

WHERE WINE MEETS WEED

THE TWO CATEGORIES HAVE A LOT IN COMMON, MAKING CROSS-CULTURE POSSIBLE—AND FUN.

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As a wine person who is just now dipping her toe into the weed world, the similarities between the two categories aren't just interesting—they're engaging in a way that makes this new-for-me imbibe more accessible, fun and familiar.

Indeed, wine and weed have parallels in terms of assessing aroma, flavor, mouthfeel and finish. Put these components together and, just like quality wine, one can deduce the quality of cannabis.

It's not a new concept, per se, but one that's gaining momentum as the cannabis category achieves more social—and in some places, political—acceptance. And as consumers

of all demographics, this writer included, are looking for alternative products to share, commune over and relax with, the concept of duality—being a wine and weed enthusiast—is, too, becoming more common.

FROM SOMMELIER TO GANJIER

Someone who can speak first-hand about the confluence of the two categories is Elizabeth Rice, current director of sales operations at KIVA Brands, who spent 20 years primarily in international sales management for a leading global wine company. Rice achieved an advanced Level 3 wine certification through the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) and was completely immersed in the wine industry until just five years ago.



“When I earned my Executive MBA, I realized I was ready to move on to a new challenge; with the legality of cannabis spreading, it was an easy choice,” says Rice, who describes her native Northern California as synonymous for both wine and weed “vices.”

A successful transition, Rice realized, meant that—just as in wine—building both community and education is key. “So, one of the first things I did was complete the Ganjier certification ... where I was able to deep-dive into the plant while at the same time network with many incredible people in the industry.”

In a nutshell, the Ganjier certification is the weed industry’s version of accrediting a sommelier. Folks who complete the program engage in rigorous training in how to assess aroma, flavor, intensity, complexity and overall quality of cannabis flowers. They come from all sectors of the industry—growers, producers, retailers, buyers. The systematic assessment protocol (SAP) used to assess flowers is inspired by different drink industry certification programs, including the WSET as well as the Court of Master Sommeliers coursework and Cicerone Certification Program.

Rice found her WSET education gave her a bit of an advantage. “Both focus on appearance, aroma and taste,” says Rice. And while appearance is (obviously) very different, aroma and taste, she says, share a lot of qualities.

“Fruit, floral, earth and fuel are prominent in both cannabis and wine,” she says.

And, just as with wine, it’s possible to dive into even more specifics within these broader categories. “For example, when evaluating my favorite cannabis flower, Whitethorn Rose from Huckleberry Hill Farms, I can detect red currants and ripe plums with notes of moist moss and fresh lavender.”

Sounds like a tasting note to me.

Further, Rice comments that, like wine, the mouthfeel of cannabis smoke plays a significant role in quality, too.

“The weight of the smoke and where it weighs most on the palate is fun to figure out,” she says. “Harshness is something I look for when evaluating; it’s similar to experiencing harsh tannins from a young Cabernet Sauvignon in the back of the throat.”

One area that was completely new was the concept of rating the experience of a smoke.

“In wine, the effect is usually the same no matter the varietal consumed,” says Rice. “In cannabis, the complex matrix of cannabinoids, terpenes and flavonoids creates an entourage effect which means every cultivar [strain] is a different experience.”

She also had to learn how to “sip” cannabis in order to evaluate that experience without getting so high that she couldn’t accurately perceive and describe the effect. It’s not like you can spit smoke, after all.

“When I taste cannabis, I draw it in slowly to fill less than half of my mouth with smoke and then suck in fresh air to awaken the esters,” she says. “I hold the smoke in my mouth and move it around feeling the weight and thinking about the flavors that are announcing themselves to me and if they are similar or different from the aromas. I then breathe some smoke out my nose, as often the flavor will evolve since the nose has around 400 different types of olfactory receptors. I breathe the rest of the smoke out of my mouth and pause to detect the finish.”

CULINARY CANNABIS

“A good way to connect cannabis to wine is the terpene profile,” says Rice. Terpenes are the aromatic compounds behind many prominent plant aromas and an integral component of olfactory impact, and cannabis is rich in a wide array of them.

Author Jamie Evans, also known as The Herb Somm, has been mastering this connection and offering various experiences to demonstrate it since launching her brand in 2017.

“From the beginning, I created a pairing guide that I use at all my events,” says Evans. On her website, curious consumers can find a list of common cannabis terpenes alongside their wine-like counterparts. For example, the alpha-pinene terpene exudes notes of pine, rosemary and dill, common descriptors found in Pinot Gris, Vermentino and Sauvignon Blanc.

“Many of these aromas and flavors that are included in cannabis are also reflected in wine,” says Evans, adding, “it’s a gourmet ingredient that I can pair with a meal.” And, in fact, her helpful infographics also suggest food pairings as well as common effects and purported terpene benefits, such as anti-inflammatory properties or energizing effects.

Evans hosts events in which cannabis plays a prominent pairing alongside complementary food and wine.

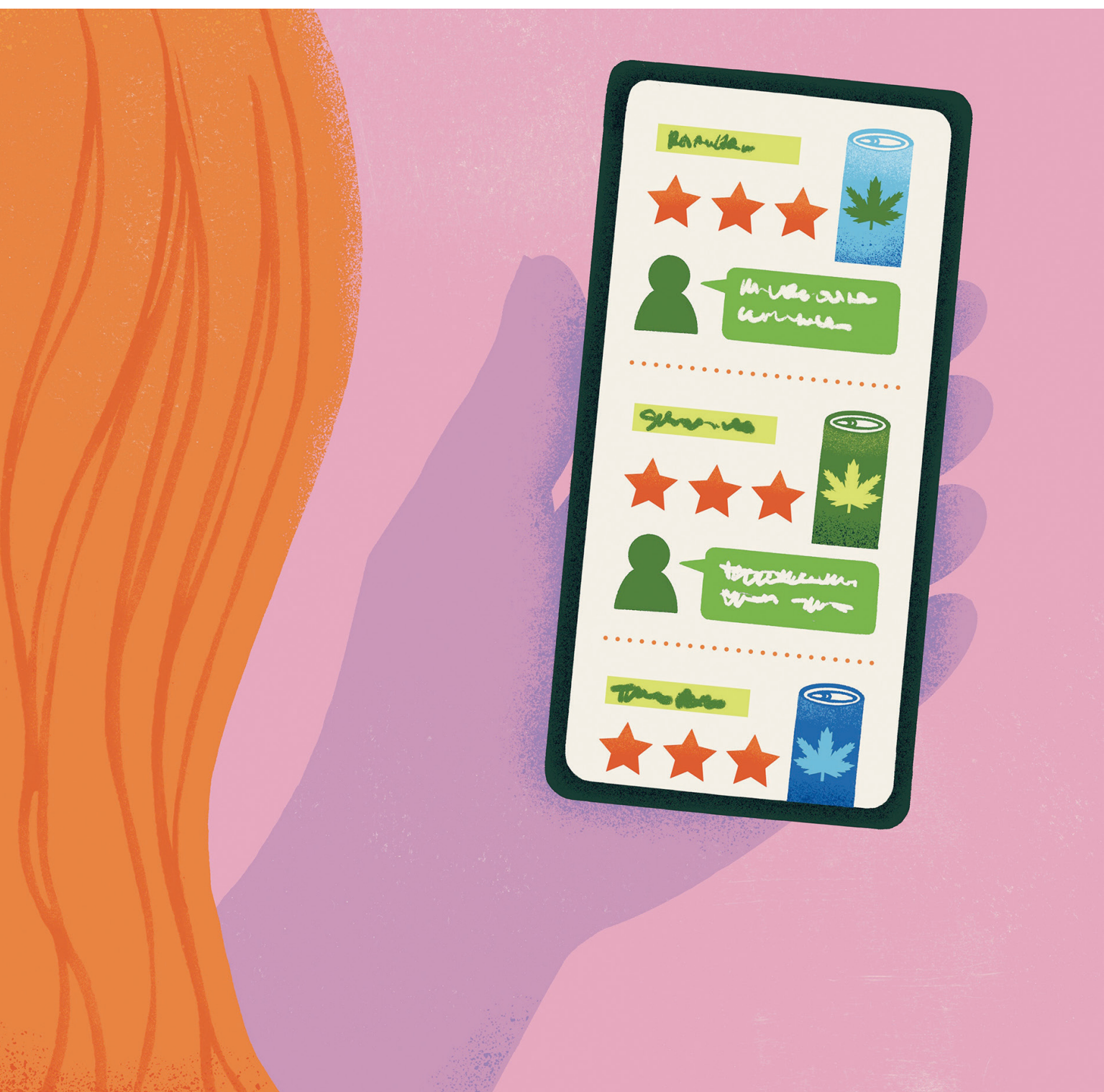
“Culinary cannabis is a great way to give it that elevated approach and break the stoner culture conception,” she says.

When experimenting with a new category, and especially when experimenting with both wine and weed in tandem, moderation is the number one rule.

“You never want to consume a bunch of alcohol and then cannabis because that cross-fade can make you dizzy—start low and go slow,” she advises.

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At her events, Evans finds that three strains and three wines is the perfect amount to smoke and sip alongside a four-course dining menu, curated in partnership between the flower grower and a professional chef.

BUD BUDDY

Ok, but what if you’re curious about cannabis and don’t have crazy wine knowledge or professional experience. That’s OK—like much else today, there’s an app for that.

Outside of her personal business, Evans is also a taster and reviewer for the fairly new app Budist.

Cofounded by partners in life and business Jocelyn Sheltraw and Claudio Miranda, who both have backgrounds in wine, the platform, which officially launched in 2023, is designed to help the canna-curious of any experience level navigate the ever-growing options of weed and weed-infused products.

“I’ve been collecting wine and traveling the wine world for most of my adult life and it’s been a parallel passion along with cannabis,” says Miranda. “Through that process, I, along with our business partners, thought about all the things we’ve learned from *Wine Advocate*, *Vinous* and other publications—that’s something the cannabis industry needs: critics, community and a culture of connoisseurship.”

Wine, coffee, beer, tea, chocolate—the duo along with their team of advisors delved deep into categories where connoisseurship plays a part and where competitions and critics help develop rating systems to educate and guide consumer purchasing decisions. And while wine, notes Miranda, was a major influence in how Budist developed its rating system, it wasn’t the sole consideration.

“We also looked at analogous apps like Trip Advisor, Yelp, Vivino, Rotten Tomatoes, where there’s a crowd-sourcing community,” he adds. “So, on the one hand, we have the more traditional, hierarchal kind of ‘influencer’ but also that bottom-up approach.”

The team of “Budists” is a group of 30 critics which include Ganjiers, journalists, growers and influencers who rate and review products across the cannabis spectrum from flowers to pre-rolls, edibles and drinkables.

“These are individuals who have been sharing their expertise in the cannabis market for years,” says Sheltraw.

“However, due to strict regulations, spaces like Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn don’t allow this type of content to be fully expressed. That’s why we created this dedicated platform—to provide a space where cannabis knowledge and reviews can thrive.”

Budists follow a 50-page editorial guideline which provides the strategy for the assessment, scoring and reviewing, including a standard for consumer communication. From there, users can then follow the model of the Budist reviews when writing their own consumer-based feedback on products.

In addition to creating an online community, the Budist team also hosts a series of events for new and veteran cannabis users alike and also utilizes pairings as a way to engage, educate and entertain their guests.

“We incorporate these pairings—whether tea, coffee, preserves, chocolate—to present something familiar that people can use as a reference point to better understand and appreciate cannabis,” says Sheltraw. “Taking a mental model of something you love, creating a parallel with this new product—that’s what creates that ‘aha’ moment,” adds Miranda.

HAVE BUD, WILL TRAVEL

An area where many cannabis-industry pros see room for growth is in the canna-tourism sector. Think bud tastings around weed country as you would wine tasting around wine country.

“Napa has the perfect growing conditions for both wine and cannabis along with almost four million visitors annually,” comments Rice. “Unfortunately, the region has not been open to cannabis tourism outside of allowing dispensaries to operate, a few clever tour bus operators and private events.”

Sonoma, on the other hand, does have more cannabis tourism opportunities due to having more operators in the region, she adds. But due to regulations, consumers can’t legally visit and taste as they would a winery. So, tourism options, at the moment, are very limiting.

“The best cannabis tourism drink experience I have had was, funny enough, at a winery called Sunstone Winery in Santa Ynez where I was able chose to sample wines in their tasting room or taste their rosin-extracted cannabis beverage on the outside patio,” says Rice. “*Highly recommend!*” **EP**