



MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE I'M A LONDONER

Continuing our series profiling iconic Londoners, **Marianka Swain** meets Peter Green, a flower seller by royal appointment. Portraits by **Arnhel de Serra**

Flowers weren't the plan. Peter Green's father worked as a fruit and veg trader in the old Covent Garden Market, and "he used to take me there when I was growing up. I loved the buzz – in the dead of night you had this hive of activity, right in the middle of London. I always intended to go into fruit and veg like my dad, but I started when I was 16 and couldn't drive, so the flower market was the best option."

Covent Garden Market has changed sites since that time, and the 30 or so wholesale flower suppliers working here will enjoy new surroundings again this year. "It's still the same in the important ways: the

traditions, the people, the atmosphere," believes Peter. He started his career as a stand boy, then a porter with a 'barrow, before working his way up to buyer, manager and finally co-owner of his own business in 1991.

His partner, Billy Smith, has since retired, but the company, Smith & Green, is still going strong. In fact, Peter holds a prestigious Royal Warrant, supplying flowers to Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace twice a week. "We do the odd plant order for St James's Palace and The Chapel Royal too," he adds. "They leave it to me now: 'You know what we like!' I've had complimentary letters, which is quite ▶

Above: Peter Green picks out blooms at Covent Garden Market

THE INSIDE TRACK: A FLOWER SELLER'S CHOICE CUTS

Favourite London attraction

"It's a tie between the London Eye and Stamford Bridge [the home of Chelsea Football Club]."

Favourite London view

"Standing at the Admiralty Arch at the end of The Mall, looking towards Buckingham Palace. I've ridden my horse down there in the All The Queen's Horses parade on New Year's Day."

Favourite London meal

"Pie and mash, of course!"

something." Peter also receives special orders from the royal household for events like state banquets, at which the flowers will often need to be a species or colour related to the flag of the country being hosted.

His other high-profile clients include leading hotels such as The Dorchester, The Savoy, The Lanesborough and The Langham. While business from such places help pay the bills, he is just as happy dealing with tricky seasonal requests from individuals. "One man wanted peonies for his 50th wedding anniversary, as they're his wife's favourite, and tracking them down took some doing, but it's a brilliant feeling knowing you've made someone's day."

Peter sources from places such as Holland, Italy and Columbia, but he also does the rounds of the market every morning, buying up blooms here too.

"You pick up who's best for what, and when you do regular business you get good deals – we look after each other. Covent Garden is a very friendly place, like a little village, with lots of hustle and bustle and plenty of banter.

"We get members of the public visiting too – it's a such a sight, this mass of colour. They love walking around, taking it all in, with a cup of tea and a bacon sandwich.



I know technology is a wonderful thing, but it's nothing like being here, smelling and holding your own flowers. You can't get that by looking at a photo on a website."

There's a definite nostalgic quality to working there as well, such as Peter's use of handwritten invoices. "Everything's done the way it was back in the day," he says. "It's a trade you can't learn from a book or degree – it's passed down. My dad said you never stop learning, and it's true: I learn

something new all the time, whether it's a new variety or trend, or knowing when to buy in or not. There's a gambling element to the trade too – anyone who could read this market 100% accurately would be a millionaire!"

While business is thriving and Peter loves the smell of the garden roses, it is the community feel to Covent Garden Market that is the most appealing aspect of the job. "We're working in this market that's

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hundreds of years old and has that unbroken history, from Eliza Doolittle going out with her basket to us now.”

When personal tragedy struck 18 months ago and Peter lost his daughter Molly, his friends on the market helped and supported him through a very difficult time. “They’re salt of the earth,” he says. “You might not make huge sums of money working here, but finding a job in a place you love makes you feel rich.” ■

Peter supplies flowers to Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle.
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