

## // SOURCING //

SUPER FLORAL / FEBRUARY 2018



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# LOCAL FLOWERS AT BERKELEY BOWL MARKETPLACE

AN INDEPENDENT GROCERY CHAIN'S FLORAL BUYER TAKES A HANDS-ON APPROACH TO SOURCING.

By Debra Prinzing, Slowflowers.com

**Berkeley Bowl Marketplace** is an independent, full-service supermarket committed to stocking high-quality groceries at the lowest possible prices. Since opening as a neighborhood market in 1977, blocks away from the famed University of California, Berkeley, its quality and selection has made Berkeley Bowl an institution in this college town.

Owned by the **Yasuda** family, Berkeley Bowl's name comes from its original location – a former bowling alley. In 1999, the store moved into a 40,000-square-foot, renovated former Safeway site in the heart of Berkeley. A second, newly constructed store in West Berkeley opened in 2009, complete with an expanded floral department just inside the main entrance.

**Joanne Lee**, third-generation Bay Area florist and past president of the California State Floral Association, runs Berkeley Bowl's floral program. Given her established connections in the industry – particularly with flower farms across the state – Lee has developed Berkeley Bowl's floral program into a full-service floral department with two designers among its staff.

Proximity to the **San Francisco Flower Mart** – one of the most prolific wholesale markets in the country – is a huge benefit, Lee says. “I shop there three times a week with an assistant,” she says. “We use our purchases to design and make our own consumer bunches, which allows us to offer different sizes and prices to our customers.”

While some of the chain's flowers come from non-domestic sources, most are purchased directly from local growers and wholesalers from the Watsonville, Salinas, Half Moon Bay and Petaluma areas that surround the Bay Area. Berkeley Bowl procures California-grown roses from Petaluma-based **Neve Bros.** Inc, which operates a stall at the San Francisco Flower Mart. “Local roses are a scarce commodity and it's great that we can buy direct from Neve,” Lee says.

The stores also have a weekly standing order of bulk flowers and mixed bouquets with **KB Farms** in Watsonville, Lee says. “They do bouquets for us in-house, usually labeled with the CA-Grown sticker. We like to put ‘locally grown’ or ‘California grown’ on our signage.”

According to **Robert Kitayama**, president and CEO of KB Farms, his family's farm is the largest remaining greenhouse operation near the Bay Area – an advantage for supplying Berkeley Bowl's two locations and other grocery chains.

“Sixty-five percent of what we grow stays in California – that's a competitive advantage because it helps us manage transportation costs. And we save on packaging, because we deliver most flowers in buckets of water.”

KB Farms is known for its gerbera daisies (including standards, Gerrondos and minis), Asiatic and oriental lilies, snapdragons, lisianthus, calla lilies and ornamental kale. “The Bay Area is a good market, so we're focusing on hard-to-grow, hard-to-ship and in-demand flowers,” he adds.

Grocery customers are interested in the origin of their

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flowers, but also in the growing practices behind them, Lee says. “When we buy from certified organic farms, we use different signage and group all of our organic flowers in one area to make it easy for shoppers.”

**Bluma Flower Farm**, based in Sunol, about 30 miles inland from the East Bay region, is one of Berkeley Bowl’s consistent sources of organic flowers. Run by **Joanna Letz**, the boutique farm sells to independent grocery stores in East Bay, as well as through two farmers’ markets and to area florists. Letz also provides wedding floral designs using flowers she grows and she has recently opened a retail shop in the San Francisco business district.

Bluma Flower Farm holds CCOF (California Certified Organic Farmers) certification, which is accredited by the USDA for organic growing practices. “It definitely gives us a leg up in our marketing,” Letz says. “It’s easier to explain our growing practices when we can say we’re certified organic.”

Her farm’s relationship with Berkeley Bowl has been an important source of steady revenue, Letz says. “Berkeley Bowl ended up being my largest account during my first year; Joanne guided me through the process of selling my flowers to a grocery store.”

Bluma Flower Farm’s bunches begin at \$6.50 wholesale for 10

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**- LOANNE LEE**

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stems, Letz explains. “We try to be pretty consistent, although the number of stems depends on the bloom size,” such as with sunflowers. “Berkeley Bowl really likes our sunflowers in bunches of threes – so we try and do that for them.”

Berkeley Bowl’s customer demographic includes shoppers who are curious about the source of the food and flowers that they purchase.

Thus, having a floral department brimming with California-grown blooms is a plus. “Our owners’ philosophy has always been to buy local and support small produce farmers,” Lee says. “Similarly, with our floral program, I’ve tried to find local farmers to supply

our stores.

If you ask Letz, a bouquet of local flowers means more than meets the eye. “Our farm and the flowers support vast numbers of pollinators and insects. By buying Bluma Flower Farm’s flowers, customers are supporting local, sustainable agriculture and helping to preserve biodiversity.”

#### Details:

*Berkeley Bowl Marketplace,*  
*berkeleybowl.com, @berkeleybowl*

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*@kitayamabrothers*

*Bluma Flower Farm, blumaflowerfarm.com,*  
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the producer of *slowflowers.com*. Each Wednesday, approximately 2,500 listeners tune into Debra’s “Slow Flowers Podcast,” available for free downloads at her web site, *debraprinzing.com*, or on iTunes and via other podcast services. In 2016, GWA: The Association for Garden Communicators inducted her into its Hall of Fame. She is the author of 10 books, including *Slow Flowers* and *The 50 Mile Bouquet*.

