



A Romantic Revival

THE FIRST WEDDING IN THE NEWLY RENOVATED CRYSTAL BALLROOM COMBINED THE TORONTO VENUE'S STORIED PAST WITH THE COUPLE'S UNIQUE PERSONAL STYLE.

BY LISA MARIE HART

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL GREENBERG OF PHOTOTERRA

When real life mimics scenes from what could be a blockbuster romance film, a surreal story unfolds. The spring wedding of Caterina “Cat” Sharifi and Joe Jackman was filled with exhilarating moments and a happy ending that was nothing short of a fairy tale. As coincidental as in cinema, the reopening of historic The Omni King Edward Hotel’s Crystal Ballroom aligned flawlessly with the couple’s nuptials.

Before the two ever stepped foot in the construction zone that ultimately would become their wedding venue, the ballroom enjoyed decades of distinction. The Crystal Ballroom initially opened its doors in 1922 as Toronto’s first luxury event space. Hailed across the city and beyond, it quickly became society’s most sought-after destination for high-profile galas.

An elite social scene fluttered behind its doors on the 17th floor. In its heyday, it was a place where brides tossed their bouquets from the sweeping balcony; the Prince of Wales sat down to an extravagant state dinner; and big-band legends, including Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and Count Basie, brought audiences to their feet.

Nearly a century after the grand opening of the Crystal Ballroom, The Omni King Edward Hotel vowed to restore its time-honored original charm and enhance the space with an unparalleled air of modern luxury.



The Crystal Ballroom at The Omni King Edward Hotel originally opened its doors in 1922. Caterina Sharifi and Joe Jackman's wedding was the first to be held in the newly renovated space.



Meanwhile, as Sharifi and Jackman gathered inspiring images that represented their dream celebration during their engagement, a photograph of the unrenovated Crystal Ballroom was among them. "It wasn't even on our target list, but it spoke to us with its elegance and character," Jackman says.

When their planner, Melissa Haggerty of Spectacular Spectacular, discovered that the timing of the ballroom's unveiling and the couple's big day might coincide, the trio donned hard hats and work boots to tour the space.

The original character shined through as unmistakable evidence of its former glory: floor-to-ceiling windows



framed panoramic views of Toronto's skyline, original ornate moldings presented a sense of place and time and the coffered 21-foot ceiling seemed to touch the heavens. It dawned on the couple that beneath the work equipment and dust was not only a vision coming to life, but also an opportunity to bridge an iconic past to a glamorous new future.

"My parents and grandparents had spent time there and we just fell in love with the place," Jackman says. "And when we saw the mezzanine, we all agreed it must have an orchestra in it."

A LOVE AFFAIR UNFOLDS

After an elaborate \$6.5 million renovation, the Crystal Ballroom was ready to once again sparkle above the skyline as the crown jewel of Toronto. Sharifi and Jackman's May 13th wedding presented the perfect occasion to show off the meticulous details and craftsmanship that had gone into reimagining the space.

"First off, they wanted a great party," Haggerty says of her clients. "Both are very discerning, well-traveled, well-educated, sophisticated people; yet they are also very funky and work in the artistic community." Sharifi

works at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto while Jackman owns a branding company, Jackman Reinvents.

"Their guests probably thought they would get married at a warehouse, microbrewery or a super-cool loft," Haggerty continues. Instead, they chose the only setting that could leave them feeling on top of the world.

A deep respect for the venue's legacy and the metamorphosing ballroom shaped their decisions while planning their big day. "We ended up getting inspired by the space instead of the other way around," Sharifi says. "Instead of us transforming it, it transformed us."

Their vision was simple: elegant, fun, with a bit of modern flourish. Down to the cuisine served and the drinks poured, they desired to capture the spirit of this storied room, both what it was and what it would be again.

Although the couple's tastes generally tend to veer modern, the decor theme that emerged was born from the classic surroundings. The harmonious color scheme of subtle grays and creams incorporated rich golds that enhanced the ballroom's opulent accents. Stark-white flowers added a freshness without detracting from the architecture and embellishments.



A few weeks before their big day, the couple finalized the details at the hotel. "In all our engagements with the chef, beverage team and service staff, there was an excitement that this would be the first wedding in many years," Jackman says. "Even at the first tasting, the team was excited to present us with a new Champagne flute consistent with the 1920s style, knowing we would be the first to use it. From everyone involved, there was genuine enthusiasm in taking this up to another level of experience for our guests."

A MAGICAL MATRIMONY

Adding to the dramatic nature of their big day, the tight-lipped bride and groom wrapped their grand affair in a layer of mystique. When the 160 guests arrived from all over the world at the famed address of 37 King Street East that afternoon, they never suspected they would be



The groom's Irish-Canadian heritage and the bride's Persian roots were gracefully woven together throughout the occasion.



the first in nearly half a century to celebrate under the soaring ceilings of the illustrious Crystal Ballroom.

"We purposefully omitted the reception venue from the invitation [to infuse an element of surprise]," Haggerty says. "They just knew they were going to the King Eddy."

Greeted by Champagne and caviar on the second floor, guests mingled before the candlelit evening ceremony to the tunes of a classical guitarist. A friend performed a traditional Persian ceremony under the arched dome ceiling of the Vanity Fair ballroom. With Jackman's Irish-Canadian heritage and Sharifi's Persian roots, the couple wove both cultural experiences together throughout the occasion.

The bride wore a custom Galia Lahav dress made in Israel and personalized through Toronto's designer bridal boutique, White. Extra embroidery and an additional train made her fully beaded gown even more romantic. Her groom stepped out in a black bow tie and a dashing white dinner jacket and black pants by Tom Ford, which was customized by Harry Rosen, a luxury menswear retail store owner and personal friend of Jackman.

After the ceremony, guests gathered for a cocktail hour that featured a bountiful oyster bar and three signature drinks the couple co-created with the hotel. Jackman and Sharifi say they were especially impressed with the above-and-beyond efforts behind *The Persian*, a special libation blended with key cultural ingredients.

"We were suggesting a cocktail that wasn't typical," Jackman says. "The team went to a Persian restaurant in the city, tasted samples, talked to the bartender and owners and experimented with different formulations. We tasted their results twice, and the second was spot on." To guests' delight, the saffron-infused vodka concoction with pomegranate was served in striking, gold-trimmed glasses.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

After cocktail hour, guests were escorted to the elevator and whisked up to the 17th floor for a momentous moment. From the mezzanine, the orchestra was playing in full swing as the doors to the grand 5,000-square-foot Crystal Ballroom opened to reveal the first wedding party in decades.



Outside the towering windows, the sun was just beginning to set, bathing the room in its warm, golden light. Hundreds of candles flickered across the tables and window ledges. From the French blue ceiling high above, three contemporary Czech-made crystal chandeliers created an ambient glow. A photographer stood ready by the door, capturing the expressions on guests' faces as they suddenly found themselves in the spectacular space.

The 18-piece orchestra, comprised of musicians dressed in tuxedos and black gowns, sat on the bandstand with pride. As they filled the air with live music through dinner, they were making history. "I think, more than anything, that made the night," Haggerty says. "With its vaulted ceiling, the room was made for that sound."

Sharifi agrees the band was a standout memory for her. "The whole experience was really lovely," she says. "It felt like that's what the room would have sounded like when Joe's mom used to throw parties there back in the day. A lot of our guests had a memory of the room. They were all so excited to be part of the first experience there."

Murmurs among the guests drew comparisons of the evening's glamour to films set in the Roaring '20s such as "The Great Gatsby." "There was a moment where everyone just stopped and said, 'Where are we?'" Jackman recalls.

Assuring no detail was overlooked, Omni staff provided formal French-style table service—even the upscale menu was a nod to the venue's bygone era. Haggerty says a proper beef Wellington and a jellied aspic salad were appropriate choices to evoke throwback dishes that might have once graced the ballroom's dinner tables.

Between two courses, the groom made an appearance on the balcony with the band. He looked the part of a

true renaissance gentlemen as the musicians accompanied him in an unforgettable rendition of Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon."

After dinner, the couple found another chance to honor the bride's heritage through a Persian tea service served alongside mini baklava and chocolates. A whimsical dessert table with bite-size doughnuts dusted in 24-karat gold and gourmet lollipops with edible flowers at the center were also crowd-pleasers.

When the orchestra finished their last set, the disc jockey stepped in to spin Persian music and elevate the party's ambience to new heights. Just before midnight, the tireless staff delivered imaginative dessert shots to everyone on the dance floor.

"There are certain, undefinable things that money can't buy," Haggerty says. "One of those is magic. The combination of a really wonderful bride and groom, only 160 people, the sexy ambience we created in the room, amazing food and extraordinary wines all added up to a beautiful, elegant, formal and, most importantly, timeless wedding."

The next morning, guests joined the couple for a well-appointed brunch at the Palm Court of The Omni King Edward. Coinciding with Mother's Day, the meaningful gathering made for a wonderfully fluid continuum of the night before.

"In over 13 years, designing close to 400 weddings, this one stands out for all the right reasons," Haggerty says. "None of us took it lightly that we had this place in history at The Omni King Edward Hotel. And we made it a very special evening that could never be replicated. Joe wrote to me the very next day and ended his email with, 'I think we did right by the Crystal Ballroom.'" •

Libations served at the event included a special cocktail called *The Persian* in addition to two other signature drinks, which the couple co-created with the team at The Omni King Edward Hotel.