

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Smoking and networking at Anchorage's marijuana social club

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Opening the door at Pot Luck Events, the inconspicuous marijuana social club not far from Anchorage's downtown Hilton, can be an intense welcome on a busy night. A heavy aroma hits you in the face: pungent, hazy air.

On Saturday, the place teemed with pot lovers and hopeful marijuana entrepreneurs alike for the smoky release party of ArcticBlue, a strain of pot from Anchorage cultivator ArcticBlue Farms. People gathered in a corner to smoke dabs -- highly concentrated marijuana -- or lounged in low-slung chairs to share joints and bowls under dim lights and a disco ball.

ArcticBlue doled out free marijuana to smoke and edibles to snack on, in celebration of the strain getting listed on weed review website Leafly.

Dave Nyberg, 66, is one of the owners of ArcticBlue Farms. He developed the blueberry strain about four years ago and says it helps with his aches and pains from health issues over the years. Now, although he said he isn't doing this for the money, he sees a business opportunity.

"What we're hoping is, when all the cruise ships come in, they'll want an Alaskan strain," said Nyberg, who kept his wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses on inside the club.

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Paintings and vintage-looking marijuana posters adorn Pot Luck's walls, and a VIP room in the back boasts blacklights. Patrons get free candy from the bar (where no alcohol is served), and can pay for other snacks while they share weed with the bartender.

But despite having some indicators of typical stoner culture, Pot Luck is trying to break through those stereotypes.

"We're trying to normalize it," said Theresa Collins, one of the owners. She said the club now has more than 3,500 paying members, about a year after its opening in March 2015.

Saturday's crowd was diverse in race, age and background. People in button-downs and ties mixed with others in sweatshirts and jeans. Collins said the youngest Pot Luck member is 21 and the oldest is 78.

"The first instinct is judging, but there's more to it," said Peteri Faaaliga, 27, a volunteer working Saturday's party. She said she's noticed a lot of people who come to Pot Luck to get access to marijuana for medical uses.

"I'm probably the only Polynesian that comes in here all the time, and I'm trying to reach out to my community, and let them know there's more ways to think of it than getting high," she said.

Selling marijuana isn't allowed at Pot Luck, but people are allowed to share, smoke and consume. Marijuana social clubs in Alaska are currently straddling an unclear legal area, the Alaska Journal of Commerce recently reported.

Meanwhile, marijuana businesses have applied for licenses that are expected to be granted later this year. ArcticBlue's name isn't on the list of applicants because, Nyberg said, they had to apply under a different name. He wouldn't say what that name is.

"Once you apply," he said, "you can't give out any free samples."

Hosting a strain release party is one way to make a name visible in a market that will soon be teeming with new companies trying to establish their brands in Alaska. And plenty of people showed up Saturday with a focus on networking.

"We've been looking for new clients tonight, been making ourselves known," said Bobby Burns, owner of AkCannaBiz, a Palmer marketing firm that's working with about five marijuana companies.

Cameron Erickson, 40, was at Pot Luck to partake, but also to meet with other people who work in the industry. He wants to develop a business selling edibles.

"For the first time, there's a place where people can come and talk about the industry," he said, passing a joint around a standing table.

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Those who prefer pot over alcohol were also sure to point out the differences between the vibe at Pot Luck and the vibe at a bar.

"That's what makes it the best -- you don't get the drunken idiots," said Lamond Roberts, 34, who lives in Anchorage and has been a member of Pot Luck for about a year.

Roberts said his children have asthma, which means he can't smoke in the house. He said he used to smoke on the porch, and now the club has provided him with a place to go.

"A lot of people come here to get medicated after a stressful week. It's better than going out and getting drunk," he said, exhaling a mouthful of dense smoke from a strawberry-banana joint.

He and his friend, Solomona Lesu, who was visiting from Barrow, ate various edibles and smoked all through Saturday evening. But between that and the sheer amount of pot being smoked around them in an enclosed area, did they worry about getting too high?

"It's not possible," Roberts said, ordering an ice cream sandwich from the bar.

Correction: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly said that AkCannaBiz is based in Wasilla. It is currently based in Palmer.*

About this Author

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Annie Zak covers business news and general assignments. She joined the Daily News in 2015 and previously was a reporter at the Puget Sound Business Journal in Seattle and the Orange County Register in California.

Comments