## THE GRANDE DAME OF CANNABIS

THE PROLIFIC AUTHOR, TIRELESS ADVOCATE AND FRENCH CANNABIS ICON MICHKA IS HONORED WITH HER OWN STRAIN.

BY CASSANDRA PURDY—

ICHKA SEELIGER-CHATELAIN and I are in her cozy kitchen in Paris, knives in hand, chopping vegetables on wooden boards while sirens blow by on the boulevard below us. Her favorite traditional Moroccan pipe waits in the cut-glass ashtray beside a flickering beeswax candle; a ceramic lid rattles gently as steam escapes the rice pot on the stove. Ever since I was a young teenager, we have spent time this way, chatting deeply like women have done for millennia over the preparation of food. But this time she has some big news to share. As we pack the bowl with a crumble of precious Haze that has made a heroic journey and pass it between us with our garlicky hands, Michka confides that she is being honored by Sensi Seeds with the creation of a strain that will carry her name. We toke to that. She will be the first and, to date, the only woman to have had this honor. But she has often been the "first and only woman" in the European cannabis scene since the early 1970s.

Michka was born and raised in postwar Paris as an only child by parents who were focused on her education. She attended the prestigious Sorbonne and, while on a skiing holiday in Switzerland, met an older seafaring man. After spending a year in Paris, they moved to England. There, her life began to take a decidedly different route. She and her man decided to immigrate to British Columbia. They spent the next three

years teaching while building a 44-foot cutter by hand. In 1974, they set sail from Vancouver, traversed the Panama Canal and voyaged all the way back to Europe. Michka published her first book about this trip and her life at sea in 1977. As a well-raised Parisian girl in her early 20s, cannabis was a new discovery for her in Canada. But by the time she returned to France, the plant had become a well-loved companion.

After her epic voyage, Michka found herself back in Paris and newly single when she met the charismatic writer Hugo Verlomme, a fellow lover of the seas who kept "really good Colombian" in a blue tin candy box. They were a powerful match and spent 24 years together producing books and a family. Michka was aware that there were few, if any, accurate published works about marijuana and its prohibition in France, and by then that subject had become a passion of hers. She researched fastidiously and came out in 1978 with the first of several books she wrote on the subject, Le Dossier vert d'une drogue douce (The Green File of a Soft Drug). Shortly thereafter, Michka and Hugo decided to leave Paris and build a homestead on a parcel of land in British Columbia with no electricity or running water. They had their first son there and wrote manuscripts by oil-lamp light, surrounded by a small community of like-minded friends. It was a far cry from the urban lives they had led in Paris. Michka continues to this day to spend a part of each year living in this cabin, which is as rustic as it was 30 years ago.







WHEN THEY RETURNED TO PARIS in 1985, Michka was considered an expert on hemp and marijuana as well as organic gardening in general, and she regularly wrote articles about urban gardening and regenerative practices for French magazines. She has a green thumb and an ability to transform with her vision and dedication. One of the most magical places in the entire city of Paris is a secret garden that Michka and her friends carved out of an abandoned lot full of concrete and broken glass and turned into a dreamlike oasis bursting with verdant life. Over the years—and still today—this garden has been a welcome respite from the intensity of the capital and a reminder that, although always a Parisian, Michka is also a country girl who needs to occasionally be barefoot in the dirt and to cook over a fire. The extraordinary hybrid of urban sophistication and rural simplicity is one of the great charms of Michka—straddling two disparate worlds is often her way. For example, she embraced the relative cannabis freedom of North America while remaining outspoken about the more prohibitive atmosphere in Europe.

Many people consider Michka to be an activist, but she has always regarded that title with skepticism. "I don't claim to be an activist. I like to push limits," she says. "I guess if you are a spokesperson for marijuana and you like to push limits that makes you an activist." Like many people who have deep relationships with the plant world, Michka has made marijuana a personal ally in her life, one she feels called to defend. In 1993, she wrote an article for a French magazine denouncing the false science of a supposed cannabis expert. This led to a highly publicized court case that landed Michka front and center in the debate on cannabis in France. The case galvanized her role as

MICHKA IS A CONNOISSEUR, A DISCERNING PERSON WITH WELL-FOUNDED OPINIONS ON MATTERS RANGING FROM COMPOST TO CHILDBIRTH, AND IS NO LESS PARTICULAR ON THE SUBJECT OF THE INSPIRATIONAL PLEASURE OF A FINE HAZE.

someone who uses her platform as a writer to combat the worldwide effort to villainize this healing plant. When I asked her recently about the stubbornly harsh cannabis laws that still persist in France today, she responded that

in spite of them, the French consume more cannabis than do people in most countries in the European Union. "Looking at the laws on the books is not enough; you need to see if they are being enforced," Michka says. "I think by now cops feel they have better things to do. The situation is changing rapidly here."

In 2000, Michka and her longtime friend and collaborator Tigrane Hadengue decided to start their own publishing company, Mama Éditions. Just the year before, they had co-written, along with Hugo Verlomme, a massive anthology of cannabis literature that further pushed the conversation in France about the long and well-established history of this plant from the ancient Greeks to Baudelaire. Mama Éditions publishes books on taboo and esoteric subjects such as cannabis, shamanism, natural childbirth, channeling and entheogens with an emphasis on global well-being. (I joined Michka and her team for the exciting beginning of this project, which has since become one of the most respected, totally independent publishing houses in France with half a million copies in circulation and 100 titles published in the past 20 years.)





ONE MEMORABLE MOMENT from the publishing house's first year transpired at a huge agricultural trade fair in Paris, where a slim new volume called Pourquoi et comment cultiver du chanvre (How and Why to Grow Hemp) was displayed at the Mama Éditions stand. The cover depicted a graceful Eve with a cannabis leaf covering her pubis. One of the shockingly draconian scare tactics in France at that time concerned the depiction of the cannabis leaf in public or commercial use and whether it was deemed "incitement to consume a controlled substance." The police considered the display of this book an open provocation and descended on the stand, confiscating the books as well as the hemp seedlings on the table. France has a long tradition of hemp-fiber agriculture, which was what led us to launch the book at this fair. As Michka says wistfully, "I miss the guerrilla tactics of our beginnings!" The following day, we rebelliously displayed the books covered with a sheet of paper stating "The book whose cover we cannot show," which only increased the public's curiosity. The controversy around the book actually made national news and put an end to this ridiculous practice of marijuana-leaf censorship.

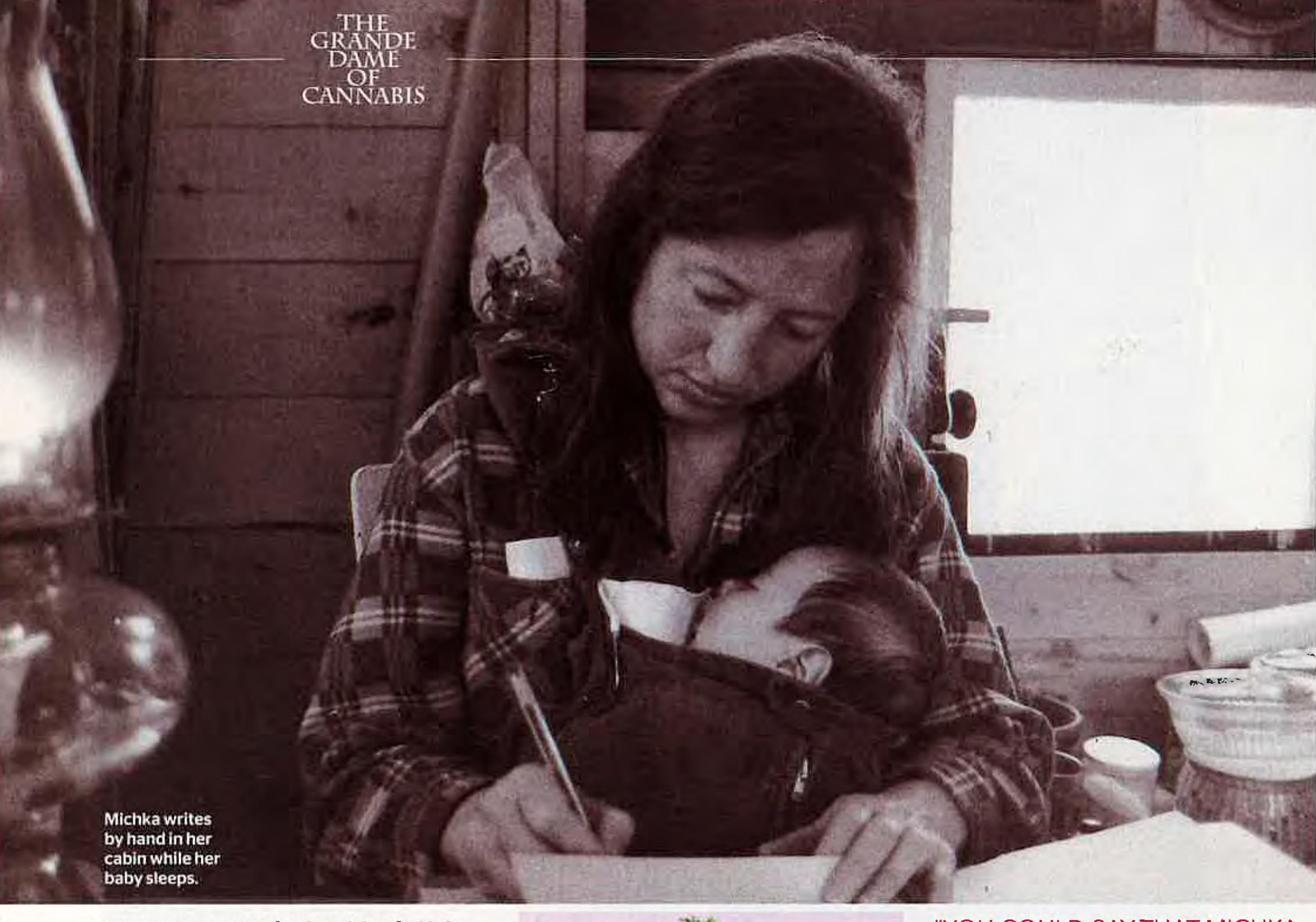
Twenty years later, Mama Éditions continues to push limits and speak truth to power on unusual subjects. Michka has been writing a series of personal stories about her life and journey as a woman in the weed world. These will be featured in her book *The Cannabis Icon Tells Her Story*, which will debut at the Emerald Cup in December 2019 in California. About the choice to prioritize the English-speaking market, Michka says: "I'm



very excited to launch the English version before the French because I relate so much to what is happening in North America. Outdoor organic cannabis is my dream, especially with access to great genetics. I'm hoping some extraordinary Haze will find me there!"

Speaking of hazes! Most people would simply be honored to have a strain named after them and call it a day. But Michka is a connoisseur, a discerning person with well-founded opinions on matters ranging from

compost to childbirth, and is no less particular on the subject of the inspirational pleasure of a fine Haze, the champagne of *sativas*. Her strong preference for Haze is rooted in her relationship with master breeder Nevil Schoenmakers, who was one of the loves of her life as well as a major catalyst for her understanding the psychedelic effects of weed. Even before she met Nevil (who died in 2019), she had some of his Northern Lights \$5 x Haze in 1993, the year it was launched and won the Cannabis Cup. "There was before, and there was after," Michka says reverentially. "I will never forget the brilliance of that smoke, and its feel-good effect. It has remained one of my all-time favorites."



WHEN FIRST ASKED by Sensi Seeds if she would agree to the honor of a bespoke strain, Michka had a couple of nonnegotiable requests. "I said, 'Only if I like it.' I have very specific taste. It needs to be a sativa; in fact, it needs to be a Haze." The crew at Sensi Seeds knew her bar is set high. After all, her standard for Haze was set by Nevil. Ben Dronkers, the founder of Sensi Seeds, is an old friend and ally (and a former business partner of Nevil's), and his sons, who now run the company, proved to be cut from the same OG cloth. The development and presentation of the strain was done with enormous class and respect. Michka traveled to Amsterdam to taste it and give her official approval before it was later launched at a trade show in Prague. "I had one hit and it was so clear, I had my answer instantly. It was yes! You could say that Michka [as the strain is known] is a rather feminine weed because it's powerful without being violent. Perfect if you want to feel really high but not as if you've been hit on the head. Ideally, I like cannabis to be clear and joyful. In the creation of this strain, I was heard."

Cannabis is often maligned by its detractors as dulling the mind and making people less articulate. Michka would argue, and many intellectuals



would agree, that the right weed actually enhances the mind, helping to provide clarity and insight. As a writer, translator and editor, Michka can attest to the nuanced effect of what she calls "a good writer's weed." This is something quite the opposite of a strong, soporific indica, or a body-high hybrid. As she explains, "There is a connection between Haze and words; it makes me want to write or express myself verbally. As opposed to many other types of weed that send you into yourself and then you

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don't want to talk to people anymore." In the more than 30 years of our friend-

ship, we have attended countless book fairs and cannabis trade shows all over the world, traveled in India, pulled all-nighters working on book projects, cooked thousands of meals together and celebrated many family rites of passage, all in the gracious company of a good Haze.

When asked about the growing role of women in the traditionally male world of cannabis, Michka, who has always felt at ease in the company of men and was accustomed to being outnumbered by them, says she certainly has seen a shift. From the first Cannabis Cups in Amsterdam and the early cannabusiness trade show in Germany in the '90s, she says, "I remember it was almost exclusively men until the first wave of women appeared



with the hemp renaissance, the fiber aspect of the movement. The second wave has arrived more recently, with medical marijuana. Because healing is inherently feminine." In Europe as in the United States, more and more womenowned businesses are cropping up in the cannabis space and many of the women who head them seek Michka out at trade

shows to express their camaraderie and share their stories.

In 2018, Mama Éditions published Mila Jansen's book How I Became the Hash Queen, giving a voice and a platform to another elder woman's voice in the cannabis scene. Michka and Mila were both featured in the beautiful traveling photo exhibit We Are Mary Jane,

which seeks to educate the public about and promote influential women in our community. This exhibit was presented during this year's Spannabis tradeshow in Barcelona to a packed house of admirers at Sensi Seed's Marijuana and Hash Museum. To see the gathered tribe acknowledging the impact of these women not only as activists, but also as contributors to the decades-long cultural and sociopolitical movement to remove the stigma and legalize this plant, was deeply moving. "In a country that is still very repressive," Michka says, "I am totally open about my relationship with herb and I am happy to talk about it."

Michka's new autobiography gives voice to her personal journey; it's a deeply honest and vulnerable account. She is not afraid to share her truth, and to encourage others to do so, in an effort to create a better reality for us all. Transparency and clarity of expression are her hallmarks. Michka continues to forge a path for us all, women and men alike, who love this plant and have respect for the natural world. Now, in addition to her books, this legacy will be carried forward through an actual botanical expression of these characteristics in the form of her eponymous strain.





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Spannabis

MARCH 2020 PARIS, FR

Livre Paris

APRIL 2020 - IRUM, ES ExpoGrow

JUNE 2020 - BERLIN, DE Mary Jane

JUNE 2020 - AMSTERDAM, NL

Cannabis Liberation Day

OCTOBER 2020 - VIENNA, AT

Cultiva

NOVEMBER 2020 - PRAGUE, CZ

Cannafest

DECEMBER 2020 - CA

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