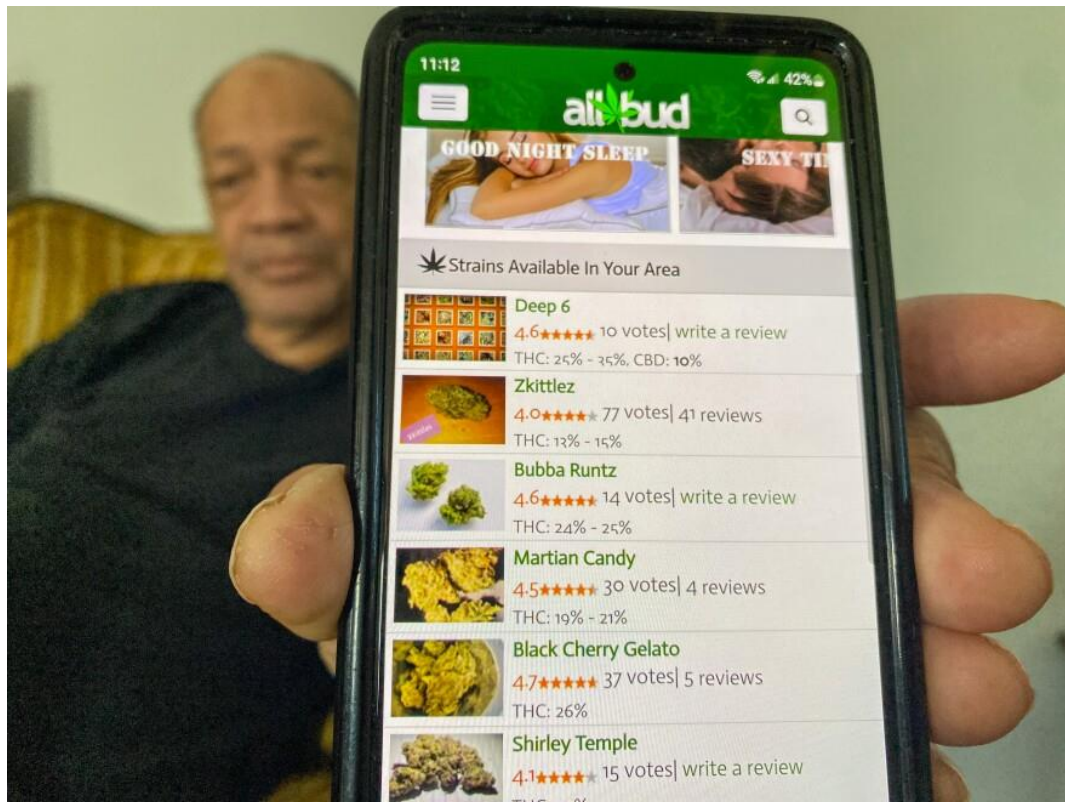


Missouri's legal weed is stronger than ever. But these consumers say strength isn't everything

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Calvin Jacks says he uses the app, AllBud, to find the weed he likes. He says he has trouble finding strains that suit his tolerance levels.

Since recreational weed was legalized in Missouri, thousands of residents say they get a greater high than from the pot they used to buy. It's spurred many consumers to ask: "Has weed gotten stronger?"

Calvin Jacks, 71, remembers the pot he and his friends used to get back in the '70s being as strong as anything he can get at a dispensary today.

"I miss some of the marijuana we used to get," Calvin says. "We'd get Columbia Red Bud, Gold Bud ... and this stuff was wicked."

Jacks may have a vivid memory of his "wicked" highs back in the day. But that may be because of his tolerance level at the time, rather than the potency of the weed itself.

Research shows that weed has actually grown exponentially stronger over the last few decades, both [on the street](#) and in [dispensaries](#). But as Missouri reaches its first full year of legalized weed, local growers and sellers are seeing an increasing demand for weaker weed, both [online](#) and in brick and mortar dispensaries.

“We’d have customers come in all the time asking for something that was a little more dumbed down,” says former bud-tender and grower Joshua Ross.

Ross and other industry locals see a growing market in low strength weed. They also see it as a chance to educate buyers who put too much emphasis on THC.

‘Sometimes you need diet’

When buying, selling or regulating cannabis products, THC level is often the focus. This is because it is the main psychoactive compound in the cannabis plant, responsible for creating the high that users experience.

Because of this, THC level has become the widely accepted measure of a cannabis product’s strength. Based on that metric, weed definitely has gotten stronger in the last 30 years.

In 1995, the average THC level of weed [seized by the Drug Enforcement Administration](#) was around 4%. By 2021, that average had jumped to over 15%. Since legalization in Missouri, 15% has become the low end of what consumers can find.

Data published by the [Missouri State Medical Association](#) shows that, by 2017, most strains of weed sold in dispensaries averaged between 17%-28% THC. When you look at concentrates in vaporizers and waxes, that average can range between 40%-90%.



Joshua Ross is renovating an abandon warehouse in Kansas City, Missouri's West Bottoms to house the wholesale facility for his new business, Flavors. He said he hopes to have the facility fully up and running by the end of 2025.

This spike in potency is largely fueled by demand: Consumers with a growing tolerance want it and sellers can hike the price.

Joshua Ross worries that this movement towards high THC levels leaves out customers who may want or need something a little less intense.

“You have to give the patient or customer an option, right?” says Ross. “Not to call it diet weed, but sometimes you need diet. You need to be able to bring it down a notch.”

Ross is one of several recipients of a cannabis microbusiness wholesale license given out by the state of Missouri. He plans to use his license to open a new business by the name of Flavors, which he says will offer more low THC products to local dispensaries.

Another recipient of a state license, certified [ganjier](#) Mitch Alexander, also hopes to use his new business, South-O-Bones, to offer options for low THC products.

He’s also frustrated by the cannabis industry’s focus on THC and how it has influenced the perception of existing products. He compares people buying weed based on its potency to people buying Everclear instead of wine to pair with their dinners.

“If you did that, you'd be skipping over all the fine whiskeys, all the fine wines,” says Alexander. “I guarantee you there's bottles of whiskey that outsell Everclear every single day, even though they’re not as potent.”

‘We’re looking for the Entourage Effect’

THC’s role in creating the high that users experience has led many to assume that the more of it there is in a product, the higher its quality. However, experts like Ross and Alexander say the compound is just a part of what determines what your high is like and what it does to your body.

“A lot of the high that you get is really driven from terpenes versus the THC,” says Alexander. “We’re really more looking for the Entourage Effect, the full cannabintic profile, the full terpene expression, versus just focusing on one cannabinoid.”



Racks of cannabis plants sit ready to be harvested in an Elevate Missouri cultivation facility in Kansas City, Missouri.

Cannabinoids and terpenes make up a majority of the chemicals found in the cannabis plant. THC itself is a cannabinoid, but it is only one of over 100 that have been identified in the cannabis plant.

You can think of the other cannabinoids and terpenes in cannabis as variables that can make smoking two strains of weed with the same THC level have different effects. The mix of reactions which occur when THC and other cannabinoids and terpenes interact inside the body is known as the [“Entourage Effect.”](#)

Cannabinoids from the plant can interact with our body’s [endocannabinoid system](#), which regulates many biological functions including memory, sleep and pain tolerance. They interact with the system's receptors, which is how THC creates the sensation of being high.

Terpenes have not been widely researched so remain more of a mystery. They can be found in most plants, but are most common in cannabis and herbs with strong scents. They are responsible for creating the aroma and flavor of weed strains, but [studies show](#) they may have more beneficial effects.

“Each strain has different terpenes, and they’re gonna affect you in different ways,” says Courtney Bock, a cannabis cultivator with South-O-Bones. “There's certain terpenes that may help anxiety and depression, and then there's certain terpenes that help pain.”

‘Know what’s coming next’

The expanding group of local weed growers and sellers like Ross, Alexander and Bock, say they want both new and long-time users to make better informed decisions when it comes to buying and consuming cannabis products, especially because no two people will have the same reaction to any product.



Mitch Alexander is hoping to have South-O-Bones' wholesale facility operation by early 2025. He currently works at a local dispensary and as a manager at several business around Crown Center and Union Station.

“Everyone's different,” says Alexander. “Just because I smoke something that's high in THC and it treats me well, does not mean that you can smoke and it's gonna treat you the exact same. As a (cannabis) [sommelier](#), potency is one of the absolute last things that I even look for.”

Calvin Jacks agrees. He now uses apps like [AllBud](#) to research and find the strains of weed that best suit his needs.

He believes that even people who only using pot recreationally should educate themselves as much as they can because, as he puts it, it's the best way to ensure you don't get too stoned.

“By educating yourself, you will change your experience,” Jacks explains. “You'll know what you're feeling, why you're feeling it, and you'll know what's coming next. Then you're a happy camper.”