

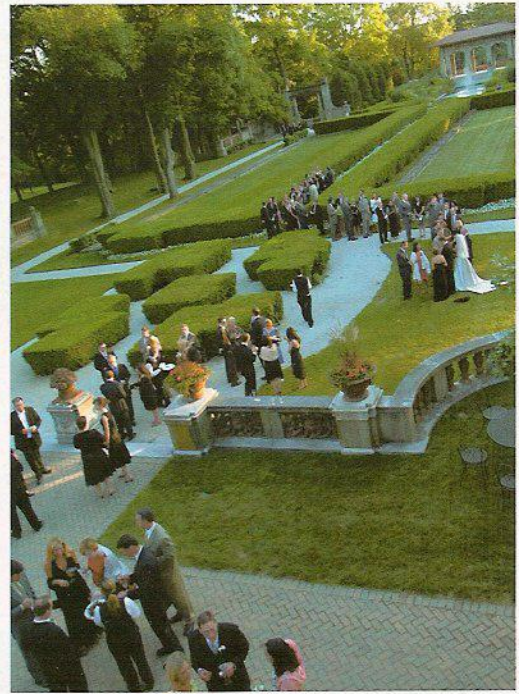
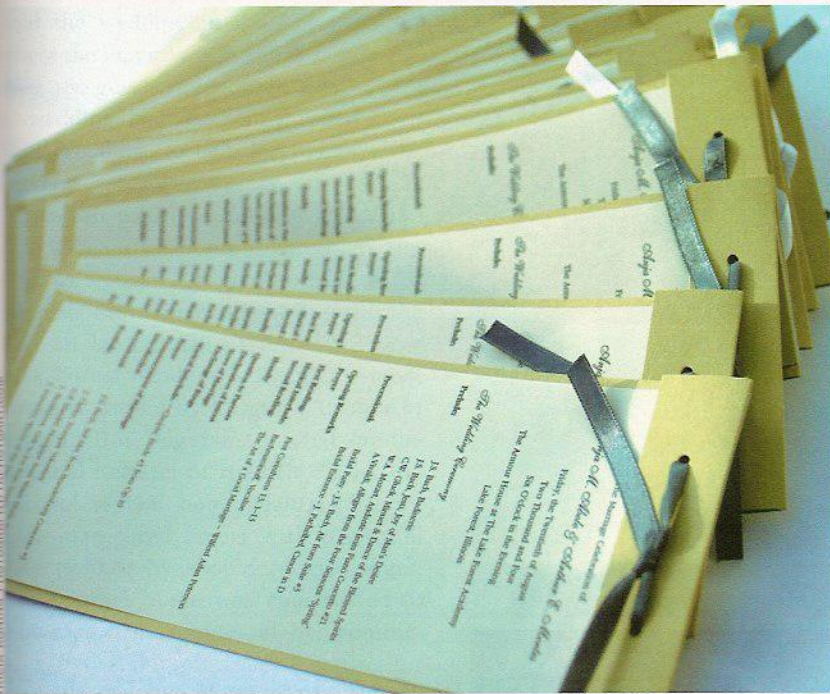
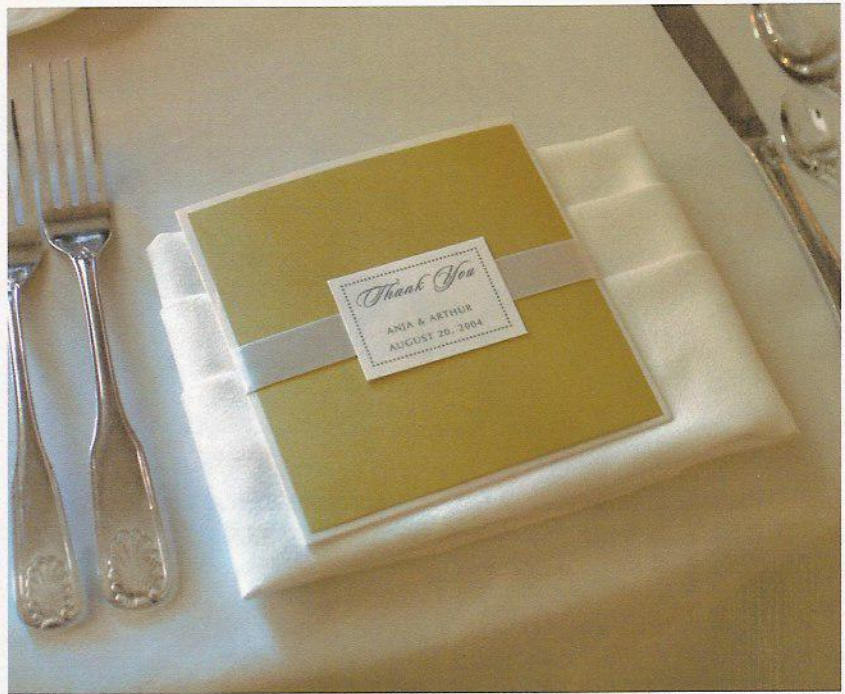
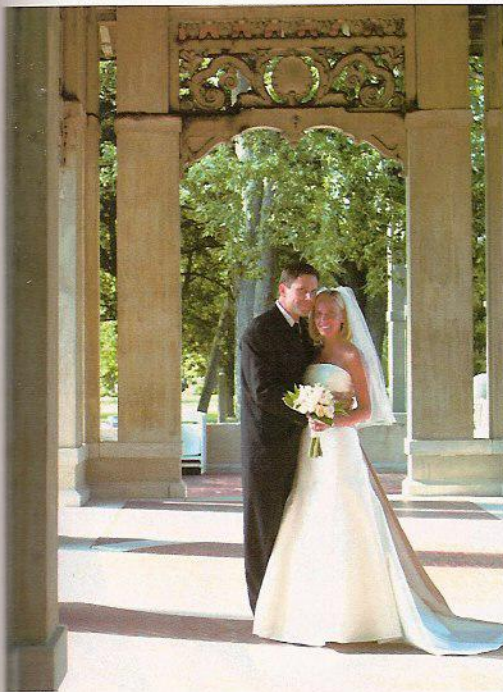
Love At Second Sight

Anja Abele and Arthur Mertes BY LISSA POIROT

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ANJA ABELE AND ARTHUR MERTES WERE BOTH ON THE board of a local charity group, and a fellow member thought they would be a perfect match. But after their disastrous first date—a quick meeting for drinks—Anja wasn't so sure. "He was on the phone 90 percent of the date," she recalls. What Anja didn't know was that Arthur was in a relationship. But a few months after their bad date (and after his relationship ended), Arthur called to ask for another chance, hoping Anja would go with him to a wedding. The second date was the charm. They danced, took a romantic stroll on the shore of Lake Michigan and shared their first kiss.

Opposite, Anja carried a lush bouquet that included pale pink roses. *Clockwise from top*, The happy newlyweds pose for a formal photo. Customized CD favors, wrapped in chartreuse paper, match the programs and invitations. Guests mingle outside of Lake Forest Academy's Armour House, where the couple held their celebration. Elegant chartreuse programs were tied with satin ribbon.

an unexpected proposal

Love was in the air, but it took five years for Arthur to propose to Anja. "He definitely took his time!" she says.

Just before the holidays, Arthur asked Anja to go out for dinner with him. As she was standing in her closet getting dressed, he entered with their cat, Simba, claiming that the cat needed to be comforted, right then and there. Anja started petting the cat and discovered an engagement ring attached to Simba's collar. Arthur got down on one knee in the closet and proposed, then the to-be-weds were whisked away in a limo for a romantic dinner. »

"We took a tour around Chicago, which was lit up with holiday lights because it was just before Christmas," Anja recalls. "Then Arthur took me to dinner at Lake Point Towers' CITE Restaurant, with a fantastic view of the city skyline. It was absolutely perfect."

worth the wait

Deciding on a wedding date was a bit of a challenge for this pair. "Once Arthur made up his mind to get married, he wanted to get married immediately," Anja says with a laugh. "He was ready to elope."

Instead, Anja convinced her fiancé to wait eight months so they could host a summer wedding outdoors. Anja's family, originally from Germany, lived in New Jersey during the summers and in Florida during the winters. So the bride chose to hold the wedding in the Chicago area, where the majority of Arthur's family and their 180 guests resided. She then turned to wedding planner Renny Pederson of Bliss Weddings to help her organize the big day.

The top priority? Finding a location with a beautiful outdoor ceremony setting, as well as a romantic interior for the reception. The couple found just the spot an hour north of the city at the Lake Forest Academy's Armour House, formerly owned by J. Ogden Armour of Armour Hot Dog fame. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the colonial revival home features beautifully manicured lawns with a natural aisle flanked by shoulder-high hedges. The original home was constructed to showcase his daughter at her coming-out party, making it an ideal setting for a bride's coming out, as well.

On August 20, 2004, a quintet of two violins, a cello, a bass and a trumpet played romantic Baroque music as the four bridesmaids, clad in black tea-length organza gowns, began the processional down the petal-strewn aisle. The bride soon followed, wearing an ensemble worthy of the romantic setting: a strapless, silk A-line Carolina Herrera gown, topped with a champagne-colored silk taffeta wrap. Her bouquet of pale pink roses, accented with lily of the valley, looked like it had been fresh-picked »



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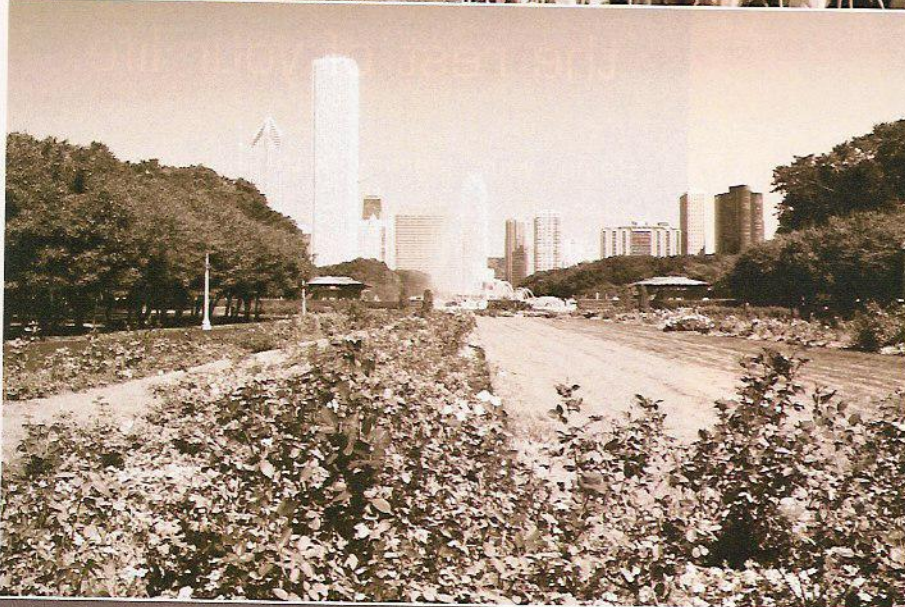
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fall colors highlighted the space. The tables were decorated with votive candles and arrangements of roses and orchids.

Guests chose between New York steak with a roasted shallot demi-glace, fillet of salmon with mango-raspberry glaze or spinach gnocchi in a tomato cream sauce. A buttermilk wedding cake with crème brûlée and cream cheese fillings was garnished with a swirl of mango coulis. Also on the sweet side: Godiva chocolate favors.

memorable moments

To include their loved ones in their special day, Matt and Christina created a "memory table" at the reception, which included wedding photos of their parents and grandparents and photos of family members who had passed away. "We wanted to commemorate happy moments in the past and honor our loved ones," says Christina.

For the best man's speech, Matt's brother Tom gave a PowerPoint presentation highlighting some of Matt's "least fine moments" growing up. "He had our guests in hysterics," says Christina. "We loved it!"

Matt and Christina had their first dance to "Come Away With Me" by Norah Jones. Guests then danced to big band, swing and jazz music, along with a CD of meaningful songs that was played during the reception. "We wanted to include music that had significance to us," says Matt.

The couple couldn't be happier with the way their married life began. "There's nothing in the world like having the people you love supporting you when you pledge to spend your life with someone," says the bride. "It was over too soon," adds Matt. "We couldn't have asked for a more beautiful day to begin the rest of our lives together." ■

BEHIND THE SCENES

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312/345-3506

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312/421-6666

FLOWERS: Botanicals, 773/269-3142

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