

420 Times Interview
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George Van Patten AKA JORGE CERVANTES

By Jim Carlson

To hear him described, you may think he's "the most interesting man in the world" from those Dos Equis beer ads. And maybe he is: world traveler, internationally renowned publisher and author, botanist, raconteur, lightning-rod for controversy and--to some degree--man of mystery.

What the man known as Jorge Cervantes shares with nearly every pot-smoking American is this: a life somewhat divided, out of necessity, between reality and protective myth.

This much is true. For nearly 30 years, Cervantes, has been public about his love of cannabis and has been responsible for spreading the secrets of successful marijuana cultivation to thousands of growers around the globe. In 1983, he penned *Indoor Marijuana Horticulture: The Marijuana Grower's Bible*, which has since spawned a cottage industry of books and instructional DVDs. For this, he became infamous to law enforcement and a hero to pot enthusiasts. But the admiration isn't something he wears easily.

"It's kind of weird. I look at myself as a pretty normal guy," he says. "When people look at me as a leader, I take that part pretty seriously. People rely on information, and I do my best to give good information."

With Cervantes, it's difficult to separate the man from the image he created. Readers of his books and columns have been treated to stories of his Mexican upbringing and world travel. Viewers of his prolific cannabis-growing videos see a dreadlocked, beret-wearing character, hidden behind sunglasses, talking about his "home country," Spain.

"I'm a U.S. citizen," Cervantes states for the record. "It was kind of a joke I played to throw people off. A little game I played for a long time. But I don't have to play anymore."

Indeed, the man known as Jorge Cervantes also answers to the name George Van Patten, as he revealed publicly this year.

"A lot of people knew about it. It was kind of a public secret, I guess," says Cervantes about his alter-ego. But, until recently, the law enforcement climate in the United States meant significant legal jeopardy to anyone involved with marijuana cultivation or distribution. Cervantes calls that an understatement: "it's very scary," he says. "I've been scared more than once."

The legal risks in the United States were among the reasons that Cervantes chose to live in Europe for much of the last three decades, settling in Spain. "The cannabis smear campaign that

happened in the U.S. in the 1930s...none of that stuff ever happened in Europe like it did here--a little bit in France, Italy and the U.K. But not in Spain," he says. "Spain is just miles from Morocco and the military was there. And the military always brought hash back and a lot of people in the military started smoking. And so, it's been a cultural thing and accepted."

Cervantes says the cultural differences continue today. "For example," he says, "here they had the 9-11 bombings. In Spain they had the 11th of March, the train bombings. The way they [the terrorists] got the money for those explosives was through a hash deal--and nothing ever came of it. Here [in the U.S.] they would have tied the two together and said anybody that smokes cannabis supports terrorism."

Today, Cervantes says he spends about half of the year in the U.S. So, what has brought him back to California after all these years?

"Actually, I didn't know if cannabis would ever be legal in America or if I'd come back very often," he says. "I have family here, but I planned to stay away for a long time. Forever, I guess. And then, when things changed here, I came back. And I'm in California now. This is the most liberal state and almost everybody I know is involved in this. So, it just didn't seem like a big jump." Today, the dreads and glasses are optional attire and the man we encountered at L.A.'s Hemp Con--and that you'll see in his latest video projects--looks more like a college professor than the "ganja guide."

Still, unmasking his identity on these shores was a big deal. "So many people have seen me in Europe. I've given advice on stage a lot of times. I write for over 20 European magazines, so my picture has been in all of them. And I go to six to eight fairs in Europe a year. So, it wasn't such a big thing. But it still makes me nervous here."

Cervantes remembers his first experiences smoking marijuana as a high school student. "I was like 16 or 17," he says. His evolving expertise in cannabis cultivation was a natural extension of his love of plants.

Known as a guru to marijuana growers, Cervantes came upon his expertise largely by trial and error. "I talked to a lot of people, too. It's not just me. I also do a lot of studying," he says. "And I realize that there's more than one way to do the same thing."

Asked the common mistakes that growers make, Cervantes chuckles, "too much tender loving care."

"Because one thing that people can actually, physically, do is fertilize their plants," he says. "You can measure things out like a doctor would. But a lot of what a plant requires to grow is not fertilizer. They need proper air and temperature, as well. The proper amount of light. All of those things are more important than fertilizer. But you can't really see those things--they're intangibles. So, consequently, people tend to over fertilize all the time."

Ironically, the book that made Cervantes famous was turned down by every publisher he approached. "I couldn't find a publisher. Nobody wanted to publish it," he says. "So, I said, 'fuck it. I'll print it myself.'"

"I didn't have enough money to pay for it," he remembers. "So, I made a deal with the local quick-print place to let me print it myself. I went in at night, after they closed, and printed page after page. The first book I printed 6,000 copies of, and it was 96 pages. I did all of the artwork myself--and it looked like shit," he says, laughing. "But it still filled a need. People wanted it."

Cervantes began tending cannabis in the hills above Santa Barbara, not far from where many large growing operations have been discovered in recent years, deep within the Los Padres National Forest. But, like many growers, legal and practical concerns turned him away from growing outdoors. "You just couldn't do it. And plants could get stolen--that was a big thing. Security concerns--what if somebody wanted to do violence? My God! I'm not into that."

For all the effort he's put in to successful indoor growing, Cervantes still thinks outdoors is best. "If it were much more legal, people would grow it exclusively outdoors or in greenhouses because it's cheaper. It's expensive to grow indoors," he says.

There are also environmental concerns about large-scale indoor operations, ranging from fertilizer discharges to the polluting diesel generators used to power them off-the-grid. But Cervantes thinks indoor growing technology is evolving to address some of them. "The first things I'd look at are the practical [techniques] for production," he says. "Because the green stuff tends to follow that. I'm also going to be looking into solar light panels. But, when it comes down to it, the sun is the absolute best." Still, he points out, indoor growers "can have up to six crops a year," without worrying about seasonal limitations.

Cervantes has been at the forefront of a number of technological innovations to improve cannabis yield, including lighting. "Everybody started out with those vertical cone hoods. And it took me about two weeks to figure out why they made them four feet around with the bulbs in there vertically," he recalls. "Finally, one guy said, 'well that's the size the material comes in. You cut it in two and you can make a cone out of it!'"

"They just set up the fixture and started growing and if something grew, they made big claims, he says. "That's when I went to the Netherlands and started hanging out with [Seed Bank founder] Neville [Schoenmaker]." Cervantes redesigned the fixtures for more efficient lighting. "We turned them 90 degrees and made them horizontal."

In Europe, Cervantes found the company of kindred spirits. "Neville is an Australian guy with Dutch relatives, so he moved to the Netherlands to escape a legal charge. He was the first one to concentrate all of the different seed varieties," says Cervantes. "Neville came to America and got Big Bud, one of the Hash Plants and all eleven Northern Lights. He ran an ad in High Times and sold seeds. And that was the first time they were disseminated properly."

Cervantes says he didn't earn much money as a grower in the early days. "I was more of a smoker back then," he observes.

Since the 1980s, the financials of cannabis cultivation have changed significantly. "I remember when the price went from \$800 straight to \$1,200 for a pound. And that was 30 years ago. It became scarce and more popular and went all the way up to \$5,000 a pound or more. And a lot of that was, if you had a better story about where it came from and how it was grown, it was just plain worth more. At least 10%. Sometimes more. The bullshit factor!"

Back in California, the same openness that has allowed Jorge Cervantes, a.k.a. George Van Patten, to be less guarded about his identity, may lead to a wholesale change in the legal landscape for marijuana. The state that has already led the way in the field of medical marijuana is set to vote on the legalization of marijuana for recreational use in November, Proposition 19, potentially making it the first state to do so.

Cervantes counts California initiative organizer Richard Lee among his movement heroes. "He fears nothing," says Cervantes, admiringly.

What would such blanket changes mean for marijuana users and growers? Cervantes thinks, "it would be pretty amazing. First, I think we'd see a lot of new immigrants. We already have with the medical laws in California--and we'd see a lot more. And California is unique in this way: they commercialize everything about as fast as you can. So, I would look for major commercial endeavors here. In Holland it took them ten years to get ten things on the menu. In America it took a week."

But that doesn't mean there won't be bumps in the road. "There are a lot of other things that need to be worked out such as driving laws and impairment. And none of those things **have** been worked out," he says. "And I'd imagine there will be towns or counties that make specific laws about it--similar to prohibition."

Growing techniques have led to significant variances in the potency of marijuana strains, another issue that Cervantes would like to see addressed. "The first thing I'd like to see is standardization. That if something is sold as Northern Lights that it actually is a Northern Lights and contains a specific level of cannabinoids," he suggests. "It should be sold by weight. That's one way to control what's given out. The dosage is often individual, but it should be a little at a time or a progressive thing. That part is a little bit difficult to control. But it's also difficult to control with pharmaceuticals."

Cervantes dismisses critics who warn of dire consequences should California further liberalize its marijuana laws. "The gateway theory has been disproved many times," he says.

Looking back at how far the movement has come, Cervantes can't think of too much that he'd change. He does, however, have some thoughts on the kind of campaign that it will take to continue the progress. "Keep things as middle-America as possible," he says. "I don't like saying that. But everybody has got to be on the train before it can take off."

Still, Cervantes believes California is ready for legalized cannabis. "Vote yes. I think it's a perfect time," he says. "The polls show it's very close. The majority is apparently there."

With any luck, marijuana users, like Cervantes, may one day experience the kind of freedom in California that they enjoy overseas. "Well, I've been in Europe straight-on for the last seven years and on-and-off for the last 35," he says. "And the thing is: I can be myself. I can be a normal person. I like cannabis. That's it."

Jorge Cervantes blogs and shares growing tips at his web site, www.marijuanagrowing.com.