

Hyphens, Hybrids and Getting a Hand

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September 8, 2013

The aisle has been walked, the cake eaten and the bouquet tossed. Now, what name or names will the happily married couple use? These days, the options have become more varied.

But six years ago, when Brian Wilkins (then Lagasse) took his husband Bill's last name, the range wasn't quite so free. The couple, who now run the Snug Cottage Inn in Provincetown, Mass., married in Massachusetts, the first state to legalize same-sex marriage, and they hadn't given much thought to what names to use until they were filling out the application for a marriage license.

"That was a great moment, to realize it's a choice," Brian Wilkins said. "We're not activist kind of people. We live quiet lives. By taking his name, it was, in our small way, a witness to marriage equality." They settled on both of them using Wilkins, because it was easier, he said.

"All my life it was explaining how to spell Lagasse, how to pronounce it, and I have no relation whatsoever to Emeril," he added, laughing.

The new name change became quite the conversation starter.

"We definitely got a lot more questions back then, especially, 'Are you brothers?' " Brian said. "It's still not quite standard today, but society has really become more and more accepting."

Among the options for newlyweds to consider: hyphenated names; hybrids that use pieces of both spouses' names; the bride keeping her maiden name, at all times, or just professionally; and, of course, the bride adopting the groom's name. And it can be hard to choose.

After marrying in 2009, it took Alexis Rodriguez, 33, a beauty publicist in New York, two years before she legally took her husband's last name, Alvich.

"A lot of women I know waited to change their name or are waiting," she said.

Her friends were getting married later, she said, after putting years into educations and careers.

"We're all a little more realistic about marriage in general," she said. "You go in hoping and praying you'll be in it forever. But a lot of times these women are the breadwinners or are the solo incomes. Just in case, you'll still have your name."

Besides, in her industry, recognition is particularly important. “When you work in P.R. and have established yourself amongst a set of editors who know you as one person, it’s hard to quickly transition to something else and to get them to recognize who you are,” she said.

Ms. Alvich is also tied to her Hispanic heritage (“I don’t look like an Alvich,” she said) and is close to her family.

But she began to notice that a few of her girlfriends were keeping their maiden name for work but adopting their spouse’s name for everything else.

“I realized there could be this delineation between personal and professional, and I realized it did mean so much to my husband,” she said.

She settled on Alexis Rodriguez Alvich.

“The first place I changed it was on Facebook,” she said, chuckling. “I thought, well, if it’s on Facebook, it’s out there. That’s the place that mattered.”

She said the legal stuff — tasks like changing names on credit cards and dealing with the Social Security office and the Department of Motor Vehicles — “seemed like such a pain.” So she tried HitchSwitch.com, which, with packages starting at \$25, offers help with the name-change process, after reading about the service in a magazine.

“It’s a lot of virtual hand-holding,” she explained. “They fill out everything for you and then send you the documents with tabs on where to sign and what checks to write.”

Other outfits like MissNowMrs.com and NameChangeExpress.com offer similar services.

HitchSwitch was founded in 2011 by Josh Gelb and Jake Wolff, who met at Fordham Law School and whose wives complained about the name-change process. It now has a new name itself — Kleinfeld Name Change — after partnering with Kleinfeld Bridal, the store in New York.

“About 90 percent of our clients are women who are taking their husband’s name,” Mr. Gelb said. “About 7 percent hyphenate and 3 percent are men taking their partner’s last name.”

But even if most newlywed name changes are more Jane Austen than Gillian Flynn, it’s still “a huge decision,” Mr. Wolff said. “In the last two-plus years we’ve really come to appreciate that everyone views this decision differently.”

And actually, convention, in some cases, has turned out quite profitably, at least in the field of fashion. Tory Burch has a catchier ring than Tory Robinson. Tamara Mellon is more memorable than Tamara Yeadye.

Or in the case of the dual Veronica Beards, sisters-in-law who founded an eponymous apparel line, it provides an amusing back story.

The first Veronica Beard, formerly Miele, married in 1999 and was loath to change her name.

Beard, she thought, “was the least feminine name you could have.”

“The other thing is my name, Miele, is Italian and I grew up in an Italian neighborhood in New Jersey,” she said. “When you change, your identity does get stripped from you.”

To complicate matters, another Veronica married her brother-in-law, and, in due time, there were two Veronica Beards in the family.

The second Veronica Beard, born Swanson, recalled: “I didn’t change my name for a long time after I got married. It was partly laziness, but also there was already a Veronica Beard.”

More couples are choosing to combine parts of each of their names to come up with a hybrid moniker. “It’s a different process, because it’s a legal name change as opposed to a marriage one,” Mr. Gelb said. “It’s a little more tricky, more steps to do.”

That didn’t deter Sarah Marbach, 28, a content and new media specialist in Richmond, Va., when she married Josh Greeson a couple of years ago. The two now go by Greesonbach.

“Some people don’t mind taking the last name, but it wasn’t really something I was excited for,” she said. For one, “ ‘Mrs. Greeson’ made me think of my husband’s mom, which is weird if you get down to it,” she said. There were also feelings to consider.

“Josh’s family is from Tennessee and it’s more traditional there,” she added.

Mrs. Greesonbach shared her experience on TheEveryGirl.com, a site that she frequents.

“I was surprised by all the comments, all these women talking about their stories too,” she said. “Maybe I still had that attitude that I was going to get into trouble — it really was not something any of my friends had done. But when it came down to it, I wanted a name that I could live with.”