

Here Comes the Mother-to-Be

By MIREYA NAVARRO

LOS ANGELES

FOR her wedding last year before 100 guests at the historic Mission Inn in Riverside, Calif., Neomi Padilla, 32, wore a sexy spaghetti-strap dress from L'ezu Atelier in Newport Beach and four-inch heels.

Then she held on for dear life.

At the altar, she was unable to kneel comfortably. "My husband held me because I thought I'd fall," she said. Making her way down a staircase to the reception things got more precarious. Being seven months pregnant, she couldn't see her feet.

Only a few years ago, women planning simultaneously for a wedding and a due date would beg designers and

bridal stores for dresses that would camouflage their growing bellies and — if they told anyone at all — would insist on silence. These days, however, brides are not only not hiding their pregnancies, but they are showing them off, celebrating the upcoming birth in vows and toasts, wearing gowns that flatter their bump, and, in short, refusing to give up any elements of a traditional wedding just because there is a baby visibly on the way.

Some bridal gown manufacturers are rushing out maternity designs and officiants are blessing more and more unborn children.

"It is a growing trend," said the Rev. Christopher Tuttle, a nondenominational minister who presides over the National Association of Wedding Officiants — with about 200 members. "It's all become, 'Hey, look at me. I'm preg-

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Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

PREGNANT AND PROUD Carmela Pampillonia says she found her Catholic parish "very accepting" of her wedding at five months along.

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nant!"

The Rev. Scott Carpenter, a Unity pastor who presides over another national group of officiants, the National Association of Wedding Ministers, said that eight years ago he never had a bride openly announce her pregnancy, but now those brides account for about 20 percent of the weddings he performs.

At a time when pregnancies are obsessively chronicled and celebrated in celebrity and fashion magazines, it is perhaps not surprising that they are being showcased even as women walk down the aisle. But there are larger cultural factors at work as well: women are getting married older, and many are living with their husbands-to-be for years before exchanging vows.

"They're older, they're more confident," said Carley Roney, editor in chief of *The Knot* (www.theknot.com), a Web site devoted to wedding planning information. "Oftentimes couples are paying for the wedding, so they don't worry about what people think."

Mrs. Padilla, who runs a family food business in the Los Angeles area and is now the mother of 8-month-old Sophia, said her attitude was, "Why can't I have it all?" She said she became pregnant after plans for a big wedding were under way, and she decided to stick to them.

"I'm 32, my husband is 34," she said. "We wanted a family, so we weren't embarrassed."

The timing of baby and wedding is not always coincidental. Even though increasing numbers of heterosexual couples live together without marrying, Americans still lean toward marriage once a baby comes because people think it will provide greater security for the child.

But if pregnancies have often led to marriage, they have not always paved the way for full-blown weddings if the bride was far along.

With today's pregnant brides, Ms. Roney said, "It's the flaunting of it where things are taking a turn. We're talking about seven months pregnant."

Or eight. Laura Taylor, 21, of Terre Haute, Ind., said her only concern about her Feb. 12 wedding was that she was cutting it so close to her March due date that she feared she might have the baby before the husband.

Ms. Taylor, who until recently worked as a cashier in a tanning salon, said she had been engaged for more than three years and, upon learning she was pregnant, debated for a week and a half whether to have a big wedding. She decided on "this huge blowout," including a Baptist church ceremony and a reception for 125 guests.

"I just decided, what the heck," she said. "I do things out of order anyway." "I thought about an ivory dress and my mom was, no, you're getting white. It's 2005."

Those who shared the limelight with their unborn babies on their big day say the pregnancy made an emotional occasion even more intense. Jane E. Smith, 38, a director of training and development with InterContinental Hotels and Resorts in San Francisco, said even her guests cried at her wedding last November outside Palms Springs when the minis-



Tom Stratman for The New York Times, left

DRESSING FOR 2 Laura Taylor, above left, married at eight months pregnant, said that finding a maternity wedding dress was a nightmare.

ter mentioned her yet-to-be-born son, Miller Michael (who was born Feb. 12).

"It was so unique and so special," said one teary-eyed guest, Jeff Rogers, 38, an information specialist with Nike in Portland, Ore. "I just sort of went, 'Oh, my gosh, there's so much more going on here than just two people getting married.'"

But being pregnant for your wedding is not necessarily the easiest

felt they didn't want to help me."

At a second shop, "the dresses looked terrible; they were five sizes bigger than what I wear."

Ms. Taylor said she finally found a satin dress with lace overlay that she loved from TeKay Designs (www.tk-designs.com), an online clothing retailer based in Houston that specializes in maternity wedding dresses in the \$150 to \$800 range.

The company started out in 1998 selling wedding, bridesmaid and prom dresses, but in recent years maternity wedding gowns have sold so briskly that they have become TeKay Designs' specialty, accounting for 60 percent of all sales, or about 300 dresses a year, said Joseph Okyere, director of operations. He said the demand is largely because of the company's wide maternity bridal selection — more than 100 designs — and its relatively low prices.

"In 2000, we started getting calls from pregnant women saying, 'I saw this dress on your Web site, can you custom make it to fit a pregnant woman?'" he said, adding that now the company has "orders coming from all over the world."

Ronald Rothstein, principal owner of Kleinfeld Bridal, the large bridal salon in Brooklyn that sells up to 8,000 wedding dresses a year in the \$2,000 to \$4,000 range, estimates that 6 to 7 brides out of every 100 who come to his salon are pregnant and will show when they marry.

"It used to be that the bride would call us in advance and say they wanted to talk to us privately," he said. "Nowadays, the bride comes in and

says, 'I'm pregnant. What am I going to look good in?' It's just an extra level of excitement."

While pregnant brides say they have found overwhelming support from bridegrooms, parents, friends, officiants and wedding industry vendors, some said social acceptance is not universal.

Joy Lynn Leech, 31, who was seven months pregnant at her wedding last August, said most people were "extremely supportive" but among her 200 guests she noticed some people conspicuously "quiet about the whole thing."

And when she called her Roman Catholic Church she was told that one priest would not marry her but another "would most likely not have a problem."

Mrs. Leech, a volunteer firefighter who owns a pony ride business in New Jersey, got her church wedding — along with a beaded, double-silk organza gown by Jane Wilson-Marquis, a New York designer; horse-drawn carriages; and a big party at Nanina's in the Park in Belleville, N.J. — but she said she was "slightly disappointed" that the baby was not mentioned in the ceremony. She said she did not push it for fear that the accommodating priest would balk at marrying her altogether "because Catholics are so strict."

Christian conservative groups that promote abstinence before marriage, like the Family Research Council and the Christian Defense Coalition in Washington, said that they found it positive that these pregnant brides were getting married, yet they objected to the message they may be sending.

"On one level it is sending the message that sexual activity before marriage doesn't have the kind of harmful emotional, social and economic consequences that can happen," said the Rev. Patrick Mahoney, a Presbyterian minister who heads the Christian Defense Coalition.

Carmela Pampillonia, a restaurant manager in Staten Island who was five months pregnant at her wedding Feb. 13, found her Catholic parish "very accepting" but waited three months for her priest to submit her request for review by his archdiocese. "I couldn't plan anything until they accepted me," she said.

But for brides like Ms. Pampillonia, however, etiquette was not on top of the priority list. "Marriage is supposed to be a symbol of love and unity, and a child brings you more love and unity," she explained. "I showed that belly off all night long and I felt great."

Editors' Note

An article last Sunday described Mary-Kate Olsen's fashion influence on young women, who are copying her slouchy "ashcan chic" style of dress. The article concluded with a quotation from Marina Albright, a college senior who was shopping at Barneys New York for clothes like Ms. Olsen's. The article should have disclosed that Ms. Albright's mother is a friend of the writer.

Correction

An article last Sunday about the popularity of old-fashioned photo booths misspelled the surname of the writer of a history of them. She is Nakki Goranin, not Garonin.