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Michael Cerra and Cristina Vildostegui-Cerra on the steps of the Princeton University Chapel. Cristina's Monique Lhuillier gown was accented with a soft gold sash. Adriene Presti of Dahlia Floral Concepts in Pennington used calla lilies, orchids, and roses to create a lush, textured bouquet. Facing (bottom, left): Cristina's sisters, Lauren and Danielle, presented her with custom sneakers to don while dancing at the reception.



Cristina AND MICHAEL

*A Princeton couple takes the plunge and weds
in the heart of autumn with a ceremony and reception that
are as personal as their vows to each other.*

BY PATTI VERBANAS PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF TISMAN

It snowed.

It was October, and it was *snowing*,” says Cristina Vildostegui-Cerra, a kindergarten teacher at Brooks Crossing Elementary School in South Brunswick. “My 23 students jumped from their seats and ran to the window, screaming. Meanwhile, I’m turning white and screaming, too — in horror.” Three days later, on November 1, 2008, Cristina and her fiancé, Michael Cerra, were scheduled to wed at the Princeton University Chapel and host 250 guests in a tented reception at the Manor House. Fortunately, by that evening, the flakes had melted, and that weekend the couple was wed, as anticipated, on a sunny 65-degree day.

Michael and Cristina hadn’t set out to have an autumn wedding. The original plan was summer nuptials, to work around Cristina’s teaching schedule, but they had difficulty coordinating their preferred vendors and locations. “November 1 was available with everybody, and we just took it,” Cristina says.

The Princeton backdrop was a given: Cristina grew up there, and after college she returned to be close to her family and set up a home with Michael, an early clinical development specialist at Merck. Though they knew they wanted to be married in the chapel — the third-largest university chapel in the world — finding a site to accommodate the reception’s size proved more difficult. The couple turned to Teri Lands of Main Street Fine Catering for assistance. Lands’ charge: to find a location that fit the couple’s clean, modern aesthetic but would also reflect the chapel’s classical ambiance. Her solution: a tented reception at the Manor House, which, Michael says, “had an old Princeton feel, with hardwood floors, beams, and stone, yet nicely accommodated our modern décor.”

At the outset, there were three vendors the couple knew they wanted: Main Street, which had been recommended by Cristina’s mother, florist Adriene Presti of Dahlia in Pennington, and photographer Jeff Tisman. “After we met with Jeff, we were dead set on having him,” Cristina says. “His work spoke for itself, and his rapport with us and with my parents was great.” Lands, Tisman, and Presti had worked together at many other weddings, which made planning easier for the couple. “Adriene took the time to understand our vision, and created unique arrangements for us,” Cristina says. “And Teri was a great point person during the whole planning process.” The couple chose their remaining vendors based on this trio’s recommendations.

The challenge was to create a wedding that was seasonal but not schlocky. “We were worried about a November 1 wedding date because we didn’t want a Thanksgiving or Halloween theme,” Cristina says. “We wanted to play up that it was fall and a gorgeous time of year, but we didn’t want it to feel like the traditional fall wedding — with leaves and gourds everywhere.



Top: The bridesmaids were resplendent in ginger-colored dresses by Jenny Yoo. Center: Artisan table during cocktail hour. Fall colors accent the cake from Main Street in Princeton. The layers alternated between devil’s food cake with chocolate genoise filling and hazelnut cake with fresh berry filling. Below: The groomsmen reveal a surprise right before their entrance to the reception. “They tucked their pants into their socks so they came out like golf knickers,” Cristina says. “It gave people an energetic vibe and set the tone for the party.”





Clockwise, from top, left: Michael and Cristina's recessional. Presti's centerpieces of spray orchids in dyed water gave the tables a crisp autumn feel. The couple listens as Cristina's sisters give a joint wedding toast. Crab cake appetizer, prepared by Main Street Fine Catering.

We wanted it to be classy but also have a youthful, modern flair.” The solution was using rust-orange details on elements such as the invitations, flowers, cake, and tabletops to give a nod to the season in a cohesive, but subtle, fashion. Even the groomsmen got in on it. “We wanted to add something that wouldn’t be obvious,” Michael says. “So they wore tuxedos, but after the ceremony they hiked the legs up to show their orange socks. It was a lot of fun.” The menu also referenced harvest time, including dishes such as pumpkin ravioli and field greens with blood orange vinaigrette, butternut squash shoestrings, and toasted pumpkin seeds.

Autumn aside, the couple wanted the wedding to be unique to them. And the details certainly did have people talking long after. The program’s cover was created by one of Cristina’s students; it depicted the couple, heralding “Miss V. and Miycol are getting mared!” The table names were based on locales in New Orleans — where Cristina was born and where Michael held his bachelor party — with corresponding stories as to why each place was special to the couple.

“After all, that’s the biggest thing: how personal the event is,” Cristina says. “We wanted people to feel like it was ‘Michael and Cristina’s Wedding,’ not just some couple that was getting married. All weddings are nice in their own way, but it’s what you do to make it *your* day that people will remember.”