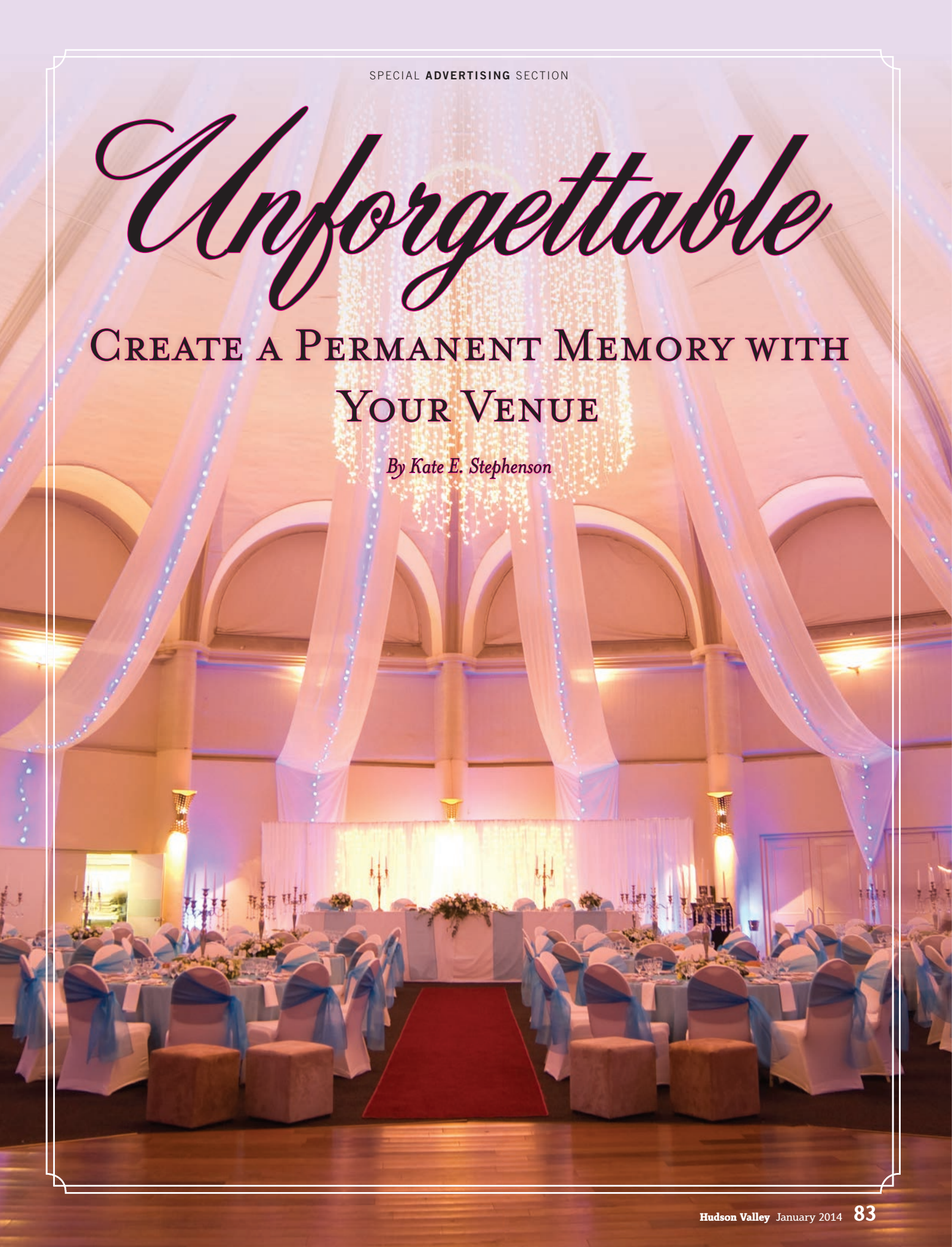


# Unforgettable

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*By Kate E. Stephenson*



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hat makes an amazing event? Some say the company — people are the most important. And that's certainly true. But even more than the people, the venue is often the deciding factor between "Oh!" and "ho-hum." The venue is the first impression.

The question then becomes how do you choose an unforgettable one?

The Hudson Valley is a wedding hot spot. Breath-taking views and hauntingly beautiful vistas are everywhere. The area's historical buildings can be fantastic event sites. And the growing popularity of the region as a culinary destination has cultivated the emergence of many new restaurants, caterers, wineries, and shops to support the events industry.

Finding unforgettable locations is easy — deciding on one is hard.

Professional event planners recommend you come to the table with a basic understanding of what it is you want. Without a few guidelines — how many attendees, what kind of location, what kind of vibe — it's really difficult to narrow down the venue choices.

So first things first.

**FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT.** Do a little research and figure out your must-haves. Jane Wilcox, owner of Forget Me Not Events, says: "Sit down and write a list of elements you would like to see for your wedding, using all the different resources — online, magazines, books — and just pull ideas. Then make a decision: Where do you want to be? Do you want to be in a restaurant, at a wedding venue, next to the Hudson River, or in the Catskills with majestic views of the mountains? Decide what you think is unforgettable then build your wedding around that."

Once you have your own list of must-haves, then incorporate your guests' sensibilities. It's almost impossible to please everyone, but you should identify those who need special accommodations and make sure they are attended to. For instance, is there a need for handicap accessibility? Do arrangements need to be made for the elderly, for the young?

Identifying both your own and your guests' must-haves is crucial to managing expectations. When you don't know what you want, it is easy to be disappointed.

**HAVE A BUDGET.** Ashley Douglass of Ashley Douglass Events says, "I always start with budget besides the must-haves." Prices in the Hudson



Valley vary greatly. Two events held at the same location can have vastly different price tags depending on the available funds. People often think that by setting a budget they limit themselves, but identifying your cutoff ensures that you won't have buyer's remorse down the line. Being realistic about how much you can spend provides focus.

Remember, the budget needs to fund the entire event. Improper allocation of funds can be as detrimental as not setting a budget at all. Booking a venue for \$25,000 but leaving only \$2,000 for all other expenses may not give you the unforgettable memory that you want.

**DECIDE BETWEEN INDOOR OR OUTDOOR.** Each choice has advantages and drawbacks. Indoor locations allow shelter from the elements. They also remove some uncertainty — you can see what the space looks like on your initial visit. The structure, the general setup, and the basic materials are already there. You just have to decide what you want to do within it.

Outside venues may require more imagination, but they offer a certain creativity and increased flexibility that inside venues cannot. Wilcox enjoys the challenge of outdoor locations, saying: "If you're in a tent you can do a lot of different things. It's harder to individualize a venue that's already established." Tents and outdoor platforms can be configured to provide any



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number of entertainment areas, any mood, and any aesthetic you want. From high-end elegance to rustic charm, anything is possible when you build your scene from scratch.

Of course, nature is mysterious, so be sure to have a backup plan for changes in weather. That may be something as simple as having shawls on hand for a drop in temperature; protective covering around the tent that can be lowered in the event of a rain shower; or covered "hallways" connecting multiple tents.

Inside or out, you have to be comfortable with the setting and it must meet the criteria of the event.

**COMFORT IS KEY.** Comfort should be as much a consideration — if not more — as design. A hospitable environment will always create a better memory. Basic concerns like comfortable chairs need to be addressed. Douglass illustrates: "There have been weddings where the couple wanted people to sit on hay barrels. But there are those who would be uncomfortable sitting there in hay barrels and will want a chair. I suggested assorted chairs with some interspersed hay barrels, because really — does your grandmother want to sit on a hay barrel?"

Other comfort elements like the proximity and availability of bathrooms are essential. Walking a mile to the bathroom in high heels is not a pleasant experience.

Douglass cautions that the event should match the setting, recalling a black tie event held at a barn where guests walked through the mud in dress shoes and sat downwind from horse stables. Needless to say, it was not the most enjoyable experience. Whatever your vision, attendees should feel at ease during your function.

**VENDORS AND STAFFING CREATE VALUE.** Your vendors should work to ensure that your guests' overall experience isn't lost in the glare of mistakes. Lauren Paige of Lauren Paige Associates suggests that you ask several questions to ascertain how willing the venue is to accommodate your specific needs, like how willing they are to negotiate or if they will allow you to customize your menu and offer a tasting. The answers to these questions may help you decide if you have the right chemistry with the venue. A beautiful place with difficult or unyielding staff may not provide the best memory. "Staffing is overlooked a lot but it's so important," says Paige. "What is the guest to wait staff ratio? How large does your guest count need to be in order

to open a second bar? The food and party could be great, but when one table finishes eating before another even gets their dinner, it can take away from your affair.”

**TIMING IS A SERIOUS FACTOR.** Amazing venues are often coveted, so you may need to plan well in advance, act decisively and be flexible in order to book the perfect space. According to Douglass, the Valley is the place for weddings, edging out the Hamptons and other traditional wedding spots for both traditional and unconventional brides. “Engagement season starts a week or two before Christmas and lasts through February,” she remarks. “This is the time when people are booking their venues. Because the Hudson Valley has become so popular, people are currently booking for 2015. There are many venues that are fully booked for 2014.” So, don’t wait too long after he pops the question to book your space.

Brides also want to know that their day is specifically their own. Speak to the venue to ensure that your wedding is the only affair booked for your allotted time. Each venue is different and may have different options and price points for time-related conveniences.

**KNOW WHEN TO WALK AWAY.** There may be challenges in achieving your vision but is the challenge insurmountable? Not every venue can or will accommodate the elements of your vision. “When you are talking with a privately owned place, find out in advance what they permit. One place that I work with doesn’t permit candles on the property. So in advance of booking, check with the owners. Are candles permitted? Are balloons permitted?” says Wilcox. If you can’t achieve your vision in the space, then it may not be the right space for you.

**HIRE THE RIGHT HELP.** The devil is in the details. Keeping up with all of the different elements of planning an event and choosing a venue can be daunting, so many venues request or require the support of a professional event planner. While it is not always necessary, and not all sites demand an one, he or she can be a serious benefit. There is the matter of the extra expense, but planners can also be budget savers because they know the lay of the land, general pricing for all required vendors, and how to deal with the hiccups that inevitably happen. There are always unforeseen expenses, but a planner may



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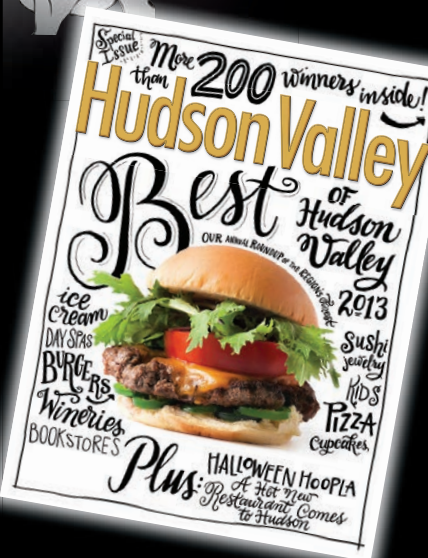
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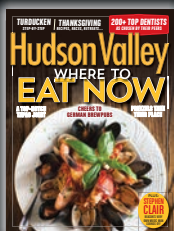
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