

Cannabis chef takes fine dining to new high

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Cannabis indica. Credit: Wikipedia

Christopher Sayegh holds up two syringes filled with cannabis compound, primed to pump tiny amounts into a pomegranate sorbet, or a juicy cut of Wagyu Japanese beef as part of a bold new sensory experiment.

As more US states move to legalize the use of recreational marijuana,

the California chef is aiming to elevate haute cuisine to a new level.

Armed with cooking skills acquired while working at Michelin-star restaurants in New York and California, Sayegh says his mission is to redefine haute cuisine with [cannabis](#)-infused meals that are becoming increasingly popular as the stigma surrounding marijuana gradually evaporates.

"I am trying to give people a cerebral experience," Sayegh, 24, told AFP during a recent interview at The Herbal Chef, his Los Angeles-based company.

"But I'm also really careful in how I take them along on this journey."

Sayegh's foray into edible cannabis comes as more and more entrepreneurs look to capitalize on a new gold rush in California which is set to vote in November on legalizing recreational marijuana for adults 21 and over.

Five other states, including Alaska, Colorado and Washington, have already adopted similar legislation and more are expected to follow suit as cannabis moves out of the shadows and becomes more mainstream.

Medical cannabis use is allowed so far in 23 states—including California—and that number is expected to grow, despite the fact that at the federal level the product remains illegal.

According to the Arcview Group, a cannabis investment and research firm based in California, legal sales of marijuana in the United States reached \$1.2 billion in 2015, a 232 percent increase over the previous year.

By 2020, sales are expected to surpass \$22 billion, the group said in a

recent report, with California making up \$6.4 billion of that market.

'Like a symphony'

Such projections are enough to make entrepreneurs like Sayegh salivate and quickly move to stake out their place in the burgeoning market of cannabis-laced cuisine.

The young chef, who was studying molecular biology at university before dropping out to pursue his culinary project, said he has seen a huge uptick since starting his business about two years ago.

His services, for now, are exclusively private affairs for people with medical marijuana cards, but he expects that hurdle to come down following the November vote on recreational marijuana.

His meals, at \$300 to \$500 a head, are aimed at taking diners on a unique "immersive" journey and not just getting stoned, Sayegh says.

"I am literally changing people's brain chemistry as the dishes go on," he says enthusiastically, as he displays the tiny syringes he uses to spice up his cooking.

"By the third course you feel it a little, by the fourth a bit more and by the fifth course, you're starting to hit your groove.

"So it's like a symphony," he adds. "I have to make sure that as the come-up is happening, the dishes correspond with that and as it's coming down, the same happens."

'Taking people on a trip'

Sayegh, who is of Jordanian descent, is even experimenting with cannabis-laced stuffed grape leaves, falafel, chickpea beignets and other Middle Eastern dishes.

His cannabis-infused dishes even include "medicated" oysters.

He says his family was appalled when he entered into his new venture, but they have since come around, even sampling, and enjoying, his creations.

Sayegh and others, however, warn that as the appeal of cannabis-laced food continues to increase and Americans grow comfortable with the concept, consumers need to be made aware that getting high on a cannabis meal is not to be taken lightly.

"This is an inexact science in so many ways because so many factors come into play when you cook with cannabis," said Robyn Griggs Lawrence, author of "The Cannabis Kitchen Cookbook."

"It's not like ordering a Jack Daniels and coke.

"There is a whole discovery going on right now as this is kind of reaching out from the Wild Wild West."

Sayegh said he realizes that his meals can pack a wallop and treads carefully when he gets behind the stove to concoct his recipes.

"Cannabis is not like any other ingredient," he said. "You have to be extremely careful because not only does heat play a very important role when cooking with cannabis, but you're also taking people on a trip, literally, and you have a responsibility to make sure it's done right.

"This is not about throwing butter in a pan to get everyone super high."

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