

Tomato soup, spice, and all things nice:

A recipe for eloping

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Colleagues for three years, occasional lunchmates for 13 years, romantic partners for another 13 years, and then on the anniversary of our first date, standing next to the lovely Salish Sea, we quietly eloped.

We thought a modest adventure would be fun and did not want to deal with our beautiful, large band of well-intended friends and families making a fuss. The thought of minimal brouhaha resonated.

On Valentine's Day, 2024, my now-husband Daryl suggested we shop for an engagement ring. But the ring tradition didn't grab me as technically we weren't getting engaged. He suggested we go downtown to a local jewelry shop and look around. We ended up settling on a pretty gold wedding band carved by Joe Jack, a Coast Salish artist. It was a fun Valentine's Day excursion, and on the way home, Daryl suggested we consider eloping on May 9, the anniversary of our first date.

I called the local marriage commissioner and she offered half a dozen script options. We chose the simplest, non-religious version, as we had no need to make any grand statements. The important ones had all been whispered to each other in private over the years. We kept our romantic scheme a secret for three exciting months. Only the jeweller, the city hall clerk and our tiny wedding party knew – and we asked them not to tell.

Daryl dug deep into his closet. Way past the stash of colourful cotton T-shirts he usually wears, and beyond his cherished Seahawks jerseys and hoodies, he arrived at his best dark suit and a silk tie with an elegant First Nations motif.

Since I hate shopping, I was happy to unexpectedly find my wedding dress at the Esquimalt Pharmasave in Victoria when we were picking up prescriptions the week before we married. One look at the pretty yellow sundress with the tiny white flowers, and in less than five minutes I knew it was the one for me. I could be wrong, but I have a feeling that few brides have found their wedding dress at a drugstore.

Growing up in hardscrabble Verdun, Que., in the 1950s, my mother always made tomato-soup cake for special occasions for our family of eight. The idea of putting a can of Campbell's tomato soup in a dessert has a bit of an ick factor to the sound of it, but friends and visitors always loved the spiced cake when they tasted it. The novelty factor has always appealed to me – and the orange colour is pretty, too. The day before we married, I made a tomato-soup cake with a chocolate ganache frosting as our Elopement Cake. With a bit of white decorative icing, I wrote "WE ELOPED" in big letters, next to two smiley faces.

On our chosen date, we had a cup of tea at home at 9:30 in the morning and then stepped outside to get married – in the company of the marriage commissioner and our treasured witnesses.

My old friend, Janet, brought flowers. And Daryl's old friends Jim and Terri brought something old, new, borrowed and blue. All three provided the satisfied grins of happy friends.

The six of us sat in a semi-circle facing the sea in its blaze of sparkling, reflected sunshine. Our favourite music came from a small speaker Daryl set up on a TV tray beside us. After the legal bits were exchanged, we listened to two songs: *What a Wonderful World* by Louis Armstrong and *Cupid* by Michael Kaeshammer. I closed my eyes and listened to the words and savoured the warmth of the moment. I couldn't have imagined a more simple or more luxurious wedding – witnessed by dear friends and the spectacular sea. We have always loved the Salish Sea, but that day, I was feeling so enchanted, I imagined the sea was loving us right back.

Our first official kiss as a married couple took place not far from the bench at Saxe Point Park – where two nervous seniors had had a first kiss 13 years earlier.

Daryl told me back then that his dad had offered some wise words for him when he was a teenager: that you should choose your friends based on how they affect you and your life. If they bring out your good qualities and inspire you to become a better person, embrace their friendship. If they bring out your bad qualities or lead you into trouble, you need to look for better friends.

Right from the start of our time together, we found a profound truth in that sage advice. We both had had short, disappointing first marriages long ago, and we knew this one to be a different kind of connection. We were deeply grateful.

When I decided to earn a Master's degree to celebrate turning 65, Daryl supported me all the way. When he decided to try to write a novel after a lifetime of writing as an economist, I encouraged him. *The Advice Collector* may never get published, but he finished the task after working at it for four years. I loved watching his creative effort as he approached the goal with his usual sense of wonder and purpose. On a scale of one to 10, one being a good cook and 10 being a great cook, Daryl is a 15! It may be a bit self-serving, but I encourage him plenty there, too

After the 20-minute ceremony, we took our friends to lunch at Glo restaurant, the memorable scene of our first date. We enjoyed a meal together and then my new husband and I came home and put on our comfy house clothes, puttering around for the rest of our satisfying wedding day.

Over the next few weeks, we had booked lots of lunches and dinners with the people we love. We are not on social media and wanted to tell people in person. At what friends and family expected to be a routine, friendly visit, ancient newlyweds shared their elopement news.

When several members of my family came to our place for a 70th birthday lunch for my brother, we made our announcement at the end of the meal. I already knew they would love their new brother-in-law, but was happy when everyone around the table erupted in a string of authentic, exuberant cheers. When we met up with Daryl's stepdaughter the next day, she was sweetly and equally thrilled for us.

The same wonderful responses continued at a dozen casual meals in the following days. All were happy at our news, although a few were sorry to have missed the event. When two or three asked why we got married, we didn't really have a good answer – only that we were happy to share the kind of bond Daryl's father recommended to him long ago.

We had lived for many years in a committed, common-law relationship and did not expect marriage to change anything. But it did. The ceremony, ritual and celebration brought us both an unexpected joy. It is hard to explain.

On my first birthday after our wedding, Daryl appreciated buying me a beautiful card with the words, “For my wife.” (I carry it around in my purse and look at it every once in a while.) I still fall in love with the man every two weeks or so. Nothing new there. But these days, every so often I look at him and feel a thrill to know he is my beautiful husband. He has the kindest smile I have ever seen, and a solid, responsible and loving nature to back it up. And just to add a bit of spice to the description: he is the kind of man who changes the light bulb on the day it burns out. Now that is what my friends call sexy. Of course, I am biased.

Through the lovely warm summer after we eloped, I wore my drugstore dress dozens of times. I will probably wear it again, as we celebrate our first Valentine’s Day as newlyweds – retired, old newlyweds.

Tomato Soup Elopement Cake Recipe: Mix 1/3 of a cup of olive oil, one egg and one cup of sugar for two minutes. Add one can of Campbell’s tomato soup and 1/4 of a cup of oat milk (or any milk). In a different bowl, combine two cups of whole-wheat flour, one teaspoon each of baking soda, baking powder, cinnamon, ground cloves, nutmeg, ground cardamon and powdered ginger, and add 1/4 of a teaspoon of allspice. Mix the two bowls together and add half a cup of raisins. Bake in a round cake pan for 45 minutes at 350 degrees F. My mom always decorated it with a plain, cream-cheese icing, but if you want to “get fancy” (as mom would say), make some chocolate ganache frosting. Heat 2/3 of a cup of whipping cream in a saucepan over low heat until hot, but not boiling, then remove it from heat. Stir in 3/4 of a cup of chopped semisweet baking chocolate and let stand for about five minutes. Pour ganache carefully onto the top of the cake at its centre, and then spread with a large spatula so it flows evenly over the top and down to completely cover the side of the cake. It will become firmer the longer it cools.



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