

## **O.K. It's Over. So Now Let's Party!**

By RACHEL DODES - The New York Times

HEN Rachel Bendtsen walked through the doors of the Mulberry Street Bar in Little Italy on a recent Thursday night, she was greeted with a cake and a standing ovation. Cameras flashed as she said hello to friends she hadn't seen in three years, since she got engaged and stopped traveling frequently from Minneapolis to New York to visit. Leaning over the cake, decorated with a bird flying out of a cage, she closed her eyes and blew out the candles.

"I am so happy to be a free agent," Ms. Bendtsen, 27, said as more cameras flashed. "And I am accepting applications to make out." Several single men were on hand, eager to apply.

As divorce parties go, this one was pretty tame – no caterer and no band, and the cake was homemade. It was certainly nothing compared to the \$20,000 wedding she and her parents had paid for just two years earlier, the one at which 200 guests watched as she pledged to love and cherish her husband forever.

"Once you say you are going to get married, it is hard to get out of it," Ms. Bendtsen said. "So the divorce puts us both back on course. In my case it is definitely cause for celebration."

The divorce party, a hybrid of a bachelor-bachelorette party and bacchanalian exorcism, is emerging as a celebratory occasion, complete with gift registries and a set of social protocols. Once a source of shame, divorce has become its own peculiar rite of passage, so commonplace that more people are looking to commemorate the occasion, even on Valentine's Day, with friends and in public.

Experts see a combination of factors at work, including a growing acceptance of divorce and society's need for rituals to mark important life stages. "Fifty years ago divorce was almost a forbidden thing," said David Popenoe, a director of the National Marriage Project, an interdisciplinary research project at Rutgers University. "Today you do not think of a divorcée as an outcast; you extend your sympathy and sometimes offer your congratulations."

Dr. Reena Sommer, a psychologist and an author of the 2004 e-book "How to End a Marriage: Leaving Your Spouse in 21 Steps," said she often recommends to her clients that they do something special for themselves in the wake of a failed relationship to mark their return to single life.

"If you can afford it, I say find another place to live," Dr. Sommer said. "If not, then redecorate, and start with the bedroom. Buy newsheets." Having a party, she said, "is just another rite of passage, a way for somebody to say, 'It's finally

over.’ “

It is impossible to determine how popular divorce-and-breakup parties are becoming because they are often small and take a variety of forms – girls’ or boys’ nights out, a full-blown ceremony involving both former spouses or a Valentine’s Day party. But it is evident that divorce celebrations are gaining converts.

Charlotte Eulette of Celebrants USA, a nonprofit group based in Montclair, N.J., that provides people to conduct all kinds of events like weddings, funerals and divorces, said that though divorce parties are still rare, they are becoming more frequent.

“Fifty percent of marriages result in divorce,” Ms. Eulette said, “and ideally I would like to hear my phone ring with 50 percent of calls being requests for divorce ceremonies.” Her own divorce celebration took place a year and a half ago. It was held in Montclair, at Diva Lounge, and featured a drum procession and a renaming ceremony in which her mother symbolically gave her back her maiden name.

Philip Tabor, a 30-year-old actor, gave himself a breakup party in September. “My godmother said, ‘When life gives you lemons, make lemonade,’ ” he said. “I added tequila.” Mr. Tabor, who broke up with his male partner of eight years last summer, sent out invitations with a script-written header, “El Divorcio,” for his margarita-drenched party at the Mexican restaurant Café Juanita on the Lower East Side.

“Without sounding too Lifetime television, it was very therapeutic,” he said. His friends gave him plenty of liquor, erotic videos and a self-help book entitled “Finding the Boyfriend Within.”

And at Andrew Marks’s “Single de Mayo” party, which took place in Los Altos, Calif., last May, 80 guests ate Polynesian food and danced to Mr. Marks’s “Divorce Mix,” which included Carlos Santana’s “Black Magic Woman” and Fleetwood Mac’s “Go Your Own Way.” Friends gave Mr. Marks mostly gag gifts, including a voodoo effigy of his former wife.

“I figured when you get married it’s supposed to be this wonderful occasion,” said Mr. Marks, 37. “Sometimes when you get divorced it is a wonderful occasion, too.”

Businesses, too, are hopping on the breakup party circuit, advertising their services as the perfect pick-me-up for the newly single. At [www.theytookeverything.com](http://www.theytookeverything.com), the recently broken-up can sign up at the gift registry for anything from a new toaster to a flat panel television. Nearly 4,000

copies of the spiral-bound guide “How to Throw a Divorce or Breakup Party,” by Christine Gallagher, a Los Angeles writer, have been sold since she began offering it on her Web site, [www.revenge lady.com](http://www.revenge lady.com), in mid-2003.

Plum Party, a New York-based party supply company ([www.plumparty.com](http://www.plumparty.com)), sells items like a Getting Over Him Kit and an Ex-Husband Voodoo Doll to give as gifts or party favors. At [www.breakupnews.com](http://www.breakupnews.com), people can submit their sordid tales of woe and have them written up in the style of wedding announcements.

“Breakups are the new relationships,” said Flint Wainess, a Los Angeles screenwriter and a founder of Breakup News, whose blogging partner is Anna Jane Grossman, a wedding columnist for The New York Post.

Sylvia Weinstock, master of the wedding cake – she made the 10-foot confectionary tower for the wedding of Star Jones and Al Reynolds – said she received her third order for a divorce cake last year. Ms. Weinstock had baked a wedding cake for that client just four years earlier. For the divorce party she baked another wedding cake, but with a difference – she made it appear as if it had been sliced down the middle.

Having a divorce or breakup party raises some thorny etiquette issues. Should the former spouses celebrate together or apart? Is it appropriate to burn the wedding album? In perhaps the greatest sign that celebrating breakups is becoming a trend, Peggy Post, the great-granddaughter-in-law of Emily Post and the editor of the 17th edition of “Emily Post’s Etiquette” (HarperResource, 2004) added a section in the book about these sorts of events. This is her advice: skip the party.

“If you are going to have a party at all, make sure you do not demean the former spouse and just don’t celebrate the divorce in a public way by being mean,” Ms. Post said. “It sounds basic, but it is important.”

Don’t tell that to Dan Savage, a syndicated sex columnist and editor of The Stranger, an alternative newspaper in Seattle. Mr. Savage might be considered a trailblazer on the angry breakup party frontier: For the past eight years, he has held a Valentine’s Day bash on the evening of Feb. 14, at which single people can destroy artifacts from their previous relationships.

“You are in a room full of people who are single and bitter and looking for rebound sex,” said Mr. Savage, who will hold the party this year at Chop Suey in Seattle. “It’s great.”

Dominic Barbara, a Long Island celebrity divorce lawyer whose clients include Lindsay Lohan’s father, Michael, and Victoria Gotti, said one of his clients is giving a Valentine’s Day party this year with her former husband to celebrate their divorce at a four-star New York restaurant. Mr. Barbara, who wouldn’t

reveal the name of his client, said that the client and her former husband are investment bankers who decided to split \$20 million between them instead of enduring a drawn-out legal battle. “They threw the prenup in the garbage,” Mr. Barbara said.

A 43-year-old woman named Sasha, who spoke on condition that her last name not be published, has a breakup gala scheduled for this weekend in Los Angeles featuring salsa dancers and a fire pit for burning old photos. (Sasha is from Los Angeles but now lives in central Massachusetts.) The party’s centerpiece, a mounted deer head – her former boyfriend’s first kill, which she took from his home – is also en route to the fire pit, in commemoration of her return to being single.

“I win because I’ve got the trophy,” she said.

Back at Rachel Bendtsen’s divorce party a few Thursdays ago, friends drank vodka, traded jokes about marriage and quoted famous divorced people like Mae West and Woody Allen. “I love this one: ‘For a while we pondered whether to take a vacation or get a divorce, but then we realized a trip to Bermuda is over in two weeks and a divorce is something you have forever,’ ” said Oded Burger, a guest at the party, quoting Woody Allen.

Miguel Drake-McLaughlin, who organized Ms. Bendtsen’s divorce party, said he and his friends wanted to learn from it.

“We wanted to set a precedent,” Mr. Drake-McLaughlin said. “Now, when other friends of ours get divorced, we’ll know what to do.”