

A Fresh Twist: Cannabis-Infused Beverages on the Rise

Cannabis Beverages Gain Popularity in Ohio as Recreational Cannabis Becomes Legal

With the legalization of recreational marijuana in Ohio, cannabis enthusiasts and the canna-curious alike are exploring the growing range of products available. While edibles, gummies, and traditional cannabis flower often dominate consumer interest, marijuana-infused beverages are emerging as a popular alternative in both the recreational and medical cannabis markets. Entrepreneurs and industry experts say these products offer a different consumption experience and present new possibilities for social settings and self-care routines.

Wesley Bryant, founder of Brook Park's 420 Craft Beverages, is one of the Ohio entrepreneurs capitalizing on this trend. His handcrafted THC drinks come in the form of hemp-derived seltzers and juices, containing up to 25 milligrams of THC per 12-ounce can. "They are very intoxicating, and those are full-flavored beverages meant for a single dose," Bryant explained. "You don't have to drink three or four of these to get where you want to go." His offerings also include lower-dose beverages, ideal for bar settings or casual gatherings.

A New Option for Experienced and Novice Users

The cannabis beverage industry caters to both seasoned users and newcomers. Bryant notes that while his higher-dose drinks are popular among experienced users with higher tolerance, he also offers 5-milligram drinks designed to deliver a mild effect. New users, however, may find they need several lower-dose drinks to achieve their desired experience. Lower-dose options are well-suited to tailgates, barbecues, or other gatherings where a lighter high is preferred.

Bryant's journey into the cannabis beverage market began in 2020, initially limited to drinks containing less than 0.3% THC to comply with the federal 2018 Farm Bill. As a fan of natural flavors, he saw an opportunity to create a refreshing product that avoided the artificial taste associated with many cannabis edibles. "I was looking for a single serving where I could come home, consume it, and it tasted good," Bryant said, noting that the response to his product has been overwhelmingly positive.

Cannabis Beverages as an Alcohol Alternative

The legalization of recreational marijuana in Ohio has led to an increased interest in cannabis beverages, particularly among individuals looking for an alternative to alcohol. Roberta Rosa, general manager of Nirvana Center's Elyria location, said THC-infused sodas, juices, and drink powders have gained traction among customers who want a more controlled and potentially healthier option than alcohol. Nirvana Center, a medical and recreational dispensary chain, estimates that cannabis beverages make up 15-20% of its dispensary sales.

“People want to party, but don’t want to drink, and they’ll get a 5-milligram drink and sip on that and they’re fine,” Rosa explained. THC beverages, unlike edibles or gummies, are absorbed quickly into the bloodstream, offering a faster onset of effects and providing an experience some find similar to drinking alcohol. This appeal has made THC beverages a choice for many customers who are moving away from alcohol but still want a social experience.

Market Trends and Growing Demand

Cannabis beverages represent a burgeoning market within the larger cannabis industry. According to research by Grand View Research, the global cannabis beverage market is projected to reach \$2.5 billion by 2025. In Ohio, however, questions remain about whether THC-infused drinks will gain the same mainstream acceptance as craft beer or wine. Cleveland beer entrepreneur Sam McNulty, who owns multiple restaurants and brewpubs in Ohio City, believes the experience offered by craft beer differs fundamentally from that of cannabis beverages, and he is unconcerned about losing market share.

“There was a lot of speculation that legalized marijuana would compete directly with craft beer,” McNulty said. “Thankfully, we’ve seen that’s not been the case. The increased connectivity craft beer brings is wildly different from the social experience of smoking weed or taking a gummy.”

Industry and Consumer Perspectives

While McNulty has been approached by cannabis industry players interested in a potential collaboration, he remains cautious. Higher-dose THC beverages, he says, may not align with the brewpub experience, which encourages multiple servings of craft beer in a social setting. He sees THC drinks as better suited to consumption at home or in a relaxed environment, where individuals can fully appreciate the experience.

McNulty also expressed skepticism regarding lower-dose THC drinks as a profitable addition to his brewpubs. “For the most part, a THC seltzer or beer is something folks want to buy and consume at home,” he said. “If everyone is enjoying THC cocktails or beers during a party, it’s probably going to be a very quiet party.” Despite his reservations, McNulty hasn’t ruled out the possibility of a future collaboration, provided he can find a balance in dosage and flavor that complements his existing offerings.

Bryant, on the other hand, is optimistic about the future of the cannabis beverage market in Ohio. Since launching 420 Craft Beverages, he has witnessed exponential demand, to the extent that his initial production assembly line, purchased last winter, became insufficient within two months. “As far as consumers are concerned, if you guys want to see more of these beverages on the market, make sure you’re doing your part and reaching out to lawmakers,” Bryant said, urging consumers to advocate for industry growth.

Public Perception and Future Outlook

While cannabis beverages are gaining traction, they still face challenges in achieving mainstream acceptance. Some people are unaware of the full range of cannabis products available, while others remain uncertain about the potential health implications or the social dynamics of consuming THC in a beverage. For many consumers, cannabis beverages represent a new experience and an alternative to the traditional methods of consumption.

The potential benefits of these beverages, including their appeal as a healthier alternative to alcohol, position them as a promising segment in the growing cannabis market. However, the industry will need to focus on educating consumers, especially new users, about the effects and safe consumption of THC-infused drinks. As the legal market takes root in Ohio, industry players like Bryant and dispensary operators like Rosa will

play a key role in shaping public perception and consumer preferences.

A Collaborative Future for Cannabis Beverages

The legalization of recreational marijuana in Ohio has opened new doors for cannabis entrepreneurs, with cannabis-infused beverages emerging as a standout product in the marketplace. Entrepreneurs like Bryant and dispensary managers like Rosa see an opportunity to cater to a diverse range of customers, from experienced cannabis users to those exploring cannabis as an alcohol alternative. Though challenges remain, including public acceptance and regulatory hurdles, the demand for these products is clear.

Ohio's cannabis beverage market will likely continue to evolve as entrepreneurs experiment with flavors, doses, and product varieties to meet consumer demand. By working together and educating the public, Ohio's cannabis industry stakeholders can help create a dynamic market that satisfies both recreational and medical consumers in search of new ways to enjoy cannabis.

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