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STYLE

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## Pushing the envelope

MEET BOSTON'S  
PAPER PRINCESS

BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER  
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# Addressed to impress

Evite and the economy should be killing her business. But Karen Bartolomei is quietly building a stationery empire, one lavish invitation at a time.

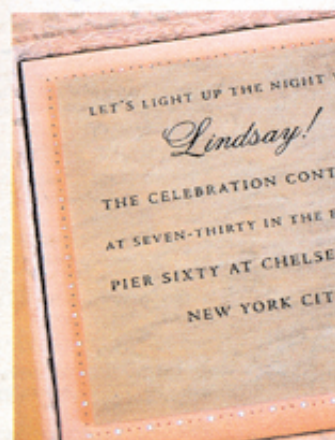
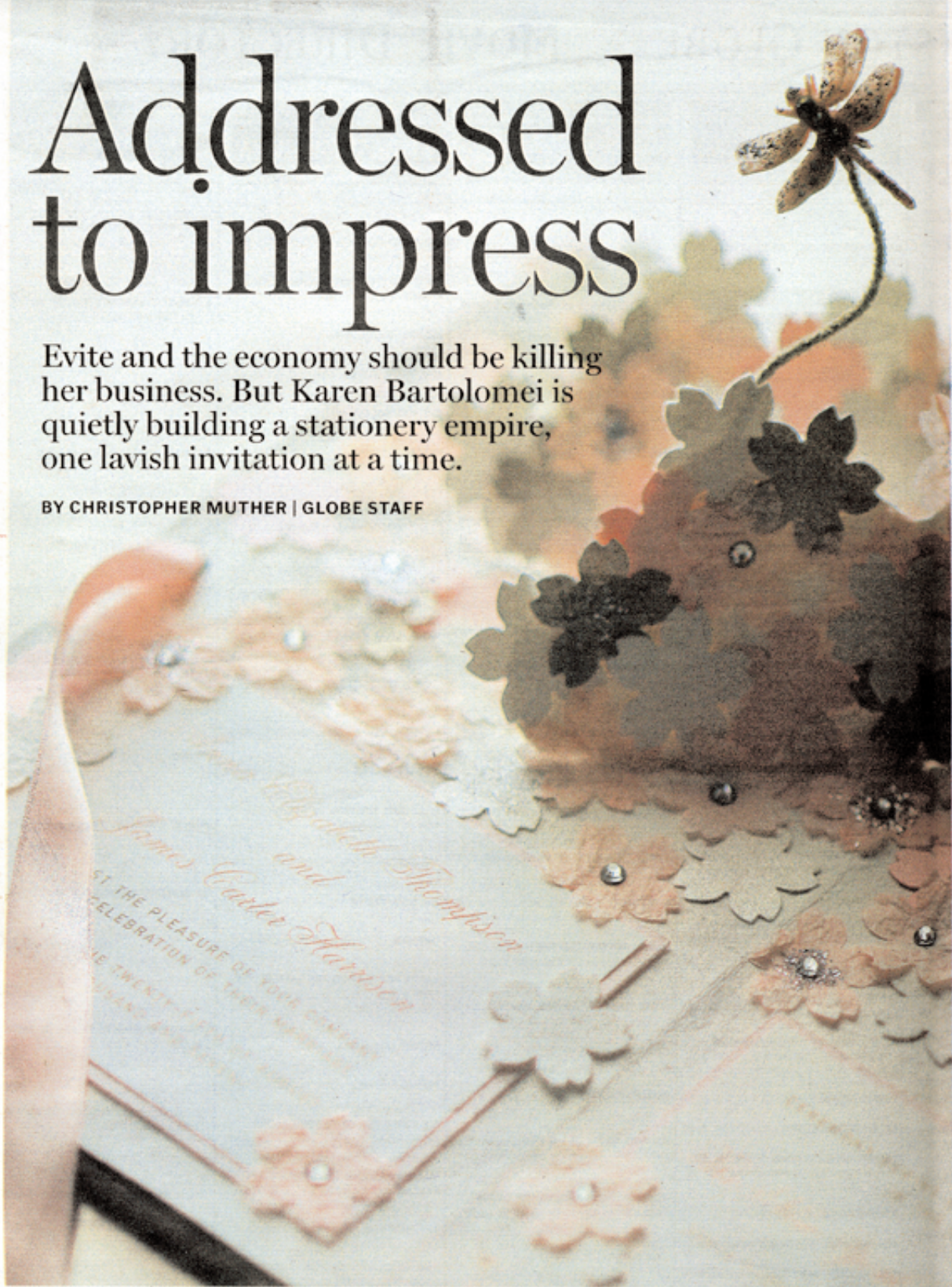
BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER | GLOBE STAFF

**M**y husband wishes I had an off switch," says Karen Bartolomei, Boston's reigning queen of wedding invitations, thank-you notes, and all manner of over-the-top paper products. She pops a bit of calamari into her mouth at Les Zygomates on a recent rainy afternoon. "He honestly thinks I'm a freak about design. I'll get up in the middle of the night and start writing down ideas. I'm literally always going."

Bartolomei is the first to admit that she would benefit from an off switch, but her non-stop schedule and elaborate designs have helped to make her one of the go-to designers in the country for lavish invitations and stationery. When monied brides — those willing to spend in the neighborhood of \$10,000 to \$50,000 on invitations alone — search for the perfect paper representation of their love, they turn to Bartolomei.

A perfectionist to a fault, she insists on meeting at a restaurant because her South Boston home studio is a mess after a busy season that included creating the invitations for the wedding of Red Sox owner John Henry and Linda Pizzuti. The intricate invitations were sent in boxes designed to resemble vintage cigar boxes, with the card presented inside a silver envelope with box sides. Additional enclosure cards were letter pressed in gold and silver on luxurious cotton paper.

"That's why you're not allowed in my studio right now. It's utter chaos," the delicately pretty 38-year-old Bartolomei said with a devilish smile. "I had John Henry's wedding, and then I had my sister-in-law's wedding in Rhode Island. She brews her own beer with her fiance so we made



ESSORAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Karen Bartolomei designs her intricate wedding invitations, costing between \$10,000 and \$50,000, to set the tone for the big day.

Some of the high-end creations to c

these custom labels for all the bottles."

She pulls a bottle of beer from her purse with the custom label that reads "I Do Brew," and it becomes clear why Bartolomei's rates are high and her following devoted. Aside from the beer labels, she planned out and created thoughtful touches for the entire day. Custom menus for her sister-in-law's wedding incorporated the couple's first e-mails to one another. Seating cards were coasters that guests could take home. Bartolomei's a high-energy stickler with a busy season that stretches from February to November, during which she often works 14- to 16-hour days.

"The biggest wedding I've done was \$70,000," she said. "It was save-the-date notices, escort cards, menus, programs, welcome notes, door cards that said 'I was out late partying with the bride and groom. Do not disturb.' We even did monogrammed bathrobes for gifts. It was over-the-top."

Bartolomei's all-encompassing approach to wedding stationery has landed her on Modern Bride's trendsetters list, with the magazine calling her the "Sky's the Limit Stationer." *El News* anchor Giuliana Rancic, on the phone from LA, said she was so impressed with the invitations Bartolomei created for her wedding in Italy to "Apprentice" winner Bill Rancic that she ditched the menus she'd already had made and asked Bartolomei to design those, too.

"What's unique about Karen is that she's able to come at each project differently," says Michelle Rago, a New York celebrity event planner and author of "Signature Weddings: Creating a Day Uniquely Your Own."

"She's the type of local artisan that you have in Boston, and

oddly enough, her client base is really not based out of Boston."

Bartolomei's mission — which began 10 years ago when she started designing wedding invitations for friends — is simple: make the invitations dazzle, and you set a tone for the entire wedding. Dull, poorly designed invites conjure images of dried-out chicken and a DJ with a playlist limited to Kool and the Gang and the Village People.

Bartolomei, whose company is called Grapevine, can tick off celebrity names ("Moonlighting" and "Medium" producer Glen Gordon Caron, "Numb3rs" actor David Krumboltz) and corporate executives as clients. Her work has appeared everywhere from InStyle Weddings to "The Martha Stewart Show."

Still, no amount of celebrity endorsements and prestigious product placement could shield her from the current economic downturn. While the greeting-card market continues to grow steadily, a May 2009 study by market research company Mintel found that couples are pulling back on wedding spending, and to cut corners, many are now making their own invitations. Even brides with money to spare are being cautious.

But the expanding online universe, with electronic invitation services like Evite, presents the greater challenge to her industry. As the author of a new book "Paperie for Inspired Living" (Potter Craft), Bartolomei is well aware that instructing people on how to create beautiful paper products for dinner parties, wine tastings, and holiday bashes may be counter-intuitive. But she believes strongly that putting thoughts, invitations, and thank-yous on paper gives them more weight and importance.

"The idea of sending out

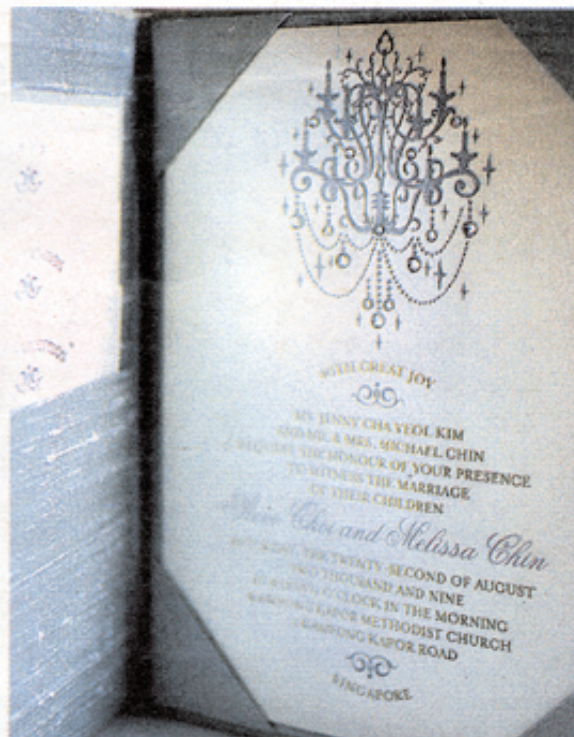
'It's all about making your guests think they're number one.'

KAREN BARTOLOMEI

proper invites for anything other than a bar mitzvah or a wedding seems a little foreign to people these days," she said. "I know that someday the idea of sending out an invitation that you can hold in your hand will become an absolute luxury. But people love receiving something in the mail, other than junk mail."

Her current world — of \$140 bar mitzvah invitations that sparkle with LED lights — is a long way from Bartolomei's first job as a marketing assistant at Putman Investments, where, she confesses, she was miserable. Fresh out of college in the mid-1990s with a business degree from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Bartolomei quickly realized she'd picked the wrong profession. After all, she was someone who'd created a miniature version of her favorite quilt in Play-Doh as a little girl.

She left Putman and went back to school to learn computer design, eventually making wedding invitations on the side. Word of mouth pushed her to abandon her day job at a Newbury Street ad agency and start designing invitations full time in 1999. From the start, she targeted the luxury market by designing what she called "stationery wardrobes." These wardrobes encompass everything from save-the-date cards to thank-you notes. Shortly after her entrance into full-time design, she was featured in the high-profile *grace ormonde* Wedding Style maga-



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

zine, and her career took off.

"I fought my way through to stand out from the crowd," says Bartolomei, a Framingham native. "It's all about making your guests think they're number one."

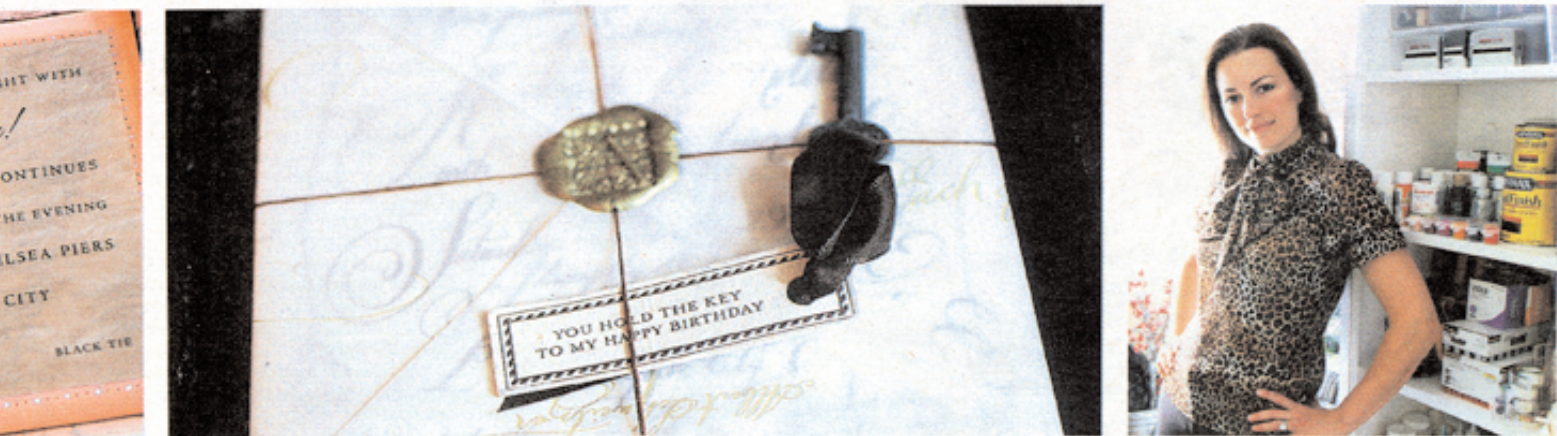
Now that her book project is completed, she is already contemplating her next move: a line of over-the-counter cards and invites. "I'll get about 100 inquiries a month, and two or three of those can afford me," she says. "It would be nice to produce a line that some of the others could use."

It seems impossible that Bartolomei could find the time to

cram yet another work obligation into her already busy life. Just last week she was at the FedEx facility at Logan Airport at 9:27 p.m., shipping wedding invitations to Singapore, with just minutes to spare. She's such a familiar face at FedEx that the entire staff pitched in and helped her send out the six boxes of invitations, ensuring she would make the deadline.

"Now I just need a TV show," she says. "I'm just not sure if I could keep my potty mouth at bay for that long."

Christopher Muther can be reached at [muther@globe.com](mailto:muther@globe.com).



PHOTOS BY SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF (LEFT AND SECOND FROM LEFT); ESSDEAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

to come out of the studio of Karen Bartolomei (right): an invite for a wedding in Singapore (top), one that lights up (left), and a birthday invitation with a skeleton key.