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Bay Area Cannasseur: Vape pens are hot product for medical cannabis

NEWS

by Sari Staver

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Available vape pens include, from top, Alchemy, hmbldt, Level, OMG Farms, Pax, and SPARC. Photo: Sari Staver

Pre-filled vape pens are the hottest products in the San Francisco cannabis market, but shopping for one can be daunting, with more than 100 different products sold in medical marijuana dispensaries.

Vaporizers, for cannabis newcomers, allow a person to inhale cannabis without producing smoke. Vape pens work by heating the concentrate to approximately 400 degrees – before combustion – allowing the user to inhale vapor without the toxins found in smoke.

The early models of vaporizers designed for cannabis – such as the tabletop models like the German-made Volcano or the popular San Francisco brand, Pax – vaporize flowers, requiring users to grind and load them into the device.

As cannabis concentrates became more popular, so did portable vape pens, pre-loaded with a cartridge of oil, typically with a 50-70 percent THC level, compared to flowers, which are usually under 30 percent.

The SOMA medical cannabis dispensary SPARC, founded by Erich Pearson, a gay man and longtime political activist, carries 75 different vape pens and cartridges.

"It's definitely the fastest growing segment of the cannabis market," said Josh Hoffman, SPARC's director of products.

As Hoffman and his team tried the dozens of products on the market, "we were frustrated" by the quality of either the concentrate or the pen itself.

So SPARC designed its own pens and cartridges, which quickly became the number one seller at the dispensary. At least four strains, or flavors, are available at all times. Soon the company will produce special editions with concentrates made from biodynamically grown flowers from its organic farm in Sonoma, Hoffman said.

The cartridges sold at SPARC typically sell for \$35-\$60 for 500 milligrams, or half a gram, which can be used with a reusable push button pen and charger, which costs an additional \$12. All-in-one pens are also available, ranging in price from \$40-\$100. A 500-milligram cartridge typically produces 150 three-second pulls, or "hits."

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"Consumers are looking for something convenient and discreet," said Hoffman. "A vape pen fits in your purse and pocket and doesn't signal to the world that you are using cannabis."

Unscientific product test

For this column, I asked two gay Castro medical cannabis patients – Zack Karlsson, 39, who is CEO of an educational technology startup, and his partner, Derek Shockey, 34, a software engineer – to sample half a dozen different vape pens.

Karlsson and Shockey, who have been vaporizing flowers in the Pax 1 and Pax 2 hand-held vaporizers, had tried cartridge pens shared by friends but hadn't made the switch to the next generation of products.

Karlsson said he'd hesitated because, "I was so happy with using flowers in my Pax. I know what flowers I liked and how to buy them."

When he did browse in a dispensary looking at cartridge-based vape pens, "I was totally overwhelmed" with the choices, he said.

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"I felt like I didn't know what I was looking at or how to judge them. It was actually intimidating," he added.

Shockey recalled a physician warning him not to use cannabis concentrates, "so I had a predisposition that they probably weren't healthy." Since reading more about them, he said now, "I realize that probably wasn't true."

Karlsson and Shockey tested vape pens from Alchemy, hmbldt, Level, OMG Farms, Pax, and SPARC.

Karlsson said he liked all the pens but his top pick was the Pax "ERA" model.

"I'm brand loyal," he said. "And I like the fact that it looks like a USB stick."

"I could definitely use this in public and not feel weird about it," Karlsson said. But the ERA's app that allows users to recreate a previous vaping session "is absolutely absurd," he added.

Shockey also enjoyed the vaping experience of all the products, and was most enthusiastic about owning a product that did not have to be filled or cleaned.

"If I'm going out to the park, I can put it in my pocket and don't have to stop and think about whether I need to grind and pack more flowers. And the fact that these pens don't need to be cleaned is really a major selling point for me."

Other features they praised were the aromatherapy herbs added to the oils in the Alchemy pens, as well as their round mouthpieces, which made it easier to use; the custom variable temperature battery on the Level pen; the ease of use of the hmbldt and OMG Farms pens, which are preheated and ready to use; and the SPARC cartridges, which have a rotating selection of interesting strains available, such as Lavender, Grand Daddy Purple, and Sour Lime Kush in June.

As California's adult recreational marijuana law use takes effect in 2018, the market for vape pens is expected to increase, said Savannah Hanks, a lesbian who is marketing manager at Oakland's Dark Heart Industries, which produces the Alchemy pens.

"We expect to see new users as well as those who haven't used since high school or college interested in trying cannabis" once it is legal next year, said Hanks in a telephone interview. For those users, Alchemy offers a lower dose pen, with 30 percent THC.

"We think that will be a good product to use to introduce our brand to those who are curious about cannabis," she added.

Rather than labeling their products by strain, as most companies do, Alchemy has chosen to market them by the experience they are expected to elicit, such as awaken, relax, and inspire. The company has also added botanicals to the cannabis oil, including chamomile and lavender.

"We're trying to create an approachable product," Hanks explained. "We think that many of the new or returning users, particularly women, will relate more to this approach and be more likely to see what the new cannabis is all about. This has been a male dominated industry for a long time. We think there are a lot of people out there who will be interested, if approached in a way they feel comfortable with."

Bay Area Cannasseur runs the first Thursday of the month. To send column ideas or tips, email Sari Staver at sari@bayareacannasseur.com.



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