WEDDINGS

Gen Z's 'Quiet Weddings' Are a Clapback to Millennial Excess

PREP PINTEREST FOR THE COURTHOUSE WEDDING

BY SYDNEY MEISTER • PUBLISHED SEP 11, 2025

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It hit me somewhere between the fifth matching robe and the third Instagram carousel. A girl I used to know—let's call her Madison—had just gotten married in what appeared to be a Tuscan vineyard (though I'm fairly certain it was somewhere in upstate New York). There were drone shots. Three extravagant dress changes. Floor-to-ceiling roses with signature cocktails named after her dog. I watched the weekend unfold in real time: the bridesmaids' wedding speeches; the groomsmen sipping beers. We hadn't spoken in years, but I felt like I was there—whether I wanted to be or not.

That's the thing about weddings now. They're not just personal milestones. They're public-facing productions. Carefully curated, content-ready spectacles designed to prove not just that you're in love—but that you have taste, money and a florist who understands negative space. And for a long time, this was the wedding I wanted. (Or at least, the wedding I thought I should have.) I remember pinning mood boards to secret Pinterest accounts at 15, long before I had a real relationship—or a credit score. Back then, a wedding wasn't just a celebration. It was a declaration: of who you were, what you valued, how well you could style a cocktail hour.

But somewhere between the mood boards and the monogrammed menus, the whole ordeal has started to become more about performance than partnership. And now, my generation seems to be saying...enough.

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According to a recent report from Aura Print, Google searches for "weddings in local registry offices" have surged by 5,000 percent, with nearly 30 percent of couples opting for small, intimate ceremonies over traditional affairs. And when you look at the numbers, this makes sense. The cost of the average American wedding climbed from $15,208 in 1990 to $27,852 in 2006, according to a Condé Nast Bridal Media research survey. And by the end of 2025, Zola projects the average cost will reach $36,000. For context: The average wedding cost has jumped 30 percent since 2019 for the same guest counts and the same venues. And yet, Millennials still top the spending charts, with an average wedding budget of $51,130.

These numbers aren't just about inflation—they're about priorities. Millennials came of age when starter homes were attainable, job security felt plausible and weddings—lavish or not—felt like a worthy investment. And while it's easy to blame Instagram for the rise of the spectacle wedding, it didn't start with social media. It started with access. Reality shows like *Say Yes to the Dress* and *Four Weddings* made six-figure nuptials feel aspirational. Pinterest made them feel replicable. *Then* came Instagram, where a single day became a 30-story saga. Suddenly, the wedding wasn't just a milestone, it was a brand launch.

But Gen Z is coming of age under a completely different set of circumstances. Financial precarity is the norm. Rent eats half your paycheck. Groceries cost more than your first car. Wages aren't rising, but costs certainly are. And in that context, saving for a wedding doesn't just feel difficult—it feels absurd. Plus, even if you can afford it, it's worth asking: *to what end*? We've lived through the full lifecycle of online perfectionism. We've seen how quickly curation becomes comparison. Where Millennials leaned into visibility, we're leaning into preservation—of energy, privacy, money. It's a generational shift that's showing up everywhere: in fashion (quiet luxury), in work (quiet quitting), and now, in weddings.

This is what a Gen Z wedding looks like now: micro-celebrations with 10 to 50 guests. Pinterest reports searches for "civil ceremony photography" are up 637 percent, and "courthouse wedding dresses" have jumped 137 percent. Couples are swapping traditional photographers for content creators who document the day in documentary-style snippets, favoring candor over choreography. Weekday ceremonies are rising, RSVP lists are going digital and eco-friendly touches—like paper-flower bouquets or secondhand gowns—are the new flex. It's less about throwing the "event of the year" and more about curating something intimate, sustainable and unapologetically personal.

And historically speaking, the wedding "shrink" is hardly a new trend. During the Great Depression—and again in post-war America—couples got married in courthouses and kitchens, in borrowed suits with homemade cakes. These ceremonies weren't any less meaningful; they simply mirrored the reality at large. A moment marked by instability and restraint. A moment not unlike the one we're in now.

Take it from me—I'm 27, at the age where the engagements start to come in waves. You blink, and suddenly everyone has a ring, a venue and a wedding hashtag that sounds like it was pitched in a marketing meeting. And again, for a long time, I thought that's what I wanted. The Millennial Pinterest board come to life; an event that would live on my socials for eternity. But the older I get, the less I'm drawn to the spectacle and the more I crave something personal. Not a moment designed for the camera, but a celebration with meaning. One that values the partnership over the party. The person over the production.

This isn't a critique of celebration. I love a big wedding. I'll wear the dress, raise a glass, cry during the vows. But let this be a reminder to my generation: the standard has changed. It's no longer about meeting Millennial expectations. It's about leaning into what feels right for our reality. If that means Champagne towers and a weekend in the Berkshires? Go for it. Put me down for the rehearsal dinner and a +1. But if the whole thing feels absurd or out of reach to you personally, consider this permission: you can skip the big day. Because for many of us, opting out of the performance *is* the point.

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