A photograph of a person from behind, wearing a dark jacket and a patterned winter hat, carrying a large, vibrant bouquet of red flowers. They are walking on a wet, reflective sidewalk at night. In the background, another person is visible, and the street is lined with flower shops and plants, illuminated by city lights.

Wednesday, Jan 2, 2013

# IN PURSUIT OF THE PERFECT PETAL

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By Daniel Scheffler

New York's historic flower district may be a shadow of its former self, but the die-hards still show up every morning before sunrise.

*Photos by Jessica Bal*

Vermilion pigments light up the wonted grey sidewalk and crimson petals accent the still-dark sky as I enter this inner-city hideout. Flowers and plants are packed tightly in plastic containers all around me, hanging from windowpanes and filling storefronts. And then the smells—the overwhelming punch of gum and sweet and incense leaving a candy

taste that sits like a bird on the tip of my tongue. Dawn is just breaking as I enter this parish, one that New Yorkers often miss in their haste of life.

A kick downtown from Madison Square Garden and a skip west of Koreatown lies the Chelsea Flower Market—less of a traditional market and more a throng of about a dozen flower shops and wholesalers, which add to the city’s marinade of felicity every morning around dawn.

The market’s origin was based on its locality, a well-worn stretch of West 28th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Positioned by enthusiastic wholesalers in the 1890s to be near the then-fashionable shopping locale now known as “Ladies’ Mile”—a designation attributable to the abundance of voguish stores selling every possible female desire of the time—stretching from 18th to 24th Streets and Park Avenue South to west of Sixth Avenue. After shopping at Bergdorf Goodman and Lord & Taylor, gloved ladies came open-armed to the flower ward to take home pipe dreams of Europe, as many of the blooms came off the grand boats from flower-heaven Holland and exotic South America.



Officially designated in 1989, the “Ladies’ Mile Historic District” preserves 440 buildings on twenty-eight Manhattan blocks, an area now tingling with boutique hotels, fashion mavericks and upstart tech companies. Yet

most of the stores along the Chelsea Flower Market strip are from another era, and they represent a true Gatsby dream of making it in the new America.

At five a.m. on a recent weekday morning, Paula Johansen, a ripened Norwegian import who has lived in the city for the last thirty years, set up the day's arrangements outside her shop. Paradise Plants is known for specialized flowers, like large and unique orchids that are often unavailable to most, with their smooth leaves and exotic splashes of petal; and smallish monocot bromeliads from Central and South America in every shade of red.

"I came to make a new life for myself—and I have," Johansen says candidly. Her white hair, lipstick-less mouth and soft voice bring a seemingly ancient Nordic wisdom to the fore as she croons and warbles about the life the market has given her. "My husband and I have been here for a long time. We like the consistency in our work and what we're able to deliver to florists, floral designers, aspiring designers and, of course, the public," Johansen continues, speaking proudly as she looks around the street at the surrounding retailers' chromatic displays, the street happy in all its tint. "It's given me a real life here; money; a purpose in the country I always dreamed of."





Two florists working on a recent early morning.

Around the corner and just up Sixth Avenue is Superior Florist, a business that has been operating for more than eighty years, through three generations of owners. Louie Rosenberg, who founded the store in 1930 after coming here from Poland, handed the shop over to his son who, in turn, eventually passed it on to his own son, Rosenberg's grandson Steven. Now in his early fifties, Steven Rosenberg has focused the business on personal, high-end flower care, offering private consultations and accepting late-night phone calls. These phone calls range from the bereaved seeking emergency funeral requirements, to frantic parents in need of additional flowers for the odd bar mitzvah, to disgruntled hoteliers whose deliveries have been ruined by heat waves.

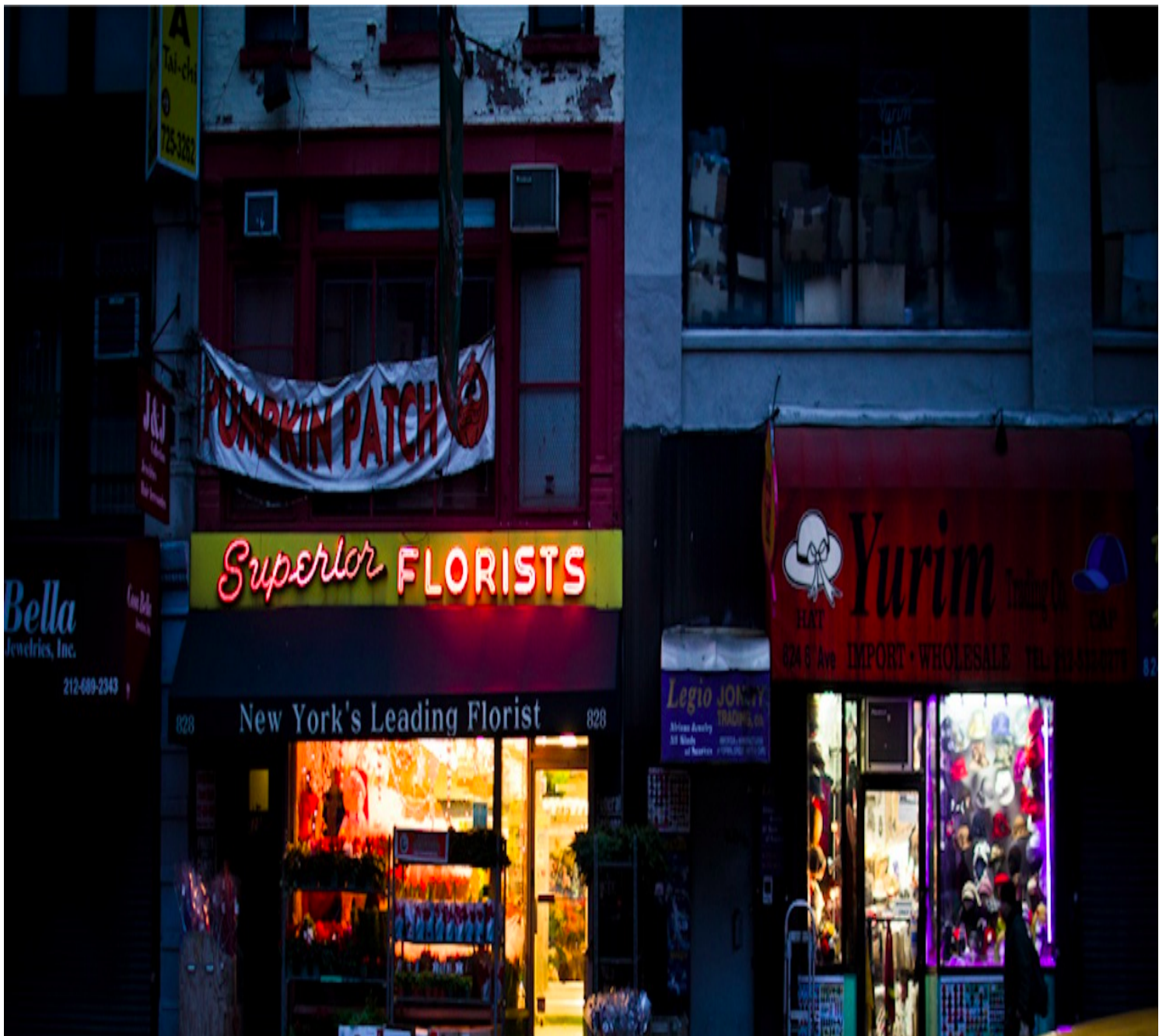
As Rosenberg recalls, the Chelsea Flower Market, which has long been the city's main district, has been splintering since he was young. Over the years, the majority of flower shops in the area have rushed off to suburbia, due to the increase in property costs in Manhattan, combined with the convenient allure of ordering flowers online, leaving the market's tactile

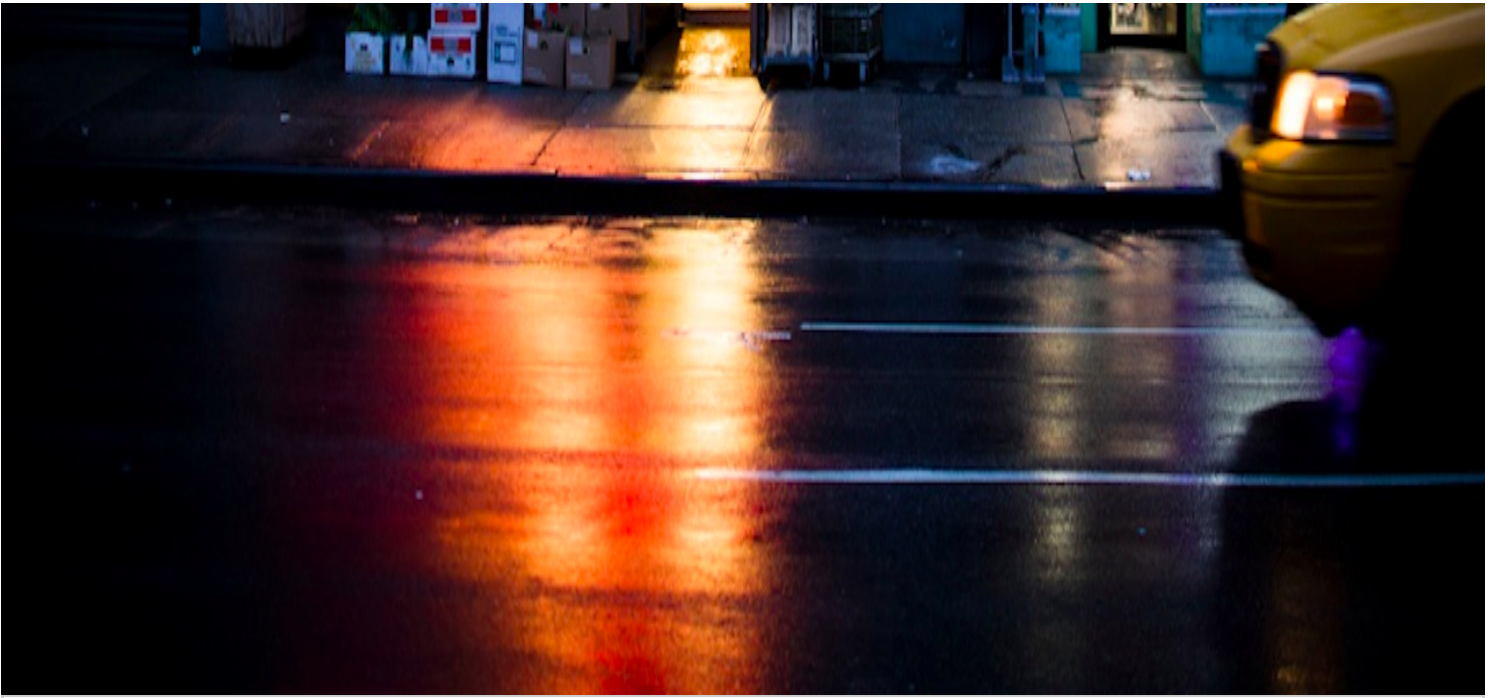


nature largely forgotten.

“The flower market has changed tremendously. It’s nothing like how it used to be,” laments Rosenberg. “It’s a skeleton of what it once was—about fifty to sixty wholesalers now down to about eight to ten retailers and about four florists.”

“The flower market was once a central market for getting flowers,” he continues. “They were produced locally in New Jersey, Long Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts, but 99 percent of it is gone”





Superior Florist, one of the shops in the Chelsea Flower Market

Yet, Rosenberg unabashedly subscribes to its dynamo and insists that the market's prominence in Manhattan continues with its legacy.

Businesses like Rosenberg's are exactly what makes the city feel like a village, reminding New York evangelists, and the occasional jaundiced resident, what the island is all about: hard work, bona fide craft and a sense of family. Photos of Old Man Rosenberg line the walls, showing, among other things, the family's involvement in Florists For Change—a nonprofit group run by Steven Rosenberg's wife, Bonnie Bank, which advocates for independent florists—lending an authenticity that streams out of the neatly organized shop.

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Floral designer Brenton Wolf, a regular at the market, regrets that pricey hotels have swooped into the area and filled the streets with tourists disinterested in the flower trade.

"I'm sad that they miss the color and fragrance of the whole area," Wolf



says. He seconds Rosenberg's belief in the district's longevity, noting that the flower market, although smaller than before, is a legacy in the city and may well rise again with New York's constant redevelopment and shuffle.



Floral designer Brenton Wolf shopping at the market

The market is open to the public, unlike many of the world's inner city floral wholesalers, such as Amsterdam's main flower market, Die Bloemenmarkt, and the grumpy London Flower Borough Market, which require licenses to shop. Still, most of those spotted meandering between the stems and buds at five a.m. are professional florists and floral designers. Oversized logs, thewy stems, umber twigs, mystical moss and scads of pebbles are heaved, dragged and plucked, disappearing one by one as the morning starts to swell.

The housewives, teacher's pets and other casual shoppers will not arrive until a slightly more civil eight a.m. to single out what's left after the die-hard purists have unloaded their yearnings. These sticklers who brave the streets before sunrise have a whole different approach, as they are florists



out of the mold that only New York can cultivate: they are fierce and fastidious, and they know their flowers—orchards and roses and hydrangeas and tulips alike.

Wolf, six-foot-one, consciously stubbled and armed with thickly calloused hands, slinks through the vacant, subdued city, the sun not yet a thought in the skyline.



“Early is best because things have not been picked by the hordes that come during the day, and the most lush inspirational items are still there waiting for me,” says Wolf, blithely dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

Wolf has lived in New York City for the last twenty years, refining a floral design company with clients he can namedrop for pages. The Minnesota-born aesthete has that magical adroitness that manages to transform just

a bouquet, just a wedding, just a party, into an episode.

“There is no routine per se in my early morning,” he says. “I wake up and go to the Chelsea Flower Market with color in mind or a decor genre like ‘Mediterranean country chic’ or ‘winter gold’ or something that one of my hotel clients liked.”

His natural ability to put together arrangements, designs and décor is what has given him a name in the industry. “A lot of times I just get what I like and the things seem to melt to the space,” he adds.

Navigating among the wholesaler employees who are hanging around getting their brethren ready for the day, Wolf slinks through the pageants of produce and involves an eager salesperson in his creative process. He seems to move instinctively toward certain colors and textures, which change by the day. Wolf’s familiar frolic around the flower market typically keeps him busy for about half an hour and then, as if everything suddenly makes complete sense, he lifts his head and is finished. Market employees know the symphony is finally composed, and they wrap the particulars in brown paper, ready for Wolf to dispatch to a Midtown hotel or a new, flashy bar on the Lower East Side.

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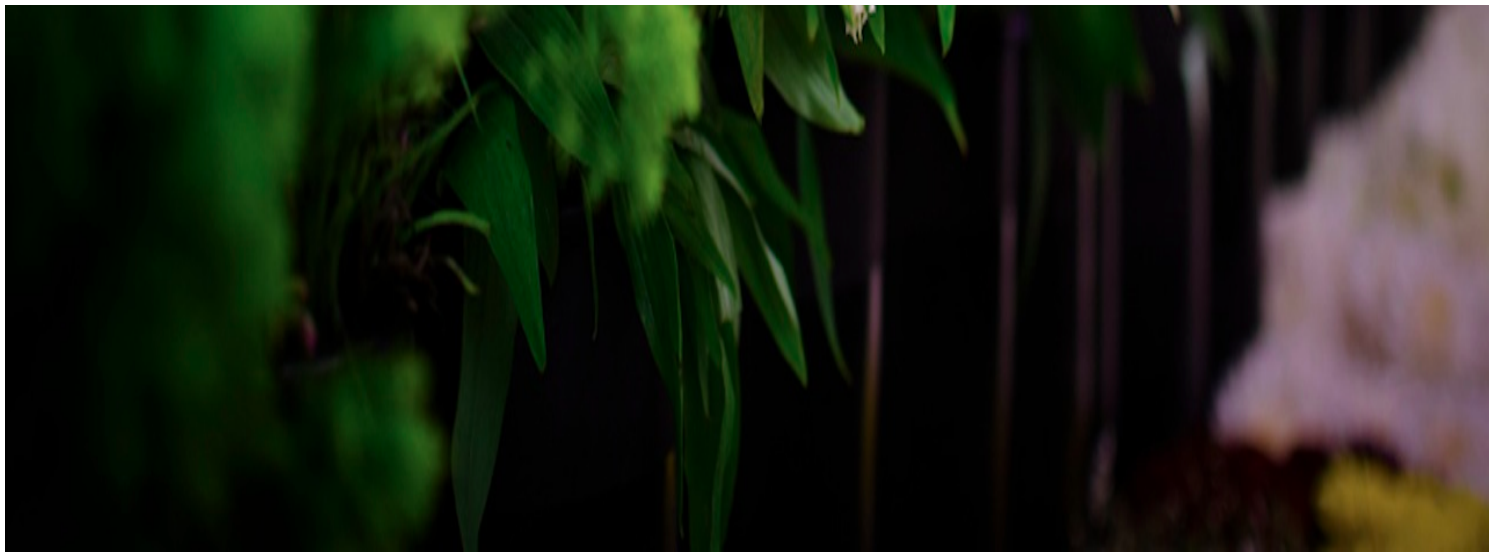
 Another of the flower shop owners, Gary Page, has been in the business, Gary Page Wholesale, also on West 20th, stands out with pews of product never tarried as its flowers move from shop to water with a quick lick. “My biggest thrill is to supply customers with *sui generis* flowers they may have never even heard of; that’s what really surprises them,” says Page. And in that regard, Page often succeeds. The smattering of hue slathers wonder on customers, fans, friends and workers as they enter



Page's shop: from difficult-to-name greens to lurid brights and back again, to the pious browns in and out of giant freezers and coolers. The store's endless rows of packing shelves are filled with flowers of every imaginable variety, like ordinary roses, idyllic Chrysanthemums, and extravagant, otherworldly orchids. Some flowers are packed in boxes with foreign labels from their trans-Atlantic or northern journeys and others are wrapped in simple brown string waiting to be picked up.







Outside, a harlequin flood of pigment and bloom awaits. The arcane streets are now hidden by the parade of wares filling the sidewalks, the area outside each shop redolent of buds in various stages of folding and unfolding.

“Millions of flowers come in and out of our doors annually,” says Page, who notes that his shop generates up to about five million dollars a year in revenue. “We strive to provide our clients with the best quality merchandise; cheap materials don’t work as that could easily be found in a supermarket. Buying flowers is like buying a suit; you can go to Men’s Wearhouse or get one from Zegna.”

Each sunless morning, long before day breaks and the Manhattan bustle ensues, is a reminder that New Yorkers still seek out that quality, that the medley of stems and delicate petals and the ritual of careful buyers picking through them, will continue.

The market may have changed markedly; the days when, as Rosenberg remembers, shop owners “would run after you in the street to get you to buy,” are long gone. But certain century-long traditions must endure, after all, and the nouveau push toward natural design, artistry and authenticity seems to be right up the Chelsea Flower Market’s alley.

“I remain positive,” says Rosenberg, “and believe that this place is part of grand Manhattan in all its heritage.”

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