THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHEFS • UDO KIER CONTINUES TO LIGHT UP THE SCREEN • RAPPER JUNES3RD JOURNEYS FROM FLORIDA TO L.A.

NORMAN SEEFF  THE LEGENDARY PHOTOGRAPHER IS ON A DEEPER CREATIVE JOURNEY BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT
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Photography by Norman Seeff
WHO WILL BE THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHEFS?

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

Using the Montessori method of hands-off teaching, the Little Kitchen Academy says they will be empowered to change the world.

Ten focused three- to five-year-olds are making Monet-inspired garden focaccia, washing and prepping produce and cleaning up after themselves during a two-hour cooking session. Once the kitchen is spotless and their yeasty creations have cooled off, they sit down at a communal table made from more than 33,000 recycled chopsticks from L.A. restaurants to discuss vegetables and how dough rises. This is the Little Kitchen Academy.

The first-of-its-kind, Montessori-inspired cooking academy for kids ages three through teen opened its first U.S. location at the Westfield Century City open-air mall this week. The quickly growing concept was founded by longtime Montessori director and trained chef Felicity Curin and her husband Brian. LKA Century City will be the fourth location, with the first two franchise locations having opened in July in Canada. The academy plans to open 423 locations worldwide by the end of 2025.

Iron Chef and mother of six Cat Cora heads up recipe development and is the brand’s key advisor.

Instructors show the students how to safely use tools, but step back to closely observe the independent work, only stepping in when deemed appropriate. This teaching approach, which was developed by Italian physician Maria Montessori more than 100 years ago, enables students to learn at their own pace and develop practical life skills that foster independence, confidence and socialization.

The academy empowers students to make better food choices, apply age-appropriate math and science skills in real-world settings, and embrace practices such as recycling and composting. The little tots stand on step stools, measure their own ingredients with specially designed measuring cups that help them learn fractions by immersion and clean up their own spills. And yes, they use knives.

“I love the idea of empowering children to become confident learners and the beautiful organization and passion of productivity in the kitchen is the place for that,” Curin, a mother of three, tells L.A. Weekly. “The first three years of what they learn in primary school, they’re learning here. They’re learning patterns and shapes and how to listen to the instructor. Maria Montessori realized that children have to be respected and empowered in order to develop the confidence to make good choices later in life.”

In our current age of the helicopter parent, where guardians go to great lengths to shelter their kids from missteps by swooping in before they can make a mistake that might be a valuable learning moment, Curin and team believe that kids solving problems is a healthier approach to learning and growing.

“Parents are so busy these days and some of them don’t know how to cook and others don’t want their kitchen messed up,” says Curin. “The secret here is that the children have to clean up and it turns out they love to do it. They want to mix their own ingredients, crack their own eggs and chop their own vegetables. Kids want to do it themselves, they don’t want to have it done for them.”

Oh yes, the subject of knives. It all starts with a wooden chopper for the three, four and five year olds made from Canadian maple by people out of work trying to get back into the workforce. The students are carefully taught to hold it with the exact same grip as a chef knife that they will end up using later. Onions will be cut into smaller pieces for the little ones in the beginning. They move on to the plastic serrated knife as their skills improve, which still employs the same grip.

“They learn how to position their fingers, hold the knife correctly and safety skills all at the same time,” says Cora as she catches herself and holds herself back from the instinctive reaction to help a junior chef pick up a spill of mixing bowls.

“They graduate as their cooking skills advance and it’s very subtle,” says the Iron Chef. “At Little Kitchen Academy it’s not a competition, it’s about being competent and learning knife skills. It’s not about keeping an eye on
what your neighbor is doing. When we see they’re ready to move up we casually slip a new knife in their hand without even missing a beat or drawing any attention to it. It’s about giving them this empowerment in a very discreet way where they feel it inside without being threatening to anyone else. They don’t need the sticker or the trophy, the confidence lasts so much longer. There’s no big celebration. It’s the opposite of what we see in traditional learning.

Seasonal sessions run year-round and are organized by age group (ages 3-5, 6-8, 9-12, and 13+ years old). Students experience a three-hour class once a week during the school year or over five consecutive days during summer, winter and spring breaks. Each week, students learn how to make healthy and seasonal meals from scratch to consumption, while experimenting with math and science concepts, working on reading skills, and polishing up on table manners by sharing meals. Sessions are limited to 10 students and are overseen by three instructors. All students are welcome in the fully inclusive program, including those with learning or other disabilities. The program, which is nut, meat, poultry and seafood free, also can accommodate those with gluten, dairy or other allergies.

“With the older students, we talk about how to buy a sweet potato and what a sweet potato is,” says Curin at the chopstick table designed by Chop Values in Los Feliz. “What’s in it? How much does it cost and how do you make it? Right now those kids just hop on to DoorDash and skip doing the dishes and are hooked on these instant food apps delivering saturated fat and oversalted meals to our homes at 11 o’clock at night. That has to stop and we need to teach them that a jar of salsa and a sweet potato can be breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

There’s also a charitable arm of Little Kitchen Academy that teaches the students in every session how to give back. Three jars are positioned at the entrance, where students make a donation of their choosing after they have taken off and hung up their chef jackets.

“At the end of every session, each child gets a token which represents a dollar from their registration and we give them age-appropriate information about the three jars and the foundations they represent and they can make a choice of where they want to make their donation,” Curin explains. “They’re all color-coded according to age group. They have such incredible emotion behind their choices. Sometimes it boils down to one jar not having as many tokens. Yesterday they chose Chefs for Humanity because they themselves are chefs now. They’re learning that they can help and make a difference. Most schools will choose a charity for everyone to donate to, why not let the kids pick? By the end of 2025, we expect to reach more than $1 million in donations from the kids.”

Cora is the president and founder of Chefs for Humanity, an organization that originated in response to the 2004 tsunami disaster. Modeled after Doctors Without Borders, the nonprofit gathers the culinary community together to raise funds and provide resources for emergency, educational and hunger-related causes.

So who are these chefs of tomorrow? “They’re going to be everything,” says Curin. “This generation in front of us is going to have five or six careers and be vibrant and inspired. They’re going to change the world because they will be empowered to be independent and confident. And they can make focaccia.”
Evacuations continue in Afghanistan as the U.S. tries to safely leave the country before August 31.

BY ISAI ROCHA

A

t least 10,000 people were evacuated from Afghanistan Monday, despite violence at Kabul’s airport.

There have been at least 37,000 people evacuated since the U.S. began its military airlifts on August 14.

“We’re going to do everything – everything that we can to provide safe evacuation for our Afghan allies, partners, and Afghans who might be targeted because of their association with the United States,” President Joe Biden said in an August 20 briefing. “I cannot promise what the final outcome will be or what it will be – that it will be without risk of loss. But as commander-in-chief, I can assure you that I will mobilize every resource necessary.”

Biden said the U.S. has been in constant contact with the Taliban, making sure evacuations are allowed to be made safely, and Tuesday, the Taliban informed the U.S. that they would be given safe passage until August 31.

“I don’t think any one of us can see those pictures and not feel that pain on a human level,” Biden said Friday. “Now we have a mission – a mission to complete in Afghanistan. It’s an incredibly difficult and dangerous operation for our military.”

On August 14, Biden said the Taliban were informed that any attacks would be “met with swift and strong U.S. military response.”

By the following Monday, violence had quickly escalated when Afghanistan leaders fled the country. That led to the collapse of the Afghan military, to which Biden said, “American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves.”

“It is wrong to order American troops to step up when Afghanistan’s own armed forces would not,” Biden said in an August 16 address to the nation. “If the political leaders of Afghanistan were unable to come together for the good of their people, unable to negotiate for the future of their country when the chips were down, they would never have done so while U.S. troops remained in Afghanistan bearing the brunt of the fighting for them.”

There are currently 6,000 U.S. troops on the ground in Afghanistan, as it continues evacuations.

I’m proud of the fact a disproportionate number of Afghani refugees are here in Northern California, not just here in the south, but also up in Sacramento County,” Newsom said during a “Vote No” rally Wednesday. “We’re already working in terms of a lot of those refugees coming in and working with CBOs and non-profit organizations to make sure that they feel welcome and celebrated as members of our community.”

In Los Angeles, vigils have been held throughout the week, in remembrance of those who died at the height of Monday’s evacuations in Afghanistan. Signs were held reading, “20 years, for what?” and “Free Afghanistan” as members of the community mourned the loss of life.

While a screening process must occur, President Biden has stated that the U.S. will take in refugees.

“Once screened and cleared, we will welcome Afghans who helped us in the war effort to their new home in the United States of America,” Biden said on August 23. “Because that’s who we are. That’s what America is.”

FDA Gives Pfizer COVID Vaccine Full Approval

The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine was given full approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Monday.

Before Monday’s approval for those 16 and older, Pfizer’s vaccine had been given emergency use authorization by the FDA, which allowed it to be administered to that age group without its full endorsement, since December.

“The public can be very confident that this vaccine meets the high standards for safety, effectiveness and manufacturing quality the FDA requires of an approved product,” acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock said Monday.

“Today’s milestone puts us one step closer to altering the course of this pandemic in the U.S.”

When the FDA gave Pfizer emergency use authorization, it was after two months of a study on 44,000 volunteers, 16 and older.

The FDA examined results from Pfizer’s continued study, as well as real-world data from millions of vaccinations that had been administered to Americans, to this point.

Americans in the 12 to 15-year-old category may currently receive Pfizer vaccinations under emergency use, but the vaccine has yet to be fully authorized in that age group.

Pfizer is now the first COVID-19 vaccine to receive full authorization, with Moderna and Johnson & Johnson still being under emergency use.

Vaccine Becomes Mandatory For Military

With Pfizer receiving full FDA approval for the COVID-19 vaccine, the door opened for the military to make them mandatory.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday, “A timeline for vaccination completion will be provided in the coming days.”

Before the vaccine’s approval, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said a vaccine mandate would require a waiver from President Biden, a move that Biden said he would get behind.

“Secretary Austin and I share an unshakable commitment to making sure our troops have every tool they need to do their jobs as safely as possible,” the president said in the statement. “These vaccines will save lives. Period.”

Once the mandate goes into effect, troops will have the choice to get vaccinated at military medical facilities or show proof of previous vaccination.
CALIFORNIA GUBERNATORIAL RECALL ELECTION

September 14th

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AFTER 50 YEARS, UDO KIER CONTINUES TO LIGHT UP THE SCREEN

The Warhol fave is hot again after playing a charismatic hairdresser in Swan Song.

BY LINA LECARO

“T

his is not my swan song,” insists iconic character actor Udo Kier, chatting by phone about what many are calling the best performance of his career — playing a flamboyant hairdresser in Todd Stephens’ sublime indie portrait called Swan Song. “Also they are saying ‘comeback,’ but in my case it’s wrong because I never went away.”

Even so, Kier — who starts our interview telling us that he graced the cover of L.A. Weekly decades ago for a special German Fashion issue (he was interviewed by performance artist and former Weekly staffer Ron Athey) — finds himself a hot commodity again thanks to the role. The former Echo Park/current Palm Springs resident obviously stays very aware of the media and the buzz from his latest role (playing real life hairdresser “Mr. Pat,” a local legend and long-time stylist in San Diego’s historic hair salon across the street from his once busy salon) and its strong supporting role as the mad doctor in Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein to the collection of horror cult classics that followed (Blood for Dracula, Suspiria). He went on to appear in countless acclaimed films from there, from auteur classics such as Gus Van Zandt’s My Own Private Idaho to pretty much everything Danish director Lars von Trier has made, to mainstream hits such as Ace Ventura Pet Detective, Blade and Armageddon.

He’s a great villain and a provocative pansexual presence (Madonna cast him in both her infamous SEX book and the video for her Erotica single “Deeper and Deeper”), but the subtlety and sadness he conveys in Swan Song is relatively new for him and lead billing or no, it’s something he’d be smart to tap into again. Kier did get his start as a leading man after all, first in Germany, then in the U.S. The actor’s piercing blue eyes and ominous charisma made him a standout from the start, from his early starring role as the mad doctor in Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein to the collection of horror cult classics that followed (Blood for Dracula, Suspiria). He went on to appear in countless acclaimed films from there, from auteur classics such as Gus Van Zant’s My Own Private Idaho to pretty much everything Danish director Lars von Trier has made, to mainstream hits such as Ace Ventura Pet Detective, Blade and Armageddon.

It’s a simple story and the film as a whole is pretty lowkey, even as it explores a flamboyant subject. Kier’s nuanced portrayal is deserving of every accolade, especially since he’s anything but subtle in real life. Reminiscing about Warhol and how working with him changed his life (“I moved from the regular newspaper to the glamour papers”) he admits that out of 250 or so films he’s made, some were memorable and some were not. “I always say that maybe 50 are bad and 50 you can have with some alcohol and be amused, and you know, there’s a lot of good ones too,” says the actor, who was most recently seen in the acclaimed The Painted Bird and will be part of Amazon’s Hunters season 2 cast.

“With the pandemic, people want to go to the movies and they want to have tears in their eyes and they want to laugh and they want to love!” Kier answers when we ask why he thinks the movie is resonating with film-goers, but it’s more than that and throughout our conversation, he’s not shy about saying so. “All the big movies, I always had supporting parts and people might have said, ‘yeah he was good in that.’ But in this film I’m on screen from beginning til the end!”

Kier’s performance — and really, his entire career — has earned him the right to bask in this moment. Here’s hoping that Swan Song is indeed, anything but for him.
GO WEST!
Rapper June3rd journeys from Florida to L.A. and finds success.

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

Melodic rapper June3rd was a fresh-faced 19-year-old when he made the move from Kissimmee, Florida, to Los Angeles. He was a small-town boy, the sort of place where everybody knows everybody. But it wasn't enough and, as an admirer of west coast rap from afar, he knew he had to make the leap.

"I want to say [my music] started when I was about 14," he says. "That's when I created my first song, in high school. I think it got real when I moved out to L.A. in like 2015. That's when I could see what it actually took to be an artist. What it is to take your artistry to the next level. That's when I figured out my sound as well, and who I was.

Florida and California might have sunny weather and palm trees, but the similarities pretty much end there. Culturally, June3rd found himself in richer surroundings.

"Coming out here, it was a whole bunch of different creatives, and a whole bunch of different motivation," he says. "I was seeing a side of life I hadn't seen before. So that really motivated me to lock in and step my game up. I wanted to live this way. The scenery as well is completely different from where I'm from. It's a big change, for sure."

The artist had his eye on L.A. musicians such as DJ Mustard and Kendrick Lamar, and knew he wanted to be a part of what was going on here.

"I fell in love with that style," he says. "I wanted to do that, even though I was from Florida. That was my main influence on just wanting to be out here. Being on the west coast, just seeing how cultured they were.

June describes his sound as "melodic rap," and he considers himself more a rapper than a singer even though he certainly sings on a lot of his material. "The guy has an extensive range. "I consider myself more of a rapper, just because that's my background and that's where I started," he says. "Before I became melodic, I was just rapping. So I definitely consider myself more of a rapper, but I had to learn to develop and what notes to hit. Staying in my pocket, in my lane, with the melody. I just kind of mastered it and got good at it. That's how I figured my sound out, just playing around with melodies, seeing what I can and can't do vocally."

His debut album, Jemini, just dropped and he's super-pleased with the way it turned out. "I think it's so beautiful because it really captures every single emotion that I've been going through for the past year since I started creating it," he says. "Every song is exactly where I was in life. It was a lot of new things for me, like falling in love. That was a new thing for me, so you get to touch on that. Me battling whether I want to be in a relationship right now, whether I'm ready for that. Really touching on things as I'm living through them. I think that's what made it special for me."

The concept, he says, is that people don't have to have everything figured out right now. We can cut ourselves some slack and learn from our mistakes.

"You have to accept that there's many different sides to you," he says. "Just embrace those things, and not be too hard on yourself. Because people constantly change their minds, they constantly make decisions that affect the next move, and that's ok because you want to keep living through it. That's why every song is exactly what I'm going through right now, because I'm talking about it and realizing that it's cool and I'll figure it out. What's meant to be is meant to be.

Fellow Floridian Rick Ross pops up on the song "Friends," a collab that June describes as a blessing.

"He's somebody that I always looked up to because we're both from Florida," he says. "Just to see his development throughout the years, and how long he's been able to be in the game. It's just mind-blowing, that somebody I grew up with as a kid watching is on the same record as me. It was dope. I just remember doing the verse and I was just mind blown. Smiling. I made a video and all that. It still seems surreal to me and obviously that's a fan favorite. Everything works out."

That song, he says, is pretty self-explanatory. You need to appreciate the people in your life.

"It's not just about me, it's about the people around me too," he says. "That's the main point to take away from this – appreciate the people around you, showing them love, and appreciating the fact that you can't do this alone. You need those people in your life to take you to the next level. Then when you get there, that's when everything comes full circle."

So far, the reception to the album from fans and critics has been all good.

"I think it's dope," June says. "We've been taking the more natural approach to build that fanbase and that following, based off of me and getting people to gravitate towards me. So I like the approach, and we're starting from the ground up. It's beautiful to see everything develop before my eyes."

Looking ahead, June will be releasing more music videos, promoting this album. He's already thinking about the next project though – the guy never stops working. Meanwhile, we had to ask him where his unusual moniker comes from.

"My grandfather's nickname was June, so when he passed away I wanted to keep that name alive," he says. "My family always spoke about him. So it stuck and I ran with it. But that's how Jemini came about – everybody thinks I'm a gemini born June 3rd. So it's a play on words."

Little trickster!

June3rd's Jemini album is out now.
What is the nature of change and healing in the creative process? What is invisible in us?” muses Norman Seeff. “Photograph that.” Seeff has created some of the most recognizable images of iconic innovators in music and pop culture across the past five decades, and this week, a monumental selection of new prints of classic works goes on view in Los Angeles. But as his Sessions Project video series and nascent Power and Passion to Create foundation make clear, in some ways, his truer work exists on a higher plane that transcends portraiture to touch on the very essence of human creativity.

From a youthful career in professional soccer in his native South Africa, to years studying and practicing medicine in Soweto, and following his spontaneous, intuitive move to New York City at the end of the 1960’s, Seeff has pursued a way of life with meaningful creative dimensions. Looking back now, even those seemingly disparate experiences feed the story. “In soccer you can change the game even if you don’t have the ball,” Seeff tells the L.A. Weekly. “During medical school I ran life-drawing sessions at night. Photography and video came later, and they are only some of the forms of creativity I’m engaged in. It’s a multidimensional spiritual seeking, and my own personal journey to become real and vulnerable was a fundamental necessity.”

The idea of the switch from practicing medicine to making art fulltime was brought on by an increasing sense of despair that medicine was inevitably about reacting to disaster, in a vicious cycle with nothing ultimately changing. “Healing ultimately means to bring about change,” Seeff says. “If you don’t unstick the patterns of the past, life becomes meaningless. It’s about fixing versus truly healing.”

Some of the earliest photographs Seeff made in New York were portfolios of the denizens of the Chelsea Hotel and Warhol’s Factory; pictures of Andy, Patti and Robert that soon became enticing commercially. When music industry impresario Bob Cato saw those and also Seeff’s drawings, he was at first hired to design album covers. But then by 1971, having relocated to L.A. to become Creative Director of United Artists Records, Seeff was shooting as well as designing, and hiring on all the young L.A. artists and photographers he could as well. After two years and multiple Grammy nods, he went out on
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his own. What is now Bar Marmont was Seeff’s legendary studio and spontaneous social hub for 15 years.

Seeff filmed over 500 portrait sessions with musicians, actors, writers, directors, scientists, entrepreneurs and politicians. Each video is more than photo shoot footage; they are full, emotional, insightful, honest and often quite moving conversations between Seeff and his subjects— including Ray Charles, Joni Mitchell, Steve Jobs, Steve Martin, John Huston, Martin Scorsese, Billy Wilder, Bob Fosse, will.i.am, Tina Turner, Cher, Ricky Lee Jones, The Band and Alicia Keys — all while the shutter clicks away. Despite the indelible ubiquity of many of the specific images that resulted from these sessions, Seeff is adamant about their broader qualities as windows into profound self-awareness and human connectivity.

“Each image represents the pinnacle of how the artist sees themselves,” says Seeff. “Each one is truly a co-creation. These are not even portraits per se, they are experiences in the moment, soul-to-soul connections. The secret to the image is the resonant energy that remains of what was going on at the moment,” says Seeff. “A photograph is not about the technology, but about the authenticity of feeling trusting, safe, and seen. All the energy of the defense mechanisms falls away.”

The beauty of the Sessions Project videos is that the audience can witness for themselves these principles being put into effect, in real time. Often the conversations take the form of relating early memories of performing in public for the first time, or presenting original material, memories of the events that changed the course of their lives, articulating the fears that once held them back, celebrating the courage that pushed them through and the faith in their own imaginations that fuels it all.

With will.i.am you can see him writing, right there on camera. His clothes and his demeanor at first really speak to control and focus, but as the session progresses, a conversation about what drives and inspires him turned back the clock and lowered the walls. At one point speaking of an early teacher who was, to say the least, not encouraging about his ability to pay attention, in his five hours together with Norman, will.i.am remembered literally everything he’d ever written.

Ray Charles spoke eloquently about the relationship to his personal emotional energy and the energy of the song he is set to perform. He said “It all begins in the mind,” before flashing that million-watt smile. Seeff makes a point there, noting “Ray did not say the brain, he said the mind, which is so much bigger.” The Alicia Keys interview is one of the most emotionally powerful of the lot, watching her face change as Norman takes her back to the first song she sang for an audience, which at first she could not recall. “Sing it to me,” Norman said, and by the end, she remembered.

“James Taylor came by about nine months
 ago to shoot for his new album," Seeff tells us. "I hadn't seen him in 30 years and it was like no time had passed." Even Steve Jobs appreciated the value of these ideas. For years after they'd created that iconic photograph of Jobs cradling the first Mac, he'd call Norman every so often and they'd meet and talk about creativity. "He'd say things like, 'I know there's a dimension of cause and effect in consciousness; if you want the effect, you have to search for the cause.' He knew it, his visionary frequency was high, instinctively."

And it's exactly that bridge between the inner process of creativity and its outer expression that the Sessions Project explores. "True creativity is emotion balanced with the intellect," says Seeff. "All the real artists spend time in the imaginal realm and the emotional space. Society (especially sports and medicine) thinks emotion gets in the way, but that's what makes for imagination. It's not abstract, this is all very practical in terms of making good pictures -- and making change in the world."

Seeff's special sauce in these studio sessions is the way he has the ability to do what he calls, "putting out an energy field in the frequency of the subconscious. It's not just talk, it's very real. I'm a spiritual explorer," says Seeff. "The nature of existence is mystical, I'm working with that. [The artists] feel seen by me because no one ever speaks to them like this; then the communion of honesty is quite profound. For the best shots, I had to go through it with them. If it ever failed, I would apologize and start over, and that would often bring us even closer."

The Power and Passion to Create is his nonprofit which will offer screenings and conversations, using the materials as a map of the inner resources and resonant energies that the great artists know how to harness. He conducts inspiring workshops around the short films that have been edited from this archive, so that curious people can see the principles applied in action.

The video project will be going live in short order, but in the meantime, audiences in Los Angeles can experience a new exhibition of fresh prints of classic images. Chandeliers + Tulips represents local artists and photographers, and when its owners met Norman, they "instantly had a beautiful, organic connection with him. He was someone we felt we knew our whole lives. Norman has such an extensive, extraordinary body of work that we knew we couldn't just hang a few of his pieces in our existing store. We decided to open an entirely new space called Studio CT dedicated to Norman and his pieces. His words and works are something that need to be experienced in person."

"Great artists have these senses highly developed," says Seeff. "But these ideas are universally applicable, in business, science, all of it. Creativity can jump into the future, manifest something tangible from a concept. The world is in crisis, our problems cannot be solved at the level they were created. We need a new paradigm for the age of information consciousness," he says. "Everyone has access to this power. I'm just sharing what I've learned."

Studio CT in Agoura Hills will be hosting soft opening events on August 28 and September 9, in advance of the grand opening invited-only reception on September 18. For more information, contact Shanesa Fath at (818) 548-5343 and visit chandeliersandtulips.com and normanseeff.com.
PUNCH EDIBLES CONTINUES EXPANSION EFFORTS

BY JIMI DEVINE

CANNABIS had previously allowed products 10 times stronger, people still shopped for value in their edibles. The idea of getting the most bang for your buck when buying a cannabis-infused brownie or gummy bear was definitely a thing.

But prior to the cap, there were a few companies that really took potency to another level. Punch Edibles had firmly positioned themselves in that group in the buildup to legalization. Punch Edibles’ COO Michael Martinez chatted with us about the ups and downs of the years since.

“We started right at the tail end of 2013, but we’re a full seven years into the market at this point, being a previous Prop. 215 operator that was then able to transfer over into the new recreational side of things,” Martinez told L.A. Weekly. “It’s been a journey for sure.”

For many years, Punch felt like a very L.A.-centric brand. Edible enthusiasts from out of town would grab a few before they left. We asked Martinez what it’s been like to have the brand’s identity be so local as it now branches out across the state more.

“You know, it’s been one of the things that’s been to our benefit,” Martinez said. “Also, there was a period of time where it was kind of to our shortfall. The city of L.A. had a crazy licensing process and we ended up getting kind of held back for almost a year when rec finally first came about. But as a company, we’ve actually really wanted to put our anchor and base points here in the Los Angeles area.”

Martinez feels like from a long-term perspective, people are really going to care about not only their products coming from California, but being competitive in the industry as a whole in bigger cities like Los Angeles. Being a top chocolate producer in L.A. rather than a mystery town that decided to be pro-weed has a better ring to it.

The weed chocolate industry itself has been a bloodbath in recent years. I wouldn’t be surprised if the number of weed chocolate companies that came and went over the last decade approached triple digits. But the fierceness of the competition only makes what the survivors pulled off that much more impressive.

We asked Martinez how cool it was to be one of the survivors.

“I think the biggest thing we really want to let everybody know is that we are a legacy brand and we plan to be here for the long future and we’re excited,” Martinez said. “We’re excited to be a part of this industry just as much as everybody else is. We’re just normal guys, though. Out here just doing our thing and just feel blessed to be a part of it.”

Martinez said while they were able to carry that brand into the recreational market it wasn’t like they were just making money hand over fist at first just because they were able to make the transition.

“There’s just now a mountain of competition that is coming into the place and into the field. We kind of quickly pivoted ourselves a little bit into not just being focused on being a chocolate company or an edible company as much as we have built a brand around,” Martinez said. “Our success from a financial standpoint, unfortunately, really couldn’t stand on just those legs.”

The biggest success story yet from the new look lineup is the rosin.

“Obviously with the rosin that we’ve put out that’s been a big, big, big pull for us,” Martinez said. “We dabbled a little bit into some dry flower. We started doing pre-rolls here recently. And then we were also going to be releasing some solventless vapes coming here in the near future as well. So really just trying to diversify ourselves just a little bit beyond just the edibles and chocolates.”

In the end though, Punch, be it extracts or edibles, has essentially had to build out the company twice. Once before legalization, where they lived up to their namesake, and again when the entire marketplace was capped at 100 milligrams.

“It was tough, man. I mean, I’ll be honest with you, like, when we were in the 215 days, I think we were in well over 350 shops,” Martinez said. “And when we came into the recreational market, we were kind of capped in this 100-milligram category. It pretty much wiped our entire business off the face of the earth. We pretty much started at ground zero. And it was a pretty daunting uphill battle for us to regain a lot of our customer base.”

Despite the journey’s challenges and a few gray hairs, Martinez wouldn’t change a thing.

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CALIFORNIA’S TOTAL POT TAX REVENUE CLOSES IN ON $3 BILLION

With the newest numbers released from CDTFA last Friday, total pot tax revenue has hit $2.8 billion.

BY JIMI DEVINE

Despite California’s imperfect marijuana legalization roll-out, the state continues to see revenue trend in the right direction when it comes to legal cannabis. The most recent numbers show the market has put $2.8 billion into the state coffers since the first legal cannabis sale on January 1, 2018.

For many California voters who don’t use cannabis, the criminal justice reform side of things and taxes were two of the main inspirations for voting yes. In addition to sales tax, the two new cannabis taxes that went into effect were a cultivation tax on all the harvested weed that will eventually make it to the marketplace and a 15 percent cannabis excise tax on weed.

The will of the voters is administered by the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration. The latest set of numbers come from a CDTFA announcement on the second quarter of fiscal year 2021 that was due on August 2.

In the second quarter, the excise tax brought in $172.3 million in revenue and the cultivation tax generated $40.4 million.

Since the market opened, California has collected $347 million in cultivation taxes and $1.4 billion in cannabis excise. An additional $1 billion in sales tax makes up the difference to get you to that $2.8 billion figure. In addition to those cannabis specific taxes, the sales tax brought in another $120.5 million for the same period.

The reported total haul for the cannabis industry is $333.2 million in taxes for 2nd quarter returns.

So how does that weigh in against previous numbers? Very well. The first quarter of 2021 saw a $304.8 million take for the state. A 10 percent jump quarter over quarter would be spectacular for any business, but it gets even wilder when you compare things to this time last year.

This time last year the CDTFA reported the second quarter of 2020 brought in just north of $200 million and the number was later revised to $260.2 million. That was technically the first full quarter in the pandemic and numbers would end up bumping up about 25% quarter to quarter in that moment as everyone was stuck in the house. But there was such a giant run on weed in March 2020 that it helped put the revenue numbers a bit closer to the following quarter that was entirely within the pandemic.

As of right now, California’s total take in pot taxes since 2018 is larger than the GDP of 28 countries. Pretty much everywhere smaller than Aruba. But I bet if you took the sales of the last month into account then the number would likely be 30 countries. Aruba was the current cutoff with a GDP of $2.7 billion.

And it’s worth noting all of this money was collected despite the fact the state’s underground market is still likely at least double the size of the legal market, and that’s if you’re keeping to the lowball side of things. It’s fascinating to speculate how the revenue balance would work out if the bar was lowered to enter the marketplace, because while all of that underground cannabis doesn’t stay in California, plenty does.

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