Eco-Maven

San Francisco florist builds an enduring brand around sustainable design.

Photos by Lauren Edith Anderson
In 2013, during the first year of the “Slow Flowers Podcast,” I interviewed a young floral designer from the San Francisco East Bay who, at the time, was one of the only voices talking about sustainable design practices. I called her “Berkeley's eco-floral maven” and said this, “Pilar Zuniga is blazing a new trail and is the true definition of a local florist. She has a hometown, Main Street flower shop that goes the full distance to source from local flower farms in her own backyard.”

Remember, this was in the early days of Instagram. When it came to visually exciting storytelling – at least online – individual bloggers still reigned. As early as 2008, when she launched Gorgeous and Green as an event floral business, and later as a local Berkeley retail floral and gift store (2010-2016), Zuniga used her blog to write about sustainability concerns, including chemical-free design techniques and mechanics. “I don’t use sprays, glues or floral foam at all,” she explains.

Today, Instagram is home to Zuniga’s online presence, where followers are drawn to her vibrant aesthetic, often portrayed against a distinctive turquoise-teal wall – a color rarely found in flowers. Wherever she designs, including in her current studio, Zuniga relies on a turquoise backdrop, taking advantage of the beautiful wash of natural light that illuminates it for photography. “That is my brand color,” Zuniga says. “It balances with reds, pinks and burgundies as well as oranges, yellows and jade greens.”

Gorgeous and Green currently sources from several Northern California flower growers that use sustainable practices, including some who are USDA Certified Organic, basing weekly designs from the seasonal harvest of fields.
in the Berkeley-Oakland area, Sonoma County and Half Moon Bay. To augment, Zuniga shops at the San Francisco Flower Mart, buying only from vendors of California-grown product.

Her mix of botanicals from boutique area farms, combined with the commercially farmed options, gives her designs an eclectic appeal. “I love pulling together what’s a little wild with elements that are soft and structured, like local roses. I’ll even add tropical sensibility because I’m always looking for that Ikebana or modern element. Or I’ll offset a design with strange branches as an arrangement takes shape as a great smorgasbord – as colorful as possible. I always look for unique, vivid colors and combinations.”

Gorgeous and Green’s return to its studio roots three years ago has given Zuniga freedom to expand her most profitable channels of business. While she left the retail format behind, the designer has retained many of her signature features, including bicycle delivery, green mechanics and local flower sourcing.

Customers order online from a selection of sizes and styles for Berkeley, Oakland and Emeryville delivery. “Those day-to-day arrangements represent a significant amount of my business,” she says. “We deliver daily, Monday through Friday, working with Pedal Express, a bike courier collective.”

Zuniga continues to offer gift baskets that include flowers and selections of her favorite sustainable items, a carryover from the retail experience. Custom florals for weddings and events continue to drive other channels of Gorgeous and Green’s business, but Zuniga has also developed an online program for smaller wedding orders, with a $400 minimum.

“It was a lot of work for not very much income to go through a full-service process with customers who wanted just personal flowers and a few centerpieces,” she explains. “So I developed an online ordering system where couples can order based on their budgets. Generally, they pick up the flowers, or they can talk with me about potential drop-offs, but it usually does not include whole setups.”

This model is possible because of improved technology platforms as well as the marketplace’s general comfort level with online shopping. For customers who need personal consultations, they can pay $75 for the service. In fact, that’s available as an item in Zuniga’s online store.

Since closing its retail space, Gorgeous and Green has been based at a small, garden shed-sized studio in an industrial neighborhood of fellow artists and makers. Now, Zuniga is readying for another studio move. She is planning to build a workshop using reclaimed shipping containers. They’ll occupy extra space on property used by her husband’s Oakland-based company. “It will be fun to use the shipping containers, and I plan to make a garden there,” she says.

There is one more benefit of moving Gorgeous and Green to this location. “The space has a sound stage, which is basically a huge photography and video studio. So I’m thinking of creating some content to share, whatever it is I’m working on,” she says.

DETAILS
Gorgeous and Green, gorgeousandgreen.com, @gorgeousandgreen

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