

As Bordeaux is to wine, California's cannabis seeks its own identity

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News

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State plans marijuana appellations, like wine



Pat Malo, executive director of a local cannabis-industry association, Green Trade Santa Cruz, poses for a photograph on Sept. 28, 2018, at the cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collective in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)



The marijuana cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collective is photographed on Sept. 28, 2018, in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)



Goji OG, one of the marijuana strains cultivated in Santa Cruz mountains for the last decade, is photographed on Sept. 28, 2018, at the cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collective in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)



Pat Malo, executive director of a local cannabis-industry association, Green Trade Santa Cruz, examines a marijuana plant while giving The Mercury News a tour on Sept. 28, 2018, at the cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collective in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)



Goji OG, one of the marijuana strains cultivated in Santa Cruz mountains for the last decade, is photographed on Sept. 28, 2018, at the cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collective in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)



The cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collective uses no pesticides and instead releases predatory insects to control unwanted pests. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)



The marijuana cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collective is photographed on Sept. 28, 2018, in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)



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Only France can claim Champagne. Only Italy can raise Parma pigs. Only Brits can make Stilton cheese.

And soon Santa Cruz, Mendocino, Humboldt and California's other weed-welcoming regions will be granted their own protected symbols of horticultural identity, as California drafts its version of Europe's prestigious "Appellation d'Origine Controllee" – establishing rules that guarantee cannabis carrying that region's name was grown in a specific place, using specific methods.

The first place in the world to offer such designations, California aims to give small traditional growers an edge in the fiercely competitive free market – and give consumers the assurance that their \$320 ounce of Big Sur Holy Bud grew up among rugged beauty and bohemian vibes and not, say, in some San Fernando Valley warehouse.

"We're doing something new and innovative," said Keir Furey of the California Department of Food and Agriculture. At a recent workshop at the Monterey Conference Center, button-down bureaucrats met the weathered Birkenstock crowd to discuss future rules, put in place by Jan. 1, 2021. "We want to create something that will be as useful as possible," he said.

Goji OG, which has been one of the marijuana strains cultivated in Santa Cruz mountains for the last decade, is photographed on Sept. 28, 2018, at the cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collectives in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

The effort is celebrated by the so-called "heritage growers" scattered across the rural regions of the state, who have labored for years in anonymity. Now, with legalization, they fear that outsiders will steal their name and lay claim to their coveted genetics, growing techniques and landscapes – then mass-produce cheap weed like a commodity.

Location has always been key to the cannabis ethos, central to its outlaw romance. If protected from impostors and wannabes, growers say, their brands could rise in status, reflecting the state's most coveted growing regions: Santa Cruz, Carmel Valley, Big Sur, as well as the "Emerald Triangle" counties of Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity. Although growers throughout the state are invited to apply, not everyone will meet eligibility criteria, keeping much of the state's cannabis generic.

Just as Santa Cruz and Monterey vineyards are known for their distinctive wines, those regions' weed savants take pride in their harvests of Goji OG and Gorilla Glue #4, reciting maturation times, buzz properties, fragrance, color and breeding-lineage descriptions (e.g., "sativa-sativa-dominant hybrid bred by Bodhi Seeds, backcrossing Nepali OG x Snow Lotus.")

On a recent tour, a Santa Cruz Mountains farmer showed off techniques perfected by 47 years of growing. His lush emerald-colored gardens are a horticultural Xanadu, fastidious and full of preening beauty and glittery glow. Eight feet tall, his plants are nurtured by local water, organic fertilizer, protective insects, crisp air and a sun that climbs over redwood forests then sweeps across crisp and clear blue skies.

Such growers have studied the constant ebb and flow of cool and warm air, matching strains to idiosyncratic spots of fog and sun. The mountains' eastern gardens are hot and dry; western gardens are cooler and moist. In canyons, rain can pour down in torrents. Ridgelines are parched and sun-baked.

Some soils are hospitable and well-drained limestone; others are less fertile, such as the Franciscan shale. Along the southern Big Sur coast, there's lime; in northern Big Sur, soils are more granitic. Local soil bacteria and fungus vary as well, they say.

"We have unique microclimates, varying from ridge to ridge, with pockets and bowls," said Harmony D'Angelo, lithe with long honey-hued hair. A second generation grower who grew up fearing the buzz of government helicopters, she now works with Monterey County officials to create pilot cannabis projects for the Big Sur Farmers Association.

There's regional lore. Central California's introduction to cannabis happened here, say local growers, when seeds from Mexico were brought to the Santa Lucia Mountains above Big Sur, then improved upon by hippies living on isolated tracts of land with no electricity, plumbing or roads. Celebrated in raucous "harvest parties" on bluffs overlooking the Pacific, our weed eventually found its way to Maui, Northern California, Amsterdam, and beyond.

"Specific regions of California have a long history and heritage of craft cannabis production," said Pat Malo, executive director of the Santa Cruz-based Green Trade, a cannabis collective. "There's also a history of the genetics, with different famous strains passing through different regions at different times. And people farming in their special ways."

Is it possible to discern all that from a couple hits of a joint?

The cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collectives uses no pesticide and releases predatory insects to control unwanted pests. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

A recent study found that 45 percent of cannabis customers can't name a single preferred strain. "In general, cannabis users just don't have the level of loyalty or commitment you might expect," said Mike Luce of High Yield Insights, which conducted the research.

Meanwhile, prices are plummeting as a "green rush" of entrepreneurs, investors and growers from around the world build sprawling multi-million dollar greenhouse complexes in Salinas, Carpinteria, Desert Hot Springs and elsewhere.

But just as California introduced yoga, organic food and meditation into mainstream culture, the appellation system could create a buzz around boutique brands, say growers.

"Consumers know they're buying into your value system," said Big Sur grower Oliver Bates, who's seeking approval for 50 plants at his mountain home, overlooking the Pacific. "Environmentalism. Conservancy. Supporting the legacy growers, who have worked for generations on beautiful treasures."

It would help growers differentiate their brands, said Malo. "I see this as the only chance that these historic producers have to stay competitive in the market," he said.

The process is mandated by state law, which requires the California Department of Food and Agriculture to create a process for state-licensed cultivators to petition for an appellation. There currently are "county-of-origin" requirements, if 100 percent of the cannabis is produced within a designated county. But appellations go much farther, allowing growers to create areas within or beyond counties — and to create specific requirements for how cannabis is grown there.

The marijuana cultivation site of Sweet Water Creek collectives is photographed on Sept. 28, 2018, in Brookdale, Calif. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

Mendocino has already mapped out 11 distinct cannabis appellation regions. The borders don't follow geographic lines, but gravitate around watersheds and tight-knit growing communities like Anderson Valley, Potter Valley and Bell Springs, according to Justin Calvino, executive director of Terroir Mendocino. He worked with a local attorney who assisted vintners, grape-growers and policy makers with the creation of an appellations system for the Napa Valley.

Santa Cruz and Monterey County growers hope to follow suit, eventually creating a patchwork of small and distinctive appellations — Bonny Doon, Corralitos, Brookdale, Ben Lomond, Carmel Valley and beyond — that reflect the region's laid-back bohème.

"Someone here could make their little farm world famous — in a world-famous appellation, that's in a world-famous county, that's in a world-famous state," said Malo.

"We've been small underground communities for years and years," he said. "Now we can tell our stories."