

# Multicultural Nuptials

by **Cassandra P. Foster**

**Florists broaden their bridal horizons by tapping the ever-expanding ethnic wedding market.**

**H**EIDI RICHARDS, AAF, HAS ALWAYS DESIGNED WEDDING bouquets using an odd number of flowers — it makes for better distribution and presentation, she says. Little did she realize that the odd numbers are right in line with a Chinese bridal tradition. This realization came when Richards, owner of Eden Florist & Gift Shop in Miramar, Fla., had a preliminary meeting with a half-Chinese, half-Italian bride-to-be. When the bride said that Chinese traditions call for bouquets with either five or seven blooms, Richards says she initially laughed about the coincidence. But, she says that the small detail, coupled with Richards' prior knowledge (thanks to researching online) of how Chinese culture incorporates bamboo and cherry blossoms into their weddings — was, in fact, what cinched the deal for this bride's wedding.

More and more florists, like Richards, are trying to better target today's multicultural brides. And for good reason: As of 2006, one in three U.S. residents is a minority, according to Louis Kincannon, the director of the U.S. Census Bureau. "To put this into perspective," he says, "there are more minorities in this country today than there were people in the United States in 1910."

Across the country, Hispanic, Black and Asian (including Middle Eastern) communities are growing. And the specific needs of the non-Caucasian bride, including flowers, have opened a new category within the already huge \$160 billion wedding industry.

Indeed, as Americans spend more on weddings (the average wedding cost \$28,800 in 2007), the wedding industry

is responding with more niche publications — from eco-friendly Web sites to a plethora of ethnic-centric magazines and newsletters for specific communities and cultures, including *Chocolate Brides* (for Black couples), *Nirali* (geared toward South Asian brides and grooms), and *Linda Novia Wedding* (for Latino nuptials).

Richards' shop, which has been around for 27 years and has 10 employees on staff, has done weddings spanning all types of different ethnicities, including Cuban, Black, Jewish, Thai, Native American and Chinese. Knowing even the slightest information about a bride and groom's culture means a lot, Richards says. Brides and grooms have the mentality that they've "got to keep the traditions alive or they're going to

die with (their parents)," she says. "It makes a huge difference if you can find a little bit about them before they come in." By being able to relate to their ethnicity, "to them, you feel more like family than just the florist."

## Research Your Own Backyard

The first step in attracting diverse wedding work to your shop may involve understanding the unique makeup of your overall area, says Richards. Eden Florist is sandwiched between Ft. Lauderdale and North Miami, and Miramar's population of more than 106,500 is 75 percent minority and 25 percent Caucasian. The ethnic majority is Hispanic, specifically Cuban — even the city's name harkens back to South Florida's Cuban roots — but the area also has large Jamaican and Black communities and a growing Chinese population.

Once Richards understood the demographics of her area, she was able to better prepare for what cultural heritage factors she should look at closely when meeting with brides-to-be.

"Look at the ethnic groups in your community," she says. "Look for ways to get yourself known in that community." Richards, who's owned her shop



Left: Center photos by L. Alexander Photography and Video



**GLOBAL BETROTHALS** Savvy florists are striving to learn more about the cultures — from Hispanic to Black to Asian — of brides- and-grooms-to-be so that they can incorporate the couples' traditions according to their respective heritages, into their wedding ceremony, reception, and so much more.

for 13 years, provides weekly flowers to several local churches and temples of various of denominations. Those interactions, she says, have helped her understand other ethnicities, and how she can better serve those customers' needs.

Too often, florists are “just afraid they won't understand the culture, or they don't have time to do the research,” she says. What she's found by talking to religious leaders, however, is that there is always a need for a florist who does weddings for all religions and traditions.

Richards gets a better understanding of her multicultural clientele by getting involved in Puerto Rican, Latin American and Caribbean chambers of commerce.

## Understanding Some Differences

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, so do its weddings. For flo-

rists and wedding industry professionals, that change means serving, with equal panache, weddings that involve white dresses, bright saris, 6-foot flower leis and more.

In general, the wedding industry's awareness of these ethnic brides has grown, thanks to the inclusion of celebrity and “ordinary people's” weddings filmed and edited for TV shows such as TLC's “Extreme Weddings,” a program that looks at glamorous and anything-but-understated weddings, according to Christopher Aldama, wedding expert and owner of Fiori Special Events in Southern California's La Habra Heights. His company, which does high end floral and event design and production, has won several Gala awards from Special Events Magazine — which “recognize the finest work in special events worldwide” in areas such as “Best Event for a Private Individual” and “Best Wedding.”

“On these TV shows, people are celebrating their ethnicity; they've got great pride in their ethnicities,” Aldama says about the bride and groom and their family's interests in expressing their traditions at their weddings.

Aldama received a lot of press for his company's work on a Hindu and Sikh wedding in 2005. According to Special Events Magazine, Aldama and his team prepared for this wedding by thoroughly researching the religious traditions of each faith. The wedding expert met with “religious leaders, consult[ed] with university faculty and watch[ed] hours of foreign films” to achieve the wedding clients' desired results for their affair. Aldama's team created “two 20-by-50-foot custom tents swagged with orange silk” as well as a bounty of floral designs, provided luxury coaches — including a red convertible Ferrari for the groom's arrival at the ceremony



## Test Your Ethnic Traditions IQ

**1. In what religious tradition does the groom arrive at the ceremony on a white horse (often decorated with flowers)?**

- a) Muslim    b) Baptist    c) Anglican    d) Hindu

**2. True or false?** Flowers are forbidden at Jewish funerals.

**3. Catholic weddings are rarely held during Lent. When they are, the flowers used should be:**

- a) Purple    b) Loose    c) Understated    d) Inexpensive

**4. True or false?** In the Islamic tradition, white flowers are especially suitable for funerals.

**5. In which houses of worship are flowers not permitted in sacred areas?**

- a) Jewish    b) Mormon    c) Buddhist    d) Methodist

**6. What sort of flowers should never adorn a Buddhist altar?**

- a) Thorned    b) Silk    c) Chrysanthemums    d) Potted

**7. In which religious tradition do congregants construct an “epitaph,” or tomb of Christ, entirely from flowers during the Lenten season?**

- a) Catholic    b) Mennonite    c) Episcopal    d) Greek Orthodox

**8. In the Catholic, Episcopal and Anglican traditions, what color is especially appropriate for flowers used at Pentecost?**

- a) White    b) Red    c) Blue    d) Multicolored

**Answers** 1. D -- Hindu. 2. False (sort of). Flowers are used at some Reform Jewish funerals but not at orthodox ceremonies. 3. C -- Understated. 4. False. White (and red) flowers are often used in Islamic weddings, while greenery and perfumed flowers of any color are used at funerals. 5. B -- Mormon. 6. A -- Thorned flowers. Note that chrysanthemums are actually a particular favorite in Buddhist ceremonies. 7. D -- Greek Orthodox. 8. B -- Red.

**Editor’s Note:** Quiz courtesy of Heidi Richards of Eden Florist.

— for the family’s transportation from the home to the ceremony, and so much more lavish details both customary for the religions and others for fun.

One thing most experts agree on is this: All weddings — even weddings within a specific, insular community — are different, and making broad generalizations is problematic. Still, key distinguishing characteristics within communities do exist. For instance, Aldama says many Asian brides change

clothes during their weddings up to six times, going from short to long and plain to embellished. Changing clothes also is common in many Middle Eastern weddings, where brides often change from ceremony attire to reception dancing attire. This is an important characteristic for florists to keep in mind in the early planning process, because this could mean more than one look, such as different flowers for the bride’s different ensembles, Aldama says.

Predictably, event décor also is influenced by a couple’s history, religious beliefs and families. Middle Eastern weddings often feature a “more is more” mentality, Aldama says, with lots of flash, sparkles and draping.

In Indian weddings, brides, brides’ mothers and bridesmaids do not carry bouquets but rather wear long garlands of bright-colored red and yellow carnations. As part of the Indian wedding tradition called “var mala” or “jai mala,” the bride “welcomes and greets her groom by putting garland around his neck ... a ritual that signifies that she accepts him as her husband. This is also associated with fun as the groom is lifted high up when the bride tries to put the garland around his neck,” according to I Love India’s Indian Weddings Web site.

At the end of the ceremony, some Black brides ask guests to throw corn, a symbol of fertility, instead of rice, according to the “Bride’s Book of Etiquette,” a guide by the editors of Bride’s Magazine. And, in Indian traditions, as opposed to the western tradition of a flower girl, it is the job of the groom’s brother to shower the newlyweds with flower petals immediately following the end of the ceremony — this action is done to keep evil away.

## Sorting Out the Differences

With so many different customs and groups, it can be intimidating to meet with couples from different cultures, especially if you don’t know at least their basic wedding traditions and expectations. How can you retain your professionalism when talking about wedding flowers? The short answer: Be prepared and admit that you don’t know everything.

Some florists with experience in cross-cultural weddings advise adding a simple question to your pre-consultation worksheet about the ethnicity of both the bride and groom. (To avoid any

## Bridal Magazines Go Multicultural

**W**ant to get a better understanding of today's multicultural brides? Check out one of the many ethnic bridal publications carving their own niche in the U.S. wedding industry. Below is a brief list of wedding magazines, broken down by ethnic group, which are distributed here in the U.S.



### Multi-Ethnic

World Bride Magazine  
[www.worldbridemagazine.com](http://www.worldbridemagazine.com)

### Asian (including Middle Eastern)

Nirali  
[www.niralimagazine.com](http://www.niralimagazine.com)

Ziba Beauty

[www.zibabeauty.com](http://www.zibabeauty.com)

Asiana (based in the United Kingdom, but sold in the United States)  
[www.asianamag.com](http://www.asianamag.com)

### Black

Chocolate Brides  
[www.chocolatebridesmagazine.com](http://www.chocolatebridesmagazine.com)

Black Bride & Groom  
[www.blackbrideandgroom.com](http://www.blackbrideandgroom.com)

Brides Noir  
[www.bridesnoir.com](http://www.bridesnoir.com)

### Hispanic

Linda Novia Wedding & Quinceañera  
[www.lindanovia.net](http://www.lindanovia.net)

Bodas USA (in Spanish, with few English translation)  
[www.bodasusa.com](http://www.bodasusa.com) — C.P.F.

legal headaches, it's a good idea to make the question optional.) Finding out that information beforehand gives you time to at least familiarize yourself with

some traditions that the couple could be interested in, says Richards, whose business does about 20 percent of annual sales in weddings, which are "mostly

ethnic weddings." Even if your knowledge is superficial or surface, the fact that you researched the topic at all will prove to the couple that you are interested and engaged in their wedding.

You can gather information on traditions for cultural weddings from reputable sources online or in various print publications and TV segments, such as the Library of Congress, the Bridal Association of America, or turn to ethnic wedding advice at [www.theknot.com](http://www.theknot.com).

"They want you to understand them," Richards cites, explaining that the ethnic brides and grooms want you to be able to relate to their culture and incorporate what you know about it into their big day. Richards has even gone so far as to learn a few conversational phrases in other languages to try out on the bride and her parents. "Do a few [wedding consultations] like that and pretty soon you'll get known," she says.

Richards says to be prepared for a larger showing at bridal consultations with some ethnic brides, who sometimes bring five or six family members. For instance, the half-Chinese, half-Italian bride-to-be came to her wedding consultation with not only her mother but also her stepfather, grandfather and



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Photo by L. Alexander Photography and Video

**BRIDES OF COLOR** When working on wedding floral plans, florists advise: Do not be afraid to ask questions about the bride's background so that you can be prepared to give ideas for infusing her culture into the wedding.

aunt. The bride, she says, stressed the importance of having her family mem-

bers present during the meeting to get their thoughts on what flowers works best with their Chinese traditions.

One thing you should not do at a wedding consultation is try to fake an understanding of a different culture, says Stacy Taylor, a designer for Loki Flower Gardens in Houston, and an owner of a wedding floral design business, Utopian Blooms. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to ask the bride to make sure you get the details correct.

"Some ethnicities have religious aspects that are incorporated into a wedding," says Taylor, who is currently planning her own wedding, which will incorporate elements of her fiancé's Mexican culture. "Some of these things may not have anything to do with the flowers, but most brides feel more comfortable if you understand their needs

and religious aspects of their weddings."

One aspect that might dictate your ability to take on more multicultural weddings is their sheer size. In the United States, the average wedding includes about 150 guests, according to the Association for Wedding Planners International. Middle Eastern weddings, however, in particular those involving specifically Indian and Persian couples, can have a 400- to 1,000-person guest list.

In certain cultures, "if you don't invite someone, you're insulting them," Aldama says.

## Reaching Out to All Brides

When it comes to reaching brides, some truths are self-evident and universal: Word of mouth is key — whether the bride is from New Guinea or New England — and direct contact is important.

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## How Multicultural Is My Market?

Trying to get a better sense for the ethnic demographics of your city? Here are a few resources:

Plug your city name into **www.city-data.com** and scroll down to get specific breakdowns on all kinds of variables, including ethnicity.

Nationally, the U.S. Census Bureau's **http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/** is another resource for florists interested in general information on people, businesses and geography of a particular area. The site is searchable by state- and city-specific categories, searches that provide insight on a population's culture, religion and other variables. That kind of information is not only interesting, but practical.

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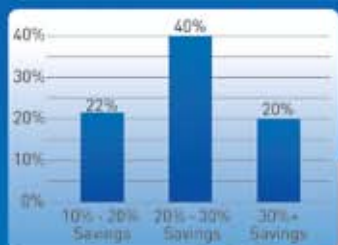


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## Common Cultural Customs

Looking for more good resources on ethnic weddings? The Web site, [www.theknot.com](http://www.theknot.com), offers a variety of ethnic-specific advice columns and resources. Here's a sampling:

### Chinese Weddings

Flowers are very important to the Chinese tradition. Common wedding ceremony flowers include "peonies, orchids or lotus blossoms — all meaningful Chinese flowers." Also, for outdoor weddings, theknot.com experts recommend keeping in step with traditional customs such as incorporating oranges (these fruits represent good wishes) into the overall wedding theme as well as "having your florist create garlands of lilies or orchids," to designate special seating for the outdoor ceremony.

To read more on Chinese wedding customs go to [www.chineseweddingsbytheknot.com](http://www.chineseweddingsbytheknot.com).



### Black Weddings

Former editor for Essence Magazine, Harriet Cole, provides her insight on wedding traditions for the black community. She writes: "Couples want more of a personal stamp on their weddings and look to their heritage as a way of doing this. Within the African tradition there is room for a wide range of expression — there are many customs to draw from, including East African, West African, Egyptian and Moroccan." Cole also describes the black couple's wedding receptions as lavish affairs, placing a lot of importance on food choices as well as making sure the African-American spirit is present in the event décor.

### Hispanic Weddings

The site explains several Latin-American wedding traditions (and it even provides the appropriate Spanish names of the customs) from where to get married to what's involved in the procession.

"And don't forget about the decorations: use brightly colored linens, flowers, and pottery. You can even hang pinatas from the ceiling. At Puerto Rican weddings, a doll dressed in a bridal gown is placed at the head table," according to the site.

### Indian Weddings

In Indian traditions, as opposed to the western tradition of a flower girl, it is the job of the groom's brother to shower the newlyweds with flower petals immediately following the end of the ceremony — this action is done to keep evil away. 🌸

— C.P.F.

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**DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS** Heidi Richards of Eden Florist & Gift Shop, sits down to discuss flower options for a wedding with a bride-to-be in her Miramar, Fla., shop.

For a lot of florists, big shows are expensive and time consuming, and they don't always lead to new clients. But Taylor says there are more and more ethnic bridal shows popping up, and that, for her, they've led to new business. She says that Loki Florist, which has been in business in downtown Houston for 34 years and has about five employees total, participates in three different bridal shows in Houston. During these, she connects with ethnic brides, which ultimately leads to additional business through word-of-mouth.

"The best way in Houston to get certain ethnic wedding business is by word of mouth," Taylor says. "If you get in good with a group of people, then your business grows. There are certain [bridal] shows that target higher-end brides, and a lot of ethnic brides are included in that category."

"My first year in business, I did one [ethnic] wedding from every child and friend [of the bridal family]. And, they're still really good customers," adds Richards. "One wedding can lead to tons of other weddings." ❁

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