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Marijuana America

From California to downtown Detroit, there's a green revolution sweeping across the nation — and it's changing the weed business forever

By **Mark Binelli**

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If you spend enough time up in the Emerald Triangle — an area in Northern California comprising the adjoining counties of Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity — you might notice a few things. There's the crab fisherman selling you fresh crabs from his boat with a lit joint hanging from his mouth. There's the jingle on the local radio station with chorus "Going to jail sucks!" (It's an ad for a bail-bond agency, which runs right after the harvest season, you might notice people standing by the side of the road with cardboard signs that read "Looking For Work", or signs simply depicting a hand-drawn pair of scissors. You might notice that locals call hundred-dollar bills "Humboldt twenties" and complain about how expensive everything is, or their use of the verb formation "getting flown," meaning one's property has been buzzed by a DEA helicopter (e.g., "We got flown a bunch of times this summer, so we knew a bust was coming") some point, your cellphone will probably stop working, and you might notice how the two-lane road darkens as it slices into a canyon of redwoods, and how your car shrinks too, pattering at the foot of the giant, primeval forest, and how that Bigfoot-themed souvenir shop several miles back is starting to seem like a beacon of civilization. As you keep going, eventually, somewhere deep in the mountains, you will arrive at Vic Tobias' place.

Tobias is a marijuana grower, and he is having a very long day. His waterlines froze, broke, he's not sure which, but that has meant no running water at his house for the couple of days. This coincided, as luck would have it, with out-of-town visitors — but looking to be introduced to other local growers with weight to unload. Tobias has been scrambling to set up the meets, a delicate process in a part of the country where new faces are not generally greeted with small-town hospitality, where it's considered sufficient (as one grower tells me) to give your real name to the pizza-delivery guy. Most urgently, though, Tobias has 45 marijuana plants in full bloom that need to be harvested by tomorrow morning if he wants to move his product on schedule. It's close to midnight, and he's been up since dawn.

In years past, work in this part of the country meant either logging or fishing, though with the depletion of natural resources, neither industry has been much of a going concern for years. Countercultural types began drifting up here from the Bay Area in the late Sixties, drawn not only by the spectacular landscape but by its remoteness. Which, of course, lent itself to the creation of a new local source of income: growing pot. In Tobias' succinct but essentially accurate historical telling, "Hippies went to India, smuggled out seeds up their asses and came here." It was really more often Afghanistan, but the point is the same. From an origin story as humble as that of Hollywood (Cecil B. DeMille filming his first feature in a horse barn) or Silicon Valley (Steve Jobs inventing the personal computer in his garage), a massive, quintessentially Californian industry was born.

Thanks to the ambiguous wording of Proposition 215, the 1996 ballot initiative that allows for the possession and cultivation (but not the distribution or sale) of medical marijuana in California, the weed business has expanded exponentially over the past decade. Most of the medical pot in California is sold through dispensaries: Some, in

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cities like Oakland, are massive places that see hundreds, even thousands, of patients every day, whereas in Los Angeles, storefront pot clubs — up to 1,000 of them by some estimates — have crept into mini-malls and commercial strips all across the city. This has so embarrassed the L.A. City Council that, in January, it passed an ordinance that could slash the number of shops to 70. All told, the state's annual marijuana crop is estimated by some to be worth about \$14 billion, "dwarfing," in the words of a recent Associated Press story, "any other sector of the state's agricultural economy."

When California voters passed Prop 215, it seemed like typical behavior from the people who brought us Scientology and the career of Gary Busey. But now, as the economy has cratered and millions of Americans have found themselves forced to rethink their livelihoods, there's a growing feeling that the country can no longer afford its longstanding prohibition on marijuana — a sense, for the first time since the Seventies, that pot could soon be decriminalized in many states, or even made fully legal. Fourteen states have already approved medical marijuana, and 14 others have some form of marijuana legislation pending. And that doesn't include Massachusetts, which last year effectively decriminalized pot for recreational use, making possession of up to an ounce punishable by a \$100 ticket. On the national level, a Harvard economist has estimated that legalizing pot could save the government \$13 billion annually in prohibition costs (including cops and prisons) and raise \$7 billion in annual revenues if marijuana is taxed — a potent argument at a time when local municipalities are being forced to slash services and cut public-sector jobs. "In past years, people have interpreted legalization to mean liberalization — to mean condoning marijuana and letting it get out of control," notes Ethan Nadelmann, the founder of the Drug Policy Alliance Network, a nonprofit group devoted to ending the War on Drugs. "Now, more and more, people are interpreting it as taxation and regulation."

This is why I have come to the Emerald Triangle: to witness, firsthand, this singular, transformative moment in what's been, for so long, an underground culture, one that became both refuge and perfect fit for an oddball combination of righteous outlaws and straight-up hustlers, conscientious dropouts and scary guys with guns, all of whom are now having to adapt their unique skill sets to an ever-shifting legal and economic landscape. The bulk of the marijuana cultivation in California is done by growers like Vic Tobias and his neighbors; a recent study commissioned by Mendocino County had pot accounting for two-thirds of the local economy. Over the past year, in fact, the so-called "green rush" has created such a spike in the number of California pot growers that there has been a negative impact — a glut of product. A recent article in the local *Anderson Valley Advertiser* observes that "supply is way up, prices way down, even if you can find a buyer, and a kind of desperation is rippling through the north hill country of Mendocino County as land and pot partners turn on each other and ruthless bands of home invaders cruise the mud dirt roads from Branscomb to Spy Rock to Alderpoint and points between."

I meet Tobias in the town closest to where he lives, which is still about a 45-minute drive for him, mostly down winding switchbacks. (Tobias' name has been changed to protect his identity.) "The thing you have to understand about up here is, everyone has a hand in the game — everyone," Tobias tells me as we stroll along a small-town main street. "See that kid over there?" He nods at a guy in his 20s in a baseball cap. "I guarantee he's growing. See that old lady who looks like a grandma?" He shifts his gaze to a sweet-looking gray-haired woman wearing a red Christmas sweater and cooing over a baby. "She's either a trimmer, or she's got people working her land for her. Up here, everyone's playing the law of averages: Ninety percent grow, one percent get busted."

Tobias has been growing weed since the mid-Nineties. He's in his late 30s, and today he's wearing muddy boots and a one-piece Carhartt coverall. At first, when he was living elsewhere on the West Coast, the pot growing was mostly for himself, a hobby, like home-brewing beer. He had a day job in an office, and he sold any weed he had left over on the side. But he discovered he had a green thumb, and he eventually moved to the Emerald Triangle to turn his hobby into a career.

He makes a decent but not extravagant living, one that places him somewhere in the middle of the Triangle's growers — a bigger fish than the single mom who keeps a dozen or so plants in her backyard for some extra cash, but not in the same league as the major players, who often have ties to some form of organized crime and grow on a massive scale. (The biggest grow in recent memory was uncovered in 2007, when authorities in Humboldt County discovered an astonishing 135,000 plants in a remote section of forest owned by a private timber company. No arrests were made, but authorities said evidence on the scene pointed to Mexican drug cartels.)

A hardworking grower with more modest aims, though, can still run a four-season operation in the Triangle — one outdoor season in the summer and three hydroponic indoor seasons. Tobias' current indoor grow, about 200 plants, is in a long, windowless shed on his property that's divided into two rooms, one dark and one lit, alternating at 12-hour intervals. The 45 plants being harvested tonight should yield about five pounds of weed, which could fetch about \$20,000.

When we enter the grow from outside, the light is initially blinding. The room is packed tight with marijuana plants of varying heights. The tallest are chest high. Each plant has its own little black bucket, fed by snaking tubes that lead back to four plastic barrels filled with nutrient solution. Banks of grow lights, covered with silver shades, hang from the low ceiling like the canopied lamps over a pool table; four fans on the wall slowly move back and forth to cool the space. The walls are white and reflective, making it very bright and, with all the visible tubes and wires, like the set of a science-fiction movie. A lower-end grow tends to evoke a spaceship from an Ed Wood production. Tobias', though, is pure Kubrick — a 1960s vision of a gleaming, sterile future.

The plants are leafy and pungent, filling the room with a hothouse musk. The largest buds, fist-size footballs, form closest to the lights, making the stalks top-heavy; a gridded net of string prevents them from falling over. Tobias, slipping on a pair of sunglasses, slides beneath the netting and begins to cut the plants ready to be harvested, using a pair of clippers at the base and gingerly maneuvering the tops between the string. He wants to avoid touching the buds, if possible, particularly the hairlike trichomes (or "crystals"), which contain most of the plant's THC (tetrahydrocannabinol, the intoxicating substance in cannabis). "That's a sales tactic," he says. "Never touched by human hands." Now, one by one, he passes the stalks out to me. I balance as many as possible in a plastic tub, my hands and clothes quickly covered with sticky resin.

After filling tubs with two dozen plants, we carry them out to Tobias' truck. The night sky is clear and filled with stars. "There's Orion's Belt — see it?" he says, pointing out the constellation. Then we drive to another house on his property. This one looks long-abandoned. Old comforters cover the windows in lieu of curtains. Inside, there's a dim light in the kitchen, and the jam band Oysterhead are playing on an iPod hooked up to a boombox. Tobias' partner is toiling over a tabletop jack press, which he is using to make bricks of hash. Occasionally, he'll pause to take a hit of a joint (Mendocino Beauty crossed with Willie Nelson).

We carry the weed into another room, where several wires stretch from wall to wall, as high as clotheslines. Using clippers, we cut the plants into smaller branches, then hang them upside down from the wires, where they'll dry for a few days, at which point Tobias will hire a team of trimmers — who are paid \$225 a pound — to cultivate the valuable buds. Trimming is tedious, difficult work, but potentially lucrative: A good trimmer can do a couple of pounds in a day, though many take some of their payment in weed. To make their job easier, tonight we clip off as many of the large pot leaves as possible. This is called "big leafing." After 20 minutes or so, the red-tile floor is covered with a thick green-and-yellow carpet. When we're finished, Tobias grabs a broom and methodically cleans up the leaves, like a barber sweeping hair.

Once the weed is ready for the market, Tobias will sell it to a middleman, who will, in turn, transport it to a larger city and find another buyer — either a medical-marijuana dispensary or a street dealer. Like many an ambitious small-businessman, Tobias is pretty much never not working. His career choice is one that's stressful, labor-intensive and, obviously, very high-risk. There are the typical farmer's worries of pulling off your crop, the constant pressure of getting busted and the danger, from the other direction, of robbery, home invasions, biker gangs. Since Tobias has been out here, he's had terrible years where he's lost almost everything, been reduced to near-homelessness — certain strains died, other patches had to be torn up to avoid law enforcement.

And now, like workers in just about every other sector, from auto manufacturing to big-box retail, Tobias is being forced to re-examine his place in the market. In the case of marijuana, this upset is not being caused by new technology, globalization or recession, but by a change in public consciousness. Like other once-divisive social issues — gays in the military, to take the most recent example — the specter of reefer madness seems to have lost its effectiveness as a political wedging tool. Robert Mikos, a Vanderbilt University law professor who has written extensively about the rights of states to defy the federal ban on marijuana, says the ongoing medical-marijuana experiments in California and elsewhere have opened the door for further decriminalization. It's allowed people "to see that all of the horrible things that the Clinton and Bush administrations predicted did not come to pass," says Mikos. "The world did not come to an end."

Nadelmann, of the Drug Policy Alliance, agrees, noting he's recently been seeing "the most dramatic polling results in all of my years working on this stuff."

The legalization fight has acquired a new urgency in recent months thanks to the economy. In the past, of course, there were plenty of moral arguments to be made for drug-policy reform — from the money wasted on prohibition to the lives ruined by absurd prison sentences to the simple hypocrisy of banning a substance no more harmful than alcohol, tobacco or many prescription drugs. But compared to issues like civil rights or unjust foreign wars, protesting for the right to get high always felt, frankly, frivolous; even to a liberal pot smoker, listening to some dude from NORML go on about how the "Don't Tread On Me" flag and the Gutenberg Bible and Abe Lincoln's stovepipe hat were *all made of hemp* can be just as annoying as a sobriety lecture from Bill O'Reilly. Mikos didn't think the general public was onboard with "wholesale recreational legalization" — until this past year. "What pushed it over the top," he says, "was the realization that 'Hey, we could make a lot of money off this.'"

The economic collapse, in starkest particulars, has highlighted the fact that shifting marijuana from black market to organic farmers' market could be a boon to ravaged state economies. True, President Obama, in touting his new green economy, has thus far avoided mentioning this other, not-quite-so-new green economy. But some politicians are beginning to. California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced last year that "it's time for a debate" about legalizing pot, just before it was estimated that decriminalization could net California \$1.4 billion in annual revenue. (Schwarzenegger is unlike most other governors in that not only has he smoked weed with Tommy Chong, but when asked about it by an ambushing paparazzi with a video camera, he beamed and nearly shouted, "We always had a good time!") Another high-profile proponent of legalization also happens to be a Republican: former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson, a popular figure in the libertarian/Ron Paul wing of the party who is considering a presidential run in 2012. "Ninety percent of our drug problem is prohibition-related, not use-related," Johnson insists. "As someone who has smoked pot and consumed alcohol — and neither of them do I use today, I haven't had a drink in 22 years — I think people are waking up to the fact that when it comes to marijuana and alcohol, you can draw some very real correlations. The issue right now, nationally, is at a tipping point."

This fall, California activists will be taking the fight to the next level, having gathered 700,000 signatures for a November ballot initiative that would fully legalize pot. Tom Ammiano, a state assemblyman from San Francisco who got his start in politics working as a gay-rights activist — he portrays himself in the 2008 Gus Van Sant film *Milk* — has also reintroduced his own legalization bill in the state legislature. "The temperature has changed a lot in Sacramento over the past year," Ammiano says. "If we had a vote in the hallway, it would pass right away. You hear all these Republicans saying, 'Yeah! Tax that shit! I smoke it! Well, why don't you smoke some right now and vote for the bill?'"

Ammiano chuckles, then continues, "Obviously, the issue has become seductive in a way that perhaps it had not been before. People see their schools closing, they see furlough days and reduced health care, and then they see this \$14 billion industry that's untaxed and unregulated. So now, with dear old capitalism involved, everything is coming together in a perfect storm. In the Seventies, we had a term called 'harmonic convergence.' I mentioned this to someone in their 20s, and they said, 'Dude, what is that?' It means all the stars are aligned. It's starting to feel inevitable."

The complicating factor is a legal landscape that has become increasingly surreal. Pot remains illegal on a federal level, yet in certain states, it's legal to consume with a prescription while remaining illegal to grow. In California, this means growers and dispensary owners, who are not supposed to be earning profits or even selling marijuana, continue to operate in a legal gray zone. Meanwhile, legitimate patients can possess marijuana, but they often have no legal way to obtain it.

Beau Kilmer, the co-director of RAND's Drug Policy Research Center, cautions that even if pot is fully legalized in California this year, "it's really hard to project what might happen." The ballot initiative would essentially give local governments the kind of autonomy extended to wet/dry counties. "You could see some counties set up Amsterdam-type coffee shops," Kilmer explains, "and you could see others setting specific policies regarding regulation and taxation." Other questions also naturally arise. If California legalizes pot and it works financially as well as promised, will other states rush to snatch their own piece of the sin tax, in the same way that some form of casino gambling has appeared in much of the country? How much would the price of pot fall as a legal commodity? How much should it be taxed? If the tax is too high, would the

marijuana black market continue to flourish? Why would that black market — particularly the more organized gangs and biker clubs that have traditionally earned steady profits from the pot trade — give up this cash crop so easily to some yuppie dispensary owner? Forget the Hells Angels and the Mafia: Will Philip Morris or Pfizer swoop in and simply take the whole game over?

And what will happen to growers like Tobias? At this point, he thinks he'd be able to adapt to the new laws, but the increased competition could also hurt his bottom line. One of Tobias' friends, another longtime grower, tells me angrily, "We're the people who were out here taking all the risks, and now we're going to be squeezed out!"

Still, the financial success of growers in the Emerald Triangle, however niche, is a prototypically American one, a classic story of can-do frontier spirit that embodies entrepreneurship in the purest, market-capitalist sense of the term. And at a time of deep economic uncertainty, this sort of success might be something to pay attention to. Whereas cheap, mass-produced weed from Mexico and South America once dominated the U.S. market, about half of the marijuana sold is now high-quality domestic product. Partly, this has to do with the tightening of the border after 9/11, making it more and more difficult to smuggle large quantities of pot. But, as *The Washington Post* pointed out last year, the homegrown bud often comes from "small-scale operators who painstakingly tend greenhouses and indoor gardens to produce the more potent, and expensive, product that consumers now demand." (THC levels of Mexican weed, while improving, hover around seven percent, whereas high-end weed in Northern California can reach THC levels of 20 percent.)

This is kind of amazing, if you think about it: a triumph of quality over mass-produced crap — and we're not the ones making the crap! Marijuana farming is exactly the sort of semiskilled, labor-intensive work that, in any other (legal) industry, would have long ago been outsourced to Mexico. But its very illegality has made growing weed NAFTA-proof. At a time when unemployment hovers around the double digits, when heavy industry and the family farm have been gone so long that to evoke either verges on Rockwell-esque nostalgia, when (we've all said it) America no longer even makes anything anymore — well, we do still produce extremely high-quality weed. And we're very, very good at it.

On a frigid evening in January, in a bland suburban office park in Southfield, Michigan, just outside Detroit, about 25 students begin filing into an adult-education class. Three of the students — brothers Eric and Jerry Boyajian and their friend Jon Goodwin — drove three hours from Benton Harbor, a rural town on the opposite side of the state. "First time I've ever wanted to sit in the front of a classroom," jokes Goodwin as he settles into a chair at one of the room's long tables. A skinny 37-year-old wearing a gray T-shirt over a long-sleeve thermal undershirt, Goodwin is a plumber by trade. The Boyajians own a watch-repair shop. All three have seen their business drop, along with the fortunes of the rest of Benton Harbor: Two local stores, a sign shop and an old Italian restaurant, have closed in the past month alone. Jerry Boyajian, who is 39, a big guy wearing a blue knit cap with a Ford logo, pulls me aside and, lowering his voice, says, "We've never done anything like this before. But the economy's so bad, I'm making about half of what I used to make. So we started thinking, 'How can we get involved in this thing?'"

"This thing" is growing and distributing pot, which can be done legally in Michigan now, after 63 percent of voters passed a medical-marijuana law in 2008, allowing a patient with a valid doctor's recommendation to grow their own marijuana — up to 12 plants. Alternately, a patient can obtain their "medicine" from a licensed caregiver, also registered with the state, who can grow for themselves and up to five patients. The state of Michigan has been inundated with applications for medical-marijuana cards: Since April 2009, there have been about 14,000 requests, or about 75 per day. With Michigan's unemployment rate still the highest in the country at nearly 15 percent — in Detroit proper, some have put the number at a staggering 50 percent — many residents see pot farming as one of the few growth industries in an otherwise ravaged state economy.

Which is where the Med Grow Cannabis College comes in. According to Med Grow's website, it's "the first Michigan-based medical-marijuana trade school." Med Grow is modeled after the wildly successful Oaksterdam University in Oakland, California; the curriculum of the six-week, \$475 program includes Cooking and Concentrates and Cannabis History, with lecturers ranging from doctors and attorneys to a horticulture professor named Nature. The only required reading is Cervantes — Jorge, not Miguel de, author of *Marijuana Horticulture: The Indoor/Outdoor Medical Grower's Bible*. Since opening last September, Med Grow has been averaging 100 students each month.

Med Grow was founded by Nick Tennant, a slight, baby-faced 24-year-old in a dress shirt and argyle sweater who sits at a mostly bare desk; practically swallowed by his own executive chair, he looks like a kid playing Captain Kirk in his dad's office. Tennant grew up solidly middle-class. His father works for General Motors, and his mother handles foreign patents for an intellectual-property firm. He started his first business — an auto-detailing service — when he was just out of high school. "I had a lot of automotive dealerships that were clients and they couldn't afford the service anymore — margins were getting thinner, stuff like that," Tennant says. "I was fighting for every dollar. So I knew I wanted to get into an emerging industry, something that would be more viable."

Though he says he was never a big pot smoker, Tennant looked at the Oaksterdam model and saw an opportunity. "It's better for society to stimulate micro-economies of scale," he says. "You give 10,000 people the opportunity to make \$50,000 a year, rather than giving 10 people the opportunity to make \$10 million a year."

Similar entrepreneurial endeavors have been sprouting up in medical-marijuana states all across the country, from "urban gardening" stores to ad-packed grow magazines like *The Midwest Cultivator*. In December, Ganja Gourmet, the self-described "first gourmet marijuana restaurant" in the U.S., where you can order things like an \$89 cannabis pizza, opened in Denver; the ski town of Breckenridge, Colorado, has gone a step further, hoping to attract tourists by voting last November to legalize possession of up to an ounce of weed.

State-level medical-marijuana laws can be deeply puzzling to the average observer. Under a legal concept called "prohibited commandeering," the federal government cannot compel a state to enforce federal laws. According to Mikos, the Vanderbilt professor, "a state could basically say, 'If you want machine guns, or to obtain partial-birth abortions, or get a physician's help in committing suicide, or use cocaine or heroin, go ahead — we're not going to stop you.'" The state couldn't provide any of those services, or give its citizens any sort of financial subsidy to obtain such services — meaning that, in the case of medical marijuana, states can't grow their own weed on public farms or distribute it in a special line at the DMV. "But," Mikos continues, "a state can remain very passive and look the other way while someone is violating federal law. They just can't stop the DEA or any other federal officials from enforcing that law. That's the tricky thing. Without the cooperation of the states, the DEA has to conduct raids on their own. And they just don't have that many agents. There are fewer than 5,000 nationwide, and they have to handle all kinds of drugs, not just marijuana."

Even for supporters of legalization, there can be a grating intellectual dishonesty to the medical-marijuana argument. Very few people would deprive cancer or AIDS patients from using pot for medicinal purposes. But everyone knows that the overwhelming majority of people in California getting medical-marijuana recommendations are using pot as "medicine" the same way characters in John Cheever stories used three extra-dry martinis on the 6:15 bar car as "medicine." A mini-industry of doctors who specialize in writing medical-marijuana recommendations has popped up; after paying a flat fee, usually in the ballpark of \$200, any number of vague "ailments" (stress, insomnia, a bum knee) will qualify you for a medical-marijuana card, good for one year. (For a state with such a health-obsessed reputation as California, I've never met so many perfectly fit-looking people in their 20s and 30s complaining about some sort of chronic back pain or nausea.)

Tactically, though, the medical-marijuana push has proved a brilliant move by those seeking to reform the nation's drug laws. "Medical marijuana has transformed the image of the marijuana user from a 17-year-old with blond dreadlocks to a middle-aged person with a real disease," argues Nadelmann of the Drug Policy Alliance. "It meant that people would talk seriously about the issue rather than laugh about pot as a gateway drug. It really helped transform the dialogue."

By 6 p.m., the Med Grow classroom is beginning to fill up. The students are a demographic hodgepodge, including a young black construction worker from Detroit taking notes in a composition book; a white kid in his 20s with a goatee and a backward baseball cap; a ripped guy with a shaved head and a rattlesnake tattoo on his forearm who looks like an ex-Marine; and a mild-mannered 57-year-old with round glasses and thinning gray hair who decided to enroll after hearing about the medical-marijuana business on NPR.

Tonight's lecturer, horticulturist Nathan Greene, has shoulder-length hair and a cocky smile. Truth be told, some of his growing advice sounds an awful lot like that of an illegal-drug dealer. He mentions how flushing a plant with water can raise the final

weight of the product by 50 percent, how "here in Detroit, all anyone wants is Kush or Purple." He also recommends renting a commercial facility for growing, one that might normally be drawing a fair amount of power anyway, so the high electric bill won't raise any red flags. "Even though you're running a legal operation," he adds quickly, "you don't necessarily want to show up on anyone's radar." Then he tells a story about finding his own commercial grow space, one with no chance of walk-in traffic or need for meter-readers: "I told the real estate agent I had a company developing a top-secret widget. That's all I said. Guy said, 'What is it?' I said, 'It's fucking top secret!'"

Emerald Triangle growers often use diesel generators to stay off the power grid. But another option is simply stealing power. "Half of Detroit is stole," a local grower tells me with a cackle. "I had a buddy worked at Detroit Edison who had to go around looking for people stealing power. He'd roll up to places and have people put a gun to his head and say, 'You're not turning my power off. Get back in your truck.'"

One afternoon in Detroit, I visit John Sinclair, the poet and former manager of the MC5, and a longtime pot activist. Sinclair was famously busted in 1969 for possession of two joints and sentenced to 10 years in prison. By 1971, Sinclair was still doing time, so his supporters organized a massive "Ten for Two" rally in Ann Arbor, featuring John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Stevie Wonder and Allen Ginsberg. "In court, we'd been arguing that marijuana was not a narcotic, and that my sentence was cruel and unusual punishment," Sinclair, now 68, tells me. "Once the concert happened, though, the people in charge went, 'What the fuck? What are we doing? The Beatles are coming here for *this* guy?' I was out three days later."

Sinclair and Holice P. Wood, his outspoken co-manager, plan to open the first pot collective in Detroit. It will be called Trans-Love Energies, named for the Detroit commune co-founded by Sinclair in the Sixties. "Legalizing pot would be a viable way to turn this city around," says Wood. "Detroit is a place where even the people who have a real job also have a hustle going. And now most people have lost their real jobs." Wood, who notes that "there's no hope in hell of another industry coming here anytime soon," plans to make a detailed presentation to the Detroit City Council. He's confident that he will receive a warm reception. "The last City Council?" he says. "I probably smoked weed with half of them."

While states like Michigan continue to sort out the parameters of their changing laws, residents and politicians alike will certainly look west, to California's 14-year medical-marijuana experiment, for some sense of precedent — or, in the case of Los Angeles, as a cautionary tale. Crazy, there's no official count of the number of dispensaries in Los Angeles. But their number has exploded from 186 in 2007, when the City Council — which had spent years avoiding the issue altogether — placed an ineffective moratorium on new dispensaries, to somewhere between 800 and 1,000. Most of them opened in the past 12 months.

Despite the excesses, experiencing certain sides of the L.A. dispensary-pot boom up close feels, most of all, civilized. One of the best arguments for proponents of an enlightened drug policy has been the success of the Farmacy, a minichain of L.A. dispensaries started by JoAnna LaForce. A licensed pharmacist who has worked extensively in hospices and with the elderly, LaForce makes her clubs feel more like upscale health-food stores than rundown head shops. The Venice location is bright and sunny and wide-open to the public, with Ella Fitzgerald playing on the sound system and much of the space taken up by things like Chinese herbal teas, organic toothpaste and knit Himalayan purses. If you present your cannabis card to one of the people working the main counter, they'll hand you a laminated menu, listing strains like Sour Goat and Skywalker OG, and answer any questions about effects. Prices range from \$25 to \$85 for an eighth of an ounce. There is also a wide variety of cannabis-infused edibles, including six types of gelato, a tub of pesto spread (\$65), an "enhanced" peppermint patty (\$15) and, for the yuppie stoner who has everything, a fancy bottle of olive oil (\$199).

A few blocks down trendy Abbot Kinney Boulevard from the Farmacy, a newer dispensary, 99 High Art Collective, has more the feel of a hippie arts and community space. The front of the building is a gallery focusing on "artists with higher states of consciousness" — when I visit, it's a show featuring the work of a Peruvian artist who paints psychedelic jungle scenes and parakeets. (Admittedly, this exhibit is a strong argument for keeping pot completely illegal.) They also host "high yoga" classes and Friday-night "Get Happier Hours" with "medicated hors d'oeuvres." Co-owner Yvonne DeLaRosa is a pretty, dark-haired actress wearing a jewel-encrusted peace symbol over a low-cut floral chemise; she co-starred in a short-lived Fox sitcom called *Señor White*, playing, in her words, "the lovely Mexican *señorita* who runs Señor White's business and

pulls his heartstrings." (She has also appeared on *Weeds*.) When she's working at the store, she generally goes by the name "99." "It means 'paradise of the gods' — in many cultures, it's the highest spiritual number," she tells me, before adding, "It's also the legal limit in Humboldt, as far as the number of plants you can grow." DeLaRosa's business partners include her husband, Sam, whose ancestor was Samuel Huntington, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Back up north, a grower and pot activist named Tim Blake is also laying the groundwork for a more legal future. One of the ventures he's spearheading is a group called the Mendocino Farmers Collective, a cooperative of local growers that would create a sustainable, certified-organic marijuana-growing community, one concerned with the environmental ramifications of their agricultural operations — basically, the Whole Foods of the weed industry. Water scarcity, for example, is a big issue throughout California, and illegal growers are sometimes caught stealing water from public rivers like the Eel; likewise, massive indoor grows leave a huge carbon footprint. Blake thinks the small pot farmer will survive, and thrive, in a legal world in the way microbrews have found a niche in a Budweiser-dominated market — by targeting elite connoisseurs.

With the current trendiness of the Slow Food movement and the fetishization of everyone from artisanal butchers to "rock-star farmers," it's not surprising that Blake and his friends also want to be taken seriously for their craft. "Growers up here?" he tells me. "We're the black sheep of our families. The guys who've never been able to be honored like the wine industry. And we're tired of that."

To that end, I visit Blake at Area 101, a 145-acre former campground on Highway 101 in Mendocino County where, on a violently stormy night in December, 700 people showed up to fete the winners of the 2009 Emerald Cup. Like the Cannabis Cup, Amsterdam's infamous Oscars of pot, the Emerald Cup honors the best strains of marijuana of the year. "Six years ago, we were afraid to do it," says Blake. "We thought we'd all get busted." That year, there were fewer than 20 entrants; an 86-year-old man won with a strain of Purple Kush given to him by his son.

Strains of marijuana are generally named by the original breeders, who then sell their "genetics" to growers like Tobias for anywhere from \$5 to \$100 per pack of seeds; a strain that becomes trendy, say by winning the Cannabis Cup, can fetch top dollar on the open market. At this year's Emerald Cup, there are 100 entries, all sampled over a period of only a few weeks by a distinguished panel of eight judges. (To qualify as an Emerald Cup judge, one needs to have had "at least a decade of smoking experience"; this year's crop of judges calculated that they had 330 years total among them.) Each entry is graded on a scale of one to 10 in various categories, including smell, taste, look and "effects"; points awarded for the latter category count, reasonably, as double. "It's a lot more work than one might think," one of the judges, a man who will identify himself only as Fuzzy, tells me. Fuzzy is wearing a vest over a purple T-shirt and knee-high waders; he does not tell me the origins of his nickname, but it most likely involves his cartoon moonshiner's beard. "We talk about the subtle undertones," he says. "The fragrance could be referred to as 'the nose.' The aftertaste might have 'a lingering fruitiness.'"

Blake, who owns Area 101, rules over the scene with an affect both mellow and deeply intense. He has a thin, bony face, slightly weathered, but with a glow — something about him brings to mind an extremely healthy version of Keith Richards. His eyes, dark and sincere, with their tendency to linger too long on your face and their slight disconnect from his smile, give him the borderline messianic vibe of a cult leader. Before he settled in Mendocino County, Blake's résumé included creating a children's television series and an indie rap label, and working on the "virtual reality" special effects for the movie *The Lawnmower Man*. He also served a six-month jail term in the Nineties for growing pot.

Blake leads me through the crowd, weaving past people openly passing around joints and long glass pipes. (The only thing the cops around here care about, one of the organizers tells me, is making sure no one parks too close to the road.) In his office, a small group of friends relaxes on a couch, beneath a painting (on a blanket) of a UFO hovering over some trees. Someone else has fired up a vaporizer, which is making a flatulent, percolating sound. This year's Emerald Cup winner, a soft-spoken, middle-aged guy in a Carhartt cap named Hawaii Dave, sits on a chair near the door, shyly basking in his moment of glory. His winning strain, Cotton Candy Kush — an extremely strong indica (full-body high) strain with a sweet, berry-ish smell and taste — will likely fetch a higher price on the open market once word spreads of his win; past winners have seen their prices jump by as much as \$500 per pound.

Another judge, introducing himself as Swami, is a slight man with a long white beard, wearing a white robe, a knit cap, white tube socks and Birkenstocks. He has a kind smile that's also ever-present, in the manner of a guru who's always having to condescend to regular people's lower planes of consciousness. Swami agrees to walk me through the judging process, first having me examine the trichome crystals on a marijuana bud, using a jeweler's microscope. Then he instructs me to do sense-memory exercises as I smell a pile of ground-up weed on a paper plate: Maybe, he suggests, it reminds me of my mother's kitchen or of someone's stinky armpit? After rolling a joint, but before lighting it, Swami instructs me to do a "dry hit," purely for taste. "It's almost like a mindfulness meditation," he says, "like eating an apple and really tasting every bite."

Fuzzy acknowledges that judging multiple entrants in a single day might bias against slow-acting "creeper" strains — though, he adds, "I discovered that, after trying 18 different entrants in one day, you eventually pierce through the veil. You end up being able to determine effects with a minimal amount. 'OK, this one here is a positive muscle relaxer.' 'This one is bright and electric, more high-energy.'" I would simply add that, after consecutively sampling the three top winners, "piercing the veil" is not the phrase that came to mind.

The dry-hit joint has begun making the rounds. Another judge compliments its "beautiful bouquet."

"I'd say there's some vanilla," she says. "And a hint of Pine-Sol."

As easy as Blake and his friends make it seem, there's a difficulty inherent in dragging an underground culture into the (natural, non-grow-room) light. Back in Detroit, a grower with a more serious criminal background tells me, "What if some kid decides to rob me?" He has about 300 plants growing in an unmarked warehouse building in a blighted light-industrial zone. "Am I willing to kill someone for 200 grand?" he continues, becoming heated. "Some of the people I grew up with, they'd kill someone for 20 grand. Do you see the dilemma I face? I don't want to kill some kid over pot. But what would I do? You steal my shit, I can re-gangsta."

In Los Angeles, many of the newer dispensaries are shadier, fly-by-night operations that are worlds apart from the boutique clubs in Venice. The San Fernando Valley, in particular, has become a hotbed of hole-in-the-wall dispensaries. They're run by Russians, Israelis, Valley kids in their 20s with seed money from their parents. These places are typically in strip malls, looking like porn shops with their blacked-out windows. Inside, the clubs are often nothing more than small rooms with a clerk standing behind a counter, or bulletproof glass; "patients" often need to be buzzed in through multiple security cages known as "man-traps." One Valley club raided by police had a full airport metal detector.

Mendocino County Sheriff Tom Allman is also forced to deal with a natural fallout of such a thriving black market: violence. The image of Northern California remains one of hippies from Haight-Ashbury drifting north in the late Sixties and peacefully growing weed. But in fact, as one former trimmer tells me, "It's hippies with guns." Allman tells me that he has five unsolved homicides dating back from the past few years. The day before we spoke, his cadaver dogs uncovered the body of 49-year-old Steven Schmidt in a remote marijuana garden. He had been struck repeatedly in the head with a hammer; 62-year-old local resident Phillip Frase has been arrested for the murder. He has pleaded not guilty. "It was a marijuana deal gone bad, no question about it," Allman says.

Adding to the tension is the increased presence of Mexican drug cartels who don't want to give up their extremely lucrative weed business and are finding it easier to smuggle growers across the border than large quantities of marijuana. The cartels have lately become infamous for setting up grows on public land, in remote areas in the many national parks in Northern California. "We're seeing illegals dropped off in the spring with seeds," says Allman. "During summer, food is dropped off to them — they don't come into town to do their shopping — and at the end of the year, after the harvest, they're paid forty or fifty thousand dollars." Most of the local growers I spoke to sounded nervous (often with more than a touch of jingoism) when asked about the cartels, who tend to be heavily armed and have been known to booby-trap their grows. "The woods up here are dangerous — there are mountain lions, Mexicans," one grower warned me, adding, "and the Mexicans will *kill* you."

Even if everything goes off perfectly for a grower in the Emerald Triangle — if their crop produces good weight, if their trimmers don't abuse their buds, if they're not arrested during a fluke raid or jacked along the way by bad guys with guns — at that point, they still have to deal with the final but most crucial problem: making the sale. In California,

the decidedly mixed signals regarding cultivation and distribution hit growers — who should be profiting from the pot boom, if anyone does — the hardest; getting the weed across state lines, or even down to San Francisco or Los Angeles, can be an exceedingly dangerous business. The current pot glut has only compounded the problem. "You used to be able to sell smaller amounts for more money," Vic Tobias tells me. But now, small growers are often forced into doing business with larger distributors — middlemen who have the means to transport the weed to larger cities where they have sales connections, and who have the purchasing power to push prices down. "It's like America — just like Walmart," Tobias says, shaking his head with disgust. "It's all about big corporations buying huge bulk for cheap. And the little guy gets screwed."

Still, Tobias, who has about 10 pounds of weed that is ready to be sold, knows a distributor who can move a bunch of weed out of Northern California. But he won't move less than 50 pounds. So Tobias has agreed to help the distributor put together enough weight for a shipment. Tobias is confident that they'll be able to pick up the weed for a steal, thanks to the current oversupply. "It's really a buyer's market now," he tells me one afternoon, as we drive along a windy mountain road, the heat in his truck buffeting us at full blast. "That," he continues, "and Christmas is coming up, so people want cash to buy presents. What are you gonna do: Leave a three-pound bag of weed under the tree for your kids?" Just then, he spots an unfamiliar car driving behind him. "Who's this guy?" he asks, slowing down to let the car pass. The car stays behind him. Finally, Tobias spots an open patch of shoulder and pulls over. The car drives past. He watches it suspiciously. "Probably nothing," he says. "But you never know."

Making the rounds with Tobias, I hear lots of stories. I meet a grower who, describing her bust, proudly notes that the cops were foolish enough to bring standard-size clippers. (When they saw the size of her plants, they needed to go back and get a chainsaw.) I meet growers who talk to their plants, and I meet a grower who says he jacks off into his patch — the plants are all female, after all, and isn't a fat bud basically the plant going (this grower says), *OK, I'm a bitch, I'm gonna spread my legs here, hope I get fucked?* I hear a story about someone's buddy, a dealer in L.A., who fronted \$5,000 worth of weed to one of the bestselling rappers of all time, and how that rapper was busted by the police while on tour, and how, when the dealer called the rapper and asked for his money, the rapper replied, "You need to talk to the po-lice."

Back at Tobias' place, he and the distributor go through their take. Garbage bags of weed are piled in one corner of a sunny day room, close to 30 pounds; thick stacks of twenties are taped up inside plastic turkey bags. (According to local lore, Reynolds Wrap noticed an unusual spike in the sale of plastic turkey bags in Humboldt County and was planning to stage some sort of local celebration until they realized the bags were being used to pack and transport marijuana.) "I knocked the last guy down a couple of points," the distributor says, meaning he reduced the per-pound fee by \$200. On a large flatscreen television, CNN is on mute — entirely coincidentally, it's a special about the marijuana industry. Anderson Cooper is standing inside some kind of drug tunnel in Mexico. The distributor glances idly at the screen, watches it for a moment somewhat disinterestedly, then goes back to counting his money. There's lots of hand sanitizer around because of the amount of money being handled. One of the several prepaid phones sitting around rings. (Everyone's prepaid looks the same, so they occasionally get mixed up, and people say things like, "Where's my blue phone?") Tobias answers and says, "Yeah, I need you to bring over that thing we were talking about."

It's a frantic couple of days, but in the end, Tobias and his connection end up getting most of the weed for a great price — an average of \$2,000 a pound. Some comes from very small growers, just a pound or two; others from larger operators. One of the sellers laughs about all the talk of "medicine" in the dispensary world. Showing off his massive grow, he says with a grin, "As you can see, I'm a very sick fucker."

Tobias doesn't seem relaxed, though. He needs to check his "genny shed" — one of his diesel generators is either out of fuel or dead — and then there's the next five pounds to dry and process. We take a break to meet his girlfriend at a bar; she used to have her own grow in a remote spot several miles away. She doesn't want to talk to me about it, though. Nor does she think much of Prop 215 or the November ballot initiative. "It's all cool and almost legal," she mutters skeptically, taking a sip of her IPA, "until it's not."

In 1999, when Gary Johnson was still governor of New Mexico, he spent some time examining drug-policy reports, found the evidence for decriminalization compelling and publicly announced his support for legalization — and immediately saw his approval rating plunge from 58 percent to 28 percent, almost overnight.

"I wasn't blind — I knew that was going to happen," Johnson says today. "But actually having it happen was something else." Rather than backtrack or waffle, Johnson took a novel tack: He continued to speak out on the subject. "I vowed to myself to make it to every nook and cranny in New Mexico to explain to people what I was talking about," he says. "And I ended up leaving office with a 58 percent approval rating. I really see this issue as one of education." Later, he adds, "There is one segment of the population that is 100 percent against legalizing pot. And that's elected officials. What I've been telling anyone who'll listen is that legalization is a good issue. By good issue, I mean it makes sense. I really believe that, literally, one day all politicians are going to go to bed and get up the next morning and say, 'Yeah, OK.' I always say it's a litmus test for having a brain."

Ethan Nadelmann feels confident about the changes in the air. "The first thing we're going to see is a continued proliferation of tax-and-regulate and decriminalization bills around the country," he predicts. "And the medical-marijuana stuff is going to continue. We're getting close in Illinois, Connecticut, New York. The third thing is, ballot initiatives will begin to pop up. If Oaksterdam" — the legalization ballot initiative in California, largely funded by Oaksterdam founder Richard Lee — "does not win in 2010, there's a commitment to come back four years later. Any state where legalization polling is above 50 percent, you'll start seeing initiatives. And eventually, some of those will win."

There are legitimate concerns about the social ramifications of such a major policy shift — a reduction in social stigma and street price, for instance, might spur a significant increase in usage. Others express principled reservations about certain of the claims being pushed by proponents of legalization, wondering whether the economic boon has been overhyped. "There are a lot of numbers being thrown around out there based on some very shaky assumptions," cautions Beau Kilmer, the RAND researcher. "We don't really know what will happen to prices after legalization, and it's unclear what the appropriate tax rate would be."

Of course, in a more positive economic telling, there would be numerous other new revenue streams, beyond just the sale of marijuana itself. The Emerald Triangle could market pot tourism, much as Napa Valley does with its wineries. And naturally, there will also be elaborate new types of vaporizers and pipes and rolling papers to serve the growing market. Britain's GW Pharmaceuticals, for instance, has been developing an asthma-type inhaler to regulate the exact amount of medical marijuana one might inhale. (One of the problems with writing prescriptions, even if weed is eventually taken off the controlled-substance list, is the difficulty of prescribing specific doses.) Another grower I talk to claims his friend was approached by a major agrichemical company that is developing a cannabis seed that can produce a yield in 40 days with only eight glasses of water.

Not everyone is thrilled about the idea of an increased commodification of the weed industry, one of the last refuges from corporate infestation. It's been a pothead urban myth for decades that tobacco companies are waiting to take over the business the minute marijuana becomes legal — that spies from Philip Morris, for this very reason, have been trolling towns like Garberville, Ukiah and Eureka. Now that something like legalization might actually happen, that dangerous moment is approaching when pot smokers' paranoia will intersect with a viable reality.

Robert Mikos, the Vanderbilt professor, says an interesting historical parallel to consider is America post-Prohibition, when tens of thousands — perhaps hundreds of thousands — of illegal distilleries were concentrated into the liquor industry we have today: a handful of major companies that dominate the beer and spirits markets. Some predict that a similar consolidation could happen in California with legalization — that only a handful of big marijuana distributors would be left standing. "Walgreens isn't going to be selling pot, and Philip Morris isn't going to be growing it," Mikos says. "But a large California company might spring up to do that. And California as a state might do everything to foster that. It's much easier to regulate a product sold by four companies than one sold by thousands."

Over the past year, President Obama, while grappling with his own attempts at economic stimulus and job creation, has reportedly looked to Franklin Roosevelt's handling of the Great Depression for inspiration. Repeal of Prohibition is not normally listed as a New Deal jobs program. Still, it happened in 1933, when unemployment had soared to nearly 25 percent, the high point of the Depression. Certainly repeal had some positive economic effects. Alfred Vernon Dalrymple, the National Prohibition Director — the drug czar of his day — predicted in *Time* magazine that repeal would mean "putting hundreds

of thousands of men back to work and...hundreds of thousands of dollars of new business." And FDR himself — who, in 1937, would be the first president to make marijuana illegal — argued in a 1932 campaign speech in Sea Girt, New Jersey, that "our tax burden would not be so heavy nor the forms that it takes so objectionable if some reasonable proportion of the unaccounted millions now paid to those whose business had been reared upon this stupendous blunder could be made available for the expense of government."

People like Tim Blake, who have been out in the trenches — or, more accurately, out in the old-growth-forest-camouflaged gardens — have no doubt that major change, unlike any in their lifetime, is inevitable, that they are at the vanguard of a coming revolution. Imagine buying a joint as easily as you can buy a six-pack of Corona. Imagine the rap-song product placements. Imagine the *Super Bowl ads*. "People won't be able to make a killing if pot becomes legal and the big players come in," Blake concedes. "But they'll be able to make a living. What's gonna happen is, if you really love growing cannabis, you'll be able to make a living doing something you love. You won't be making million-dollar deals. But look around — the whole country is going under." Blake, a self-described survivalist, is warming up to the topic now. "Farming, industry, everything we as a country do as a country is going away," he continues. "We're lucky out here. We're blessed." Fixing me with one of his long stares, a grin frozen on his face, he speaks as if he can see the future, and he likes it. Then again, he might just be high.

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