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DINING



James Tensuan / Special to The Chronicle

Michael Ray smokes cannabis during a Cannaiseur dinner in San Francisco. Bay Area chefs are divided on the best way to incorporate cannabis into fine dining.

DINNER DEBATE STIRS THE POT

By Jonathan Kauffman

If there's one word that characterizes the cannabis dinner party in 2018, my friends, it is not "munchies." One might talk about "craveables," which is an actual

word people use to describe snacks in 2018, though none of them are editors of the Merriam-Webster dictionary. No, one does not attend a cannabis dinner party in order to crunch glassy-eyed on one's food. One approaches dinner

as a sensory experience. And the word you'll hear most often in those discussions is "terpenes."

"If you are new to herbal products, terpenes are the organic compounds that give cannabis all of the wonderful

aromas and flavors we can perceive," writes Jamie Evans, a San Francisco wine professional who hosts tasting events as the Herb Somm (www.theherbsomm.com). "Each strain has unique characteristics due to farming

practices and the terroir in which it was grown to create different and expressive cannabinoid and terpene profiles."

So now we are savoring the limonenes in our OG Kush and the myrcenes in our Hi-

malayan Gold. As to the how, however, a schism has emerged: Should a cannabis dinner involve good food and things to smoke along with it, or should cannabis be infused into the food?

Evans, who organizes a series of dinners called Thursday Infused (www.thursdayinfused.com), says she always asks the chefs she partners with to incorporate cannabis into the food, though they have to keep the total dosage to 5 milligrams of THC — which many longtime users would consider microdosing and newbies would find is quite enough, thank you.

Cooking with cannabis butters, oils and flowers in a way that captures their aromas takes some serious technical as well as culinary skill. “The more heat terpenes are exposed to, the more they’ll evaporate,” Evans says.

There’s another, more pressing concern with serving infused food. “A dinner party situation can be tricky because you can’t know until two hours (after you eat it) whether you want more or not,” says Stephanie Hua, co-author of “Edibles: Small Bites for the Modern Cannabis Kitchen” (Chronicle Books, November 2018) and founder of Mellows, a medicated marshmallow company.

Anyone who has consumed edibles has a story about the time they ate too much. Mine involved a basement kegger and a chocolate-chip cookie blackout. The perils do not end with graduation. Friends of mine have found themselves, in their 30s and 40s, waking up against the wall of a bar to a ring of concerned glances, or calling people in other states, asking them to help calm down a freakout.

The recipes Hua developed with co-author Coreen Carroll for their book are designed to be small, low-dose eats, which Hua recommends serving at



Diners share marijuana at a recent Cannaiseur dinner. Some chefs object to pairing food with smoking.



The Cannaiseur staff plates food for guests at a recent dinner in San Francisco.



Jess Cosca passes around cannabis cigarettes to Cannaiseur diners in San Francisco.

Photos by James Tensuan / Special to The Chronicle

the beginning of a party so people can gauge their mental state later on.

Other cannabis chefs, such as Michael Magallanes of Opulent Chef (www.opulentchef.com), have asked the guests at his private dinner-party series about their tolerance level before it starts so he can add the right amount.

These days, however, the chef, who cooked under Mourad Lahlou for five years, generally works with cold-water hash and concentrates, serving them with vaporizers that heat the cannabis to a lower temperature.

“I feel that using high-quality concentrates that are strain-specific, usually outdoor grown from Humboldt or Mendocino, you can really pair that well with food,” Magallanes says.

Magallanes approaches the pairing as he would with wine, though he doesn’t serve alcohol at his dinners. “Some of the earlier courses will usually be strains that have more of the citrusy, floral aspects because the dishes will be lighter in the beginning,” he says. “Going into the heavier courses at the end, we’ll go into the heavier strains that have more of that mushroom and pine flavor.”

One thing Magallanes doesn’t like to do, however, is serve joints. “Flower, if you try to smoke it, then your palate is going to get blown out.”

Not all cannabis chefs agree. (Another schism!) Holden Jagger, whose culinary career began in San Francisco but who now throws cannabis-related food events in Los Angeles as Altered Plates (www.alteredplatesevents.com), does like to pair food with joints. “If you’re using high-quality products, you’re going to be able to taste the flower very well,” Jagger says. “There are things you can only get with the flower

through smoking it.”

But — sensory experience, remember — you’re not taking a bite of lamb with one hand and holding a lit blunt in the other. “The first step is sniffing the cannabis as you would a glass of wine,” Jagger says. “The next step is a dry pull, where you put the unlit joint to your lips and taste the flavor of the cannabis. The final tasting point is when diners smoke the joint.”

Robin Song, chef de cuisine at Stones Throw in San Francisco, who cooked for a series of dinners in 2015-16 called Luck Pot, says he’s interested in terpenes, sure, but he really just wants to cook good food for stoned people. “Experientially I personally prefer consuming (cannabis) on its own. I don’t enjoy the taste of eating it,” he says.

Song and Hua both flavorful food is a must if you’re going to serve dinner alongside joints or vaporizer, whether or not you’re paying attention to the aromatic complexities.

“I know that when I have been at infused dinners, something refreshing is good to have on hand,” Hua says. It could be ice cream — OK, ice cream is really good — or a lemonade, and doesn’t need to have marijuana in it.

“There are the craveables, the sugars and the salty foods and fried foods,” Song says. “But does anyone need to be stoned to crave those? The reality is, if the flavors are good and the experience is fun and the hospitality is there, it doesn’t really matter.

“Honestly,” the chef adds, “I’d rather feed a bunch of stoners than a bunch of drunks.”

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