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# Cooking Well-being amidst Aromas, Flavors, Colors, and Textures: Cannabis Flowers, a Complex, Fascinating Ingredient<sup>1</sup>

Practically everything related to cannabis in the last 100 years has been permeated by prejudices, stigmas, and political, economic, social, and even cultural interests. If we add to this the lack of reliable information, it becomes indispensable to take every opportunity and space to look more deeply into everything related to cannabis. What has been seen down through the years worldwide is that this twisted paradigm has created stigmatization and criminalization of people linked to it in one way or another and been a brake on research about it, and therefore, on humanity itself.

This article includes the voices of specialists like Armando and César, with whom we have coincided along the road of activism, research, and destigmatization. As an introduction, it is important to underline that in less than fifteen years, we have seen a legal and affordable cannabis industry grow in North America, but for only a few. While it is nice to know that everything has favored the break-down of stigmas around this powerful, healing plant, reflections and questions have also arisen about where and for whose benefit that growth is heading as well as what its repercussions will be and the world of cannabis in food is not the exception.

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## My Experience: Yariela, from Tlaxcala

I'm Yariela, an ecofeminist, entrepreneur, farmer, and cannabis activist. One of my first encounters with Aaraón Díaz, the co-author of this article, was more than four years ago at the beginning of a research project, now published by the UNAM through the CISAN, in the form of four books *Romper estigmas. Arte y cannabis en Norteamérica*.<sup>2</sup>

I first encountered food with cannabis at the university when, during an exchange of chocolates among classmates, I wanted to give some "special" ones to my pothead friend. However, then, I didn't know how to do it; I didn't know that I should decarboxylate it to "activate" the medication and find the best way of extracting it.<sup>3</sup>

I went to a great friend of mine who had a different worldview from the one that we are taught about life and what we consume every day. I was twenty-two years old, and I became more and more enamored every day of the plants. That was when I understood and wanted to know where what I was consuming came from.

Anyone can make an edible. It's very easy to purchase or make a product of this kind. It can be as simple as making butter or oil for hotcakes, cupcakes, or cookies, or as extravagant and painstaking as lasagna, a cake, a chocolate, or ice cream.... This is where the cook uses his or her imagination.

We shouldn't forget how important the ingredients are. I don't want to say that you have to pick the most ex-

pensive or only imported products, but that you should know where they come from, their nutritional quality, and that the environment has been cared for when they were grown; who and how long and how many economic resources are invested in producing the ingredient; and if the producers were paid fairly and equitably.

After my first failed attempt, I decided to experiment in the cannabis industry. I started the paperwork to get my health license to consume so I could plant what I needed. Whatever I didn't have close-by, like cacao to make chocolates—which doesn't grow in Central Mexico for geographical conditions—I would buy from producers' communities and agroecological growers. That is how Nabani and Cannabru, were born, sister products that complement each other in offering medication, regenerative nutrition, and personal hygiene products using honey and medicinal plants like lavender, rosemary, mint, lime, and cacao, including cannabis extracted in different ways.

I began working empirically based on trial and error. Then I took workshops and courses with groups like TerrazaWeera, Hidrocultura Sustentable, Flor de Gallo, ECOSUR, Instituto RIA, Instituto Multidisciplinario de Investigaciones Fitocannabinoides, and the agroecologists Sebastião Pinheiro and Oliver Blanco. In each of these spaces I have come to the same conclusion: planting and transforming are the most powerful forms of the revolution, healing, and care that we have at our disposal.

### Armando Nabor Quijano's Experience

Armando is a psychologist and experimental chef dedicated to deciphering the nuances and flavors in the culinary world to turn it into well-being in every mouthful. He shares with us his experience in this complex universe of cannabis cuisine, or, as he calls it, the cuisine of well-being.

He says that the first time he used almost a kilogram of the cannabis flower, spreading the smell for several

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Armando Nabor Quijano

Roast chicken with cannabis butter, flavored with thyme, laurel leaves, oregano, strain "Simple II" and black pepper.

blocks around his home in Querétaro, making some of his neighbors uncomfortable and fearful. Since then, he has taken different kinds of courses by himself and experimented with the principles of the art of cooking, as well as with the properties of cannabis. This has transformed his understanding and relationship with the plant, "We should look at cannabis just like we look at coriander, epazote herb, chocolate, or eggs. As a chef, you have to know at least 100 ways to prepare any ingredient, and with cannabis, the same principle applies." So, he began cooking with CBD.

For Armando, the first thing you have to know to venture into well-being cuisine is to understand what phytocannabinoids are, what effect can be expected from each one,<sup>4</sup> the doses and their impacts, and what decarboxylation is and how it's done. He says that if we cook at home and don't have the equipment for measuring the doses, we have to trust the strain of the plant we have, which means we have to have smoked it and known the effects its terpenes have, that is, the intensely aromatic chemical substances present in some plants at certain temperatures. This implies previously doing organoleptic research into the flower to be consumed.

Also, he says it is fundamental to know what terpenes are, their molecular and biological structure, what they do and how they degrade, as well as the temperature at

which they vaporize. Their effects in the body are different. They do not go directly into the nervous system like phytocannabinoids, but their therapeutic properties (analgesic, anti-inflammatory, or tranquilizing) are activated at specific temperatures. In addition to being the compounds that contribute cannabis's aroma and flavor, they form a synergy with other compounds, producing different effects.

Armando also deals with infusion and decarboxylation techniques. He says that something very interesting happens with infusion: the terpenes, phytocannabinoids and other molecules go through a molecular change when they pass from one state to another. It is essential to know how to infuse, whether in tea or in butter, but first you have to know if what you are going to infuse is water- or fat-soluble. Molecularly speaking, phytocannabinoids are soluble in fat, but some terpenes are water-soluble, although almost all of them are soluble in fats; so, knowing both techniques is crucial.

It is fundamental to analyze all this, to know fully the variety of the flowers as an organoleptic whole, and to know what effect smoking it will have and at what temperature it should be processed to make the most of its properties. Armando thinks that cannabis is like wheat: it educated us and civilized us as humanity. The plant educates the cook and teaches him/her how to treat it.

He thinks that if you want to achieve an effect, you can make brownies and feel something incredible, though if you want to experiment and know more, it will take more critical capability. That's the basic idea, and each technique can apply this knowledge in a different way. It's not the same to bake as to roast or make a sauce to drizzle on a plate; they require a huge range of temperatures. He says that when beginning to acquire these skills or criteria, whoever works with cannabis becomes countercultural because the culture says what you make is a brownie, bread; it's what we're already familiar with. "I like being countercultural, since that allows you to discern, to challenge yourself. I love finding in everything a healthy way to express it. Then, when you already know all this, you want to experiment with what approximate effects each flower has and which technique should be used in a recipe. The flower indicates to me which way I can use it."

He has also found that, if your system itself is stimulated prior to eating these dishes, there will be a greater effect. "If a dish with a nice aroma is pleasant in itself

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and a caress to the soul, then, all things being equal, the pleasure is greater." In conclusion, Armando says, "I think that, medically, cannabis-based food is very limited because the dosage has to be very strict; we can't play around with the patient's well-being."

### César Olvera Popoca's Story

Last but not least is the case of César Olvera Popoca, who tells us that, despite the disinformation about this topic, sharing experiences from other places transforms our ways of consuming and that the cannabis community is countercultural. This Mexico City-based attorney and activist told us about his experiences that coincide in many ways with Armando's. For example, he also mentioned the influence of disinformation in his first encounter with cannabis and when he included it in food. "A month after smoking my first joint, I suddenly said, 'Well, I should make brownies, pancakes; I should do something with this.' And, with no knowledge at all, without knowing anything about the quality or the amount, much less where it was from, I threw the weed into the batter and ... I ended up with just the flavor of weed in my mouth."

Nevertheless, his vision and understanding of cannabis changed thanks to his desire to know about it and surrounding himself with people who had real knowledge. "I saw colleagues who were very well documented, but they went to and maybe learned about it in the United States. They brought back ideas that I had never heard of. I was really lucky to meet people who had lots more background in the plant." A while later, César created his own brand of edible gummies with the idea of making products that would alleviate pain.

Based on this principle of responsible cannabis consumption and use, he says that since the plant has these contrasts, we can decide if it will be used for recreation, like during a party, or if it will be used for spiritual or social ends. In this sense, he finds some pros and cons for edibles.

The main benefit, or pro, of consuming it in other ways than smoking is that it is much safer, since combustion carries with it many negative effects. For example, it irritates the mucous membranes, causing problems in the mouth and other negative effects associated with regular use.

An important observation, César says, is that very few people are committed to developing responsible crops that don't leave the land sterile, plus the existence of a more regulated market.

This puts us in an economic dilemma, since developing a low-quality product is quicker and more profitable, but it affects quality. That's why it's crucial for the government to pay attention to the minimums necessary for an edible to be able to pass all the regulatory tests. When the legislation on cannabis products was put forward, one of the cons mentioned was the need to develop child-proof packaging. Our community thought that was reasonable, but we also want to create packaging that's recyclable or made from the plant itself, which implies a costly, process that would not be very viable for small companies. Only competitors with a great deal of capital can participate, which is concerning.

César thinks that in Latin America, people who have capital are often individuals or companies who have accumulated it in a questionable way. This leaves out small competitors and opens up the possibility that the market could be controlled by unethical entities. It is fundamental to remember that the plant is not the guilty party, but rather it is the way we use and regulate it.

In Mexico, one of the main challenges we face today is the legal issue. When we have products that come from the United States or Canada, obviously we face several problems: they haven't paid tariffs; they have no legal status in the country; and they are probably cloned. This is why the main risk is that our market could be flooded with illegal products, in a context in which we don't even have an established national market to compete in.

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Although many of these products look like they have been imported with all guarantees intact, we don't actually know where they come from or how they've been treated. This puts the consumer in a vulnerable position and the intermediaries who attempt to introduce them at significant legal risk.

Regarding edibles, César says, one of the big risks is the lack of certainty about the amount of vegetable drug they contain. This could lead us to be catalogued as distributors, even if the product is for our own personal consumption. And that means an automatic preventive jail stay, even if the edible complies with Mexican government regulations and those of other countries, like the United States.

Cannabis products in Mexico exist to a great extent in a grey or black market, without clear labeling, without competitive or quality standards. "As a nation, we are at a disadvantage even for consuming these products. This contributes to excessive pricing and, unfortunately, prevents responsible, quality consumption."

## The Cherry on Top

Even though in our country, the production, distribution, commercialization, and consumption of non-medicinal cannabis continues to be illegal, the strategies for its sale in any of its forms, including edibles, have increased notably. Based on this, we invite consumers to question what the production of the plants they consume involves, where the seeds come from, who plants them, if they contain agricultural chemicals, what kind of care has been taken in growing them, and how they have been transported. Also, when consuming them, what energy footprint is feeding our bodies and minds, if anyone died while creating this product, and who benefits from our purchases. **MM**

## Notes

**1** We wish to thank to Montserrat Medina Pichardo, student at the UNAM School of Communication for the transcription of the interviews on which this article is based.

**2** Each volume looks at the link between cannabis and different aspects of life and culture. See <https://www.cisan.unam.mx/catalogo.php#gsc.tab=0>.

**3** Decarboxylation is the heating process whereby the cannabinoids are activated.

**4** These are the compounds present in the resins secreted by cannabis flowers.