owner of Pepe's Wharf, is taking over the Dancing Lobster space and plans to rent out most of the first floor for receptions. "I knew there was a need for larger reception halls in town," says Berg, "and I saw an open avenue."

It's an avenue many businesses in town are trying to take advantage of. Shank Painter Printers has updated their wedding invitation catalogues. Maghi Heary of Provincetown Florist has stocked up on what she calls the "hard goods" of her trade: arches, lattices and candelabras. Clem and Ursies, a popular seafood restaurant, has, in what part-owner Clem Silva calls an act of fortunate coincidence, expanded their back patio to better accommodate larger parties. Clothier Diane Z has stocked its store with rental tuxedos. Similarly the Pilgrim-Monument, which has been hosting wedding parties since 1999, restructured their renting policy. Realizing their flat rate prohibited



Cranking out the cheese puffs: Caterers all over town are prepping for an expected onslaught of wedding-related business.



Dianne Kospser was ordained this winter in hopes of cashing in on the expected surplus of weddings this summer.

smaller groups from considering the venue, Marketing Coordinator Michael Van Belle installed a sliding scale in their price structure to make renting the grounds more affordable. "The marriage decision," says Van Belle, "made us look at the revenue potential of our grounds. We saw an opportunity there."

Provincetown businesses are prepping for wedding fever in various ways. The Provincetown Inn and Cosmos Catering are lining up additional staff. Others like the Crown & Anchor, Art's Dune Tours and Ruby's are allocating additional funds in advertising. The last, a local jewelry store which has long carried commitment and wedding rings, plans to place ads in national publications including *Girlfriends* and *Out*. Others like the Oxford House, photography studio Song of Myself, and the Surfside Inn have assembled wedding packages to help cash in on the wedding business.

Some are even choosing new careers. Local artist Dianne Kospser was recently ordained by the Church of Spiritual Humanism so that she could officiate at what she hopes to be a surplus of weddings this summer. Being ordained by the church, which Kospser describes as sharing similar beliefs with Unitarian-Universalism, was seemingly made for such opportunities. To be invested, she merely had to submit her name and e-mail to spiritualhumanism.org. Though Kospser had considered the move previously, "hearing about the new marriage rights and the possibility of more business in town" persuaded her to act.

The potential economical windfall associated with the wedding industry has local businesses all but married to the idea of tapping into the gay market. But with legal details of gay marriage shifting daily now, there is of course the possibility that P'town and its well-prepared merchants could be left at the altar. In the meantime, locals, on both a personal and financial level, hope that state officials uphold the Supreme Judicial Court's mandate to legalize same-sex marriage thereby blessing what for the Outer Cape could be a most felicitous and happy union: Provincetown and gay marriage, together at last. ■