

FARM-FLORAL STUDIO
FLORET

photography HEATHER PAYNE / *words* CHANDARA K. PHANACHONE

Driving along the roads of Washington state's Skagit (pronounced 'skäjjet') Valley—located just an hour north of Seattle, one would be hard-pressed to miss the first hints of spring. In April, the vibrant hues of tulips attract over a million visitors to the region's annual Tulip Festival. Later, during the mid-summer months, the ombre shades of crimson boysenberries, currants, and cherries display the bounty of the local berry farms that also occupy this fertile farmland. To the west of Skagit Valley lie the pristine waterways of Puget Sound—the second largest estuary in the United States—while its eastern neighbors include the alpine lakes and glacial peaks of the North Cascades mountains. As one of the most diverse agricultural regions in the United States, it should come as no surprise that among its 93,000 acres of farmland, a burgeoning business in small-scale, high-intensity flower production would take root in this region.





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~ Erin



Chris and Erin Benzakein founded Floret, a flower farm and floral design company. The couple met at Upper Columbia Academy, a boarding school in Spangle, Washington; she was a freshman, he was a senior. "We had a long distance relationship for five years before he was finally able to move back to Washington. I love his laid-back nature and easy-going attitude, but most importantly, Chris is super supportive of my dreams," Erin says, smiling. When Chris and Erin got married, they decided to take a break from the big city life in Seattle for a chance to raise their family in a small town surrounded by the beauty of nature; naturally, Skagit Valley was a prime choice. "Floret started when our kids were small. I was looking for a business that I could run from home. My father was an avid gardener," Erin explains, remembering how the scent of fresh flowers always perfumed her childhood home. "From a young age I developed a deep appreciation for nature and seasonality. As a little girl, I spent the summers at my great-grandparent's house and my great grandmother always sent me out in to the garden to pick flowers for her bedside table." The experience was an impressionable one for Erin. When she and Chris first settled in their new home, among one of their earliest family vegetable gardens, Erin planted a double row of flowering sweet peas in loving memory of her great grandmother. When they bloomed, she gifted a bouquet to a friend, who in turn, cried tears of joy—a pivotal moment that would eventually lead Erin to dream up the idea for Floret. Soon after, Erin sold her bounty of sweet peas in mason jars for \$5 to family, friends, and neighbors who all encouraged her to pursue her dream.

With very little knowledge of the agricultural industry, Erin had her work cut out for her. From researching soil preparation to understanding the principles behind lean farming—a sustainable approach to small-scale, high-intensity farming methods—Erin was determined to learn as much as she could through the process. "Failure became my best teacher," she confesses, telling of the countless sales pitches she gave before realizing that perhaps her intense focus on marketing her product wasn't the best strategy for generating customer loyalty. It was also during this time that Erin began to blog about her experiences. By sharing useful tips and lessons that she'd learned from the challenges (and mistakes) that she made along the way, Erin garnered a loyal following that opened up new doors for her business and career. In 2014, Floret Flowers earned the coveted title of design winner of the Martha Stewart American Made, a national contest that celebrates the contributions of creative entrepreneurs.

Today, Floret is a thriving family-run operation that comprises a modest two-acre farm, floral design studio, and learning center. "Chris handles all of the heavy lifting and oversees the field production side of the farm, including tasks like irrigation, tractor and soil work," notes Erin. "He also manages the flower deliveries and the shipping portion of our seed company." Besides managing operations, Chris is also the talented photographer for the blog and website. Erin's responsibilities encompass the business and creative side of the equation by harnessing her talents in social media and marketing alongside her artistry as a floral designer. Their two children, daughter Elora (16) and son Jasper (13), also have avid roles

in the business. Aside from tending to a flock of bantam chickens, Elora is instrumental in creating bouquets and packaging them for shipment (Floret flower bouquets can be found at Whole Foods stores throughout the Pacific Northwest), while Jasper helps Chris in the field. Despite the help from her family, Erin quickly realized that as her business grew, so would her need to expand the Floret family by bringing on more operational and administrative staff; a decision that has considerably contributed to the success of her endeavor.

Aside from functioning as a business, Floret is also a learning center that hosts two types of floral workshops, which are "an extension of our commitment to supporting and cultivating a global network of farmer-florists," emphasizes Erin. "The first [workshop] is geared toward aspiring and established flower farmers. We teach small scale, high-intensity flower production. These workshops cover topics such as seed starting, plant propagation and marketing. Our second type of workshop is focused on flower-arranging, and is geared toward floral designers and flower lovers. Both workshops stress active participation, demonstration and lots of practice." Through these, Erin is able to teach a new generation of farmer-florists through equipping them with the tools and resources needed for their success. Later this year, she hopes to launch a national directory of farmers who previously attended her workshops as a way to support the rising numbers of farmer-florists. "By supporting like-minded growers we're keeping money in our local economy, and advancing a healthy alternative to the traditional floral industry," she explains.

From Iceland poppies to Chantilly snapdragons, all of the blooms grown on the farm are certified organic—an important element for Erin and Chris since their children have made the flower fields their playground. Instead of using harmful chemical fertilizers, Erin believes in nurturing the healthiest crops possible to combat agricultural diseases and pests. "These are old fashioned flowers," Erin explains. "They retain those ephemeral qualities that have been bred out of your standard floral cooler fare. These flowers have sweet, fragrant, delicate qualities with more vibrant colors and naturally arching stems; all qualities that lend themselves to lush, garden-style arrangements." In 2015, Erin launched Floret Seeds—a line of easy-to-grow seed varieties that have been personally tested and curated by her team. In the process of conducting research for her book (due in stores starting February 2017), Erin discovered that seeds for the best cut-flower varieties (long stems, fragrant, vibrant colors) were unavailable to the average home gardener. While starting a seed company was always part of her long-term plan, she soon realized that her book needed to provide seed sources for each of the flower varieties. From there, Floret Seeds was born.

"We are a small family-run flower farm and we share our stories of successes and failures with the world," emphasizes Erin. It is certainly a story that's been winning hearts and flowering dreams from the very start.