



rehearsal dinners: more of our favorites

BEST UPSCALE SETTING: The Wine Pantry, located in the basement of **The Bernards Inn** in Bernardsville (908-766-0002; bernardsinn.com), pictured above, was just recently redone and offers a beautiful intimate location. The stone walls, Chippendale chairs, and impeccably set tables will make your guests feel like they've escaped to your own private mansion. Then treat them to fun family movies on the plasma television hidden inside the wall.

BEST VIEW OF THE CITY: **Arthur's Landing** in Weehawken (201-867-0245; arthurslanding.com) has to-die-for views of Manhattan along with an incredible kitchen. Top it off with dessert (brought in from Palermo's Bakery), and your guests will think they've truly gone to heaven.

BEST HOT SPOT WITH AN OCEAN VIEW: For a bit of South Beach flair without leaving the state, there's **Avenue** in Long Branch (732-759-2900; leclubavenue.com). Dine in the hip restaurant, or host your dinner on the roof deck for a fun, unique party. There are gorgeous spotlighted views of the sand and surf at night, with an equally impressive menu.

BEST SEAFOOD: The award-winning **Opah Grille** in Gladstone is one of N.J.'s finest seafood restaurants (908-781-1888; opahgrille.com). For rehearsal dinners up to 35, choose from such entrées as wasabi-crusted tuna, Chilean sea bass, or grilled salmon.—*M.T.*

local restaurants for chic locales for their 20-to-30-person guest lists.

One of these options is **Daryl Restaurant and Wine Bar** in New Brunswick (732-253-7780; darylwinebar.com), where guests experience a succession of small portions brought to the table, ready to be shared, in the same style as tapas. Menu choices include croquettes of brandade (cod), gazpacho shooters, tuna tartare, warm artichoke salad with Serrano ham, beer-braised short ribs, seared scallops with fava beans and blood orange, and flat-iron steak with sautéed wild mushrooms, in a mix of Spanish and American cuisine paired with crowd-pleasing wines. You can also provide the raw bar option that

you might not have been able to afford for the reception itself, here for your VIP guests' selection. With this international fusion mixed with luxury, your rehearsal dinner becomes a mini dream reception.

Another top trend in rehearsal dinners is an interactive element. At **Rio 22** in Union (908-206-0060; rio22.net), a Brazilian steakhouse and sushi bar, you get a blend of two very different, unique styles of food with the added flair of servers coming to your table to carve meat right onto your plate. That sushi option you might not have been able to add to your wedding becomes a far more affordable treat here for your chosen guests, in a celebratory atmosphere often featuring live music.

At **La Campagne** in Cherry Hill (856-429-7647; lacampagne.com), consistently voted one of the most romantic restaurants in the state, your upscale menu might include lobster bisque, French onion soup with Gruyère cheese, roasted pear salad, escargot en brioche with garlic brandy butter, lobster and brie crepe, seared foie gras with fig compote, filet mignon with Roquefort cheese and demi glace, and sea bass with saffron fennel beurre blanc. Your foodie guests will think they just wandered onto the set of *Bravo's Top Chef*.

One of the rehearsal dinner styles that is most requested by guests who live outside of the tri-state area is "Really Good Italian" food. Their home states or regions might lack our flair for a delectable pizza or manicotti, so look at top choices in gourmet Italian cuisine, such as **Catelli's** in Voorhees (856-751-6069; catellirestaurant.com) where your guests will be treated to Northern Italian cuisine such as veal saltimbocca, capellini with crab, fried calamari, antipasto, seafood risotto, and their award-winning desserts, with your party taking place in their glass-enclosed conservatory. Its atrium setting is a big draw for non-summer rehearsal dinners, giving the feeling of being outdoors without braving the elements.

If you wanted an oceanside wedding but couldn't handle the logistics, why not have your rehearsal dinner at an oceanside restaurant with huge glass windows overlooking the ocean, and a terrace for an outside cocktail party or sunset dessert hour? If you wanted a garden wedding or a tented wedding in your backyard, these options may be resurrected for your rehearsal-dinner style.

The key is to provide a relaxing environment to welcome your parents and bridal party members, where toasts may be shared, tears may be shed, and gifts exchanged, all while you're enjoying top-notch service by the restaurant or hotel