

Oh, Happy Day:
HappyDay Farms celebrates cannabis, vegetable farming and activism



If you're even peripherally connected to cannabis, you've heard of Casey O'Neill of HappyDay Farms. One of the most public-facing farmers in Mendocino County, Casey's full-throated activism, positivity and unique vegetable and cannabis business have made him a passionate spokesperson for the industry.

His Laytonville farm is located on the family's Back to the Land home where he was born and raised. "Pops lives just down the driveway," Casey smiles.

"We got here in '82 and the choppers landed in '85. Pops became a schoolteacher and exited the culture for a time. Then we started getting back into it, and in 2008, I got a farm with college friends. We closed in January and got busted in July. I spent a couple months in the 'Low Gap Hilton,' he smiles.

Following his incarceration, Casey began developing the farm's market garden, focusing on food production. At HappyDay, it's impossible to tell where the vegetables end and the cannabis begins. Even in the dead of winter, Casey's greenhouses are full of vibrant, munch-worthy greens, and outdoors, in the cannabis garden, a sea of converging cover crops nourishes the soil for spring planting.

"In 2013, we formed a collective that developed into a solid, returning group of members. We had the Cannabis Farmers Markets at Area 101. I was honored to be chosen as a judge at the Emerald Cup and even more honored to receive the Emerald Cup's Regenerative Cannabis Farm Award years later in 2018. It was a hopeful time. I was so proud to be standing with Pops and the fam, offering canned produce and weed in jars," he smiles.

Those hopes got dashed fairly quickly, as the passage of Prop 64 and the myriad changes to local legislation appeared to favor large-scale farmers. Small farms like HappyDay were required to comply with the same, almost Machiavellian rules that were less like regulations and more like impossibly high hurdles for folks who did not have the capital or the administrative savvy to surmount.



"If I was going to start legalization paperwork now, I don't think I'd even consider it. Ironically, because we were in early, we got screwed over multiple times by regulatory changes," he smiles. "But it was only a few years ago when the proposed legislation from the Police Chiefs Association would have allowed just 30 cultivation licenses for the entire state. We've

come from a place where regulation or legalization wasn't even a possibility. But we're here now. I really hold onto this. And for me, food production is at the root. It's the energetics. Food puts energy into us."

Industry watchers predict an almost inevitable demise of small cannabis farming, with plenty of blame to go around. Casey has some theories about what's occurred and why, but he's not ready to capitulate.



"People love conspiracies, but to me this is more like death by a thousand paper cuts. People sitting behind desks creating more rules don't always understand what really happens on the ground- how things really work. There's a lot of, 'Weed farmers are criminals' out there. Cannabis is the only 21st century agricultural crop that's going to come online into a regulated framework. There are those in government who would love to do this to more established industries- who want to demonstrate programmatic success with us, so they can do it to others- classic bureaucratic creep. We're extremely underfunded. We have very little organizational capacity. I'm actually a fan of sound regulations that foster good practices. But we don't get them."

"We tried the Emerald Growers Association. The California Growers Association. We lobbied against unfair practices. We passed legislation. The state yanked the acreage cap in 2018, and big money came in. It was an uphill battle- the most important fight of my life- David and Goliath for small farms. We're always undercapitalized. There are so many remnants of the drug war. They're going to continue to make rules that don't work for us, so we'd better organize for fairer rules. To get organized, you need political representation. I'm glad MCA and Origins Council are out there fighting for us."

Members of the agricultural industry are often cast as lower-class workers, but the rigorous employment of propaganda paired with violent and often patently illegal attacks against cannabis farmers damaged several generations of cultivators- who are left angry, confused, traumatized, marginalized and in financial peril.



"Our grower meetings would be half organizational meetings and half group therapy," Casey notes. "Just saying you are a cannabis farmer was revolutionary. We're farmers, not criminals! The media calls us weed growers, or dope growers. Dope growers don't name their farms. We had to take up the mantle of being farmers."

Never has there been an agricultural enterprise where cultivators were repeatedly forced to define what they do.

"What is this that I'm engaged in? How do I articulate my practices? All of this has been so difficult. Looking back, it's been a mixed bag- so

many shining points in my life, tempered by such deep lows.”

Casey believes that farms at the Kure Invitational scale must carve out their niche.



“It’s the same as being a vegetable producer. If I’m competing with Safeway, I’m out of business. We can’t compete in the wholesale marketplace because we lack the volume, but marketing and branding are also so expensive. So we have to focus on relationships- with distro partners who I know, working directly with retailers doing demo days. We have to market ourselves and tell the stories about why what we do is so different.”

And, notes Casey, competing at this level requires the cultivation of nothing but the best cannabis.

“We have to ‘grow fire or retire.’ We can’t ask people to support us without being a cut above.”

“There is so much pressure to get bigger,” says Casey. “If I had it to do over in terms of regulation, the question I’d have to answer is, ‘Are you ready to be a business owner dealing with constantly shifting regulations at a very high cost?’”

“No one ever went back-to-the-land because they wanted to do paperwork. Many people aren’t ‘fill in the box’ folks. There are so many potential non-starters: cost requirements, paper requirements, land requirements.”

“It is absolutely heartbreaking to realize the bulk of the community I was fighting for is locked out and will remain locked out. There were so many thriving little businesses growing great flower, making excellent salves, tinctures and oils. Then the regulations separated the manufacturing from the home premises. The Medicine Mothers got locked out because they couldn’t make products in their kitchens anymore.” Because Casey sells vegetables, the disconnect between cannabis and vegetable cultivation is stark.

“I pay a \$25 fee to the county to sell my vegetables- I tell them what crops I grow and I register my scale for \$15. With cannabis, it’s thousands upon thousands of dollars.”



“Sometimes we’re so deep in the bubble, we think everyone loves weed. Full-scale canna- tourism just isn’t a reality for many farms deep out in the backwoods like us, but I think there is a lot of potential on



a community-wide basis. Maybe down the road there will be partnerships with delivery services, or bud and breakfast options. If you get a consistent set of consumers arriving in the county, that could translate to sales for the farms and broader economic returns for the county as a whole.”

For now, Casey will continue to grow his strawberry crosses, proven successful strains. He also offers a Farm Cut option. “These are minimally processed products. They’re bucked, leaving the sugar leaves intact so the consumer can take the leaf off and enjoy that experience. I don’t trim my personal stash until it’s time to roll it up. Let’s help bring some authenticity to the marketplace.”

Though the farm has not always been able to pay him, and he has had to work off farm at times, Casey says he’s still not giving up.

“My Grandpa was an Irish Catholic steel mill worker and weekend bricklayer. His motto was, ‘Let Us Be Happy in Our Work.’

And Casey’s motto? “Much love and Great Success.”

HappyDay Farms entered The Smell of Success in the Kure Mendocino Invitational. Visit the farm on Facebook, Instagram and their [website](#).

Written and Edited by Carole Brodsky for Kure Mendocino

