

## THE CANNABIS CUP

The morning sky is overcast and close as Singapore Airlines's flight #SQ25 glides into Amsterdam's Schiphol airport. Aboard are 180 of the nearly 2,000 tourists who are making their way from all over the world to the High Times's Cannabis Cup. They will spend the next several days visiting the more than 300 coffeeshops that dot the picaresque city, sampling cannabis grown all over the world to determine which varieties combine the subtleties of taste, color, aroma and physical effects that mark a championship strain. They will look through magnifying glasses, photographers' loupes and even microscopes to investigate the resins exuding from the glands at the tops of the flowering female plants. They will smoke cannabis in cigarette form and from half-a-dozen types of pipes that have been developed for the connoisseur; they will eat cannabis cakes and cannabis bon bons covered in Holland's finest chocolates. They will argue the pros and cons of dozens of varieties of marijuana and hashish. They will discuss the slight differences between cannabis grown in soil—bioponic marijuana—and that grown in rockwool or sponge—hydroponic marijuana. They will know in an instant which types were grown indoors and which under sunlight. And at the end of four days of tasting, talking and investigating they will vote on the awards to be given to the finest examples of cannabis in each of the seven categories of the contest. The awards, the Cannabis Cups, are the highest recognition offered to marijuana growers in the world. &nbsp; A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CANNABIS CUP

The Cannabis Cup was inaugurated in 1988 by Steven Hager, the editor-in-chief of High Times Magazine, the bible of the marijuana world. "The Drug War in America has made all of us who smoke marijuana outlaws," says the tall, lean 40 year old. "I decided that there needed to be an event which celebrated this plant, which is sacred to us, not only for the transcendent experience it provides, but as a medicine and for its commercial value as hemp." And Amsterdam, with its tolerant attitude towards marijuana, was the natural location. "Here what we do is not criminal," says Hager. "No one is threatening to forfeit homes for growing half-a-dozen plants to use as medicine for glaucoma or muscular sclerosis, or threatening to take our children if we are caught smoking a joint. Here in Amsterdam we can walk into a coffeeshop and see a menu that includes not only sandwiches but a daily selection of marijuana and hashish."

Indeed, for several years, Holland has been at the forefront of a social experiment in decriminalization of cannabis for personal possession, provided the user confines their smoking to the privacy of their homes or to the legalized coffeeshops where cannabis is sold—the same sanctions as apply to alcohol consumption. In addition to cannabis as a personal soft-drug of choice, Holland is also allowing for experimentation with different types of marijuana for medical benefits: a grass that is effective for alleviating the violent nausea that accompanies cancer chemotherapy or AIDS AZT treatments is not necessarily the best marijuana for relief of migraine headaches.

It is a social experiment that has the U.S. government—which continues to place cannabis in the same hard-drug category as heroin and cocaine—up in arms. But it is also one which has produced several fascinating and unexpected consequences: Besides an end to the annual criminalization of thousands of Holland's citizens for cannabis—and the subsequently enormous financial savings to Dutch government—Holland has also seen a continuous decrease in hard drug addiction over the last six years, the only European country that can make that claim. Many say the decline is a direct result of allowing cannabis consumption; that people will choose soft non-addictive drugs over hard drugs if they are freely available.

While the early Cannabis Cups were private affairs between the editors of High Times and a handful of Holland's growers and coffeeshops, the event quickly began to gather steam, and by 1991, when several rock musicians—including members of Pearl Jam, Gotcha!, and The Stairs—as well as Dr. Eric Fromberg, of Holland's National Institute of Alcohol and Drugs, asked to join in the judging, the event began to come into its own. In 1993, when the event was opened to the public for the first time, nearly one hundred judges arrived. And this year, though only 800 were given official Cannabis Cup judging credentials—on a first come, first served basis—more than 2,000 people from around the world made the trip.

To accommodate the large group, the Pax Party House on Avenue Ferdinand Bolstraat was rented out for the four days of the event. And for the first time at the Cannabis Cup, hemp, the male cannabis plant, was featured at a Hemp Exposition as well. And hemp clothes, once a world staple, and still a primary material in the making of canvas and linen worldwide were featured as well, at a Hemp Fashion show that enlisted the designs of more than 40 American and European designers, some of whom used the fabric in the traditional canvas style (the word canvas comes from the Dutch word for cannabis) while others mixed it with cotton and silk to make exquisite lingerie.

## THE COMPETITION

But while the event has taken off, so has the competition for one of the coveted cups, since winning a cup can represent not only achievement but assures a coffeeshop or seed company of thousands of additional tourists annually. And as the event is best likened to a wine or food tasting—where you cannot win if people don't taste your wares—coffeeshop owners wasted no time in providing samples. When Singapore Airlines flight #SQ25 landed, representatives from the Lucky Mothers, Picasso, and De Dampkring coffeeshops were waiting for its passengers to pass through customs to hand them small judges packets of pre-rolled joints—marijuana cigarettes.

To the consternation and amusement of airport employees, many of the judges, not realizing that legal cannabis consumption in Holland was limited to private areas, immediately lit up before heading to the Pax for their Cup Orientation.

Not to be outdone, at the orientation, Positronics Salon, a store that specializes in indoor gardening equipment and in giving lessons in hashish making—which involves collecting the gummy resin from the cannabis flowers, a tradition in the middle East—was offering anyone who

came to the shop all the free marijuana they could smoke. Positronics's owner, Wernard, is a long-time grower and one of the innovators of the Dutch cannabis industry.

Arjan, a former grower who now owns the Greenhouse Coffeeshop, went one step further, with a mini-van waiting to shuttle the judges back and forth between the Pax and his shop. Anyone who wished to taste his Cup entry, Cytral Skunk, a lemony-tart hybrid of both sativa and indica cannabis, the two primary strains of smokable cannabis, was welcome to try it for free at the Greenhouse.

Some of the other shop owners and growers were even more bold: the owners of the specialty seed house CIA, Cannabis In Amsterdam, all Americans who served prison time for growing marijuana and then relocated in Holland where they could grow in peace, walked among the crowd at the Cup orientation handing out large buds of the Grey Area Coffeeshop's entry AK47—a potent strain they jokingly said "would take the top of your head off."

Surprisingly, a few of the judges refused the more exotic methods of marijuana ingestion, like the vaporizers and gravity bong, which can put all but the heartiest smokers in a mood to sleep, preferring to taste only minute amounts of marijuana in order to keep their palates fresh and their heads clear. Others, however, were more than happy to test their smoking-mettle. Still others, on being able to smoke marijuana freely for the first time in their lives, simply began crying: Many of them told of having spouses or friends serving long prison sentences back in the States for doing the same thing they were now allowed to do without fear of legal problems.

As the crowd moved through the orientation they were given the rules of the competition: there were seven categories in which awards would be made: Best Overall Cannabis; Best Hydroponically Grown Cannabis; Best Bioponically Grown Cannabis; Best Imported Hashish; Best Coffeeshop in Amsterdam; Best Coffeeshop Outside of Amsterdam; and Best Booth at the Hemp Exposition. Judges could vote on as many of the awards for which they felt qualified, and could consider cannabis from anywhere they found it in Holland. To expedite their finding it, busses had been hired to take them on several different routes to coffeeshops both inside and outside of Amsterdam. Those who preferred to travel alone were free to walk through the beautiful cobblestoned streets of the city at their leisure.

## THE EVENT

While the primary interest for most of the group was in tasting the world's finest marijuana and hashish, for those more interested in hemp and the budding commercial hemp industry, seminars were held daily with people from around the world discussing the state of hemp in their countries. Representatives from Spain, Switzerland, France, England, Holland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, which have all recently begun allowing hemp production—outlawed years ago by the United Nations Single Convention Treaty—talked with representatives from the Ukraine, China, Romania and Hungary, which never stopped producing the plant, about the progress being made to create new hemp industries. Hundreds of the products made from the versatile cannabis plant were on display at the Hemp Expo on the second floor of the Pax: From foods like hemp cheese and hemp burgers to industrial products like hemp paper, plastics, cement and kitty litter, as well soaps, body lotions and cosmetics, the display gave good indication that the plant may well be making inroads back into mainstream culture.

For aficionados of hashish culture, Dr. Hans Georg-Behr, a professor of history at the University of Vienna, gave private displays of part of his hashish pipe collection. The collection, the largest in the world, includes such pieces as a tiny cloisonne pipe made by Fabrege for Rimsky Korsikov and named "L'Inspiration." The oldest pipe in Georg-Behr's collection has been carbon dated to the 4th century B.C. in China, a stone piece with no stem. China is also the country where the earliest historical reference of cannabis use was discovered in a pharmacopoeia dating to 2,800 B.C., where it is mentioned as a good medicine for gout, relieving the pain of childbirth, and for arthritis.

In a separate series of lectures, Dutch cannabis growers discussed their techniques with their American counterparts. At one, an American named Kyle Kushman who has given up marijuana cultivation, angrily discussed the life of an outlaw grower. "Because what I was doing was illegal, for seven years I could not allow myself to get close to anyone, not only for fear they would let on to someone what I was doing, but because they would also face jail time if I were caught. But here in Amsterdam I could do the same thing freely. We must fight to change the cannabis laws."

A young man in a business suit stood up in the audience and seconded Kushman's sentiments: "I just paid for hashish with my American Express card. I can't tell you how good that feels!"

In addition to the exposition, the seminars and the coffeeshop crawls, there were a number of side trips available to the judges as well: champagne-cannabis boat rides on the city's lovely canals; visits to secret indoor grow-rooms, and a trip to the Hash Museum—a tiny museum in Amsterdam's red-light district devoted to the historical uses of hemp and the ancient tradition of hashish smoking around the world.

One of the most unusual of the side trips was a tour of Cannabis Castle, an old Victorian house located near the German border, where the Sensi Seed Company—named after the sinsemilla strain of cannabis, a seedless variety produced by forcing unpollinated female plants to flower under intense lighting—breeds new cannabis seed strains. The castle staff dressed in old Dutch costumes and powdered wigs; castle furnishings had been reupholstered in hemp, and the owners, Ben Dronkers and his son Alan greeted visitors while one of their Castle maids offered them a sparkler-festooned silver platter filled with the Sensi Seed Bank's Cup entry, the new Jack Herer seed strain. The strain takes its name from the grizzled father of the American hemp movement, Jack Herer, who has spent more than 20 years uncovering a mountain of U.S. government material about the plant's benefits that was essentially buried after cannabis was made illegal in 1937. Herer's book about hemp and what he sees as the conspiracy to eliminate it from the historical record of the U.S., *The Emperor Wears No Clothes*, has become an underground classic in America, and the German edition, *Hanf*, was atop the best seller lists for nearly a year in 1993.

The tour of Cannabis Castle included a visit to their underground network of grow-rooms, where their hybrid seed strains are developed. Along one wall outside of the specialized indoor gardening chambers hangs a variety of drying cannabis buds. "We call this the Wall," explained Ben Dronkers proudly. "This is where we decide what to pursue and which strains simply haven't got what it takes. If we want a little smoke we simply come down here to the Wall and take a little something. Then we note its effects. And after a year or so of tasting we look at the notes and make a decision." When someone asked if it really took a year to decide if a strain was worth developing Dronkers smiled. "Personally no. But we are Dutch and we take all of our flowers very seriously. We have a reputation to maintain, no?"

Aside from their legendary status as marijuana growers, the Dronkers recently became the first Dutch hemp growers—apart from a small government experimental station—when they planted 140 hectares on fallow land for commercial use. Their results were so surprisingly good that they are currently building a hemp processing plant and local farmers have offered to let them utilize 2,000 hectares next year.

## JUDGING THE CANNABIS CUP

In the evenings the judges returned to the Pax House in various states of cannabis-inebriation for the Judges' Councils, where they spoke about the different kinds of favored-cannabis they'd discovered during the day. The councils were set up so that the judges sat in a circle around a microphone in the center of the large, crowded room. Those who wished to speak had to fill the dozens of council pipes with cannabis or hashish and were only permitted to speak while their "offering to the council" held up and the pipes stayed lit. But since few of the judges could afford to keep the pipes lit for very long, the evening ritual quickly turned into a competition among the coffeeshops and seed companies who brought in staggering quantities of their Cup entries for the judges to smoke. Trayful after trayful of Jack Herer, Cytrol Skunk, AK47, Master Kush, The Chronic, Northern Lights and Orange Bud were passed around and smoked while their various developers espoused on the reasons why their entry was the most deserving of the Cup. In minutes the room would fill with thick, pungent smoke. Night after night the ritual was repeated, to the delight of the judges and the bemusement of the Pax Party House staff, who had never seen such cannabis consumption.

Voting was on Sunday afternoon. The judges had had four days to taste, touch and smoke their way through Amsterdam's coffee shops and most had done it with a flourish. The polling room was in a quiet corner of the Pax. Ballots were handed out only to those with proper judging credentials. Last minute free-cannabis, meant to sway those not quite sure of their decisions, was handed out generously. Groups of 10 at a time were admitted to the room throughout the afternoon, where they filled out their ballots and gave them to the staff of High Times magazine. The ballots were entered into a computer and a tally taken.

The Awards Ceremony was set for Sunday night. The large council room, filled during previous sessions, was dangerously crowded for the event. Dozens of nervous coffeeshop and seed company owners stood in a corner of the room, hoping their names would be called. The lights dimmed. The room filled up with smoke. The ceremony emcee, a New York comic named Zero Boy, took the microphone. He called up the first presenters, Hans Georg-Behr and High Times Publisher, John Holmstrom. He handed them an envelope. Inside were the names of the winners of the Best Hemp Booth at the Expo. The Cup went to Positronics Salon. Wernard leapt to the stage to thank the crowd.

The next award, for Best Coffeeshop Outside of Amsterdam, went to De Boot, in the city of Hoorn; that was followed by the Cup for the Best Coffeeshop In Amsterdam, which went to Arjan's Greenhouse. One by one the Cups were delivered into the hands of the ecstatic winners until only one remained, for best overall new strain, The Cannabis Cup. The house waited. The growers waited. Zero Boy stretched out the moment as long as he could before handing over the envelope to the cup presenters. They opened the envelope: Third place went to AK47, developed by the Grey Area restaurant. Second place went to Cytral Skunk, developed by the Greenhouse. At the mention that the first prize "goes to Jack Herer!", Ben and Alan Dronkers leapt to the stage and embraced. "We've done it! We've won the Cup!" they shouted. "We've won the Cup!" The audience roared! The Dronkers danced madly about the stage, unable to contain themselves.

When the emotion of the moment passed, Ben Dronkers took the microphone. "I want to thank you for this Cannabis Cup. For Alan and I it signifies that what we are doing we are doing very well. Thank you. But I also want to say that during this week I have spent with you, I have gotten to know you a little bit. And I cannot express my sympathy enough that most of you live in countries where this event cannot be held. Countries where you are imprisoned for enjoying a harmless little smoke. I only hope that your governments realize that this is not criminal. I only hope they look at this Cup and the people who attended and realize that they must change the laws. And my sincerest hope is that someday in the not too distant future we will be holding this Cannabis Cup in the United States." The audience roared again.

## About the Author