

Faces of Pot: The Vapour Lounge

The Vapor Social is a hassle-free place to smoke weed

By: Isabel Teotonio Living reporter, Published on Fri Jan 10 2014

It's Sunday evening and a hush, along with a thin layer of smoke, settles over the customers in this College St. lounge.

Two guys with heavy eyelids recline into a loveseat with a FIFA soccer videogame. In a booth young men nod their heads to the tunes of LCD Soundsystem, gorging on potato chips.

Unlike other establishments along this bustling strip, no one is acting rowdy or being too loud. It's almost eerily quiet. Everyone is chill.

Welcome to The Vapor Social, one of seven vapour lounges in Toronto where anyone 18 or older can sit back and spark up a marijuana joint.

Marijuana may be illegal, but vapour lounges are not. The city doesn't have a specific licencing category but these businesses typically operate as retail shops or eateries.

Many patrons are medical marijuana users who have a federal exemption from Health Canada. But not all. Privacy laws prevent asking for medical status. So anyone can bring their own bud and smoke it.

"But the clientele a bar sees, and who we see, is completely different," says Salter, 32, who co-owns The Vapor Social with boyfriend Ben Reaburn. "(My customers) are not getting rambunctious, not getting into fights. My clients are relaxed and generally very well behaved."

This lounge is split into two areas. The storefront is a marijuana-themed retailer, stocked with glass pipes, bongos, T-shirts and books. Pull back a thick black curtain at the rear and you enter a dimly lit lounge resembling a basement rec room with mismatched furniture, TV screens and videogames. The lounge is especially popular with young gamers.

Marijuana is not sold here — that would be trafficking. A \$5 cover includes the use of bongs and vaporizers, movies, video games and Wi-Fi. Chips, chocolate and candy are on sale to quell the munchies. There are house rules: No alcohol, no tobacco, no dealing and no bumming weed off others.

It's open seven days a week. And on an average day, between 25 and 50 customers — from professionals to manual labourers to students — stop in to get high.

Based on conversations, Salter says most clients are recreational users, meaning they're in unlawful possession of marijuana. But as far as she is concerned "all cannabis use is medical or therapeutic."

"If you're using it, ultimately it's therapeutic, whether it be to relax, socialize, or make yourself feel better," says Salter, who uses marijuana for medical reasons. "Maybe you're in pain, having trouble sleeping or eating — it helps so many different parts of our lives."

It's evident with the after-work crowd that prefers to unwind smoking a joint, rather than drinking a beer.

Among the regulars, says Salter, are construction workers who stop by after work to get high so they get a good night's rest and wake up refreshed; apartment dwellers who want to spare their neighbours from pot's pungent smell; and young adults who still live with their parents — for them, the lounge beats sneaking a toke outside.

"We're providing an alternative to alcohol, and smoking in the street, alleyway or park," says Salter. "We're harm-reducing, rather than causing."

Salter was motivated to open The Vapor Social after her own success using medical marijuana for her psoriasis and endometriosis. She gets her weed from the Toronto Compassion Centre, where she worked and learned about different strains, tinctures and edibles. (For comparison she spends \$100 a week on weed and used to pay \$80 for three days of chemo medication to combat the psoriasis.) She needed a place to smoke and discovered the vapour lounge.

"It changed my life," she said. "The community these things foster is tremendous. You have people who are literally taking care of one another, particularly when it comes to the sick."

Salter went on to manage the Hot Box Café, a vapour lounge in Kensington Market. The customers there were so grateful for the hassle-free place to smoke that she and Reaburn pooled their savings — \$10,000 — and opened The Vapor Social in 2011 at the western edge of Little Italy.

Not everyone is so appreciative.

On one occasion an angry father demanded to know how he should explain the existence of such a place to his young daughter, recalls Salter. Reaburn encouraged him to tell his daughter the truth: educate her about cannabis.

Apart from that encounter, says Salter, the community has largely been accepting, including the police, who deal with vapour lounges on a complaint basis.

It is no secret that Salter supports the outright legalization of cannabis. “I do this because the laws have to change. Public opinion has already caught up with us. We’re just waiting for the law.”