

Grass Fed: Cannabis Cooking in the United States

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ABSTRACT: Would-be cannabis cooks in today's post-prohibition world have a wealth of choices among glossy cookbooks, magazines, and wellness guides all showcasing this herb, many produced by content creators intent on selling new audiences on the role weed can play in enlightened self-care, dining, and entertaining. In considering this emerging area of cooking culture that features an herb that was, until recently, illegal, the authors look back at publications from half a century earlier, when a turned-on generation imagined a future in which the herb was legal. The psychedelic dishes presented in cookbooks and underground newspapers in the 1960s and 1970s reveal a countercultural palate that extended beyond the ubiquitous pot brownie and provide an informative counterpoint to today's recipes and remedies.

122

At the New York Public Library, most of the newly released cookbooks arrive on our shelves from publishers automatically. Cooking, baking, any and all food-related books are hugely popular with patrons, so we tell the book vendors our budget and then watch as the books trickle in, month by month. With such a large collection, it's easy to spot trends: Atkins, South Beach, keto, gluten-free, sourdough – and you notice the regular players, too: Martha, Jamie, Alton, Chrissy. But a few newcomers have joined the table in the last few years, bringing with them a new ingredient which until just a few years ago wasn't even legal. Their new cookbooks are not just cookbooks. They're guides to getting well, or high, or both. Not so long ago, the most infamous cookbook to cover cannabis was *The Anarchist Cookbook*. Today's cookbooks, with their locked-down prescriptive approaches to serving sizes and safety, are a far cry from promoting anarchy in the kitchen.

Would-be cannabis cooks and diners in today's post-prohibition world have a wealth of choices among glossy cookbooks, magazines, and wellness guides all showcasing this herb, many produced by content creators intent on selling new audiences on the role weed can play in enlightened self-care, dining, and entertaining. What about half a century earlier, when *The Anarchist Cookbook* first appeared and a turned-on generation imagined a future in which the herb was legal? Did the countercultural cannabis palate extend beyond the ubiquitous pot brownie? Yes, it did, as we found by reading cookbooks and periodicals from the 1960s and 1970s. The psychedelic dishes from that period provide an informative counterpoint to today's recipes and remedies.

Cannabis as an Herb

Cannabis is an annual flowering herb which has been valued for thousands of years by humans both for its strong fibres (good for rope and canvas) as well as its psychoactive and pain-relieving cannabinoids (including THC and CBD). It also has an extensive history as an ingredient in dishes around the world. In India, *bhang*, a milk-based drink with cannabis, spices and seeds, is consumed during Hindu rituals and celebrations. In Morocco, one can find *majoun*, a sweet rolled ball filled with honey, nuts, cannabis, and dried fruit.¹

In the United States, cannabis has long been subject to polarizing debates. Is it toxic or medicinal? A multipurpose plant or a dangerous weed? A food or a drug? Groovy or scary? Cannabis shifted from being the source of common legal tinctures and candies to become classed as a dangerous drug, prohibited in the United States first in 1937 – targeting African Americans and Mexicans – and then again in 1970.² But cannabis and medical rights activists were ultimately successful in changing state governments' laws to legalize the herb. Today, thirty-three states allow cannabis use for medical purposes and eleven states permit it for recreational use.³ Prior to the measured and deliberate lifting of prohibition, cannabis went underground for decades.

Counterculture's Kitchens

Evelyn Schmevelyn, Deena Shupe, and the True Light Beavers may not have the same name recognition as Fannie Farmer or Irma Rombauer in kitchens today. But these authors were among many writers, gardeners, activists, and alternative living experimentalists who wrote cookbooks, pamphlets, and articles on cannabis. They each championed the herb's culinary potential in their own ways by writing cookbooks and articles in underground newspapers (although sometimes using pseudonyms). The dishes they presented in those freewheeling days of the 1960s and 1970s mirror the changing food culture of that moment in time, but with the addition of weed. Readers could find weed-heightened versions of homey dishes like meatloaf as well as more ambitious surprises like frogs' legs. Some cannabis recipes depended on convenient boxed and canned foods, while others incorporated fresh garden produce. And some writers seemingly offered grass-forward adaptations of recipes from their own childhood comfort food memories.

New York-based conceptual designer Deena Shupe aimed to help 'transform your kitchen from a place for traditional concoctions into a new place to turn on' with *The High Art of Cooking*.⁴ One imagines Shupe in her Greenwich Village apartment, trying out recipes on fellow artists (like Hannah Wilke, whose works illustrate *The High Art*) while her new puppy Fawn (also featured in her cookbook) looks on. *The High Art* feels personal and welcoming, and it draws cooking inspiration from a variety of culinary corners. Shupe's own Jewish family recipes, including borscht dairy and chopped herring, share space with Japanese *zensai* chicken bits and golden bats (deep fried weed-stuffed frogs' legs). Shupe

also includes recipes influenced by the emerging organic movement in the United States. ‘Natural foods heighten your sensory appetite, and so does that natural weed’, she explains when introducing a chapter focusing on whole grains and fresh vegetables and fruits.⁵ But even a recipe for something as wholesome as a double batch of whole wheat bread includes one cup of grass and this sly note: ‘Each raised bread highs 10’.⁶

One hundred miles north of Greenwich Village, the members of a Woodstock, New York-based commune called the True Light Beavers were busy at work on *Eat, Fast, Feast*, a rambling cookbook and memoir that reveals its authors’ priorities through the life they describe. Recipes mingle with discussions of composting, feeding babies, wine making, food preservation, using insects in agriculture, fasting, foraging, and butchering, accompanied by short fiction (‘pornography of the palate’) and art.⁷ In a chapter promising ‘to turn your mind on through your mouth’, they offer psychoactive recipes which include two for the fruit-nut-cannabis paste they call ‘marjoome’: the ‘authentic’ version makes use of cannabis, oil, chickpea flour, dates, and almonds, while the ‘Europeanized’ recipe replaces chickpea flour with ‘flour (or brownie or chocolate cake mix)’ and suggests including raisins.⁸

124 The whimsically pen-named author Evelyn Schmevelyn, recognizing that for some, eating cannabis would require a bit of orientation, provides it in *Cooking with Marijuana*. She sprinkles her breezy advice among recipes and trippy line drawings of dancing bananas, human-sized mushrooms, and loads of grinning hippies. Schmevelyn teaches you to pre-cook and grind up the herb to avoid its ‘awful gritty feeling’ and ‘acidic unforgettable flavor’, and she offers wise words about the delayed high that comes from eating weed: ‘Give it a chance before you eat another helping or you may find yourself deeply engrossed in the stitches on your saddle shoes.’⁹ Because she finds ‘food that is very spicy and flavorful is best able to accommodate pot’, she includes ‘pot Italiano’ recipes as well as ‘delicacies with a Mexican flavor’.¹⁰ A chapter called ‘Having Fun with Bananas’ features Farouk’s dick, a dish of bacon-wrapped mini-bananas dusted with sugar and hashish.¹¹ And although she doesn’t lean heavily on processed food ingredients, Schmevelyn kindly provides the following tips on improving brownies made from a mix: pre-cook and grind weed to a fine powder, and stir in extras like wheat germ, chocolate chips, or coconut flakes.¹²

It was hard to avoid brownie talk in publications from that period, and cannabis cookbooks today often include brownies as well – nodding to their place in history while at the same time reinventing them completely for twenty-first-century tastes. *Quicksilver Times*, an underground newspaper based in Washington, DC, reported in 1971 that the brownie ‘has become the traditional method of cooking with grass in the United States’ in an article about the herb. The unnamed author provided a few beginner recipes as well – for infused butter, honey slides (fried weed suspended in warm honey), and ‘cop-out brownies’, noting, ‘We recommend Betty Crocker Mix because it has the strongest brownie flavor and thus best masks the grass flavor.’¹³

Another dessert, wiggley weed, is featured in an ‘all-weed meal’ in *The Fifth Estate*, a Detroit, Michigan-based paper that made weed their cover story in April 1973. Their cannabis dining article is one of a series of pieces about the herb, including its health benefits and how to ‘avoid that bust’ by police when at home, in your car, or while hitchhiking. To make wiggley weed, readers are advised to first make a batch of weed tea by boiling cannabis leaves, stems, and seeds in water for at least four hours (‘the longer the better’). The resulting liquid, once strained, is used ‘instead of water with any fruit jello’.¹⁴ Simple, portable, and sweet. One might consider wiggley weed’s place among other spiked gelatine-based sweets like cannabis-infused gummies so popular today and candy-coloured alcohol-infused jello shots.

Cannabis cooking formed part of larger conversations about politics, race, and cultural change taking place in underground newspapers. The *Los Angeles Free Press*, regularly answered readers’ cannabis questions via ‘Dr Hip Pocrates’ and ran advertisements for mail-order weed cookbooks. Readers could also find out about the struggles faced by the local Black Panther Party when opening their free medical clinic.¹⁵ In the same issue of *The Fifth Estate* that featured wiggley weed is news of workshops hosted by the city’s Women’s Health Project for women who ‘want to learn about their bodies and want to begin developing alternatives to the way women are treated in traditional medical settings’.¹⁶ That imperative to understand, control, and care for one’s own body would be echoed in actions of those who would soon lead the fight to legalize cannabis for medical use, as well as, much later, in the motivation of readers in 2016 turning to *The Medical Marijuana Dispensary*. In the March 1974 issue of *The Lesbian Tide*, Sudi Mae, ‘friend of maryjane’, argued that women should support an upcoming ‘reeferendum’ decriminalizing possession and use of weed in California to ensure control over ‘our own lives & bodies’, outlining ‘parallels between the state’s laws against gay love & against grass’.¹⁷ Mae also included a culinary argument for supporting decriminalization: although it took more weed to get high by eating than by smoking, the referendum would allow prices to drop and people to grow their own, so that ‘we could afford baked marijuana instead of roasted lung’.¹⁸

Sudi Mae wasn’t alone in considering the culinary benefits of growing one’s own. *The Primo Plant: Growing Sinsemilla Marijuana* provides far more cultivation guidance than kitchen advice, but its author, Carolyn ‘Mountain Girl’ Garcia, indulged readers with two foundational infusion recipes (for marijuana butter and for Barney’s tequila verde).¹⁹ Dedicated to J. I. Rodale (a publisher whom *The New York Times Magazine* called ‘the guru of the organic food cult’ in 1971), *The Primo Plant* outlines Garcia’s cultivation method that succeeds without use of chemical fertilizers, which she states may be injurious to plants and ‘affect the taste’.²⁰ One can trust Garcia’s advice on taste, as she has been both an influential figure in cannabis legalization efforts as well as a countercultural celebrity long associated with musician Jerry Garcia and his band, the Grateful Dead.

The anonymous author of *A Guide to the Complete Enjoyment of Pot* also includes instructions on growing and preparing your own plants. But half of this slender volume is devoted to recipes, including one for ‘glorified high’, a cannabis-laced spin on a conventional dish called glorified rice.²¹ A dessert of rice, cream, canned or fresh fruit, and marshmallows, glorified rice was promoted to homemakers across the United States through advertisements placed by the Southern Rice Industry’s Home Economics Department in *Good Housekeeping Magazine* in the early decades of the twentieth century.²² Another well-established American recipe, shrimp wiggle, also gets a cannabis makeover thanks to the anonymous creators of *Supermother’s Cooking with Grass*, a collection of twelve printed recipe cards sold as a set. A classic chafing dish recipe that had a place in *Joy of Cooking* for decades, shrimp wiggle was only removed from that book in 2019 with the publication of *Joy’s* ninth edition.²³ *Supermother’s* weedy version largely follows that of *Joy’s* first edition, but it uses more butter (which would, one imagines, be soaked up by the 1/8 cup of grass).²⁴

Weed as a Medical Necessity

126 Despite the continued presence of cannabis recipes in counterculture newspapers and cookbooks, and the creative ways their authors suggested incorporating the herb into one’s diet, cannabis was not as enthusiastically received by the U.S. government. In 1970, President Nixon – who violently opposed to both cannabis and people who used it, especially people of colour – signed the Controlled Substances Act, which classified drugs by different schedules based on medicinal value and potential for abuse.²⁵ Cannabis fell alongside LSD and heroin under Schedule I: high potential for abuse and no currently accepted medical use.²⁶ In the years that followed the signing of the CSA, many medical rights activists took issue with the schedule designation or ignored it completely. And one in particular made edible cannabis the cornerstone of her work.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Mary Jane Rathbun became an icon in San Francisco for her commitment to supplying AIDS patients, or her ‘kids’ as she called them, with free cannabis-laced brownies to help ease pain and increase appetite. This seemingly innocuous white lady became the poster child – or rather, poster grandmother – for medical rights and cannabis legalization in the form of her ‘magically delicious’ edibles. But Rathbun, who became known as ‘Brownie Mary’, didn’t start baking with charity in mind. Upon arriving in San Francisco from the Midwest, she started her weed-spiked brownie business to supplement income from her waitressing job. By the late 1970s, she was selling up to fifty dozen brownies a day in her Castro neighbourhood, until leaflets advertising her goods gave her away to the police. As part of her court-mandated community service, she volunteered with the AIDS outpatient wing of the San Francisco General Hospital just as the AIDS crisis was gaining national attention. Despite her brush with the law, she brought cannabis brownies every day to the patients in paper bags, and within a few years, her

charitable baking was famous throughout the city.²⁷ While her commitment to helping her ‘kids’ through baking didn’t stop the arrests, it did stop the police from pressing charges. In August 1992, just a month after her third arrest, the Board of Supervisors proclaimed August 25th ‘Brownie Mary Day’ for the city of San Francisco.²⁸

Four years later, due in part to the notoriety of Brownie Mary and the work of many others, California became the first state to legalize cannabis for medical use.²⁹ And in doing so, that legislation put into motion a wave of medical and recreational legalization throughout the country that is still moving forward today.

Eating Weed Today

Since so many states have begun lifting prohibitions, today’s home cooks can choose from among a glut of new cannabis cookbooks. Unlike counterculture titles that were published by underground presses or available only via mail order, today’s titles are proudly displayed on the shelves of bookstores, purchased by public libraries, and used as promotional and retail platforms for their authors. But like cannabis itself, there are many strains to these cookbooks, each one approaching the herb through a different lens and for particular audiences. Some promote cannabis as an elixir to be prescribed as part of a larger wellness program, while others look to cannabis as an ingredient to enhance flavour and expand consciousness. And still others, but a smaller number to be sure, just want to get you high.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *The Official High Times Cannabis Cookbook* falls under the latter category. The cookbook is a celebration of the years of recipes published in its namesake magazine, *High Times*. It features dishes from former writers and editors, such as the long-standing *High Times* Psychedelic Kitchen columnist Chef Ra (his great ganja pumpkin pie graces the cover), and other canna-friendly chefs – some famous (Eddie Huang’s Cheeto fried chicken), and others less so (Ganja Granny’s smoked mac ‘n’ cheese).³⁰ While *High Times* was founded in 1974 alongside other counterculture publications, it’s outlasted them all, garnering mainstream appeal with a name that has become synonymous with cannabis culture. The *High Times* cookbook was the first cannabis cookbook released by a major commercial publisher, Chronicle Books, in 2012, when cannabis was legal for medical use in about a dozen states and on the verge of legal recreational use.³¹ And while the recipes do nod to ‘medibles’ by offering two dosing measurements – the medical dosing is more than twice the recreational amount – the cookbook openly promotes a ‘stoner-style cuisine’ with irreverence, humour, and willingness to experiment using one’s ‘stash’ in food.³² Instead of serving sizes, the recipes in *High Times* boast the number of people who can get properly stoned from each dish. Fat joints and cold beer are the suggested accompaniments to the Willie Nelson-inspired Texas cannabis chili recipe.

Despite its conventional appearance and the concessions it makes to adjust recipes for medical use, the *High Times Cannabis Cookbook* is a throwback. Its authors wholeheartedly

embrace a cannabis high and in doing so align themselves more with their counterculture predecessors than with their commercialized and often health-conscious successors.

Laurie Wolf is one of the new breed of wellness-focused guides. Called ‘the Martha Stewart of marijuana edibles’ by the *New Yorker* magazine, Wolf is half of the mother-daughter-in-law team Laurie & Maryjane, an Oregon-based business whose aim is to provide high-quality and reliable edibles to those seeking the healthful benefits of cannabis.³³ She’s also the author of four cookbooks, including the *Medical Marijuana Dispensary* which, like its title suggests, dispenses thorough and exacting advice for first-time users. Wolf goes into great detail explaining dosing, cannabis strains, and the best methods of cannabis intake based on physical limitations. It’s a prescription bottle in book form, where you’ll find recipes for cannabis cough syrups, lozenges, salves, and suppositories. The food-based recipes here are secondary – a hodgepodge of mostly hearty, many gluten-free, somewhat bland foods (besides cannabis, few other herbs make an appearance): rice and bean bowl, stuffed sweet potato, stewed prunes. Will readers of Wolf’s book, new to edibles and potentially suffering from illness, whip up a canna-compound to add to their overnight French toast? Perhaps, but far more likely is now that they trust Wolf’s cautious expertise, they’ll buy her line of small batch edibles and CBD granola by mail.

While *High Times* and Laurie Wolf might look at ingesting cannabis as a one-time high or as a dose of medicine, author Cedella Marley promotes a more holistic and spiritual approach to cannabis. It’s the tradition she grew up with, as the child of reggae royalty, Bob and Rita Marley. In 2017, she published *Cooking with Herb*, a collection of low-dosage recipes that incorporate the herb seamlessly into all the facets of one’s life, ‘from teas and tonics to soups and soaks’.³⁴ The seventy-five recipes include many Caribbean dishes and Marley family favourites, like jerk chicken and green juices, healthful breakfasts, tonics and teas, and scrubs and masks. Legalization, Marley points out, now allows for the herb to be present throughout one’s daily life with a reverence that she grew up with: ‘The ways that my family uses Herb are as diverse and varied as the colors of the ocean. It is really a part of the fabric of our lives’.³⁵

Andrea Drummer’s 2017 book *Cannabis Cuisine: Bud Pairings of a Born Again Chef* represents a different cannabis strain altogether, although, like *Cooking with Herb*, it is a post-prohibition cookbook by a black woman in an industry with few faces of colour. Drummer is a formally trained chef, a Cordon Bleu graduate and head chef of the country’s only cannabis restaurant, the Original Cannabis Cafe (née Lowell Cafe), in West Hollywood. Drummer writes about her childhood, family, food, cooking, and her reacquaintance with cannabis as an adult. Her recipes reflect her thoughtfulness: they’re creative, bold, modestly dosed – Drummer calls for approximately one quarter of the cannabis *High Times* uses in a similar recipe – and yet, although all her recipes call for cannabis oils and butters, the herb is secondary to both her narrative and to her dishes.³⁶ The recipes in *Cannabis Cuisine* stand out far more for their flavour combinations and culinary complexity than

for the potentially brow-raising inclusion of weed. For Drummer, cannabis is yet another ingredient among a list you can add to, or swap out completely, as you wish.

[...] I've gleefully brought in an exciting new concept and ingredient to the repertoire—cannabis. But wait, it is actually no different from the fresh corn that my father used to bestow upon us as kids, or the ripened berries, peaches, and crab apples that we'd pick along the roadside. I dissect cannabis as I do everything else: carefully and consideringly. I smell and taste its potential as a full-bodied ingredient, honoring the integrity of the various strains and perfectly pairing them with other ingredients, flavors, textures, and tastes.³⁷

Drummer hones in on the food itself, with dishes like quail confit with balsamic blueberry barbecue sauce (one tablespoon cannabis oil for eight servings) or blood orange sorbet (half gram for six servings).³⁸ This is deliberate. Unlike other cookbook authors whose business model often relies on website sales of cannabis infusions and edibles, Drummer's cooking stands on its own – without the bud – because it has to: the menu of the Original Cannabis Cafe does not yet feature infused dishes (it's not legal). Instead, *Cannabis Cuisine* demonstrates Drummer's culinary range and talent elevating cannabis to an ingredient that can be incorporated into a fine dining experience.

Due to the limited number of online consumption licenses, Drummer's Original Cannabis Cafe is the first, and thus far, only restaurant specializing in cannabis in California.³⁹ While the hospitality industry is one that offered the most promise for cannabis-friendly chefs and restaurateurs, it has also proven to be one of the most challenging to penetrate due to strict local and state-wide licenses and regulations. Cookbooks, then, offer one of the few ways for chefs and edibles experts to market themselves, their brands, and their products without having to muscle through a confusing system of compliance rules and regulations.

It's unclear whether Brownie Mary, a woman whose very identity is linked to cannabis brownies, followed a recipe besides the one she whipped up on her own. But likely not. Rathbun didn't start baking brownies because a cookbook published an especially enticing recipe, but because there was a market for them – legal or not – that she easily tapped into. Her home-baked brownies both supplemented her income and comforted AIDS patients, so much so that with both projects, she instituted waiting lists for her treats.⁴⁰ And she didn't feel compelled to leave a recipe behind either. Even the 1993 cookbook she and fellow activist Dennis Peron co-authored, *Brownie Mary's Marijuana Cookbook and Dennis Peron's Recipe for Social Change*, slyly left out that very sweet so many readers were hoping to recreate on their own. 'When and if they legalize it', she told the *New York Times* in 1996, 'I'll sell my brownie recipe to Betty Crocker or Duncan Hines and take the profits and buy an old Victorian for my kids with AIDS'.⁴¹ When she died in 1999, she took her brownie recipe to the grave.

The Future of the Herb

For all the discussion around the popularity of cannabis and its inclusion in recent cookbooks, one is not likely to see Betty Crocker's Brownie Mary Mix at the local Safeway anytime soon. Major food manufacturers like Kraft and General Mills will likely wait until cannabis is removed from the Schedule I classification and becomes legal throughout the United States. But even without federal legalization, there is reason for cannabis advocates to worry about intrusion of Big Canna.

Legalization has produced many of the benefits advocates have been campaigning for, but it has not ameliorated longstanding injustices. Many cannabis chefs and producers are left out of the legal marketplace due to prohibitions against those with prior arrests. And for people of colour, who are nearly four times more likely than whites to be arrested for cannabis despite similar usage rates, these laws perpetuate the inequities.⁴² Additionally, 'the reluctance of banks to supply credit to marijuana entrepreneurs for fear of being seen as enabling a business still illegal under federal law' leaves licenses open only to wealthy individuals and, of course, to Big Canna.⁴³

130 Small growers are also concerned by the threat of Marlboro Man suddenly rolling a joint and patenting it. Mountain Girl may have imagined a future of individual gardeners nurturing and enjoying their own herb gardens, but today huge agricultural companies like Scotts Miracle-Gro have been buying up the means of cannabis production.⁴⁴ And there are worries that Monsanto will develop a genetically modified strain of cannabis and corner the market – once it becomes legal.⁴⁵ In other words, there are many cannabis advocates who are understandably nervous that the future of cannabis legalization will continue to entice large corporate interests, who, like Big Pharma, see the monetary gain in the herb's medicinal value. As former *High Times* editor David Bienenstock said, 'Prohibition, for all of its evils, acted in a way to protect the underground economy from capitalism'.⁴⁶

Cannabis culture in 2020 continues to be rooted in opposing worlds: legal and outlawed, counterculture and mainstream, essential and recreational, and homespun and corporate. And questions remain about what lies ahead: What is the future of cannabis cooking? And who will be welcome at the table?

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Grass Fed: Cannabis Cooking in the United States

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Grass Fed: Cannabis Cooking in the United States

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