

A photograph of a wedding couple walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. The groom is on the left, wearing a dark suit, and the bride is on the right, wearing a white, strapless, ruffled wedding gown. They are holding hands. The background shows a vast expanse of sand, the ocean, and several palm trees under a clear sky. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early evening. A dark, diagonal shape is visible on the left side of the image, partially overlapping the text.

# *Sandy* HOOKED

*Warm Shore winds and crashing surf serenade a Brick Township couple during the elegant wedding they took from vision to effervescent reality.*

BY PATTI VERBANAS PHOTOGRAPHY BY THÉRÈSE MARIE WAGNER

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hen Jennifer Chong and Jason Larson first heard about each other, they had absolutely no desire to meet. She lived in North Jersey, he in South Jersey, and “it wasn’t very convenient,” Jennifer says. “Plus, who wants to say they’ve been fixed up?” Their persuasive cupid was Geraldine O’Brien, Jennifer’s aunt, also a friend of Larson’s business partner, who arranged for them to meet at her house on Valentine’s Day 2004.

“I was leery about the whole thing. He was cute, but I wondered, why did he need to be set up?” recalls Chong, 33, then a scheduler for the USA Network Television, now a mom who stays home with her son, Max. Chong’s appearance — she’s half-Chinese — caught Larson off-guard. “Her aunt is blonde and fair-skinned,” says Larson, 37, a podiatrist. “And there was Jennifer, with her dark hair and different features. I found her pretty and intriguing.”

Two days later, Larson invited her to brunch, and two years later, he proposed. They set the date for September 22, 2007 — the last day of summer. “We live at the Shore, so that’s where we wanted our wedding to be,” Chong explains. “We wanted it to be ‘elegant beach,’ and for it to be a big blowout for the end of summer.”

The date gave Chong and Larson a little more than a year to plan — a block of time that Chong deems perfect. She considered hiring a wedding planner but quickly dismissed the idea. “I realized that I could do this myself,” she says.

She wanted to weave her Chinese heritage through the event by incorporating red — in addition to turquoise and silver — as part of the ocean-themed wedding. The bold color juxtaposition was a challenge for Francesca Weber of What’s the Occasion in Oceanport, who designed the invitations, menus, and other stationery. “She had a definite idea: an Asian influence, but not over the top,” says Weber, who created an invitation with a turquoise vine design, placed in a red envelope with a coordinating turquoise and red bellyband.

Chong and Larson, who sought an intimate beach venue, chose Windows on the Water at Surfriider Beach Club in Sea Bright. “It was right on the beach and had great views, and it would be 100 percent ours,” Larson says. “It wasn’t a wedding factory.” The couple appreciated Executive Chef Pete Cruz’s personal attention. “On our first meeting,” Cruz says, “I started throwing ideas at them to see what their likes and dislikes were. Jen loves grilled cheese, for example, but we weren’t going to do a grilled cheese and tomato. So, I suggested a goat cheese with fig on marble rye. She loved that idea. We all loved







Chilean sea bass, and we went with that and filet mignon with gnocchi.”

The couple appreciated the location, but it wasn’t easy for florist and wedding designer Kate Duffy Barnard of Katydid in Red Bank to realize the “elegant” part of Chong’s vision. “It is a salty-earthy venue, but it was filled with windows and held a lot of promise,” says Barnard, who commissioned custom-made turquoise silk tablecloths and supplied silver bowls for the tables. Instead of numbers to mark the tables, Chong asked Weber to create cards with names of different beaches. “That got people away from the tables to check out the names — which made them chat more,” Chong says.

To dress up the beach for the ceremony, Barnard set out three-foot-high galvanized French pots filled with waving beach grasses and accented the pew markers with bunches of beargrass. She lined the aisles with galvanized lanterns and rolled out a burlap runner. “The contrast worked,” Barnard says.

Chong found that creating an elegant-beach look for herself summoned her creativity as well. She visited the Elegant Alternative in Spring Lake and decided that the right dress was the second one she tried on: an A-line strapless champagne Paloma Blanca

*What distressing incident happened to Chong a few months before her wedding? What special item did she forget at the ceremony? For the answers and for more details on the Chong-Larson wedding, including advice from their creative team, visit [newjerseylife.com](http://newjerseylife.com).*

gown with a lace bodice and tufted silk organza from the waist down. She paired it with Stuart Weitzman sandals. The pièce de résistance, however, was the jewelry, created by Erica Vermilyea, a designer whom Chong discovered at the Weston Gallery in Manasquan. “I wanted chandelier earrings, with seashells, Swarovski crystals and mother-of-pearl, and a brooch piece for my hair;” Chong says. Vermilyea recalls the creative freedom she had with the commission: “It was fun because Jennifer let me use pieces of shell, which you don’t normally see in jewelry.”

Mementos from the sea were ubiquitous, from the starfish in the flower girl’s headpiece to the program covers, which were original watercolors of seashells painted by Larson’s father, Doug.

Chronicling the affair was photographer Thérèse Marie Wagner, who applauds the couple’s choice of a late-afternoon beach wedding. “You want to wait for the beautiful light at the end of the day,” she advises. “You don’t want to squint.”

Beyond Wagner’s photographs, the details of the day remain sharp for Chong. “I worked hard, so I made a point to stop and take it all in at different moments,” she says, “and because of that I have beautiful memories.”

