



TRIMMING WEED AT A EUGENE DISPENSARY

GROWING PAINS

A glimpse at the dawning of legal weed in Oregon

BY RICK LEVIN | PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

We are first and foremost a nation of consumers, and marijuana — which begins its fitful journey into recreational legality in Oregon on July 1 — might be the ultimate consumer product. Like opium and sugar in the early history of this country, marijuana is an addictive, renewable and flexible resource whose uses seem endlessly adaptable to the contingencies of capitalism, where the trick is not to sell the product to the consumer but the consumer to the product.

Slowly but surely, the idea of legal weed is being sold to the American public. But legalization is not decriminalization — not by a long shot. Decriminalizing weed would put it on the same status as potatoes, of which you can grow and eat and trade as many as you like without anyone really batting an eye.

Legalization, on the other hand, cuts the proverbial Gordian knot, opening up an endless subset of economic, legal and ethical questions that spirals into every aspect of our society. As recreational pot enters the Oregon market in all its guises — edible, drinkable, spreadable, combustible — it faces an array of complications whose regulatory solutions remain, as yet, half-baked.

What, for instance, will happen to Eugene's thriving black market? Will weed dealers now come in from the

cold, and if so, will they be welcomed? Who will get all the money, and where will it go? How will consumers be protected from weed contaminated by pesticides? Who will create industry standards, and what will they look like?

Adam Jacques, co-owner of the Eugene medical marijuana dispensary Oregon Microgrowers Guild, says that although he supports our right to enjoy recreational pot, the process of legalization itself raises a slew of unresolved issues.

"Legalization in its purest form would be one thing," Jacques says. "It sounds so freeing. The fact is, legalization comes with a ton of legislation and new laws. While I feel that legalization is the only smart move to make, care must be taken in how they lay out these laws."

Nonetheless, Jacques says that ultimately it makes "common sense" to legalize recreational marijuana. It's not going to cause the sky to fall, he says, and moreover, "people are going to use cannabis if it is legal or not. The failed prohibition makes that very clear. So why not regulate and tax the hell out of it?"

I come, then, neither to praise nor bury legal weed, but to complicate its advent. As Jacques said when I asked him about the issues facing us at the dawn of ending prohibition: "There is going to be a metric ton of kinks to work out ...

I wish I could pinpoint one and go down the rabbit hole with you."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CAPITALISM

My friend the weed dealer, with whom I have spent hours discussing the arrival of legal pot in Oregon, is neither celebratory nor overly cynical about the so-called end of prohibition in Oregon. He tends to take the long view on things. "Illegal, now legal? Not so easy," he says about that moment Oregon's Measure 91 kicks in July 1, when anyone over the age of 21 can, within certain limitations, possess (8 ounces) and grow marijuana (up to four plants) for personal use.

"It's like witches standing around a cauldron stirring their magic pot of stew," my friend — let's call him Kermit — says about the forces of legalization. "Stirring the pot makes all the sediment that's been hiding at the bottom rise to the top. That's all that underground money. That's all the criminals, cartels and wise guys who assume (with legalization) they're just going to launder some money."

Kermit, who is a producer of licensed medical marijuana but also admits to the "criminal" activity of selling his surplus on the street, says that Eugene's black market of individual growers and dealers functions according to its own rules and standards, and has been doing so for decades.