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#### **FEATURE**

# Million Dollar Cookie: How Berner Built a Business Empire on Marijuana

Chris Roberts • 02/02/2016 6:30 pm - Updated 02/22/2016 2:35 pm

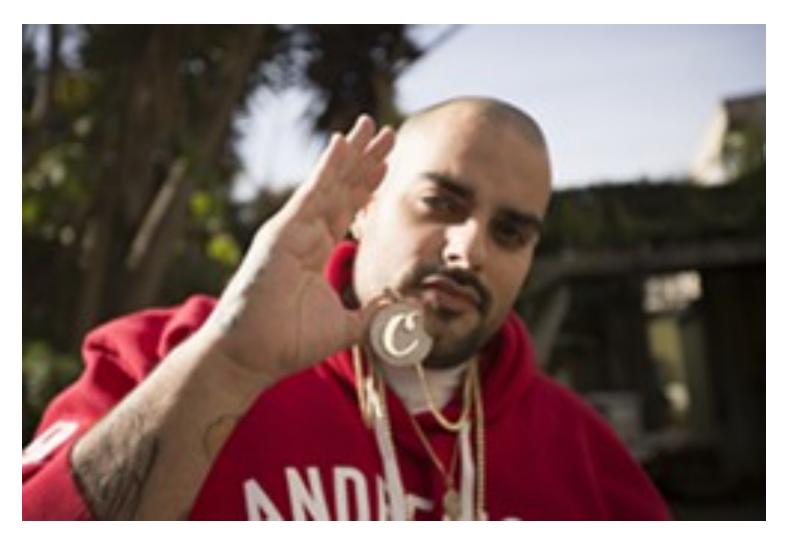












Last May, the annual Bay to Breakers shitshow started two days early in the Haight-Ashbury, right around the time a gold-painted RV rolled up in front of a Haight Street storefront near Masonic Avenue.

A line of young people — white and black and brown but skewing urban, with some suburban kids mixed in, conspicuously fronting tough — snaked down the hill on Masonic and to the left up Haight. They were waiting to enter a storefront a few doors down from hip clothier Pink+Dolphin, whose own grand opening not long before also drew a throng of stylesters, scenesters, and local rappers eager to plunk down \$80 for a hoodie.

## But not quite like this.

This line was bigger, its energy higher, egged on by the young men on dirtbikes who popped wheelies while buzzing up and down Haight. More famous locals came through, enough local rappers to fill a mixtape. These hoodies were pricier — around \$100 and up — but sold just as quickly.

Hovering over everything — the line, the storefront's backyard, and the golden RV, embossed with the name "the Twerkulator" — was a heavy cloud of an unmistakably pungent strain of cannabis.



Cookies had arrived.

The hubbub over the grand opening of Cookies' clothing boutique lasted for three days, well into Bay to Breakers Sunday, when an even-larger crowd of even buzzier young people strolled through to see what could possibly compete for attention with San Francisco's greatest outdoor drinkathon. (The golden RV, for one, with young women inside volunteering to twerk on camera; the collection of people handing out free joints outside the store, for another.) On a weekend when many Haight Street merchants would prefer to roll down the gate rather than deal with the mess and noise, Cookies was doing banner business, ringing up tabs into the hundreds of dollars well into the afternoon.

At the center of it all was a heavyset young man with light skin, a close-cropped head, a perennial five-o'clock shadow, and a tattoo on the pinky-side of his left palm that matched the "Cookies" banner hanging over the store. In between posing for photos and slapping skin with the parade of well-known well-wishers coming through, Gilbert Milam Jr. was clearly in charge.

The Fillmore District native and Galileo High dropout — better known to his hundreds of thousands of Instagram followers as "Berner" — was five months away from turning 32. And this — the crowd, the store, and that telltale heavy marijuana stink, different somehow from the clouds of smoke hanging over every street corner in San Francisco — was all his doing.

"Three fuckin' full days. I don't know why we went with three days. I honestly did not think it would pop off for three days... but all three days was crackin'," Berner said later, on a video posted to his YouTube channel. "We really shut the city down, man. The whole city came out."

The opening of the Cookies store caused a scene — and to this day, it causes some confusion. No, there is no medical cannabis for sale here; the official Cookies dispensary is on the other side of town, on Mission Street south of Geneva Avenue near Daly City. But thinking so is an honest mistake, as everything Berner does — his store; his career as a rapper, going on tour and cutting tracks with Snoop Dogg, Cam'ron, Chris Brown, B-Real, and Wiz Khalifa; his line of weed-themed, hempseed-infused flavored waters, Hemp20, also for sale at the store — involves weed in some way.

Specifically, it involves Cookies, which in the span of five years has become the best-known name in the marijuana game — thanks largely to Berner putting it directly into Khalifa's hands — and other strains grown by the San Francisco-bred cultivation crew now internationally famous as the "Cookies Fam."

Weed was how Berner graduated from working as a bartender at Jelly's on Mission Rock and a budtender at the old Hemp Center on Geary Boulevard in the Richmond to his current status as multidisciplinary businessman. Weed was how Berner appeared as a special guest on Snoop Dogg's YouTube interview series, in a seat occupied on other episodes by mainstream celebrities like Seth Rogen, PSY, and Jimmy Kimmel (though the episode with Berner has more views than Kimmel's).

Weed helped Berner turn a couple of ideas into a growing business empire that he claims cleared \$12 million in 2015. Weed definitely helps when Cookies sells out 100 \$100 sweatshirts, advertised on Instagram, in minutes — and without weed, it's hard to imagine Berner producing a show on 4/20 at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium featuring himself and Cypress Hill (for which he's on the hook to sell 8,500 tickets).

But since Berner's business does not deal in marijuana per se, it can be on the books. It can use banks, make deals, and attract legitimate investment — all things that even the biggest names in an American marijuana industry transforming from underground criminal hustle to an entrepreneur's game attracting eight-figure investments cannot do.

Activism is definitely not Berner's thing. You won't find him standing at a Mario Woods rally next to Equipto, one of the first rappers with whom Berner cut a track. (You also won't find Berner teaching preschool, which is what Equipto, a.k.a. Ilyich Sato, does for a living.) On hot topics like legalization or regulation of cannabis in California, Berner is strictly agnostic.

"I don't really get involved in all that," he says, before tacking on an honest postscript: "I'm just here to make money, really."

And he is. Kids in London, Canada, and Pennsylvania rock Cookies clothing. There are Cookies-branded rolling trays, grinders, and other accessories in smokeshops all over the country. Hemp20, on its way towards following 50 Cent's blueprint to riches with the Vitamin Water, is in 1,000 stores around the country.

"In terms of entrepreneurship, it's him and E-40," says Matt Werner, founder of Bay Area hip-hop website <a href="mailto:thizzler.com">thizzler.com</a>, name-checking the Bay Area's prolific recording artist, progenitor of hyphy, and entrepreneur with his own line of wines and, recently released, honey-flavored malt liquor as a Berner peer. "They're on a whole other level compared to a lot of other people."

## [page]

This means Berner, the city native who just a few years ago manned the bud bar at a rundown Richmond district weed club, is now at the helm of one of the marijuana movement's first multimillion-dollar empires.

Where does he go from here?

"Just \$200 million," he says. "That's my goal: Get to \$200 million and then retire, and take care of my kid."

And all thanks to weed — weed, social media, and hustle. But mostly weed.

Every person in business, from the mogul CEO on down to the neophyte fresh from a seminar at the motel near the airport, will tell you how important brands are. For an industry that could be worth as much as \$15 billion in California alone — more than almonds and more than wine — the cannabis industry is almost entirely brand-less.

That's because marijuana is still illegal — at the federal level, at least. And you can't process a trademark or a patent with the United States Patent and Trademark Office for something that's federally illegal.

There are a few exceptions. Branded edibles, chocolates like Bhang and Kiva, are available in almost every dispensary in California. Through licensing deals, you can find these brands in dispensaries in Colorado and Washington as well. (Production is done in-state; nothing crosses state lines.) And big-time brands are finally becoming aware of the enormous opportunity in marijuana. Bob Marley's estate has struck a deal with investors from tech financier Peter Thiel's Privateer Holdings, though "Marley Natural" has yet to appear in consumers' hands or lungs. Willie Nelson and Snoop Dogg are similarly looking to branch out beyond mere cannabis accessories.

With one exception, a marijuana brand has yet to emerge into the mainstream. The reason is that you can't yet trademark a strain of cannabis, still a Schedule I controlled substance.

Which is too bad for the crew that came up with "Girl Scout Cookies," because it is the most popular strain in America — and by extension, the world.

Where there's marijuana in the United States, you will find Cookies. "Cookies? Got cookies," is what the street hustlers whisper as you walk by on Market and Haight streets. In New Orleans and in Hawaii, in New York City and in St. Louis, cannabis is pushed by this name, regardless of its true origins.

Bigger than Purple, more powerful than Kush, Cookies has become the biggest name in cannabis over the past five years, and it remains the best-known strain — which is to say, it's the biggest name in the nascent weed game to date. Even California purists can't avoid this craze.

"Half the entries we had this year were Cookies," an Emerald Cup judge told me.

Girl Scout Cookies first showed up on dispensary shelves in the Bay Area in 2010 and 2011. A few years later, the Girl Scouts of America took a decided unliking to this development, and mailed cease-and-desist orders to any dispensary offering "Girl Scout Cookies" and most recently contacted a dispensary in Seattle that dared to use the GSA's trademark.

So growers and sellers dropped the "Girl Scouts," and left us with "Cookies," although you can still find "GSC" or "Original Thin Mint" on weed club menus.

Cookies' appeal is twofold. While the strain's origins are in dispute — the elusive Cookie Fam claims credit, and says its heritage is a cross between well-known strain O.G. Kush and a freak cut of Durban Poison, with unique taste and effects, dubbed F1; at least one weed expert, scientist Michael Backes, author of the definitive tome *Cannabis Pharmacy*, believes it's a purple phenotype of another strain, Champagne — but the consumer appeal is obvious.

Cookies' nugs grow big and frosty, with shades of purple, the Bay Area's former favorite. The stone is a powerful, mind-numbing mellow, perfect for regular smokers for whom a weaker strain won't get the job done. But more than any of that is the smell. Oh, the smell: thick, musty, slightly sweet. Whether it truly tastes reminiscent of Thin Mints is subjective. What's undeniable is what you're holding.

"From the moment you open up the bag, the whole room fills up," says Luke Coleman, who manages the Cookies dispensary in the Excelsior District. "Everybody knows what you have."

It fills a room, it impresses your friends, it knocks you — and them — on your ass. It's weed tailor-made for the modern urban consumer who wants something potent, high-end, and unmistakably top shelf — in every way the Courvoisier or Hennessy of cannabis.

But the name also hits just right, too. Other famous strains have always had a fatal flaw. Granddaddy Purple is too long, O.G. (which stands for "original gangster") Kush sounds too illegal, Trainwreck and Green Crack all send the wrong message. But Cookies is friendly, easy to digest. It's simple. "Everybody loves cookies," as Berner says.

Berner also found a way around the feds' ban on trademarking a weed strain. As dispensaries in San Francisco found out, you can't trademark a weed brand — there's a second dispensary, also calling itself Cookies, a few miles up Mission Street from the Berner/Cookie Fam-licensed spot (the latter of which happens to be a major *SF Weekly* advertiser) but you can trademark a weed clothing brand. And once that brand is trademarked, you can hang a trademarked sign outside your cannabis dispensary — and you can sue anyone trying to profit off of your name and your hard work. This, so far, is the lone (legal) avenue cannabis businesspeople have to protect their products from pretenders and fakers — and this is exactly what Berner did in 2013, registering "Cookies SF" as a trademarked maker of sweatshirts and T-shirts.

The story of how the brand initially began is as simple as it is brilliant. On a road trip to Los Angeles, running short on clothes, Berner and his manager, Will Bronson, went shopping but could not find anything that fit his XXXL-plus frame.

## [page]

"He wanted urban clothes in his size and couldn't find any," Bronson says. "Within a week, he had designs. A week after that, he was printing shirts."

But a trademark doesn't mean much if what you're selling is wack. Cookies has the kind of unimpeachable value that corporate suits crave: the kids think it's cool.

"It's the same reason NWA was popular with white, middle-class America," says Jim McAlpine, a cannabis entrepreneur himself who founded the "420 Games" athletic competitions. "Mainstream white America wants to emulate the street kids. It's the same reason why Cookies caught on. It has a cool street culture to it."

From the start, Berner has been Cookies' biggest ambassador. And it makes perfect sense that he would make a weed strain popular. Weed strains were how he made himself popular.

Born at the former Children's Hospital on California Street, Berner had a mostly stable workingclass life with his parents. His later mother worked in offices, and his father was a workaholic cook and chef at a Mexican restaurant on Fillmore Street near California.

Along with his younger brother, the Milams lived in homes in the hills above the Haight-Ashbury and in Daly City before the family moved to Arizona when Berner was 13. The plan was for his father, Gilbert Sr., to open a restaurant there; that fell through when Berner's mother caught his father cheating and the couple split up.

Arizona was where Berner grew a thick skin. "I was the Mexican kid with slicked-back hair. I always had to defend myself. It was, 'Oh, you're from San Francisco? You're a faggot,'' he says now, in a rapid-fire patter light-years quicker than his lazy rapping flow. "I was like, 'I dare you to go to Hunter's Point. I'll give you \$1,000 to ride the 14 bus down Mission wearing blue. Let me know how that goes for you.'"

It was also in Arizona, with his mother working two jobs, where Berner first tasted weed — pure Mexican-grown brick. "It was bammer weed," he says. "Some of my homies in Arizona, their families were selling hella brick weed. We'd go into their older brothers' rooms and strip squares off the bale. Picture a big-ass fuckin block of bud — we'd rip a corner off of it and then put it in a room with a shower to get it to fall apart, it was so dry."

"We first started chewing it — it didn't taste so good, and we didn't get high with it. So we wrapped it up in a Walgreens receipt and smoked that shit."

The first time he got high, however, was back in San Francisco at a friend's house. "I was telling him about these bricks, and he was saying how he had weed that would sell for \$4,800 a pound. I said, 'You're kidding me, dude. There's no way.' So he pulled out some weed — it was kind bud, I had never seen that before. We smoked a joint. I hit that shit twice and I was done.'"

"That's when it clicked for me — there was a huge difference between California and Arizona."

Weed led to his first "honest" hustle: lying about his age to get a job at a pizza joint at 13. (He says he was named employee of the month, just before being fired after his superiors figured out how young he was.)

His teenage years followed a routine. Bored stiff in Arizona, he'd act up and find a way to get sent back to his father's house in San Francisco; trouble there would earn a flight back to his mother's — but there was a common thread.

"Whenever I would go back to Arizona, I'd go down to HP [Hunter's Point] and buy a bunch of 10 sacks — the real Champagne. The real Champelly," he says, name-checking one of the 1990s' best strains. "I always wanted to have the best weed — I'd be the coolest motherfucker in the whole world. My first trip back from Cali, I showed everyone at school this little ass bag of weed."

"I was popular as fuck from that shit. And the obsession clicked."

In San Francisco, Berner, his brother, his father, and one of his father's "cutty-ass chef friends" squeezed into a studio apartment on California Street. (His father, who Berner says now lives in the Sunset District "and still gets up at 2 a.m. every day" to run a catering business, declined an interview request.)

The apartment had very little. When it was dinner time, Gilbert Sr. told his sons to call in a chef favor. "It was, 'Dad, I'm hungry.' He'd say, 'Okay, go to Curbside and get a burrito. Okay, go to Dino's and get a piece of pizza.'"

There was no phone, so when Berner dropped out of Galileo, his father had no way of knowing. There was no cable, either, only a VCR, and they had one tape. So Berner and his brother would "watch *Goodfellas*," Berner says. "We'd watch *Goodfellas*, smoke weed, argue, and fight."

Occasionally, they'd get into petty crime: selling weed, mostly, though Berner remembers a short-lived rip-and-run career. One day, the pair of them put a knife to the throat of a kid attending the Drew School, a ritzy private institution on California near Divisadero.

"We get his wallet, but he reported it and a teacher chased us. So we start running. Fuck, dude. It was the longest run ever," he says. "We end up getting in some building and we open the wallet — and there's literally \$2 in it. It was like, 'Dude, this shit is fucked.'"

Arizona was also where Berner discovered rap music. At a continuation school, another kid asked him if he rapped. "He said, 'You ever rap? You look like a rapper,'" Berner says. "So he started freestyling in front of me and said, 'You should try it.'"

[page]

That was a gambit for a bigger hustle. Before long, the kid came over to Berner's house to sell him an off-brand karaoke machine.

"I remember asking my mom to lend me the money," he says. "I bought the equipment and made a song right there. I used to go into the garage, where it was 110 degrees, and get my friends to watch me freestyle. I just got into it. That kid sparked something in me."

The karaoke machine was soon replaced with an 8-track recorder. Getting into music led to a permanent move back to San Francisco, where on his trips back and forth, a teenaged Berner would traffic records in addition to weed. Deep Bay Area cuts like the 18 Wit a Bullet mixtape featuring B-Legit, Cougnut, Celly-Cel, and San Quinn; records from Mac Dre, RBL Posse, Messy Marv, The Jacka, and the like.

It was weed that also led him to meet The Jacka. At 18, while working as a bartender at Jelly's at Mission Rock, Berner would visit The Hemp Center on Balboa Street as a customer. Frequent visits — and ties with some cultivators — got Berner a job there behind the counter. (He also got involved with the black market weed trade — and indeed, as a kid bought small sacks of weed from Jigga, the elusive cultivator credited with originating the Cookies strain. This may be why, for a time, he says he was routinely stopped by authorities while traveling through LAX, although he prefers not to go into detail.)

One day, his rap career not quite off the ground but with more weed than anybody needed, Berner walked into Milk Bar on Haight Street and ran into The Jacka. After praising the elder rapper's music, Berner handed Jacka a fistful of weed — and Jacka was impressed enough to give Berner his number. In 2008, the pair recorded a record together, *Drought Season*, but the reception was brutal. On TheSiccness.net, somebody posted a custom cut of the album, with all of Berner's verses cut out. "Before I ever heard of Berner, I heard of people hating on him," Thizzler.com's Werner says. "You'd hear, 'Berner sucks.' It was crazy.'"

Not that Berner cared. He continued cutting records while working at The Hemp Center, and made connections with other established rappers in the exact same way. If you needed weed — if you needed the *best* weed — you knew to call Berner. He wasn't exactly private about it, either. During the early days of <a href="Worldstarhiphop.com">Worldstarhiphop.com</a>, there was a video competition afoot to see who could smoke the most. That was hard to quantify, so it turned into who had the biggest weed stash. Berner, who worked in a cannabis club during medical marijuana's early days and had every underground connection, would win running away.

This eventually led to the big time. In 2010, Berner got a call from Mistah F.A.B., another longtime established Bay Area rapper. This cat named Wiz Khalifa was coming through town; could Wiz come by and get some weed?

"I said, 'I don't really know, dude.' But I googled him, and saw he had hella views on YouTube. So I said, 'All right, fuck it. Have him come through.'" The pair hit it off. (Search YouTube and you can still see the encounter, with a very relaxed-looking Wiz sitting at the bar of old Hemp Center smoking lounge.)

He was in, but Berner wasn't through. To solidify the relationship, he pulled a stunt. To a Wiz show, Berner somehow smuggled in a five-foot-tall plant of Cherry Pie, one of the Cookie Fam's exclusive high-end strains. "We brought it on stage, and I gave it to [Wiz] as a gift on the bus," he says. "It went from there."

Soon, Wiz was rapping about Cookies on stage. Within a year, Berner convinced both Chris Brown and Wiz Khalifa to appear in a music video for "Yoko," his biggest hit to date and one that received heavy Bay Area airplay.

The strain blew up, and the Cookies name spread across the country. And soon, so would Berner — who was sure to wear Cookies clothing in the music video.

On a rainy and raw Sunday morning in December, the man behind the biggest brand in marijuana is seated on a folding chair in a horse stall in Santa Rosa. Berner was one of the first people to arrive here to the Sonoma County Fairgrounds for the second day of the Emerald Cup, Northern California's biggest and most prestigious cannabis competition, he and his crew driving up from the Bay Area in a steady rain.

Up at dawn, it was Berner who got things moving. He called his entourage, which consisted of four people: his producer, friend, and touring partner, Stinje (pronounced "Stingy"); another longtime friend, Eric; and his lone nod to his current high-profile hip-hop lifestyle, a solitary bodyguard. This is where the Berner show is in full effect. Weed brands can live or die by their booths at cannabis events like this. This is where the kids learn about you, sample some of your product — if you're in that game — and then come home with an armload of your gear (while you head home, hopefully, with hoodie and jeans pockets stuffed with cash).

By appearances, you'd judge the Cookies booth a sad affair. There's no P.A., no dab lounge with couches to crash on, no crazy signage like the two booths next door. But things are bumping. "It's good you came through today," Berner says, after I march up to him and am invited to sit down after the briefest of introductions. Yesterday, I hear, the mob at the booth to buy a \$30 Cookies T-shirt — a riff on the Wells Fargo logo, with money sacks and weed leaves on the signature stagecoach — or the official Emerald Cup event T-shirt, an official Cookies partnership, was a constant five people deep.

[page]

Other booths would love to have Cookies' light day. Over the next two hours, I try to carry on a conversation that's interrupted every few minutes by a parade of fans, well-wishers, and customers. Berner greets anyone who wants to say hello, he poses for selfies — and he accepts their gifts of weed.

And the weed. So much weed. Good lord, everybody brings him weed, in jars, baggies, and boxes. He stuffs it all into a backpack (Cookies-branded, of course) already bursting at the seams with flower, hash, and a small wooden container of psilocybin mushrooms, gifted by a nymph-like woman in a broad-brimmed hat who'd be at home at Burning Man. While my eyes are turned, Berner slaps a picture of the mushrooms on Instagram. Within minutes, the post has over 500 likes.

Social media has also been a huge engine — as well as measure — of Berner's success. The rap videos on his YouTube channel have millions of views. One video has over 16 million; his Instagram account has 482,000 followers. (Instagram, which has proven the most effective marketing and engagement tool for the cannabis industry despite a terms-of-service policy that leads to routine deletion of weed-related accounts, axed him around Christmas 2014; he was restored after someone "in the music industry" intervened. He won't say who.)

To him, the same reason why he does well on social media is the same reason why his booth is popular and his brand has taken off: constant engagement with the people, who are convinced that the person they're engaging with is 100 percent real. "I talk to my fans," he says, while breaking up a few buds and rolling a massive joint on a Cookies-branded rolling tray. (These, he says, he's licensed out, but with a deal that works in his favor: 15 percent of sales, and then a permanent deal to buy the gear at cost. "We buy them for three," he says, "and sell them for 20.")

He'll get a few puffs through the joint — which he hands to me for the first hit — before he's waylaid by someone else wanting to say hello. Meanwhile, his crew is flying through gear: shirts, hoodies, rolling trays, and bottles and bottles of the Hemp2o. (Before the last one is sold, though, Stinje takes pains to hand it to me. "You gotta at least try it," he says. Despite the cold and rain, I'm too thirsty to argue.)

Behind the authenticity is a relentless drive. Fueled by anxiety, a hunger for money, the desire to retire young, or all of the above, it's the same drive that led him to keep recording rhymes and approaching rappers, after the internet critics on Siccness tried to shame him. The hustle has everything where it is today: the clothes, the store, the branded smoking gear, Hemp2o (which, as far as I can tell, is his sole source of beef; his former partner, who says he was verbally promised a bigger cut, is suing him); a pair of apps, one of which is in negotiations with Universal for distribution; stakes in companies like pre-roll manufacturer California's Finest, which just dropped its official Jimi Hendrix-licensed "Purple Haze" cannabis cigarettes; and the music career, which continues to gain momentum.

"I'm well aware fashion has its time," he says. "Cookies will probably be cool for two or three years, and then it's onto the next brand, right?"

"That's why I'm always coming with new products, new stuff," he says. "I just gotta stay busy — that's my business."

It's dizzying — for him and the people around him, too.

"If you had to kick it with me for a whole day," he tells me later, in between fielding calls on one of two identical iPhone 6s he has on him, "you'd probably shoot yourself. I'm on the phone all day. No one can handle it."

On a sunny Tuesday morning last week, a black Mercedes S-Class sedan glides up to the Haight Street curb. Berner pops out of the passenger door and heads straight for the opening trunk, where he grabs a fistful of something before heading into the door of the Cookies store — where the manager, who opened a few minutes early, is yet another person Berner's known for more than a decade. "He used to come by our apartment" in the Lower Haight, the manager, Emily, says, "to buy weed." (Of course.)

This is the first meet we've been able to schedule since the Emerald Cup, after Berner's trips to Vegas, Colorado, and Arizona. (A weekend meet is out of the question; that was his four-day stretch with his daughter, who's turning 8). And we only have time for a quick pit stop before Berner and Stinje, who's at the wheel, head to L.A. for another few days — recording sessions, business meetings, and a weekend at the *High Times* Cannabis Cup in San Bernardino. Berner has about half an hour before a video crew shows up to record an interview about The Jacka, whose shooting death in Oakland was a year ago Feb. 2.

"Wassup," he says, drawing the fist to his nose and inhaling deeply. He opens his hand: another handful of beautiful, exotic-looking nugs. "Gelato #41," he says, before offering two of the strangers on hand at the store a free Hemp2o from the fully stocked refrigerated case. "Please," he says, a salesman's twinkle in his eye, "I'd appreciate your honest opinion."

A few days before, Berner's biggest move yet was announced: the show at the Graham with Cypress Hill. He's recorded with B-Real before and opened for Cypress Hill at the Regency Ballroom — "for free," he notes — but this is the big one. He's producing the show, which means he has to sell 8,500 seats. While breaking up the nug to roll another fattie — the first one ever smoked inside the store, he swears — he admits he's stressing about it.

## [page]

It's a big step up from the small clubs he was playing just a few years ago, which were themselves light-years away from buying dime sacks from the crew he's now jetting to Vegas with.

And one second after saying he's worried about selling tickets, he's selling them.

"You gotta really understand, bro," he says. "I don't even really realize what it is until we do a show. It's like a movement."











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