

# THE CUT

IN BLOOM

## Gather the Flower Girls

On a tiny farm in Washington State, one woman's floral workshops have become something of a sensation.

By Cathy Horyn

Photographs by Abelardo Morell

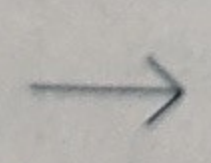
**I**N 2013, Erin Benzakein was a moderately successful flower farmer in Washington's Skagit Valley, about an hour north of Seattle. She and her husband, Chris, met in high school and had come to the valley a dozen years before, as young urbanites in search of a rural dream, and bought a house on an acre of land. Surrounded by modest farms, the place wasn't much to look at: vinyl siding, an old garage out back. By then, the couple had a daughter. (A son was born 19 months later.) While Chris found work as a mechanic, Benzakein, who had been a landscaper in Seattle, looked for ways to earn money at home. She tried candle-making, growing baby vegetables, a rainbow-egg business with a hundred chickens. But, she said, "I didn't make any money, and there was poop everywhere." The flower idea came five years later, in 2006, when she saw an article by the floral designer Ariella Chezar on arranging clematis. This totally blew Benzakein's mind, because she'd always considered it an extravagance to cut garden flowers like clematis and bring them inside. They were

for display in the garden. Which is largely why almost no one in the Skagit Valley would buy her flowers once she started hustling them. Her total profit the first year was \$1,400.

Meanwhile, the couple had taken out a second mortgage to pay for helicopter-pilot school for Chris. Unable to find a job that gave him enough flight time and with debts to pay off, Chris went back to working on cars. Benzakein, who seems to thrive when she has almost nothing to work with—a quality she traces to her parents, both self-employed—had started freelancing for a trade journal, *Growing for Market*. She gave herself the target of writing 50,000 words, just so that one day she would feel confident enough to write a book—a goal she fulfilled this year. (The book, a generalized guide to growing flowers, has sold 44,000 copies.) But the magazine work also provided her with an excuse to call up veteran growers and ask them about her own business, which was struggling. One of those calls—to an Idaho grower named MaryJane Butters—would not only change her life but also, because of how she applied the advice, have a ripple effect across the cut-flower world. Benzakein says Butters told her: Be the face of Floret Flowers. Nobody cares about your brand or logo—they want to know about you, so make your picture the homepage of your website. Benzakein, who is naturally introverted, was



The next day,  
she brought  
a bouquet to the  
Whole Foods  
buyer, who said,  
“Can I have 500 of  
these in time for  
Mother’s Day?”



*Tent-Camera Image: Floret  
Flower Farm #1, 2017.*  
To take this photograph,  
Morell used a periscope inside  
a dark tent to project the  
outside world onto wood  
placed on the floor.





④ Horyn begins her centerpiece.

not have to meet the \$3,000 full-service minimum. It's highly profitable for Floret, says Benzakein, and it's realistic.

Efficiency, of course, reigns in the land of beets and ranunculuses. Indeed, knowing that you can grow very profitably on an acre or two—by using intensive planting techniques and focusing on premium crops—makes small-scale farming attractive, according to Jean-Martin Fortier, a Quebecois farmer-author. Fortier surprised skeptics several years ago when he revealed that his one-and-a-half-acre garden brought in more than \$100,000 annually. Floret has taken the same “intensive” approach, with similar results, though not without soul-searching. At one point, the Benzakeins came very close to buying a much larger farm, 80 to 100 acres. Benzakein had found there was enormous interest among out-of-state florists in having Floret's flowers air-shipped to them.

“But as we sat on it longer, we thought, *Why not teach people in all these local communities to grow flowers?*” she said. “Connect farmers and florists together and take out the middleman. Why not just work together?” We were sitting in the dining room of a friend's farmhouse, loaned for the workshops because the property has a large barn—the same one where Benzakein and Merrick held the first workshop. Out the windows, in the distance, were the North Cascades. I had arrived the day before. A group of helpers, most of them florists from around the country who assist during the workshops, were going in and out of the barn, where a corner was massed with buckets of cut roses, peonies, poppies, irises, anemones, calendula, spirea, delphiniums, mint, and honeysuckles, all waiting for the guests to arrive and dip their hands in. “I'm not interested in taking it all or dominating,” Benzakein told me. “Really, I want it to be a win-win for everyone, so that's why we went deep into education.”

She would be the first to say that, in the beginning, she wasn't thinking of community power or taking out the middleman or any of the qualities that have inspired so many to become farmer-florists. (The Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers says its membership has doubled in the past five

your name linked to Floret can be really helpful. It was an enjoyable, knowing conversation, like one you might have at a New York party—about a new chef or Miuccia's strategy at Prada—but for that reason it also made me squeamish. Not many beginning farmers could afford the workshops. On the other hand, Benzakein was obviously a woman of guts and intelligence who, at 37, had mastered everything she'd set out to achieve—a farm, a brand, a book, lately a seed business—on two acres of land. In early June, I flew out to Seattle.

Although it's tempting to see parallels between Benzakein and Martha Stewart—both have great taste, both are attractive, both are businesswomen above all else—Floret reflects ideas that have emerged since Stewart first bread-crumbed her methods for others to follow. Ideas like directness, efficiency, community. For instance, to make it easier and cheaper for brides to order flowers, Floret came up with an “à la carte” menu that allows them to order bouquets and centerpieces as needed and



⑤ Horyn's first arrangement.

years.) But by sharing what she knows, she has influenced other farmer-florists to do likewise. Floret's workshop manuals contain an impressive amount of information, like per-acre earnings.

After my initial skepticism about spending a weekend with 25 women arranging flowers, I softened quickly. First, most of them were really good at it. Working alongside them makes *you* get better, and you gain respect for people craving more fulfillment than their careers provide. (The number of “dreamers”—that is, non-farmers and non-florists—attending the workshops has increased markedly in the past two years.) “It's like a drug,” a corporate executive said as a bunch of us met for dinner at a local bar. “I can create something and feel good about it. It's not against sales and numbers, and you're not going to be benchmarked on it next year.”



⑥ Putting finishing touches on the floral archway that framed the farewell dinner.