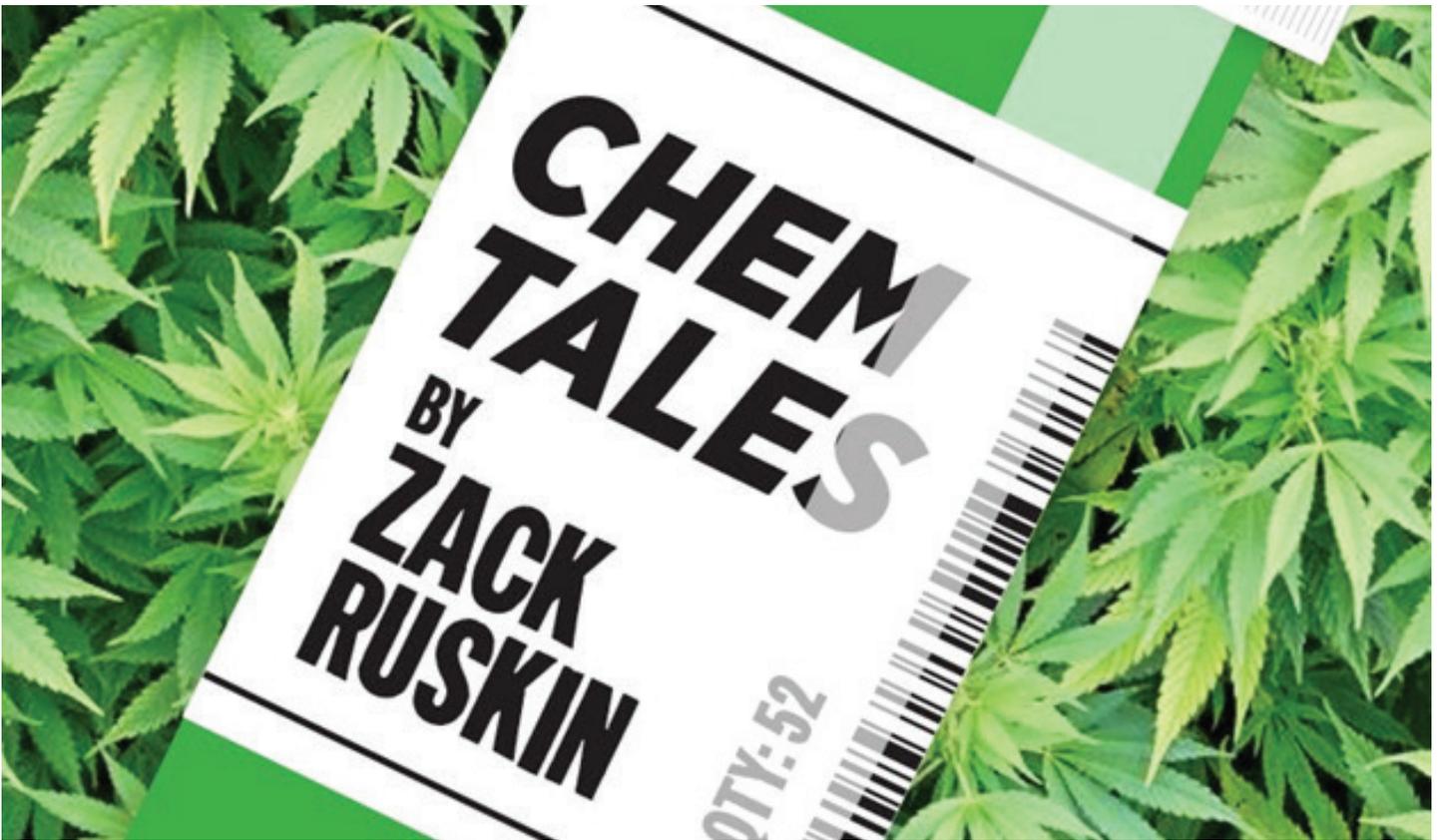


Bloom Farms Brings Charity to Cannabis

The trusted brand has donated more than 500,000 meals to California food banks — and they're not even a tax write-off.

Zack Ruskin, May 17, 2017



Bloom Farms may be a cannabis company, but as Executive Director **Michael Ray** makes clear, its mission has always focused equally on delivering a superior product and giving back to the community.

“I wanted corporate social responsibility to be at the core of our company’s values,” Ray says.

A former stock market trader,

Ray moved back from New York to California following the burst of the banking bubble and subsequent sub-prime mortgage scandal. “I really just didn’t want to play with Wall Street anymore,” he says.

The tract of land in Calaveras County that constitutes **Bloom Farms** has been in Ray’s family for nearly 50 years, several acres of which were a hippie commune

in the 1970s. Now, it serves as the home base for a veteran cannabis brand that’s one of California’s most respected. Last month, Bloom Farms celebrated a major milestone in its charitable goals, donating its 500,000th meal to a food bank. Recounting his initial efforts to align his company with a receptive organization, Ray says the initial meetings he took were not well-received.

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“It was probably a six-month process of us getting denied by various organizations,” he recalls. “We were told, flat out, ‘No, we can’t take your money,’ by many, many different places.”

When Ray walked into his meeting with the **SF-Marín Food Bank** in November 2015, he expected more of the same. Instead, he says, food bank representatives couldn’t believe no one was willing to partner with him: “They were saying, ‘What do you mean you’ve gotten turned down? This isn’t political. We’re just trying to feed people.’ It was music to my ears.”

Currently, Bloom Farms works with three other food banks across California as well: the Sacramento Food Bank, Los Angeles World Harvest, and **Alameda County Community Food Bank**. In addition to the company’s “one-for-one” program — where for every product sold they donate a meal — the staff of Bloom Farms is also given four hours of paid volunteer time each month.

“They send employees here,” confirms SF-Marín Food Bank PR Manager Mark Seelig. “They volunteer in our warehouse.”

Seelig describes the SF-Marín Food Bank as a progressive place that likes to “challenge norms and do things a bit differently.” Asked if the organization felt any trepidation about collaborating with a cannabis company, Seelig says that food banks battle their share of misimpressions, too.

“There are some stigmas attached to what they do, but we certainly have stigma attached to what we do, too,” he says. “We’re dealing with hunger and food stamps and who we help and who should be getting help. It just seemed like a pretty decent partnership, and so far, it’s worked out great for us.”

According to estimates from the SF-Marín Food Bank, Bloom Farms has already donated roughly 210,000 meals to their organization since they joined forces at the end of 2015, a number Seelig calls “gigantic.” Per a 2016 U.S. Department of Agriculture study, one in seven households in the United States is food-insecure, defined as an inability to provide three square meals a day. Seelig says perceptions of affluence in the Bay Area make the problem even bigger locally.

“We have one in four people in our community that is considered food-insecure,” he says. “It’s a huge problem that people don’t talk about often, especially when it comes to San Francisco and Marin, so when you’re talking about 210,000 meals? I mean, you can see that making a huge difference, a huge dent in the mission to provide enough food for our neighbors in need.”

Ray says that now he’s hearing from other cannabis companies looking to kickstart their charitable endeavors into gear. As a board member of the California Cannabis Industry Association, Ray is often giving advice to fellow cannabis

CEOs. He believes there are two key tenets to follow: Make sure the charity you work with is high-integrity, and don’t do it until you can afford it.

“It’s expensive,” Ray says. “It’s very expensive to maintain and do it the right way, and it’s hard enough to run a business as it is. We operate as a not-for-profit, as all cannabis companies do in California.”

Seelig also points out that as a cannabis company, Bloom Farms is unable to use their donations as a tax write-off.

He says of Ray, “Here’s this CEO who says, ‘You know what? That doesn’t matter. I recognize that hunger in this country, this state, and this community is a big deal, and I’m going to do whatever it takes anyway.’ When we think about Bloom Farms, we all smile. We think they’re doing something super-special, and we can’t say enough about their commitment to our mission.”

Ray hopes the work he’s doing with Bloom Farms sends a larger message too.

“Now, more than ever, we need to show the community and the state and the federal government that cannabis companies are not all about profits,” he says. “It’s about people, too.”