



Down to Earth

THIS NORTH CAROLINA COUPLE'S LOVE OF THE LAND SHOWS IN EVERY DETAIL OF THEIR ELEGANT-MEETS-RUSTIC FARM FÊTE, FROM THE HOMEGROWN FOOD AND FLOWERS TO THE BARN THEY BUILT FOR THE OCCASION.

Photographs by Heather Payne Text by Isabel Burton

Country Love

In postceremony photos at their farm, the bride wore a gown by Bhdn, and the groom was in a suit by Samuelsohn Made to Measure. Stephanie loves the smell of lilies, so most of the bouquets had at least one yellow trumpet stem in the mix.

Opposite: Party crashers pecked at crumbs during the outdoor cocktail hour.





Southern Comfort

1. Stephanie and her father on the day before the wedding, with her dog, Mason, in tow. Farm-grown flowers were harvested throughout the week.
2. The barn, built by a local carpenter, was outfitted with foliage- and flower-filled urns for the event.



In retrospect, it seems almost destined that their paths would eventually intersect. Stephanie Hall and Michael Noël grew up in North Carolina and then headed west looking for adventure. After traveling, exploring, and sowing their oats, they returned to their home state. They finally met in 2012 when Michael, founding partner at an investment firm specializing in start-ups, visited Stephanie's flower and animal farm at the invitation of her sister. "She works at Habitat for Humanity, and they were in a meeting together. She just knew he was the man for me," says Stephanie. "He's funny and kind, and his sister is a farmer, too!" Sure enough, the two nature lovers were a match made in hog (chicken, cow, sheep...) heaven. Seven months later, Michael proposed.

The obvious organic choice for the duo's I do's was the spot where they met: Sassafras Fork Farm, which Stephanie runs with her parents. "I was never the girl who held a particular vision for the perfect wedding, but I knew ours had to be something soulful, nurturing, and in sync with this place and time," Stephanie says. Location set, the couple began planning. Everything for their wedding would be hand-grown, handpicked, or hand-built, starting with the venue itself: a new barn made from reclaimed wood sourced mostly from a local factory and an old home on the property. "The idea of putting up a beautiful building to welcome folks was so appealing, not just for our wedding but for many celebrations to come," says Stephanie.

The carpenter on the job also made long wooden dinner tables

and a bar; Stephanie's brother-in-law brewed the beer; and the food was raised and grown by Stephanie, her father, and a few other local farmers. Then there were the flowers—lavish, breathtaking blooms. "I wanted it to feel like the trees and vines had encroached on the barn, like it had been taken back by the land," says Sue Prutting, their floral designer. Prutting enlisted five florist friends from around the country (she called them the Flower Brigade), plus nine local growers, to assist with the setup.

On October 11, 2014, loved ones (320 of them!) filled the barn in the late afternoon to witness the couple's nondenominational vows. A cocktail hour followed, including hors d'oeuvres of local cheeses, deviled farm eggs with roasted red peppers, fritto misto, crispy pork belly, lamb meatballs, and peach-glazed North Carolina shrimp, while a three-piece local band played traditional bluegrass music. The sun broke through in time to allow guests to wander outdoors, where they were joined by a few roaming chickens.

Next up, a family-style farm-to-fork dinner, featuring platters piled high with braised chicken and bourbon brisket (from animals raised and harvested by Stephanie's father), fritters, and more. Later, the twosome two-stepped to Jack Johnson's "I Got You," starting a dance party that lasted until midnight. "A handful of close friends stayed into the early hours, and we hung out around the fire pit," Stephanie recalls. "We ate leftovers, finished off dessert, sang, and just enjoyed basking in the warmth of the fire." The night was so wonderful, in fact, that by the time they went to bed, it was almost time to get up and feed the animals again.



Farm Fresh

1. The staircase was "overgrown" with enormous garlands of oak and maple branches, embellished with hanging smilax, Solomon's seal, tuberose, dahlias, and garden roses. 2. Arrangements included many varieties of dahlias, grasses, blackberry lily seedpods, celosia, tuberose, and lisianthus, as well as spray- and garden-rose varieties. 3. Even the livestock wanted in on the celebration. 4. Stephanie's parents tended to the flock. 5. The bride's ride was Michael's father's vintage Chevy pickup. "We had trouble starting it, which made us a little late to the ceremony!" she says. 6. Stephanie's nephew cuddled a resident chick.





Eating Green

1. The head table was framed by a garland, made fuller on one side so it would appear to be growing up the wall. The base included elaeagnus, ornamental pear branches, and smilax vine—foliage chosen because it holds up well out of water for hours and would remain fresh throughout the evening. Floral accents of 'Café au Lait' dahlias and garden roses dotted the vines. Vintage brass candleholders with natural golden beeswax candles provided a warm glow. 2. Rosé Champagne was served during cocktail hour. 3. Cheeses, from local creamery Boxcarr Handmade Cheese at Boxcarr Farms, included Cottonseed, Rosie's Robiola, Lissome, and Campo.





Friends of a Farmer

1. The place settings were vintage plates that Stephanie had collected over many years. "I've always loved antique-store finds," she says. 2. A flower girl, goddaughter of the groom, wore a Brooks Brothers dress and a vibrant floral crown. 3. The wedding party—a mix of family and friends—gathered by the barn for photos after the ceremony.



STYLING: ANDREW WILSON/ANDREW WILSON CO.

of a Farmer
 settings were vintage plates that
 had collected over many years. The
 new-style table, the size of a flower girl
 of the groom, and a whole wedding
 weekend from a crowd. The wedding
 of family and friends—gathered by the
 couple after the ceremony.



Dessert in Bloom

1. A lemon cake—Stephanie's favorite flavor—with buttercream was decorated with spray roses. Garden roses, dahlias, and vines graced the table. 2. The newlyweds listened to toasts as evening settled in. 3. Coffee in mix-and-match vintage cups and saucers accompanied a potluck dessert table filled with offerings from friends (some of them members of the couple's supper-club group).



JACLYN MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHY (2, 3)

STEPHANIE AND MICHAEL'S
Vows and Boughs

“Stephanie sauntered up through the woods in a brown wool sweater, EXCITED to show her farm to someone new. I wanted to KEEP LOOKING into her green eyes FOREVER. When she asked me, ‘Wanna see my yurt?’ I was done.”

MICHAEL, ON HIS FIRST IMPRESSION

By the Numbers

7

Months between the first date and engagement

15

Months the couple's engagement lasted

150

People who attended the rehearsal dinner at the Cookery in Durham, North Carolina, where they dined on pork loin from Michael's sister's farm

10

Members of the wedding party

4

Flower children

100

Chickens raised by Stephanie's dad to feed the party guests

45

Minutes between downtown Durham and the farm; guests were transported via shuttle

1951

Model year of the vintage Chevy pickup that Michael's father lent to the bride for her big entrance

The Proposal

After just three months of dating, Michael asked Stephanie, “Do I have to wait a year until I ask you to marry me?” He held out for four more months before he arranged a picnic one Friday evening in July, while Stephanie was preparing bouquets to sell at a Saturday farmers' market. Luring his intended to their “picnic rock” above the Tar River—where Stephanie's father had convinced her mother they needed to buy the farm and build a life on it—Michael pulled out a ring and made it official.

THE LOGISTICS

THE ACCOMMODATIONS Guests stayed at the **Durham Marriott City Center** hotel (marriott.com). There, they were able to explore the city's downtown, stroll the farmers' markets, visit the museums and parks, and try the great southern cooking.

THE PRE-PARTY Stephanie invited the special women in her life to join her on the farm the

morning of the day before the wedding to harvest and arrange flowers for the rehearsal dinner. With coffee, tea, mimosas, and breakfast treats, they gathered outside the flower work space and were led in a quick design demonstration by Erin Benzakein of Floret. They then spent the morning creating garden-inspired arrangements to decorate the tables.

The Honeymoon

The newlyweds left a week after the wedding for five days on Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas, where they stayed at the **Abaco Lodge** (abacolodge.com). “It was our kind of vacation—off the beaten path, on one of the least touristy islands,” says Stephanie. “We spent the first two days fly-fishing in the flats and the last few days deep-sea fishing and snorkeling offshore.”

Wedding Wisdom

“Pick the three things that matter most to you and focus on making them the best, most significant parts of the night, while letting some other things go. Our big themes were: the space (barn), food, and flowers!” —Stephanie

MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS

STEPHANIE SAYS: “When I first stepped into our barn, arm in arm with my dad and my mom, I felt embraced by all the friends and family standing snugly together as I walked toward my future husband.”

MICHAEL SAYS: “Walking through the cheering crowd with my parents to shake my groomsmen's hands—a tradition in the Southeast—then watching Stephanie walk down the aisle to me; the laughter that broke out when I messed up my vows; listening to her vows and all the lovely speeches.”

Sources

Location Sassafras Fork Farm **Event coordination** Grace Beason of Grace Leisure Events **Catering** Boxcarr Farms **Event design and flowers** Sue Prutting of White Magnolia Designs **Flowers** Floret **Photography** Heather Payne; Jaclyn Morgan Photography **Stationery** Union Press & Paper; Stampflifer **Music** Yarn (reception) **Rentals** Remember When Antiques; Classic **Videography** Inkspot Crow Films **Bride's dress** Bhdn **Bride's hair** Soapbox Salon **Bride's makeup** The Makeup Team **Flower-girl dresses** Brooks Brothers; InWeddingDress.com **Ring bearer's attire** Lito Children's Wear **Groom's suit** Samuelsohn Made to Measure **Groom's accessories** Robert Jensen (tie); Robert Talbott (shirt); L.L.Bean (shoes)

See The Guide for more vendor sources