

High hopes: French shops use loophole to sell 'ultralight' weed

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Technically, the fragrant marijuana buds on offer at a new Paris boutique are not meant to be smoked, as the friendly staff and disclaimers remind clients—brewing the herb in hot water is advised, as is adding it to food.

"Smoking is bad for you," a smiling young salesman tells a customer.

But judging by the 45-minute wait to get inside the Cofyshop near the Republique square on a recent afternoon, not to mention the smoking paraphernalia behind the counter, that certainly seems to be the goal.

France is one of Europe's biggest users of cannabis, with an estimated 22 percent of people aged 15 to 34 partaking at least once in 2016, according to the latest data available.

A recent French poll showed 51 percent in favour of limited legalisation, reflecting a growing trend toward more relaxed rules in Europe and the United States.

Despite an easing of penalties under President Emmanuel Macron, however, government officials show no appetite for allowing recreational use.

But Joaquim Lousquy, who opened Cofyshop in early June, and other boutiques across France think they have found a loophole for letting people light up.

Lousquy claims his range of buds have less than 0.2 of THC, the psychotropic compound that gets people high—below the limit set for French growers of marijuana or hemp for industrial uses.

Instead the plants contain cannabidiol, or CBD, a compound which is used for [medical marijuana](#) use and which is authorised in France.

"I use the oil because it's a good pain-killer, and you don't get addicted," an elderly woman said while waiting in line—before the doorman escorted her straight inside.

CBD oil had sold out earlier in the day, so most clients were choosing among three or four different strains of potent-smelling weed—the popular Swiss Cheese was priced at 30 euros for a 2.3-gram bag (\$35 for just under one-tenth of an ounce).

'Smell that!'

Unlike the coffeeshops in marijuana-friendly Amsterdam, no coffee is served and no smoking is allowed at Cofyshop.

Fans of its "ultralight" buds as well as cannabis resin say they appreciate the calming effects without the heavy buzz of traditional marijuana.

"Smell that, it's fantastic!" said a 37-year-old dentist at a boutique on the hip Rue Oberkampf in Paris, who said he smokes a joint or two every now and then, mainly on the weekends.

He said he liked the CBD products because they give "that little magic buzz from when I would smoke when I was young," since they are not as strong "and have fewer psychotropic effects".

Bechir Bouderbala of the cannabis advocacy group NORML said the

market was also benefiting from "the growth of the 'well-being' industry, with higher quality products coming from Switzerland".

But despite the claim the sales are legal, an official in France's anti-drug task force Mildeca said only the seeds and fibres of marijuana plants can be legally sold—not the flowers, regardless of the purported levels of THC.

And no police officer would be able to tell if a person smoking a zero-THC joint wasn't getting high on traditional weed.

'Laws a bit hazy'

Yet even Health Minister Agnes Buzyn admitted on Sunday that "the laws regarding this 0.2 percent can be a bit hazy".

Paris prosecutors have opened an inquiry into Cofyshop, whose sales are cash-only.

It is not the first time Lousquy, the store's owner and a serial entrepreneur, has courted controversy.

In February he opened a Paris "brothel" of silicone dolls, drawing the ire of women's groups and some local lawmakers who accused him of encouraging rape, though police investigated and found no grounds to shut it down.

The surge of CBD boutiques comes as calls for legalisation gain ground, with Canadian lawmakers voting this week to allow marijuana use, which would make it the first G7 nation to do so.

In January, Macron's government also announced it would scrap potential prison sentences and heavy fines in favour of on-the-spot

penalties of 150 to 200 euros.

But officials have said they will clarify French laws.

Within a few months, Buzyn said of Cofyshop, "I think they will have been shut down."

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