

TESTING TRAINWRECK

FOUR LABS RETURN VERY DIFFERENT POTENCY RESULTS FROM THE SAME MARIJUANA BATCH.

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Customers at Nectar Cannabis use several methods to choose the weed that's right for them.

Some trust the budtenders at the medical marijuana dispensary on Northeast Sandy Boulevard to pick a strain from the nearly 60 options on the menu. A few veteran patients trust their sense of smell, sniffing the green nuggets kept in gallon-sized Mason jars.

But most rely on the labels affixed to each jar, which list the percentage of the intoxicants THC and CBD in each bud.

Those numbers tell consumers how quickly the pot will get them high, what the buzz will feel like, and how long it will last.

"Patients focus a lot on the numbers," says Nectar manager Jeff Johnson. "Almost too much sometimes. There's so much variation in strains, we really need the testing to know what we're getting."

But an inspection of those test results shows consumers aren't always getting reliable information.

WW sent samples from a single marijuana batch to four Portland-area pot testing labs whose results go on the labels that inform consumers.

The results? Big discrepancies in how much THC and CBD were found in samples from the same batch. The labs' results showed a 10-point spread in THC levels. That could be like handing a glass of gin to a drinker and telling him it's wine. CBD levels ranged from one-third lower than what appeared on the label to more than six times as high.

"Of course there's a spread, because there's no standardization, there's no regulation, there's no nothing," says Amy Margolis, a Portland lawyer representing marijuana growers. "People need to know what they're putting in their body, and to have the one consumer protection be totally unsupervised is absurd."

Clamor is increasing for state lawmakers to license and regulate labs that test and label pot sold in Oregon medical dispensaries.

WW reported earlier this month that growers have complained the state requires testing pot for potency, mold and pesticides—but sets no rules for the labs doing the work ("Testing Flower Power," WW, Feb. 4, 2015).

Labs charge dispensaries \$100 to \$200 to test one batch of weed. The state doesn't regulate how much dope can be in the batch, what methods labs use to conduct tests, and what parts of the plant they measure. (Buds closer to the top of the plant, where they get more sunshine, have higher levels of THC.)

Legislators worry the lack of oversight and inconsistent results could spark a big problem as the state prepares for recreational weed to become legal this July. Lawmakers have said new buyers will have less experience with labeled products than people who have been using the medical marijuana system for years.

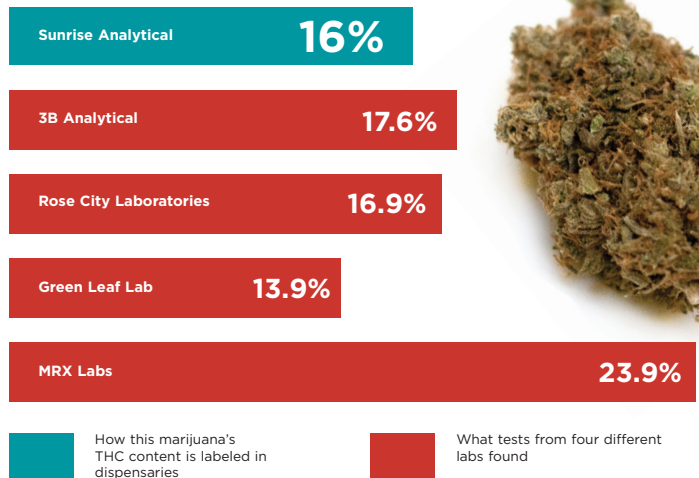
Last week, the Oregon Liquor Control Commission asked the Legislature to require licensing for weed labs.



BEST BUDS: Craig Timmerman, a chemist at MRX Labs in Northeast Portland, examines a marijuana sample.

HOW HIGH? HARD TO SAY

Trainwreck Arcata Cut from Eco Firma Farms is labeled for sale as medical marijuana at 16 percent THC content. At WW's request, four labs tested the buds—and came up with different results.



Lawmakers are now mulling a bill that would certify labs through the state accreditation agency.

"We've been hearing there are very uneven standards in the labs," says state Sen. Ginny Burdick (D-Portland), who co-chairs the Legislature's House-Senate committee on marijuana legalization. "And that can be very risky when you consider that we're getting into a recreational market. We need quality control."

WW put Portland's marijuana labs to the test by obtaining about 20 grams of Trainwreck Arcata Cut—a sativa hybrid strain known for its strong THC kick. We divided the batch into four portions, and delivered those samples to four different local labs in the span of 48 hours.

The batch, all grown in a 300-square-foot room at Eco Firma Farms in Wilsonville, is currently being sold on dispensary shelves with its THC content labeled at 16 percent.

But the results from local labs ranged from less than 14 percent THC content up to almost 24 percent.

The label also says Trainwreck Arcata Cut has a CBD potency of 0.1 percent. One lab result was .003 percent, while another was 0.66 percent.

Labs also test for acceptable levels of mold. The batch passed in three tests and failed in a fourth.

Shown the range of test results, lab owners said the variations could have been caused by different moisture levels in the buds and varying test methods and equipment.

But they agreed new oversight was needed.

"We're in support of anything that produces standardized results and keeps the costs low," says Patsy Myers, co-owner of MRX Labs in Northeast Portland. "People should be able to trust without question what their results are." WW