

**THREE'S COMPANY** California Cut Flower Commission CEO Kasey Cronquist, PFCI, (center) worked with many partners and community members including Chet Anderson, with the Fresh Herb Company, and Alicia Schwede of Bella Fiori Floral and Flirty Fleurs, on the award-winning American Grown Field to Vase Dinner Tour, which has crossed the country to introduce consumers and the media to domestic flowers and plants.





## WHAT MAKES A MARKETER OF THE YEAR?

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# A Moveable (Floral) Feast

BY MARY WESTBROOK

To get consumers thinking about American Grown flowers, a group of industry members created a high-style dinner series — and won Floral Management's 2017 Marketer of the Year honors.

It wasn't just that it was raining in Arcata, California, on March 12, 2016 — although you might expect rain to dampen the spirits of the 153 people driving to Sun Valley Floral Farms.

That evening, Sun Valley was kicking off the 2016 season of The American Grown Field to Vase Dinner Tour, a series of communal dining experiences organized by The Certified American Grown program, a collaborative of several industry groups and companies focused on raising the profile of flowers and plants grown in the U.S.

CONNIE WHITLOCK

The rain coming down that week on Arcata, however, had reached historic levels. Kasey Cronquist, PFCI, one of the chief organizers behind the dinner series, had driven more than five hours from San Francisco around landslides to get to Sun Valley; a number of guests had done the same. The dinner would take place in the company's greenhouses — the guests surrounded by tulips — and it was sold out, but as the rain intensified, Cronquist expected at least a few cancellations.

Instead, a woman contacted Certified American Grown, pleading for a ticket. She'd called earlier, and staff had explained that the event was already over capacity. Nonetheless, as the dinner was about to begin, there the woman stood, the venue filling up, that rain pouring down.

Everybody showed — but the woman decided to wait in her car, just in case a last-minute spot became available.

By then, Cronquist already was convinced that the dinner series could successfully promote American Grown Flowers to a discerning and highly connected group of consumers, reporters, bloggers and social media influencers. But the image of a woman sitting in her car during a historic rainstorm, holding onto a slim hope that space at the

table might open up, and that she was ready to spend \$175 for the dinner there in Humboldt County, erased any doubts about the public's untapped enthusiasm for the idea.

"Clearly, if people were willing to wait in the rain, we were onto something," he said.

Onto something, indeed. Since 2015, 21 floral industry businesses and 20 floral designers in 12 states plus Washington, D.C., have hosted about 2,500 guests through the Field to Vase Dinner Tour. Dinners have taken place in greenhouses, open fields, rooftop gardens and more, racking up coverage on social media and amassing millions of dollars in PR. At each event, locally grown flowers and plants are resplendent around diners and shimmering from the table in jaw-dropping floral designs, where they share center stage with local cuisine, wine and beer.

The dinners have become an idyllic, unforgettable setting for floral industry members to make the case directly to consumers, digital influencers and the traditional press that domestic flowers, in all their variety and abundance, are a thing to seek out, celebrate — and buy. For these efforts — and a whole lot more — The American Grown Field to Vase Dinner Tour is the 2017 Floral Management Marketer of the Year.

## A Marketing Vehicle that Funds Itself

The Field to Vase Dinner Tour began, really, with a question: How do you get consumers thinking about domestic flowers with the same level of attention that they think about locally sourced food? ("Where was this grown?" "Is it organic/sustainably produced?" "Tell me about the family farm behind this product.")

For several years before the series launched, Cronquist, as CEO of the California Cut Flower Commission, had been organizing free greenhouse tours, open to the public. To help earn media and promote those annual events, the Commission began holding dinners for media and sponsors in advance of the "open houses" at one of the greenhouses right there among the flowers. The dinners were so well received that Cronquist began to think, "What if the public could enjoy this, too?"

By "this," of course, he meant acres and acres of blooming flowers and plants, and all of the stories that went into growing them — environmental and economic considerations along with the businesses and their longtime employees, their histories, challenges and love for the work.

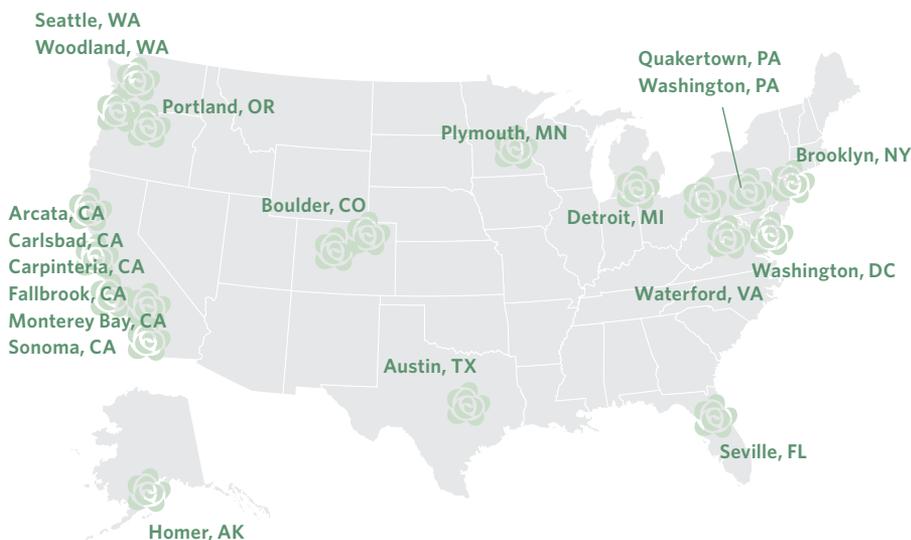
"We needed something to connect the dots that people were already making with their food," Cronquist explained.

Some of the growers themselves were less convinced when Cronquist initially floated the idea: How would they attract the public to their businesses? Would people even care?

Cronquist had a hunch they would be. After all, in recent years, Americans, particularly younger generations, have become much more interested in product origin and growing conditions. (Last year Pew Research found that 73 percent of Americans had purchased locally produced fruits and vegetables in the past month.) Farm-to-table restaurants are popping up in major metros and even smaller cities; the term has been a top trend in a National Restaurant Association survey every year since 2009. Agritourism efforts in parts of the country are flourishing.

A well-executed dinner series could combine all of these trends, and a few more, to deliver a message about U.S.

**DINNER IS SERVED** Since 2015, 12 states plus Washington, D.C., have hosted about 2,500 guests through The American Grown Field to Vase Dinner Tour. Several cities, including Boulder, Carlsbad and Carpinteria, have hosted more than one dinner.



For a complete list of the farms and floral designers for each event, go to [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).

flowers that Cronquist and his team were increasingly eager to share — and increasingly interested in organizing behind.

In 2014, CCFC had joined with other industry groups, including the Association of Specialty Cut Flowers, the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market, Alaska Beauty Peonies Co-Operative and FLGA, to start the Certified American Grown Flowers program, a coalition focused on building awareness around the importance of sourcing from America's flower farming families. The group had enthusiasm and passion but it lacked a marketing budget, a challenge Cronquist believed the dinner series also could answer.

"We had this constituency of flower farmers whose story needed to be told," Cronquist said. "We figured the dollars generated by the dinners would help us tell the story. In that way, it could be self-sustaining: The dinners tell the story and fund the storytelling."

## Dinner Served with Style — and a Message

Certified American Grown Flowers organized its first Field to Vase dinner on March 5, 2015, at Westland Orchids. The first of 10 dinners that year, it fittingly kicked off in Carpinteria, California — an area known as the nation's "flower basket." Tucked in between the rows of orchids, about 125 people attended that inaugural event. Since then, each dinner has benefited from the experience of the one before it.

"We've learned how to better tailor our marketing efforts to consumers, increased our industry sponsorship support and never served chicken as the main course at one of our dinners again," Cronquist said. (The dinners tend to attract sophisticated foodies looking for invention and inspiration on the plate, too.)

Today, each dinner pairs a professional floral designer with a farm location; the designer is then responsible for taking the farm's flowers and creating the American Grown tablescape. Chefs and catering companies are hired based on experience and reputation with farm to fork style dinner events, with preference given to those chefs and companies with "pop-up" dinner experience. During the event, floral designers share their de-



CHRISTINA OLSON

**EAT, DRINK, BE MERRY** Diners at Len Busch Roses in Plymouth, Minnesota, take in food, flowers, good cheer, and lots of information, earlier this year.

## FIELD TO VASE CAMPAIGN SNAPSHOT

**The Campaign:** The American Grown Field to Vase Dinner Tour, a series of farm-to-table dinners held at Certified American Grown farms, where diners learn about locally grown flowers and plants, while enjoying locally produced food and beverages.

**The Objective:** To increase consumer awareness for American Grown Flowers, increase sales of Certified American Grown Flowers and ultimately to increase the market share of the flowers grown in the United States via dinners and the media surrounding them.

**Marketing/PR Budget:** \$40,000 per year to promote the tour and Certified American Grown Flowers

**Dinner Series Budget:** Ticket sales cover the costs for the dinners, which average \$20,000, including party rentals, food, shipping, transportation, service and permits.

**The Results:** Since 2015, 21 floral industry businesses and 20 floral designers in 12 states plus Washington, D.C., have hosted about 2,500 guests through The American Grown Field to Vase Dinner Tour. The campaign has reached an estimated 482 million people through 505 media placements, with an estimated earned media value of \$16.3 million. Growers who have participated in the dinners also say they are experiencing increased sales.



CONNIE WHITLOCK



CONNIE WHITLOCK



CHRISTINA OLSON

**A GRACIOUS PLENTY** In just a few years, the Field to Vase dinner series has done a remarkable job of bringing together the public with floral industry members, including Lisa Weddel AIFD, PFCI, of L. Weddel Design (shown with a fellow diner, upper left) and Robyn Rissman, of Bare Root Flora, Arthur Williams, of Babylon Floral Design, and Alicia Schwede, of Bella Fiori Floral Design and Flirty Fleurs (upper right). In addition to gorgeous flowers and plants, the series has utilized stylish branding and, of course, delicious food to draw in people.

sign inspiration with attendees, offering design tips and sharing their passion for supporting and designing with American Grown Flowers.

During dinner, attendees “learn about the growing demand and momentum for American Grown Flowers, why this movement is important and how they can serve as ambassadors to help spread the word and share why origin matters when it comes to the flowers they purchase,” Cronquist said, noting that, in coordination with the dinner series, Certified American Grown has created an easily identifiable logo for sleeves of grower bunches and bouquets — a logo that diners see throughout the dinners to create brand awareness.

“The campaign and the tour not only help communicate a message, but also support a branded program that consumers and the industry can identify in retail and wholesale florist shops across the country,” he explained.

Every recipient leaves dinner with some takeaway goodies, including fresh flowers. Attendance ranges from 100 to 150 people, with 183 people as the largest guest list on record. Guests pay \$175 to \$225 per person, depending on the venue. About 80 percent of that money covers hard costs associated with the hosting of the event; the rest goes to marketing and promotional efforts for the dinner and the series. On average, each dinner costs Certified American Grown \$20,000, a figure that includes party rentals, food, shipping, transportation, service and permits.

The dinners are built around the idea of education and awareness-building, but they’re also planned with an eye toward some less tangible things — style and the feeling for diners that they’re being transported. That’s something host farms say sets the effort apart.

“The Field to Vase dinner gave many of our customers their first chance to visit the farm, tour the fields and feel like they became a part of the farm,” said Frank Arnosky of Texas Specialty Cut Flowers near Blanco, Texas. “It gave them a sense of ownership and a reason to source American Grown. When they see our flowers offered in Houston, Austin and San Antonio, they are now solid customers, and through their ‘word-of-mouth’ excitement about the



**TAKE IT BACK** Guests of the dinner series are treated to take home goodies, including branded canvas bags, reading material and plenty of local flowers and plants.

farm, they have become our best marketers and supporters. The legend continues to grow, and we are continuously asked, "I missed the first one. When are you going to do another?"

Cronquist said the dinner series has changed each year, adapting to locations, logistics and consumer demand. In 2015, the group held 10 dinners in eight states at 10 farms for 1,174 people. They hosted 85 members of the media, worked with 10 chefs and 10 floral designers and collaborated with 31 sponsors.

In 2016, the group reduced the number of dinners to seven to "better serve our ability to leverage the attention and opportunity that each individual dinner created," he said. They held those dinners in five states at seven farms for 953 people. That year, they hosted 46 members of the media, worked with seven chefs and nine floral designers and collaborated with 42 sponsors. In 2017,

they will host seven dinners in six states, welcoming an estimated 900 people.

"We're in constant refinement of our pitch. The more dinners we do, the more we learn," Cronquist said.

Chefs have been particularly instructive in some of the hospitality elements of the dinner, Cronquist noted, and their feedback has helped shape not only the planning of each meal but also the meal itself (flowers are now often incorporated into the meal, including memorable menu items such as lavender cocktails).

## Read — and Write — All About It

Certified American Grown has a roughly \$40,000 annual budget for marketing/advertising and public relations, an amount that goes fast when you're talking about a national campaign. So, to get the word out about The Field to Vase

dinners, Cronquist and his team developed a comprehensive PR and marketing campaign that's leveraged traditional and digital outreach.

Social media has been a main focus for promotions and advertising. The group started with sponsored posts and eventually created a multi-targeted ad campaign that includes videos. Beyond their email marketing efforts, Facebook and Instagram advertising are the group's primary vehicle for driving ticket sales with consumers. (Cronquist estimates that about 20 percent of sales are generated by social media ads.)

In 2017, the group also began working with "digital influencers," bloggers and social media users with strong followings, to help promote the dinners and share the message about the importance of buying American Grown Flowers. The group reaches out to digital influencers based on their own research about who

is well known in that area, and also on recommendation of other digital influencers, floral designers, hosts and others involved in the planning.

"These digital influencers have become a valuable resource in telling the stories of America's flower-farming families via their blogs and through beautiful photography on their social media platforms," Cronquist said. His goal for each dinner is to have about five digital influencers and five traditional press members. (That can vary by location.)

The raves of digital influencers have gone a long way in promoting the events and creating interest for future dinners.

"A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou may be pleasant enough," wrote blogger Pam Penick last year after a visit to Texas Specialty Cut Flowers. "But add Crayola-bright fields of flowers, a big blue barn, tables adorned with festive bouquets, chef-made dishes, a western swing band, and the starry skies of the Texas Hill Country, and you have an event not to be missed."

Elizabeth Stillwell had a similarly glowing take after attending a dinner in 2015 at the Brooklyn Grange, a rooftop garden located in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. She wrote in a Conscious Living blog: "I heard someone say, 'Everything

that is good about America is happening here tonight.' Everything good included promoting American jobs... encouraging local and seasonal agriculture, supporting community, and celebrating all of these good things with neighbors and friends."

Traditional public relations efforts have also been key to the group's marketing and promotion efforts over the past three years, and they've generated high-profile placement in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Modern Farmer Magazine*, *Sunset Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Oregonian* and the *Seattle Times*. (In 2016 *Food & Wine* magazine called the outreach "the ultimate al fresco dinner party.") In addition, the group has secured some TV segments in Oregon, Virginia, Washington state, California and Minnesota.

"Television can be a tremendous driver of ticket sales for our dinner events and is a wonderful way for our designers to share their tips for floral design ideas to a large audience," Cronquist said.

Over the past three years, the program also has amassed almost 5,000 email subscribers to its weekly newsletter.

"The newsletter helps keep our fans up-to-date on the events we've held and has served as one of the best forms of promoting dinners and selling tickets," Cronquist explained.

At press time, those efforts combined had created 62 media placements from January 2017 to May 2017 alone, generating an audience of 289 million people with an estimated earned media value of more than \$14.4 million.

## Selling It with Sponsors

Cronquist is also quick to point out how critical sponsor support had been to the effort.

For instance, *Syndicate Sales* has provided its line of "Made in America" vases and containers for the tablescape design over the past three seasons.

"They have promoted and encouraged their customers to also attend the events and featured the dinner tour in their product catalogs for the past two years," he explained.



LINDA BLUE PHOTOGRAPHY

**DOWN ON THE FARM** Sold-out crowds have proven that Americans across the country love the idea of dining at flower farms, gardens and greenhouses, including Jello Mold Farm in Mt. Vernon, Washington.

The tour also has worked closely with Mayesh Wholesale Florist, based in Los Angeles; Mellano & Company, headquartered in Carlsbad, California; DVFlora, headquartered in Sewell, New Jersey; and Frank Adams in Portland, Oregon, to help promote nationally and regionally, Cronquist said.

Each dinner also produces a new crop of cheerleaders and supporters, of course, in the form of past attendees, hosts and designers.

“Alumni farms have been a tremendous source of support and encouragement for the tour, recognizing the invaluable benefits the dinner they hosted brought to their farm,” Cronquist said.

Bill Prescott of Sun Valley insists the love is mutual, and that the dinner series is hitting all its marks, and then some.

“Once someone comes to our farm, and walks the fields and greenhouses, their view of our flower farm is forever changed,” he said.

Arnosky agrees. “When the guests left the farm, they felt ownership with our farm and with American Grown Flowers and they went out and became our best marketers. Word-of-mouth promotion is the best, and a year later, there is still a buzz out there.”

For Cronquist, the success of the dinner series over the past three years has helped prove an important point — and created excitement for the future.

“As it turns out, people are fascinated by what we do,” he explained. “We’ve learned that, in fact, they’ll travel great distances to eat dinner on a flower farm. The biggest challenge now is keeping up with it. This is a movement people want to be part of, so, how will we continue to use these dinners not to reach hundreds or thousands of people, but millions?”

As for the big question — is the effort getting more people to buy more American Grown flowers — Cronquist said the answer is yes.

“Evidence of our success is not measured by our sold-out dinners but rather the improving market position of our American Grown Flowers and the increase in our farms’ sale,” he said.

Growers back up the claim.

“Demand for our high-quality flowers continues to rise, actually beyond what we can produce simply because

our labor pool is so limited,” Pamela Arnosky said. “We sell everything, every single week. Quality is everything of course, [but] people only return as customers when they’ve had a good experience.”

Arnosky also noted that, recently, the boyfriend of one of her daughters went to buy flowers in Texas and he made a point of looking for that American Grown logo. The young man didn’t grow up in the

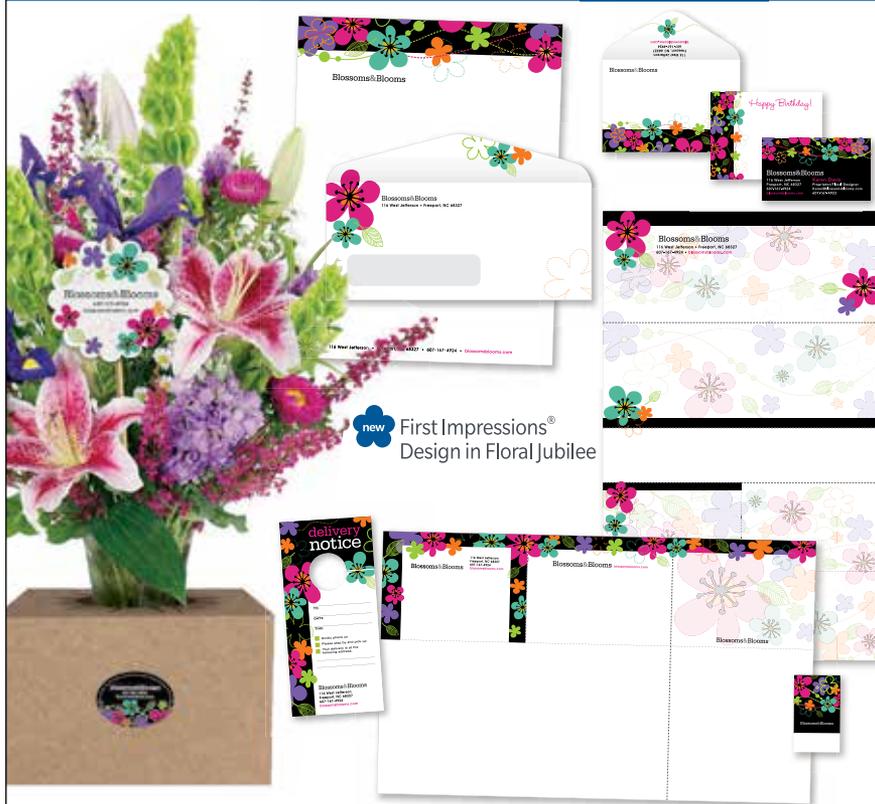
industry, and hadn’t given much thought to flowers before, but his exposure to the family’s effort had trained him: He told Frank and Pamela, “While I don’t know much about flowers, how could I go wrong with American Grown?”

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