

BIZ & TECH // BUSINESS

Weed tourism is the new wine tasting in California

Melia Russell | May 6, 2019 | Updated: May 7, 2019 10:45 a.m.



Visitors check out the serpent sculpture at the Solar Living Institute in Hopland (Mendocino County). Cannabis startup Flow Kana purchased the 12-acre property and plans to make it a visitor center.

Photo: Photos by Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

As the passenger van reached the gate of a legal cannabis farm, Lorianna Bender looked for barbed wire and barking Dobermans and saw none. A smiling farmer welcomed the tour group, and the view opened to reveal rows of pot plants baking in the sun. Her fear that pot farms were dangerous, clandestine operations vanished.

“It was like you had walked up to someone’s winery in Napa,” said Bender, a yoga instructor from Vallejo.

Bender is one of a new crop of visitors in California — call them cannatourists. With marijuana fully legal in the state, the growers’ heartland is becoming a cultural destination, with Wine Country as a nearby model.

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Options for day-trippers bloom in the Emerald Triangle, a three-county Northern California region — Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity counties — named for the leafy green plant it grows in abundance. Limo buses bring groups of friends celebrating a birthday, retirement or bride-to-be to visit some of the area’s farms. Even a marijuana museum is in the works: Last month, cannabis startup Flow Kana bought 12 acres along Highway 101 in Hopland (Mendocino County). It plans to build a visitor center, featuring grower interviews and demos.

San Francisco is also getting in on the action. A once-underground supper club called Cannaisseur Series invites paying guests to share an intimate gourmet meal paired with marijuana joints — often in a South of Market warehouse. And some pot shops are adding posh lounges where customers can try the goods.

On a typical day at Moe Greens, a new cannabis lounge in the Mid-Market neighborhood, people looking for a legal place to smoke fill the avocado-colored booths. “We wanted to create a clean, safe, comfortable environment where people could not only sit and imbibe but also get an experience,” owner Nate Haas said.

Wine Country is angling for a piece of the business, too, with several Sonoma County operators offering wine-and-weed tours.



Rye LaPorte helps Kim Hutchins (left) and daughter Tiffany VanBuskirk at the Real Goods store at the Solar Living Institute.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

California took in **\$345 million** in tax revenue from legal cannabis in 2018, the first year for recreational sales. The state has not released data on what portion of sales came from visitors, and travel associations in San Francisco, Sonoma and Mendocino counties said they currently do not track how much visitors spend on cannabis or related activities. Those estimates are hard to get right, with so many buying on the cheaper, tax-free black market.

Carmel Angelo, executive officer of Mendocino County, said cannabis has become synonymous with the area. “I don’t think there’s any one of us who doesn’t have a friend or a family member who is involved in the cannabis industry,” she said. Her office has come to call weed the fourth pillar of tourism, along with wine, waves and wilderness. Someday, she said, tour companies may fly visitors into the county’s underused airports to visit a cannabis farm, shop at a dispensary or stay in a “bud and breakfast” hotel.

California may look to states that legalized pot sooner for a glimpse of what’s to come. An estimated 6.5 million Colorado visitors together consumed 19 metric tons of cannabis in 2017, according to a report

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prepared for that state's Department of Revenue. Still, in a 2016 survey, only 5% of Colorado visitors called it a motivation for their trip, although 15% said they did some cannabis-related activity.



Brittney Moreno pours cannabis into a machine for sorting at the Flow Kana production center in Redwood Valley (Mendocino County).

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

But the demand is there, said Jamie Evans, who runs a cannabis-themed event series. The legal market has made customers of Baby Boomers and first-time users, who want to learn more about the plant in a low-pressure environment, similar to a tasting room at a Napa winery. Cassie Eternal, an activities coordinator at the Pleasant Hill Senior Center, said trips she's booked through Emerald Country Tours have sold out, with 40 seniors participating.

Last fall, Evans and a group of friends boarded a van in Sonoma for a half-day Weed & Wine Tour by Happy Travelers Tours. "California is known for the best cannabis and the best wine," Evans said. "Tour organizers know this." The \$139

expedition took them to a cannabis farm, where a grower taught them about the varieties they plant, and on to wineries for (smokeless) tours and tastings. In place of icebreakers, the tour group had a joint-rolling contest.

In Mendocino, one of the counties widely seen as part of the pot-growing capital of America, cannatourism seems even more promising. People have been drawn to the area for the cannabis industry for decades, said county executive officer Angelo, though visiting farms back then was “a lot more low key.” Legal weed has allowed cannabis tour companies to proliferate. Most of the county’s 18 dispensaries allow on-site consumption, and sales are higher at pot shops near other major tourist attractions, according to Angelo.

A museum would be a crowning feature of the region’s cannatourism industry. Flow Kana, the San Francisco cannabis producer and distributor, has grand plans for the 12-acre property it just bought for \$3.5 million (a figure provided by the county assessor’s office). For the past few decades, a store called Real Goods has sold solar panels and off-the-grid living supplies there.

“What Napa and Sonoma counties have become to wine, Mendocino and Humboldt counties are poised to do for cannabis,” said Michael Steinmetz, founder and CEO of Flow Kana.

John Schaeffer, the 70-year-old owner of Real Goods and operator of a nonprofit called the Solar Living Institute, will work with Flow Kana to build a visitor center and museum that marries the histories of cannabis and solar energy. He said many of his earliest customers were pot growers looking for cover in the hills of Mendocino County.

At the new center, visitors will someday wear audio headsets as they tour to hear interviews from the area’s growers, according to Schaeffer. They might watch a demo on trimming pot, though he said the visitor center will not grow any cannabis on site, then pick up a jar of Flow Kana’s sun-grown marijuana from the dispensary.

Steinmetz of Flow Kana said he wants to preserve the center’s roots in solar.

“We don’t get this many shots as mankind to bring massive industries to life,” he said. “Especially one that’s as tied as these two movements.”

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Correction: An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of Emerald Country Tours.

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