



When a flower farmer meets a floral designer and when both value the artisan approach to their craft, magic is likely to occur. That's exactly how a friendship was fostered between **Kelly Shore** of Olney, Md.-based **Petals by the Shore**, and **Beth Van Sandt**, co-owner of **Scenic Place Peonies** in Homer, Alaska. Kelly and Beth's camaraderie represents collaboration between brilliant floral design and exceptional Alaska-grown peonies.

Kelly was familiar with Alaska-grown peonies, having previously ordered the summer-blooming divas for a few bridal bouquets. Beth was also confident in the quality and beauty of her peonies, which have flourished in her fields since 2010.

Yet, spending a full week together this past summer changed both women,

and enhanced their appreciation for one another's floral talents. Kelly traveled to Alaska from her home outside the nation's capitol to serve as the featured designer for Certified American Grown's Field-to-Vase Dinner, which Beth and her husband **Kurt Weichhand** hosted on July 29th (*see page 106 for more on the event*).

Kelly and Beth planned numerous design elements for Scenic Place Peonies' dinner décor, including a tribute to Kurt's profession, commercial fishing – the industry that put Homer on the map long before peonies emerged on the scene. To achieve their vision, they lined up several volunteers and farm staff, not to mention plenty of gorgeous peonies.

But first, as a bonus, Kelly reserved

one day for a styled shoot that allowed her to play with Alaska-grown peonies from Scenic Place. "I knew I might never get an opportunity like this again," she says. "I couldn't go to Alaska and not do something creatively - just for me and for the sake of art! I also wanted to celebrate the seasonality of Alaskan flowers and showcase Beth's beautiful farm."

Through her social media connections, Kelly teamed up with **Donna Smith** of **Donna Marie Photography**, a photographer based in the Anchorage area, and **Chelsea Aberkane** of **Borealis Beauty**, a hair-makeup artist who agreed to be her model.

They, too, were swept up by the opportunity to create a gorgeous story with Alaska peonies. "When I got to Scenic



Place Peonies, I honestly had no idea what I was walking into,” Kelly recalls. “The lower field had just exploded into full bloom and when I saw it, I knew we had to do a photo shoot there.”

A spectrum of pink peonies was reserved for the dinner’s décor later that week, allowing Kelly to embrace a different and equally alluring palette – salmon and coral-hued peonies. She envisioned a bouquet of vivid coral petals portrayed against a field of white-flowering peonies. “Beth saved a few blooms of an etched salmon peony for me,” the designer explains. “I’d been dying to work with that variety. It’s a perfect color.”

Farmer-florist **Rachel Lord**, who owns Homer-based **Alaska Stems**, invited Kelly to harvest more flowers and foliages from her fields and high tunnels, including columbine, foxglove, stock, anemone, statice, zinnia and various foliages. Kelly also picked two classic Alaska flowers for their azure blue petals – forget-me-not (the official state flower) and *delphinium* – and she foraged aptly-named fireweed from Beth and Kurt’s greenbelt to use as a pink accent.

The mythical narrative of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* served as inspiration for the visual story Kelly wanted to tell. Chelsea’s



raven hair and pale complexion were complemented by Kelly's lavish bouquet, a floral headpiece and the diaphanous shell pink gown. With the abundant, textural blooms spilling from Chelsea's arms, the verdant fields where peonies practically grow before one's eyes, and mist from the morning dew rising from the earth it all looked so ethereal, Kelly says. "I was reminded of a nymph in her garden."

Sense of place is strongly apparent here, a fact not lost on Beth, an Alaska native. "I never get tired of it," she says. "And I love offering peonies when no place else in the world has them – in July, August and September."

Moreover, seeing stunning bouquets that feature the peonies she grows with such care is the payoff



Beth Van Sandt (left) and Kelly Shore (right)
Photo courtesy of Certified American Grown Flowers

for all the hard work of farming, Beth adds. "I like creating relationships with florists. Kelly has learned how much goes into growing our peonies, so she values our product."

The entire experience was dream-like, a "euphoric high," Kelly recalls. "To be on Beth and Kurt's farm and for them to see what is valuable to me as a designer and to be able to harvest and design with what I wanted and to have creative, artistic freedom has done so much for my soul as a creative person." ■

Scenic Place Peonies, scenicplacepeonies.com

Where: Homer, Alaska (recently named City of Peonies by local officials)

Size: 10.5 acres total, with 1.5 acres devoted to peony production

Number of peony plants: 6,000

Varieties offered: 14

Specialties: Certified American Grown, Certified

Naturally Grown, Registered Alaska Grown

Petals by the Shore, petalsbytheshore.com

Photography: Donna Marie Photography, donnamphotography.com, @smilejustbcuz

Model/Hair/Makeup: Borealis Beauty, @borealis_beauty
Ribbon: Torn & Tied, tornandtied.com, @tornandtied

Flowers: Scenic Place Peonies and Alaska Stems, alaskastems.com, @alaskastems