

POT LUCK: CULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARIJUANA EFFECT

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to open up discussions on marijuana as a psychoactive substance that engages with food and the act of eating in very complex and discursive ways. This study conducts numerous interviews that demonstrate that, frequently, marijuana is not the countercultural drug it is commonly supposed to be if analysed in its relations to food habits and the act of consumption. It also brings to light the surprising ways in which marijuana affects attitudes towards certain kinds of foods, thereby open up a space for a kind of psycho geographical tourism within the self.

Key words: Marijuana, food, ethnography, cultural variations.

INTRODUCTION

It was close to 3 a.m. one midsummer morning when a couple of friends and I decided to cook an elaborate meal. We had been smoking hashish continually for the past few hours, and 'the munchies' were beginning to set in. So we went downstairs to the kitchen in my Calcutta home, raided the refrigerator for supplies, and went about cooking a very large crack-of-dawn snack, if it can be called that, consisting of a huge pot of Reggano brand spaghetti swimming in

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tomato sauce, three cans of Campbell's soup, potatoes and *posto* (a typically Bengali preparation – *posto* is a derivative of the poppy plant, and consuming very large quantities does indeed induce mild stupor; it is, however, legal in West Bengal, although other parts of the world might not view it as benignly), twelve slices of toasted bread, and nine eggs, scrambled. And thus it was that about an hour later, three young men in a small corner of Calcutta sat down to a meal that was a melange of traditional Bengali fare, something Italian, something quintessentially American and something akin to a simple British breakfast. And all because of pot.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that consuming marijuana causes an intense feeling of hunger.² Theories abound, with the article cited in the footnote the latest and probably most authoritative yet. But in what ways do human beings satisfy this marijuana-induced hunger commonly known as 'the munchies'? Do different cultures respond differently to the munchies? And what larger cultural significances does marijuana have on the consumption of food? This paper seeks to examine, through ethnographic study, the broader implications marijuana might possess in determining taste and patterns of food consumption, and alterations therein.

A NOTE ON METHOD

Various interviews were conducted, both in person and via email and online chat engines. The respondents were male and female, all of them being long-time and/or regular marijuana users (the one exception is noted in the appropriate place below). All names have been changed; respondents chose their own pseudonyms and are

² See Vincenzo Di Marzo et al., "Leptin-regulated endocannabinoids are involved in maintaining food intake," *Nature* 410, 822-825 (2001), <http://0-www.nature.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/nature/journal/v410/n6830/full/410822a0.html>.

identified as such in the paper. Most of the time, they are identified geographically by their hometown, except in a few cases in which the respondents preferred the greater anonymity that comes with a country or continent of origin. While there is not much uniformity in their professions, they all have somewhat common academic and socio-economic backgrounds, which is probably one severe limitation of this study. However, their differing cultural spaces are what interest me, and this can hopefully contribute towards a greater understanding of the consumption of food in relation to marijuana across cultures.

QUESTIONS OF TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this paper, the words 'marijuana' and 'cannabis' are used interchangeably. Many respondents frequently use 'hash', 'weed', 'pot' or '*bhaang*'/'*bhang*' instead. Hash or hashish is the THC-rich resinous material of the cannabis plant, usually dried and compressed into a variety of forms. Small pieces can then be broken off and smoked in a pipe or a bong, or it can be ground into very small fragments and mixed with tobacco or 'weed' (the leaves, stem, etc of the cannabis plant, which is also smoked as a substance on its own) and smoked in a joint. Bhang comprises the leaf and flower of a female cannabis sativa plant and is usually consumed only on the Indian subcontinent, as a beverage mixed into a traditional north Indian drink called *thandai*, which is a cold drink prepared with milk, spices, almonds and sugar. It can also be mixed into other similar drinks, food, or, less commonly, smoked.

THC refers to delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, "a molecule with a structure unlike any other found in nature before or since."³ It was identified in the mid-1960s by Israeli neuroscientist Raphael Mechoulam as "the chemical component responsible for the psychoactive effects of marijuana."⁴ The human body is uniquely

receptive to THC, and in 1988, Allyn Howlett, a researcher at the St. Louis University Medical School, discovered a specific receptor for THC in the brain.³ Various other Indian foods are mentioned in this paper; they will be defined where appropriate.

CULTURE, CRAVING AND COCKTAILS

Gastronomic cravings are more often than not mediated by cultural contexts. People usually seem to crave familiar tastes (which is not to say they crave familiar foods). Indians, for instance, will crave spicy, 'Indian' tastes more often than not, while my Serbian flatmate frequently craves what she calls a 'herbal spicy' taste that is reminiscent of her grandmother's cooking. Consumption of cannabis, however, appears to dissolve cravings for the discrete, familiar tastes, tending to birth more uniform desires for spicy and sweet foods in everyone, regardless of cultural background. Ricardo Moralez, a graduate student from Europe, said he always wants something that's sweet alternating with salty food, "as if I'm pregnant."⁶ This conflation of the munchies with a biologically creative process may not be sheer coincidence – the so-called creativity marijuana is supposed to unleash seems to seek release often through physiological means. Hunger is substituted for the intellectual productivity that most people expect to experience, and rationalisation thus becomes an essential tool to satisfy this expectation that, contrary to popular belief, is usually not realised.

³ Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001), 152.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 153. This basically leads to the inescapable conclusion that the human brain is, by its very physiognomy, designed towards the reception of cannabinoids or cannabinoid-like substances.

⁶ Ricardo Moralez (name changed), interview by author, Bowling Green, OH, September 18, 2008.

Notably, eating takes on a touristic dimension – many tastes are craved, either alternately, as in Ricardo's case, or all at once – Manjulika Ramachandran⁷ loves to eat sweet and spicy foods, “separately and together” (*italics mine*). A multitude of experiences is usually chosen over a single experience (it is important to note, though, that this too has its exceptions. Guru⁸, an old schoolfellow in Calcutta, doesn't care what he eats when stoned as long as it's “one dish” only).

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes how food experiences not only “organize and integrate a particularly complex set of sensory and social experiences in distinctive ways, but also they form edible chronotopes (sensory space-time convergences)... Shopping, cooking and eating become more like accessing an edible database of infinite permutation than stepping into a culinary world that is defined by slower moving coalescences of geology, climate, history, and culture captured by the idea of terroir and protected by appellation.”⁹ This is why culinary tourism becomes significant, she proposes, because “the capacity of food to hold time, place and memory is valued all the more in an era of hypermobility.”¹⁰ I would suggest that marijuana acts as a substance that sparks in the imagination a desire to wander, to 'travel' outside of one's quotidian scope of life into a new realm of experience, and, as expressed above, imaginative and

⁷ Manjulika Ramachandran (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 6, 2008.

⁸ Guru (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 6, 2008.

⁹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, foreword to *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), xiii. Terroir, it should be noted, denotes the special characteristics something (usually French wine, which is the context in which the term originated, but also tea, coffee, and other foods in general) possesses because of its geographical situation/s and specification/s.

physiological cravings both often collapse into one or the other. Touristic cravings are here dependent on cultures – for all of my Indian respondents, the slower moving coalescences of food held together by terroir, that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett identifies as motivating forces for culinary tourism, are a fact of everyday life. All of them are originally from Calcutta, and have lived there all or for most of their lives, and, consequently, the food they are used to has all the elements of geology, climate, history and culture inscribed within it. Everyone buys fresh produce in Calcutta, usually at farmers' markets; the daily Calcuttan diet has remained more-or-less unchanged, ingredients-wise and preparation-wise, for the last century or more; and most families are large, and the women of the house (mothers, grandmothers) are traditionally in charge of the food, preparing elaborate meals day in and day out following age-old recipes. For these respondents, culinary tourism becomes a move towards the Western notion of fast food, a quick sandwich being more emblematic of the unknown and seldom-experienced than a 'proper' Bengali rice-lentil-curry meal.¹¹ Jean-Pierre Lafitte¹², a Calcuttan now residing in New Delhi, craves familiar tastes (“bold flavours,” as he put it) but indulges in less culturally familiar foods when stoned and hungry – he said–

Hamburgers, submarine sandwiches, pizzas, kebabs,¹³
 crisps, chocolate, biscuits, fried foods, fruit, dips, sweet
 curd, yoghurt, ice cream, dumplings, kebab-rolls, pastries,
 and cold beverages (in summer) and hot drinks (in winter)
 are essentially what I munchy on.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ This is the approximate standard structural framework of a typical Bengali meal. See Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

¹² Jean-Pierre Lafitte (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 9, 2008.

In contrast, my American respondents professed a desire for elaborately prepared meals every time they were afflicted by the munchies. Headbloom,¹⁵ an American graduate student, prefers the slower moving sense of community that comes with carefully preparing a large dinner as opposed to the “edible database of infinite permutation [that is prevalent in this American] era of hypermobility” – when stoned, he is far more inclined towards a ‘proper’ meal than to fast food –

I'll enjoy if we're high and we roll over to a fast food place, but given a choice, I enjoy preparing something [more]. I enjoy the sense of community that goes into many people cooking together. I love the aspect of making things for people, and getting things made for me.¹⁶

This touristic desire is also manifested in the need to experiment with food when stoned. The ‘edible database’ becomes an “edible dynamic... a living medium through which people can relate to each other and their nourishment.” (Belasco 1989 : 22) The dimension of ‘wandering’ that marijuana is so famous for providing – the French poet Charles Baudelaire often talks about the ability of the marijuana-saturated mind to fly (“Fly, O my mind,” he writes, in ‘Elevation’) in his essay ‘Poem of Hashish,’ and Walter Benjamin, who introduced the idea of the imaginative maps of the flaneur who roams aimlessly and observes everything, was profoundly influenced by marijuana – is transformed into this desire to travel amid the byways of hitherto unexplored cuisines. The desperate urge to experiment with strange combinations of foods constantly manifests itself. Different tastes

¹³ Chunks of meat cooked on a coal fire. Usually very spicy.

¹⁴ Lafitte, e-mail message to author.

¹⁵ Headbloom (name changed), interview by author, Bowling Green, OH, November 10, 2008.

¹⁶ Ibid.

seemingly need to be combined into one, and most people begin to express a predilection for food that is in the nature of imaginative cocktails. One respondent¹⁸ said she tried “*shondesh*¹⁹ with ketchup and fries with some weird salsa-honey-dip thing,” while another, who identified herself as Vibgyor, said one of the strangest combinations she had tried was “jelly babies with chilli sauce. The following morning was very interesting.”²⁰

This desire to experiment with weird combinations of tastes and foods seems to cut across cultures and psychologies. Almost all my interviewees claimed to have consciously desired trying incompatible concoctions when they are stoned. The list ranges from eating cookie dough with “a quart of egg nog” and “*Ballychow* (a Burmese preparation of dried [and spiced] fish), cheese and tomato sauce on toast”²¹ to “*biryani* and *payesh*. Together.”²² In fact, almost all my respondents craved a multiplicity of tastes when under the influence. A “range of textures” was a frequent response I received to my question of the kind of tastes craved when stoned. Headbloom said—

It's really nice to have a variety of flavourful things, rather than have a bag of chips and salsa. A bigger palette of food is what I

¹⁸ Ramachandran, e-mail message to author.

¹⁹ *Shondesh* is a quintessentially Bengali dessert usually made with cottage cheese or condensed milk. It is mostly soft and dry, and more often than not mildly sweet, as opposed to many other Bengali desserts which can taste nauseatingly sweet to the unaccustomed palate.

²⁰ Vibgyor (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 12, 2008.

²¹ Lafitte, e-mail message to author. The respondent stressed how “horrible” the combination tasted to him, “although some people did seem to like it.”

²² Bluegreen (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 12, 2008. *Biryani* is a family of Mughal/Persian dishes made with rice, meat, potatoes and spices (with saffron usually being an essential ingredient), the rice being cooked separately from the rest of the ingredients and then everything being mixed together. *Payesh* is a quintessentially Bengali dessert. Usual ingredients include rice, milk, jaggery and various dry fruits.

prefer. Mexican food...just because it's got the whole range with Mexican food [sic] – spicy meat, cooling sour cream, smooth avocado, tangy salsa. Just kind of a contrast. Maybe the crunchy lettuce and the soft fried beans. The range of textures and tastes that Mexican food seems to deliver easily...I enjoy different textures and tastes when I'm high.²³

And another interviewee said, almost echoing Headbloom,

I crave layered foods – hard on the outside, soft on the inside, juices spilling out. Or I like completely unpretentious things like Cheetos or chips or suchlike. I crave things I can eat quickly without having to chew too much. If I must chew, I'd like if it was juicy. Sweet tastes, however, are what I crave more than anything else. I've often walked around saying, "Sugar" to myself over and over again, seeking it everywhere; but that doesn't mean I'll eat sugar on its own. Meat is also a high priority munchy contributor. My mouth likes to be in motion, working, when I'm stoned.²⁴

Interestingly, Warren Belasco makes the connection between drug experiences and experimentation with food in *Appetite for Change*. Noticing the improvisatory tendency of much countercultural cuisine of the late 1960s, he mentions how easy it must have been to "add food to the delightful 'kaleidoscope of things' rediscovered in hallucinogenic explorations.... In acid trip's 'white light,' all connections were valid, all taboos arbitrary. If acid could go in Kool-Aid and marijuana could go into just about anything, why not put onions and oranges in the same salad, garlic and zucchini in

²³ Headbloom, interview by author.
Lafitte, e-mail message to author.

²⁴ Lafitte, e-mail message to author.

pancakes, peanut butter in ice cream?...National cuisines were mixed and matched without concern for international boundaries or incongruities.”²⁵ Of course, with marijuana, it is usually the wild hunger in need of immediate gratification that dictates the choice of food rather than a conscious desire for the joy of improvised cooking. However, at a less conscious level, judging by the sheer number of respondents who have experimented with unusual combinations of munchy food, there must certainly be an element of exploratory improvisation that is dictated more by intellect than physiology, thus strengthening the notion of marijuana as a countercultural drug at two different levels – at the behavioural level of being stoned and 'doped out' and thereby rejecting the pace of modern capitalistic life, and in terms of food practices at the level of a nostalgic reconnecting with the 1960s, the countercultural decade in the 20th century.

WHOSE CHOCOLATE CHIPCOOKIE IS IT ANYWAY?

Intriguingly, the “turn on, tune in, drop out”²⁶ culture that marijuana consumption taps into at an intellectual level is frequently offset by the more materialistic behaviour that follows an onset of the munchies. Food becomes an immediate and overwhelming need, and the easiest way to attain it becomes the sole objective, regardless of the fact that the 'easiest way' under the influence might seem life-threateningly complicated in the clear light of day – Easy Rider, a student at the National Academy of Legal Studies and Research (NALSAR) University of Law in Hyderabad, India, recounts a death-defying walk in the quest of food after a powerful attack of the munchies –

It was 3 am. We decided to sneak out of college. This is done by the potentially life threatening walk in utter darkness

²⁵ Belasco, 45.

²⁶ Famously said by Timothy Leary.

along a road said to be frequented by ghosts, robbers and rapists. Also NALSAR is 30 km away from anything that can be considered civilised. So we sneak out, braving a few cuts and bruises on the glass shard walls, not to mention the barbed wire.... Land up at the all-night *dhaba*.²⁷ *Paneer Parathas*²⁸ and steaming hot butter chicken. Brilliant.²⁹

Desperation leads to a memorable eating experience in this case, but the same desperation can also lead to selfish consumption. While smoking marijuana is seen as a communitarian act that creates bonding (because the sense of sharing is so strong – it's usually always someone's cannabis being smoked, and everyone else is always grateful; the joint is usually passed around within a circle of smokers; and most smokers have protocols that are more or less strictly adhered to – in Calcutta, etiquette dictated that everyone be allowed to take three or four puffs each time the joint was passed to one, and the 'rules' are much the same in Germany, according to one respondent³⁰ – and these protocols enhance the feeling of belonging to an exclusive club), the eating that follows can be far more individualistic and often degenerates into an act of every-man-for-himself. Food is usually not passed around, but kept in a common area where it's accessible to all, and there are no rules of etiquette governing its consumption. This is again in contrast to the preparation of food, which, as has been noted above, can be crucial in strengthening the sense of community. It is almost as if foodways break up into their component aspects, and each node in the network

²⁷ Small local restaurants along highways all over India that often serve as truck stops and are therefore usually open all night.

²⁸ *Parathas* are flatbreads made with whole-wheat flour and pan-fried in oil or clarified butter. They may or may not be stuffed. In this case, they are stuffed with *paneer* or Indian cottage cheese.

²⁹ Easy Rider (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 7, 2008.

takes on meanings very different from others. Procurement, preparation and performance, for instance, are carried out in very different, almost antithetical, spirits. This questions the anti-establishment light that potsmoking is usually viewed in. Certainly there is a dimension to marijuana that is as opportunistic as liberal economy? Going by the various responses to the act of eating, it is the free-market forces rather than the usual conception of cannabis consumption symbolising a rejection of the rat race that dominate behaviour.

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?

Contexts for eating therefore become important indicators of intention and awareness. Although a few people claimed they prefer a slow-cooked meal to fast food when stoned, most of my respondents said they chose fast food more often than not. I don't intend to equate the two (i.e., fast food with 'bad health,' and slow food with good), but hardly anyone I interviewed actually said they were fond of bingeing on something traditionally healthy, such as green vegetables, or low-fat food. Bluegreen, a Calcuttan now residing in the United States, said her preferred foods when munching were, "Fried stuff, cakes, chocolates, your usual heart-blocking, cholesterol laden suspects." And of late, she likes "corn chips [specifically, Tostitos] and cheesy salsa dip. Cookies and cream flavoured ice cream."³¹ One reason seems to be the previously-stated question of convenience, as Aerobot noted when asked where his preference lay – "Fast food generally, because it's easier to come by and tastes really good when stoned. A sit-down meal would mean an hour's worth of waiting."³²

In addition to the kind of food consumed, the amount of money spent on purchasing food is also a significant detractor to the perception of marijuana as a countercultural drug. When asked

³⁰ Moralez, interview by author.

whether they spent more money on food when they got the munchies, as opposed to spending when they're merely sober and hungry, all my respondents except one replied in the affirmative. Polo Lo, a Calcuttan now living and working in New Delhi, said –

Absolutely. When I'm at the store, I always think that I'm hungry enough for one packet of biscuits and chips each, two ice creams and Snickers. Of course, in my heart I know one of those ice creams will go uneaten.³³

Another respondent said this wasn't always the case; she, however, is “less discriminating on what [she] buy[s].” “Where I would buy one pack of something nice, I buy three packs of the cheap and nasty.”³⁴ Such wantonness seems to become the norm when people need to satisfy the munchies. More often than not, it is an excess of quantity that results in overspending. In a few cases, though, respondents said they spent more money than usual not because they tended to buy too much, but because they bought better products – for instance, Headbloom said –

I could probably justify getting higher quality items than I'd have bought sober. But nothing crazy. Like, if I was at the grocery and were to get an ordinary loaf of bread and mozzarella...instead I might get a French loaf and brie cheese. But not necessarily more food.³⁵

This predilection to gravitate towards greater quality and/or quantity in terms of economic consumption thus goes against the grain of countercultural movements. More often than not, it is fast food restaurants and chain stores that are frequented, making another

³¹ Bluegreen, c-mail message to author.

³² Aerobot (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 10, 2008.

³³ Polo Lo (name changed), e-mail message to author, December 6, 2008.

³⁴ Vibgyor, e-mail message to author.

³⁵ Headbloom, interview by author.

dent in the idealistic vision of cannabis as an herb for the anti-establishment. This is a far cry from the People's Park of 1969, when "several hundred members of the ad hoc Robin Hood's Park Commission invaded an empty Berkeley lot owned by the University of California, planted vegetable seeds, trees... [and] shared fruit, marijuana, and wine."³⁶

Convenience and quick access thus deny the subversive economic consequences that the slowing down of food can have, especially on large agribusinesses and the chemicalisation of food. In the sixties,

[w]riters of the counterculture called for a deliberate slowdown.... As Pierre Bourdieu notes in *Distinction [Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste]*, the bourgeoisie has long envied the aristocrat's power over time, that upper-class ability to carry on affairs with a sense of complete detachment, civility, ease. To an extent, the bohemian's historic function has been to explore low-cost routes to that upper-class control of time.³⁷

Indeed, that great writer of modern life, Walter Benjamin, valued his opium, hashish and mescaline induced 'trips' precisely because they opened up a differently-timed 'image space' for him in which he could opt out of the prevailing system and at the same time write about it with enough objectivity.³⁸ The munchies, in this respect, seem to contradict this aspect of marijuana by involving the user in the motions of everyday life more strongly, making one exercise one's consumerist function by giving in to the demands of an ideology of convenience.

³⁶ Belasco, 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2006).³⁹ Headbloom, interview by author.

PROFANE ILLUMINATIONS

Marijuana does, on the whole, tend to strengthen bonds rather than weaken them. Most of the dismantling of its subversive effects that occurs in relation to food occurs unconsciously. Consequently, eating experiences born out of smoking sessions tend to be memorable (a term that should be used sparingly in relation to pot, keeping in mind its very evident effects on memory), to say the least. Sometimes, it's the company and the mood as much as or more than the food that result in a special experience, as in the story of the meal at dawn this paper opens with. At other times, it is the food itself that takes on a special significance. Let me illustrate this too with a story from my own life.

Some years ago, a friend and I went out to dinner in downtown Calcutta. The restaurant we were going to, Mocambo, was an old, cosy place renowned for its Continental cuisine. We smoked a weed joint on our way there in the taxicab, and by the time we were seated, the munchies had begun to set in. So for starters, we ordered pepper devilled crabs and prawn cocktail, both of which are tangy and hot and sweet at the same time; they have never before or since tasted as sublime as they did that evening. My well done Chateaubriand steak was the perfect texture (there's that word again!), and the pepper sauce accompanying it was just sharp enough to accentuate the taste of the meat without overpowering it. Dessert consisted of soft chocolate soufflé.

I still don't know whether it was the marijuana we'd smoked prior to the meal, the company (this was the first time in months that the two of us were spending any time together, and we were dear friends), or the uncanny brilliance of our unseen chef that had something to do with it, but that particular dinner stands out in my memory as one of the best I have ever had. After talking to many others, however, I'm inclined to conclude it was a happy

concatenation of all three. Marijuana makes the world look nicer, it makes the Grateful Dead sound cooler, and a key lime pie begins to taste of flavours never imagined before, but can it be the single cause of a great eating experience? Some of my respondents tended to agree with me, that it takes many other factors to come together to create a great eating experience, but I'm also beginning to believe that pot is not entirely innocent. Headbloom told me about the one truly memorable meal he once had – needless to say, he was under the influence. He was also, however, with old friends in a beautiful setting:

I can remember camping one time with my best male friends and we were up on a ridge, and it was pretty cold, there was snow. We were passing joints around. It was sort of a coming out party for me because I'd never smoked in front of them before then. We made a delicious meal before the campfire - a buffalo steak (really nice texture), a hobo meal (in which you take some fresh vegetables and potatoes and garlic, chop it up, put some onion grass, put all this in a foil and put it over the fire), and chicken broth-based soup, coincidentally called Mrs. Grass. So warm vegetables and buffalo steak, all cooked on a fire. And in the context of a beautiful ridge and snow. With some of my best friends. There's also a value to hauling it all in...all the ingredients in our backpacks for 8 hours – it was the peak of enjoyment.³⁹

The one startlingly consistent effect marijuana does seem to have, regardless of whether it is the sole agent in creating a great eating experience or not, is an ability to influence attitudes to certain tastes. Almost everyone I interviewed claimed to have begun liking (or, if not liking, then not hating) some food or the other after experiencing it while stoned. Ricardo said he used to hate olives with a passion, but ever

³⁹ Headbloom, interview by author.

since he ate Greek olives in Munich one day while under the influence of marijuana, he began liking olives. Now he likes them even when he is not stoned, he insisted.⁴⁰

Stories of this nature tended to be of two kinds – first, the kind mentioned above, where marijuana seems to have had a lasting impact on the attitude to a specific food or taste, and second, where marijuana makes certain foods palatable as long as the high lasts, as in the case of Vibgyor, who “can only eat Hershey’s when stoned. Otherwise the sweaty cooked-milk taste of it makes [her] gag.”⁴¹ Headbloom, like Ricardo, also seems to have changed his views on a certain food after an experience with pot –

Growing up, I never liked a sweet vegetable combination, such as zucchini bread, or vegetables in jello, or carrot cake. A couple of years ago, I was stoned and with friends, and we went to a bakery. I ordered a delicious looking carrot cake. Usually I like only the frosting. It had baby carrots, and frosted nuts, and the different textures – the semi-sweet of the carrots with the sweet frosting. Ever since then I like carrot cake. I’ll actually choose it. I’ve got it at Grounds for Thought [a local coffee shop] being perfectly sober.⁴²

Other similar tales abound. Bluegreen says she is now gradually getting over her aversion to pizza after an experience she had a few weeks before I interviewed her. She was stoned and “got this insatiable urge for pizza and blew a chunk of cash on an extra-large Five Star pizza, garlic bread and Coke.” Ever since then, she “doesn’t mind” pizza anymore.⁴³

⁴⁰ Moralez, interview by author.

⁴¹ Vibgyor, e-mail message to author.

⁴² Headbloom, interview by author.

⁴³ Bluegreen, e-mail message to author.

At the other end of the spectrum, cannabis also causes the opposite reaction – Jean-Pierre, who used to drink his fair share of cola, now tries to avoid it as much as he can –

With cola, the fizziness of the drink on my tongue feels unpleasant and I don't drink cola when I'm stoned if I can help it. In fact, I drink carbonated beverages a lot less.⁴⁴

If these stories are anything to go by, then the consumption and regular use of marijuana can have long-lasting effects on the formation and alteration of taste. Aversions to certain tastes can be overcome, or new-found dislikes may emerge. Either way, it seems to influence taste and consumption profoundly.

From a different perspective, attitudes to the status of marijuana itself in relation to food vary wildly from user to user. This can be analysed by studying two things - the patterns people follow when it comes to the storage of marijuana, and other ways of consuming it besides smoking. Most of the users I spoke to store marijuana (if they store it at all) in dark secret places, in boxes under the bed, or hidden in their underwear drawers. One friend, who is European, stores his in a wooden box made in India and bought in London, while another keeps changing the location of his stash of cannabis, just to be safe. Two of my respondents, however, have very interesting ways of storing it. One of them, Headbloom, commonly stores his in the kitchen, with the herbs and spices –

If it's a smaller amount and I have to store it for a shorter period of time, I store it with the herbs and spices. I kinda like the humour of it. Also, herb is a plant, like Bob Marley says. I think that's where it should go, where it belongs. And I don't think it gets confused, with basil, for instance. It's fine.

⁴⁴ Lafitte, e-mail message to author.

⁴⁵ Headbloom, interview by author.

But if it's a larger amount and I think I'm going to store it for a while then I'll stick it in the freezer, wrapped well in tissue paper. Maybe it helps preserve it a little, keep it a little fresh.⁴⁵

Vibgyor, similarly, stores hers in the kitchen too, “in an innocent-looking cheese spread container.”⁴⁶ I have also observed her putting a piece of hashish in this same container and then keeping the container in the freezer. Although Vibgyor's reason for such storage is that “everyone thinks it's food,” there is an implicit acknowledgement here of the nature of marijuana as quasi-food. And this acknowledgement is reinforced by the consumption of marijuana in food and beverages, thereby leading to a consideration of pot as an active ingredient of food, much like the herbs and spices Headbloom stores his marijuana with.

Most adults in India have, at some point or the other, consumed *bhang*. It is usually drunk as a *bhang thandai* on Holi, a secular festival of colours, a national holiday on which *bhang* is sold on every street corner, perfectly legally. The consumption of *bhang* on specific days can actually be considered a ritual, and many devotees of the Hindu god Shiva consume it regularly as an act of worship (much like the consumption of ganja by Rastafarians). One of my respondents, in fact, first encountered marijuana in the form of *bhang* –

I was 21. I drank bhang made at home from little tablets sold at a local paan shop. We mixed it in *lassi*.⁴⁷ It tasted gritty and not very good at all, because bhang tastes foul and the *lassi* didn't entirely hide the taste. But it became something

⁴⁶ Vibgyor, e-mail message to author.

⁴⁷ *Lassi* is a cold drink made by blending yoghurt with water and various other spices, like salt, pepper (or sugar, if it's the sweet version), cumin, etc. it's consumed regularly (without bhang in it, of course) in the long Indian summer and is wonderfully refreshing.

⁴⁸ Lafitte, e-mail message to author.

I did ritually for a couple of months during weekends, on and off; sometimes visiting a *thandai* vendor in the crowded north of the city for a readymade marijuana beverage.⁴⁹

The widespread familiarity with a “marijuana beverage,” and the presence of a regular vendor of such a beverage, suggests some sort of an acceptance of the substance into the mainstream food/drink pattern. Of course, pot in cookies, brownies, even milkshakes, is a commonplace; almost all my respondents had had pot in food at least once.

So, ultimately, is herb a plant, as Bob Marley said? Is it food? Perhaps it isn't, but it certainly opens a creative space within which the appetite and the taste buds, as much as the mind, can feel free to roam, to wander, to tour, often with purpose, but sometimes without, like Walter Benjamin's and Charles Baudelaire's famous *flaneur*. “Such journey incessantly escapes words.... another dimension of wandering has been illuminated and that is the quest for a new, fit language, the one that might be found within our bodies.”⁴⁹ The munchies are perhaps the stomach's unlocking of its creative afflatus, letting forth experimentation and the desire to travel within the network of foodways that are connected to smoking marijuana. Indeed, even Benjamin got the munchies – after a session of smoking hashish, he wrote, “I had been suddenly unable to still the pangs of hunger that overwhelmed me late one night in my room. It seemed advisable to buy a bar of chocolate.”⁵⁰ So, if nothing else, at least

⁴⁹ Ana Grujic, 'The Urgency of Fantasizing: Saving Lady Sackville-West,' unpublished research paper.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, quoted in Adam Kirsch, 'The Philosopher Stoned,' *The New Yorker*, December 17, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/21/060821crbo_books?currentPage=5.

marijuana makes us want to have chocolate. We have this on good authority.

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