



The Andries, John and Amy, preside over a very green enterprise.

attached to the cultivation facility. The odd location speaks to our farm-to-table thing.”

The farm-to-table thing in the cannabis world is, approximately, the seed-to-sale thing. With the dispensary physically attached to the growrooms, the geography connecting the seed (or in this case, clone) to the consumable product—buds, topicals, concentrates—is easily traced. It all happens right here.

“My husband likes to say that you’ve got to pass about seven dispensaries on the way here,” Amy says of the out-of-the-way locale. L’Eagle has to be something special then, to attract and keep customers. Amy’s husband, John, is also co-owner. His background in food and beverage pairs nicely with Amy’s in nonprofit management. The couple’s complementary experiences are well-suited to the task of producing high-quality weed with a conscience, a combo that is attracting a loyal clientele.

Essentially, the ethic at L’Eagle revolves around a question: “Why not have the same expectation for cannabis that you would for food?” On its face, that’s a simple proposition, but consider where it leads. We all expect our food to be clean, of course, and tasty. Many of us also want food grown without toxic chemicals, pesticides or fertilizers. A smaller subset of us look for food that hasn’t traveled too far to get to us (thereby limiting the carbon footprint of its production and distribution), and fewer yet might want to be assured our food has not been raised under harsh or unfair labor conditions. Not only has L’Eagle hit the sweet spot with these criteria, but the owners are also on a mission to spread the ethic beyond L’Eagle’s own customer base with a verifiable, transparent system for the cannabis industry as a whole.

The master growers here did not, for the most part, learn the craft in underground grow ops. Rather, with degrees in horticulture and experience steeped in organic and sustainable agriculture, they bring priorities to the task that go beyond yield size and profit. The cultivators use OMRI-rated products at every stage of the growth cycle, and the fact that they’ve placed well in numerous Cannabis Cups tells us that best practices can give us the best weed.

There’s about 10,000 square feet of space devoted to growing plants. This isn’t tiny, but it’s dwarfed by bigger players around the state. Could L’Eagle

THE BEST JOB IN COLORADO



Hand-crafted, one bud at a time

A SMALL CANNABUSINESS IN DENVER HAS A BIG CONSCIENCE. WITHOUT BEING PREACHY ABOUT IT, L’EAGLE SERVICES HAS SET HIGH STANDARDS FOR SUSTAINABILITY, FAIR LABOR PRACTICES AND, NOT LEAST OF ALL, QUALITY WEED. NOW IT’S READY TO INFLUENCE THE WORLD.

BY MIKE DIPAOLA

QUIVAS STREET IN DENVER is a small and bleak stretch of commercial properties where one can purchase such

things as electrical supplies, hardware and flooring. Somewhat out of place here is a modest but prominent storefront in orange, its purpose boldly announced by a green cross and promising signage: A DELUXE CANNABIS GALLERY. But it isn’t the fact of being a dispensary-cum-grow op

that makes L’Eagle Services an unusual addition to this industrial park; it’s the company’s dedication to socially responsible principles like sustainability and fair labor.

“We’re in a hiding-in-plain-sight location,” laughs L’Eagle Services co-owner Amy Andrie. “It’s a very odd space. We’re right by the city, but we were one of the first businesses to move into a warehouse district, and we’re the first licensed facility in Denver that has the dispensary



Hands-on quality control, from seed to sale

expand without sacrificing the tender care given to individual plants, or is there a threshold at which size undermines the foundational philosophy? “We could get more people,” John supposes. “We’ll see. It could be done, but it sort of defeats the purpose of having small-batch anything.”

The staff clearly has a passion for their product, and, partly because they eschew harmful chemicals in the growrooms, they are more attentive to individual plants than the mega-farms can be. Some facilities may exude the cold sterility of a lab or the uniform drudgery of a factory floor, but L’Eagle is all about the human touch.

A small nursery is home to a verdant sea of young clones, where LED lighting was recently installed to cut back on energy usage. The babies are rooted in two-inch blocks of organic coconut coir and swaddled in compostable bags that are meant to be planted right along with the roots when the time comes. Throughout the growrooms, L’Eagle is installing drip irrigation systems, which save water and are better for the plants.

The growers strive toward zero waste in an effort to keep the company’s footprint small. “We incorporate coco coir cloning collars instead of spun plastic, and use pots made from recycled matter

and that can be recycled again after we use them,” John explains. “Our media oftentimes are used to amend the soil in organic food farms, but when that option is not available, we compost it—we compost all leaf matter and fibrous material. As far as our packaging for retail products is concerned, we spend the extra money on good plastic that is recyclable; we will of course recycle containers for customers.”

L’Eagle opened its doors to medical-cannabis patients in 2010 and expanded to accommodate recreational consumers in 2014. It has quietly been collecting accolades ever since, landing overwhelmingly positive five-star ratings on Yelp and high praise elsewhere. *Leafly* named it Best Overall Dispensary in Colorado in 2017, and *Cannabist* readers named it their favorite dispensary last year as well.

That word-of-mouth popularity is music to the ears of any small business, but just as important to the owners is that L’Eagle has also won recognition from sources that measure the sustainability ethic on which the place was founded. For one, it scored a Clean Green Certification, a third-party seal of approval that requires intensive scrutiny of every stage of production, “from

seed or clone selection, soil, nutrients, pesticides, mold treatments, dust control, and source of electricity, to methods of harvesting and processing.”

When businesses tout “organics,” it’s important to know exactly what the term means. To win the imprimatur of the US government, “organic operations must demonstrate that they are protecting natural resources, conserving biodiversity, and using only approved substances,” according to USDA guidelines. Of course, the USDA stamp of approval is not available to cannabis businesses as long as marijuana is considered illegal at the federal level.

L’Eagle meets (and almost certainly exceeds) USDA standards. The company grows its own flowers in house, then utilizes the resultant trim to produce around 80 percent of its other products. Since the grow operation and dispensary are essentially one entity, L’Eagle can piggyback things like energy expenditures to power both sides of the business. Indoor grows, being energy-intensive as they are, do tend to have enormous carbon footprints, so minimizing electricity use to the greatest reasonable extent is key.

Long before marijuana plants mature into the delicious forms we know and



Tender care is given to individual plants.

SOME FACILITIES MAY EXUDE THE COLD STERILITY OF A LAB OR THE UNIFORM DRUDGERY OF A FACTORY FLOOR, BUT L'EAGLE IS ALL ABOUT THE HUMAN TOUCH.

a sweatshop. But we're not making the same decisions, not following the same patterns as consumers [of cannabis]."

The Andrles believe their way of doing business can influence the whole industry, and they aim to spread the good news of customer-based activism. In May of this year, that aspiration was realized when Amy launched *#WhatsInMyWeed* (*whatsinmyweed.com*), a campaign with a rallying cry for like-minded growers and retail shops to create and preserve an industry with a heart: "By reminding customers that they insist on organic, fair trade, cage-free, grass fed and more when it comes to what they eat, we urge them to demand the same transparency and quality of their cannabis."

The campaign's pledge lays out the mission:

"We, the undersigned, pledge to provide transparency to customers regarding the origin, inputs, production method, harvest and processing of all of our cannabis goods to the best of our ability. More, we will seek to operate with as much efficiency as possible regarding: water, power, packaging and how we operate our business. Further, we pledge to treat our employees fairly and provide them a safe and supportive working environment. Finally, we pledge to continuously improve our business to adhere to this pledge and drive best practices. Doing these things makes the cannabis industry stronger and will help the consumer connect with businesses that reflect their values."

What these ganjapreneurs are pushing here is empowerment, along with the radical notion that you need to give customers what they want. It may take some cajoling because, before legalization, all of us were getting our weed from black-market dealers, and such niceties as sustainability and pesticide-free flowers were not top priorities in the transaction. "The power needs to shift," Amy declares. "Consumers need to remember that their dollars demand that *they* decide what we're going to carry in our store."

Amy is optimistic about where this is

love, the plant is still considered a tasty delicacy by pests. L'Eagle cultivators, no surprise, discourage the hungry hordes with safe neem-oil treatments and garlic spray, but do not apply even these once the buds appear. They also deploy beneficial pests such as nematodes to safeguard the crops, as evinced by the Bio-Boxes affixed to the plant stalks that house the predatory bugs.

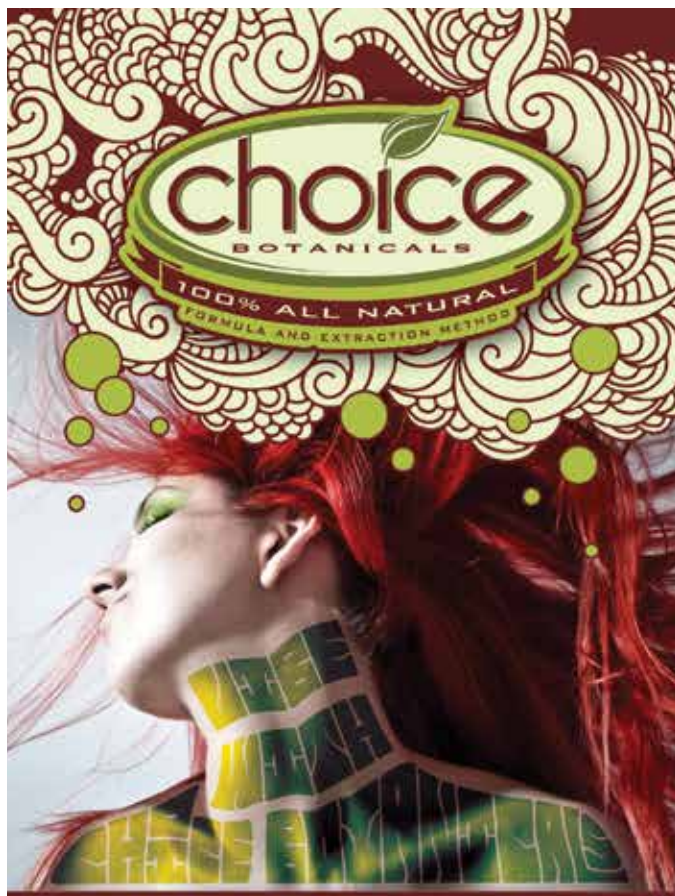
The dispensary side of the business is a small, bustling space. Amy reckons that the average customer spends around 45 minutes in the store, so customer service is crucial to L'Eagle's success. The vibe is warm and welcoming, but also abuzz with activity. Part of that is because my visit happened to be on the morning of a high holy day, April 20, so it's a bit like visiting Macy's on Christmas Eve, with last-minute shoppers seeking that perfect magical gift.

It is nice to see a mom-and-pop concern that is run by an actual mom and pop (the Andrles have a young daughter). But the pop, John, bristles slightly at the prospect of being pigeonholed as just another cool boutique-shop owner. "I want to put more into my energy than [that]," he declares. "We want to be recognized as thought leaders. We're trying to [stave off] the madness in the direction the industry is heading."

That madness, John believes, begins when a state establishes its regulations. Newcomers to the industry are instituting dumb rules that he believes do the industry—the craft—of cannabis production a disservice. "With 20 million people in New York, the [state] decided on five licenses. How in the world are five licenses going to be able to provide for 20 million residents?"

Other new players on the scene aren't much better at setting up regulatory frameworks. "There's 22 million people in Florida, and they come up with a cockamamie plan to allow *seven* ornamental-farmer operations?" John asks, incredulously. Such monopolies inevitably put out inferior product. "They create a system where buds are processed, possibly synthesized, and then processed again," he growls in disgust. "The best part of marijuana is in its unprocessed state, just like vegetables!"

Colorado, though, has wisely made space for mom and pop. And yet the Andrles are essentially providing for a need that consumers have not been asking for, at least not in great numbers. "We think about where our veggies come from, whether something is genetically modified," Amy points out. "We think about the ingredients that go into our food or [whether] our clothes come from



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headed. "Slowly, the customers are starting to realize that they can have a choice about where they shop," she says. "They can have a choice about what products they buy."

Some of the great products on offer here come out of a press. "This is the PurePressure," says Robert Hamman, a.k.a. "Rosin Rob," referring to a stout rosin press. "It's got 10,000 pounds per square inch and it can be set at any temp for any time you want." This morning, he's pressing out Durban Dream, a *sativa*-dominant marriage of Durban Poison and Blue Dream, harvested two weeks ago.

While Rob squeezes out some fresh product, he remarks on the fact that he works solo in this small space. "We have smaller batches than other places, but I don't mind because I like the craft-type small batch—we care about every single gram that goes out there, and I feel like it's just way better that way," he enthuses.

Rob also shows me the latest batch of caviar, Girl Scout Cookies nuggets dipped in rosin. (Since my visit, L'Eagle has been branding the stuff Completely Clean Caviar to highlight its purity.) "GSC is great because the nuggets are dense and small and really allow kief to coat it," Rob says, proudly describing the pungent delicacies in his hands and reminding me that one of life's pleasures is to be in the company of a master craftsman in his domain. Here's one guy who will never be alienated from the product of his labor. "So yeah, man, I pretty much got the best job in Colorado," he adds.

I'll later sample a press of Bruce Banner, a strain touted by the company as "some of the highest THC content L'Eagle has ever produced," a factor endearing the strain to med patients especially. It skews *sativa*, with OG Kush, Strawberry Diesel and Cough

laying the foundation of this potent hybrid.

The 26 full-time and 15 part-time staff members are indeed treated well. The starting wage for trimmers is \$15 per hour; wages for salespeople and cultivators average around \$20 per hour.

Behind the public-relations appeal of social responsibility is the idea that an organically grown plant will produce a clean, quality smoke in the pipe, pen or joint. It's one thing to draw in customers who wish to leave a minimal ecological footprint, but it is the superior smoking experience that will keep them coming back.

Besides the clean upbringing that all these lovely plants enjoy, there is another step in the process that teases out the very best flavors: a patient cure. Buds at L'Eagle are cured for a minimum of three months, with some strains taking up to a year to cure before consumption. This unhurried approach leads to a purer, more potent product with a cleaner taste.

Mindful that the evidence is anecdotal, Amy tells me that the buzz she hears from customers is that L'Eagle's products generate a "longer-lasting high." I'd like to believe that's true, but I can only vouch for the taste. The signature strain, L'Eagle Eagle, is a Candy Haze and Skunk #6 blend, and it burns sweet and smooth.

This mom-and-pop shop is a treasure for its customers, but the philosophy that centers it—and which informs campaigns like *#WhatsInMyWeed*—is good for everybody. As the cannabis industry matures, capitalism is going to do what it does and edge out smaller players in favor of profit-chasing giants. If consumers feel empowered to influence the direction we take, then sustainable, labor-friendly businesses like this one can thrive. As well they should. ✨