

FLOWERS FOR CHEZ PANISSE

Nothing but seasonal, locally-grown flowers decorate the Berkeley, California, bistro that boldly launched the modern farm-to-table movement 40 years ago

A serendipitous conversation with Flora Grubb led us to the legendary Chez Panisse Cafe & Restaurant, home of Alice Waters' inspiring, community-minded culinary endeavors. As we wrapped up an interview and photography at Flora's stylish flower and garden shop in San Francisco, she said in a completely off-handed manner, "I want to introduce you to my friend **Max Gill**. He does the flowers for Chez Panisse. Do you want to meet him?"



Our answer was an unequivocal "yes," and so Flora made that call.

Three days later, we found ourselves in the heart of Berkeley, standing on the porch of a gracefully aging, century-old Craftsman bungalow. Max opened the door, greeted us warmly and suggested we follow him on a tour of his backyard, a.k.a. the cutting garden. With David clicking away like he was on a high-fashion shoot, the three of us moved comfortably from polite chitchat to passionate story-swapping as we discovered our mutual obsession for gardening, unusual ornamental plants and local floral design ingredients – cultivated or foraged.

"I like to work with what's local and sustainable, but also what you'd see growing together in nature," says the handsome young designer with a big following. For him the term "local" means sourcing flowers from Bay Area farms, as well as "from someone down the street who has a crabapple tree." Twice each week Max creates fresh arrangements for Chez Panisse.

Inside the intimate restaurant, small cafe tabletops barely accommodate dishes and cutlery, let alone something like a bud vase. As a result, foodies who clamor for a seat at the popular \$60-\$95 prix fixe dinners are treated to Max's dramatic arrangements displayed elsewhere throughout Chez Panisse. One huge urn graces an entry table and another is situated in an alcove between two seating areas. Upstairs in the Chez Panisse Cafe, where things are

more casual, Max adds vases of hand-gathered blooms, vines, and foliage on the kitchen ledge.

Whether he uses berry-laden hawthorn branches or delicate clematis vines, Max feels privileged to design bouquets that are as local and seasonal as Chez Panisse's menus. His client, Alice Waters, has this to say about the designer: "Max is an amazing forager – he brings a sense of aliveness and seasonality, reinforcing the principles of the restaurant."

With an intense gaze that focuses on his subject, be it a human being or the raw material with which he works, Max could be easily mistaken for an actor or model. An eclectic background informs his aesthetic, including a University of California, Berkeley, degree in environmental science and city planning. Max has supported himself as a massage therapist, dog-walker, bartender and – yes, a theatrical actor and print model. In 2003, through a bartending gig at the restaurant next to Chez Panisse, he learned of an opening with Chez Panisse's floral designer Carrie Glenn. At the time, Max Gill Design, his small floral studio, relied on word-of-mouth referrals and freelance work with other designers, including Ariella Chezaz,



Above: An effortless urn-filled bouquet, created by Max Gill, adorns the counter at the upstairs Chez Panisse Cafe. To the left of the arrangement is a stack of Alice Waters' many bestselling cookbooks.

Opposite: On location prior to the dinner opening, Max works as adroitly as the chefs seen cooking in Chez Panisse's kitchen behind him. He uses seasonal and sustainably-grown floral ingredients, including those harvested from his own nearby backyard.



Above: As he harvests dahlias grown in the city-sized lot of his Berkeley home, Max begins to create in his mind's eye. He cites theatrical stage design as one of his influences.

a successful floral artist who has since relocated to Massachusetts. “It was pretty grass roots – I was designing in Mason jars and cutting stuff under the freeway,” he jokes.

Max likens the assisting position to a three-year apprenticeship with the woman who had defined Chez Panisse’s decor since it opened in 1971. The experience introduced him to many new approaches, such as using live plants. “Carrie showed me that it is as important to go to a nursery to buy a 5-gallon plant as it is to head to the flower market,” he says. “She is responsible for the whole genre of field-to-vase flowers. I’ve often wondered who she’s the reincarnation of, because she’s brilliant and working with her pushed all my aesthetic buttons.”

By 2007, having assumed the position as Chez Panisse’s floral designer upon Carrie’s retirement, Max decided to “go for it” and expand his business. A bank loan helped fund renovations to an elderly one-car garage adjacent to his house in Berkeley, where, incidentally, Max grew up. A new concrete slab floor, corrugated metal roof, cottage-style windows, power and water have turned

the structure into an attractive and functional design studio. It’s here that Max preps and produces flowers for his private wedding and event clients, as well as Chez Panisse, which is located a few blocks away. Behind his studio is the cutting garden, where Max grows many of his own botanical ingredients. “I lean on the garden pretty heavily, especially in the summer,” Max says of the perennial beds, woody shrubs and countless clematis vines that occupy most of the 7,000-square-foot city lot.

He hopes his field-to-vase sensibility resonates with diners who appreciate Chez Panisse’s farm-to-table approach. While Alice Waters has nurtured an entire cottage industry of organic food purveyors, her floral designer similarly encourages his suppliers. If it’s not grown in his own backyard, Max turns to people like Vicki and Valerie Prosek, sisters who are partners in Florist @ Large. “They have relationships with farmers that no one else has,” Max enthuses. “If I want fruiting branches, I call them.”

The association with Chez Panisse allows Max to support and educate local growers. “Many have been around for generations and, no, maybe some of them haven’t jumped on the organic bandwagon yet. Some local flowers are conventionally grown. But education goes a long way. I find myself asking them: ‘What did you grow that you *did not* have to spray?’ And by making it really clear where my dollar will go, I feel strongly that I’m including everybody in the ‘sustainable’ conversation.”

Feeding the eyes of diners

We followed Max’s car to Chez Panisse, located at 1517 Shattuck Ave., in Berkeley. He brought along some yummy coral-colored dahlias to refresh a naturalistic composition on display in the main dining room. “I have to credit Alice Waters for making this possible,” Max declares, sweeping his arms wide. “My goal is to make it feel like all these rustic elements are growing together – that they literally grew here.”

Admittedly, he calls his designs “high maintenance, since I don’t always use elements that last on their own for a whole week without refreshing.” Max is more than hands-on, stopping by Chez Panisse almost daily to refresh the water in vases or replace a tired bloom. “Let’s face it, ingredients last longer if you can cut them in your own garden,” he points out. “When I cut dahlias from my backyard, I get three or four more days out of each flower than the ones from the flower market.”

Drawing from his theatre background, Max composes each arrangement “as a little stage,” similar to a classical theatre set based on a grid design. “Each area of the stage has its own significance, such as the upper-left stage corner – a very powerful position where people always look to first,” he says. Similarly, Max places eye-catching focal ingredients in the upper-left area of his arrangement. “The front-center area of a stage is a really intimate place, where an actor might confess a detail to the audience. In a floral arrangement, that center front spot is an opportunity to place something a little sweet or personal, like a tiny tendril reaching down to the table.” In designing flowers using theatrical principles that have been around for millennia, Max creates a visual story that flows from beginning to end.

Of Max, his design mentor Ariella Chezar proclaimed: “Max, with his heart of gold, is a genius at creating small, magical worlds that you cannot help but be drawn into. With tenderness and skill, he assembles his elements, resulting in the most perfect balance of haphazard wildness and clear purpose. His arrangements *always* look just right.”

As a one-man studio who often relies on other freelance designers to assist him, Max feels that his own aesthetic is constantly evolving. “Having been fortunate enough to work with people like Carrie Glenn and Ariella Chezar – people who have very big shoes to fill – I know I’m still exploring my own design style. I want to realize and create for people their vision for their special day,” he explains. “I can’t stress how grateful I feel to be able to do that.”



Above: A stunning floral display is perched on a ledge separating two dining sections of the Arts and Crafts-era restaurant. Max incorporated locally-grown dahlias, branches and vines in this seasonal arrangement.