



# 2019 Retail Florist of the Year

This progressive florist's mix of modern products, attitudes and values resonate with today's consumers, proving that, when done right and managed well, brick-and-mortar flower shops can still survive and thrive.

By **Alicia Schwede**

Photos by **Lindsay Hackney Photography** and **Jennifer Bakos Photography**

**C**reating a little slice of Eden is how **Alyssa Van Guilder** described her dream shop, and that is exactly what she has built in the small town of Goffstown, N.H. After reading this article, you will see that not only is **Apotheca Flowers** Alyssa's dream shop but also that of her customers. And you'll also understand why the judges chose this business as the winner of the 17th annual "Retail Florist of the Year" contest, which is co-sponsored by Florists' Review and the **Wholesale Florist and Florist Supplier Association (WF&FSA)**.

Apotheca Flowers was born in 2005, when Alyssa found herself needing to make a jump and her dreams of a brick-and-mortar shop became a reality. She had envisioned a place that would be positive and inspiring – a real respite for people. Flowers, coffee, art and music would all converge to create this melting pot of community, creativity and inspiration, representing what life could and should be. "Some have said I live in an idyllic bubble, and that could be true," Alyssa shares.





## Apotheca's Roots

Apotheca started in Alyssa's dreams long before it became a reality. She spent her childhood in rural Alaska playing with rocks, mosses, lichens and bark, crafting all sorts of magic out of those found objects. She even tried selling some of her creations at the end of her dirt drive, which led to a dirt road that had more caribou traffic than people traffic. She always knew that she needed to create.

In 2005, Alyssa found herself at a crossroads: She was going through a divorce, and facing a future of being single mom of two children, she wanted to build a business to support her family. *Failure was not an option.* Alyssa's parents, who ran a lodge on the Denali Highway in Alaska when Alyssa was growing up, worked alongside her to build her dream of Apotheca. Her mother, **Linda Burney**, has been the office manager since Apotheca opened, and her father, **Russ**, and her brothers, **Josh**, **Ben**, **Caleb** and **Jeremiah**, helped with everything from deliveries to building the walk-in flower cooler.

When Apotheca began, it was housed in a petite shop space. Fast forward three years, to 2008, when her landlord offered her a much larger space in the historic 1860s Goffstown Train Station, which she happily accepted. Over the course of three months, her father, mother and brothers helped her transform the building into a flower shop, a full-service café and a space to host events including open-mic night, artist receptions and workshops of all types. She met the love of her life, **Pierre LaRochelle**, at the coffee bar. He has since joined the business and shares Alyssa's view of building community and connection.

## Four Focuses

From the beginning, Alyssa has had four major focuses for Apotheca.

**1. Distinctive floral design.** Since opening her store, Alyssa has handpicked the majority of the flowers carried at the shop. She takes a weekly drive to Boston (about 65 miles southeast) and Rhode Island (even farther south) to visit the flower markets and gather interesting blooms, foliages and textures to bring back to her customers in Goffstown. The flower cooler is set up with two color palettes, making it easy for customers to step in and create their own bouquets with interesting and complementary flowers and textures.

**2. An engaging environment.** This focus is about creating an environment that is constantly changing, evolving and striving to inspire the customers. It involves valuing all relationships and all people who come into contact with Apotheca.

**3. Kindness and connection.** "As florists, we have the tremendous honor of taking our customers' celebrations, love stories, heartaches and everyday messages and turning them into custom-designed conduits of emotion," says Alyssa. "Never underestimate the significance of a daily order, and remain focused on the customer and his or her needs."

**4. Inspiration.** Apotheca hosts a variety of flower and design workshops, and community members are invited in to teach macramé, craft cocktails, calligraphy and more. Art shows, open-mic nights – Apotheca strives to invite community members to explore their own creative selves.





## Customer Focus Is Essential

Apotheca's motto is "acknowledge, uplift, inspire." Alyssa shares that one of the rules in the shop is that the customer in front of you gets priority, no matter what you're working on. Always look up and take a moment to say hello. Another rule in the shop is that staff must never have conversations among themselves when customers are present, to prevent customers from feeling awkward. When a customer enters the shop, at least one staff member says hello and switches body language and conversation to be inclusive. "Open up, talk louder and engage them!" encourages Alyssa.

## Shop Culture Is Sacred

Shop culture has always been at the forefront for Alyssa, and she has a zero-tolerance policy for negativity, condescension and gossip. She shares that anything that exists within the shop is there because the owner either created it or allowed it. Even if an owner doesn't condone it, allowing negativity, gossip or complaining to exist is just as bad as being the instigator. It's imperative for the leaders to protect the environment and the team. "I've lost good people by letting stress or fear distract me from what my team needed and from what really matters," Alyssa shares.





## Building a Community

Creating an environment that is multi-dimensional and alive, where people feel welcome, has always been Alyssa's intention with Apotheca. The shop offers 2,000 square feet of community building and connecting space. Seating in the coffee bar is offered to help customers stay, relax and connect. In addition to the coffee bar, Alyssa and her staff have created community building activities that include open-mic nights, workshops, art receptions and more. The art gallery showcases the works of a local artist for two months at a time. Alyssa and her team offer an optional artist reception evening, to which local art enthusiasts and guests of the artist are invited as a way to celebrate the artist and learn more about his or her individual work.

## Know When to Lean In and When to Let Go

When Alyssa wrote her business plan for Apotheca, she planned on a coffee shop with fresh flowers, but over the years, the business has evolved into a flower shop with coffee. Weddings were not in the original business plan, but they now account for almost 50 percent of flower sales. "Our businesses take their own shapes. We can't be stubborn and inflexible; we must let them have their own lives," Alyssa advises.

Alyssa reminds other flower shop owners to pay attention to what their customers want, what sparks joy for them and what works in their lives at the time. It's at the intersection of those points where the focus should be placed. In November of last year, Alyssa decided it was time to let someone else manage the coffee shop/café in Apotheca. Her wedding business has grown substantially and requires additional travel, and it became impractical for her to run the café, which also has grown. Alyssa invited her coffee wholesaler, who has a business philosophy similar to hers, to manage the café, which offers an espresso bar, delicate loose-leaf teas, cold brew, sweet and savory pastries, and light breakfast and lunch options.

## Layers of Marketing

When Alyssa thinks of marketing, she thinks of building layers upon layers of community connection, friendship and inspiring others. Apotheca staffers share what they are doing at the shop on Instagram. Every Wednesday, for example, they





share on Instagram Stories (where posts vanish after 24 hours) what flowers have been brought in, what the team is up to and what is happening at the shop. Instagram has been a great way for Alyssa and staff to engage with customers, and their wedding couples often find them via this social media platform.

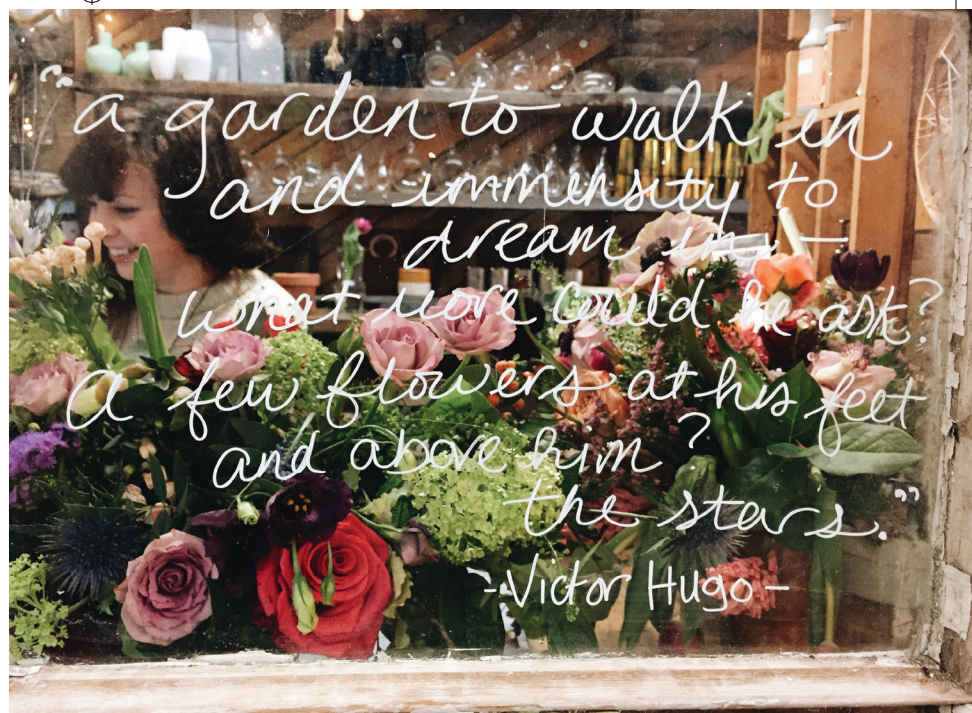
Alyssa also maintains an email list, to which she sends a monthly newsletter, sharing the flower color palettes, upcoming workshops, holiday reminders, artist receptions, new gift lines and other information about the shop and the goings-on there.

Old-school marketing: Apotheca frequently delivers small arrangements with business cards to neighboring businesses as welcome gifts, a hello and a connection. And Alyssa points out that she doesn't expect an immediate response from other traditional marketing efforts, such as when she does a photoshoot or runs an ad in *New Hampshire Magazine*; instead, she knows that it is this layering upon layering of connections, community involvement and building relationships that will lead customers through Apotheca's doors.

## How to Handle Unhappy Customers

Apotheca operates with the mind-set of always making the customers happy. Of course, this can be tough; for example, some customers won't understand that an 'Amnesia' rose isn't dead. "We try to explain and educate, but if it's not bringing them joy, we replace it!" shares Alyssa. A happy customer might remember your shop fondly, she says, but an unhappy customer that you are able to convert into a happy customer will never forget the experience.

"This past Valentine's Day, we missed a requested morning delivery," Alyssa recalls. "The customer let us know and, obviously, was not happy. We sent both the sender and the recipient flowers and handwritten cards. In turn, they both sent us emails commending our customer service and saying that they couldn't wait to use and refer us." ■



## PAYING IT FORWARD

Being open to growth and change is a necessity as an entrepreneur. Over the years, **Alyssa Van Guilder** has had several creative flower-lovers train and work at **Apotheca** and then go on to start their own businesses.

"I let that affect me in ways it shouldn't have," Alyssa shares. "I felt rejected or abandoned or taken advantage of – or that I wasn't a good boss or had messed up in a major way to scare them away. Instead, I should have fully embraced celebrating them in their own adventure and life. It's not about me!"

Changing mind-set is imperative to a business owner's strength. Alyssa reminds herself that it is an honor to play a part in someone else's growth. In this next chapter, Alyssa is jumping headfirst into the idea of supporting others in their flower business adventures. Apotheca is how Alyssa supported herself and her children as a single mother, and now Alyssa works with her partner, **Pierre**, in this business to support their family of six. The couple's four children are **Noah**, **Brynne**, **Coco** and **Totem**.

"If I can help others do that as well, how can I not?" she questions. "We will be offering a Field Guide for those who I lovingly call 'Flowerpreneurs.' In a way, it is reaching back in time and offering help to a younger version of myself. I know I could have helped my 20-something self quite a lot! I am looking forward to helping others instead."

Find out more about Flowerpreneurs at Instagram: @flowerpreneurs and on the website [flowerpreneurs.com](http://flowerpreneurs.com).