

## Thinking Outside the Bud

Episode 387 - Joe Tierney

<https://www.thinkingoutsidethebud.com/podcast/387-joe-tierney>

### Joe Tierney, Founder, GentlemanToker.com

Joe Tierney is the founder & editor-in-chief of GentlemanToker.com, a DC-based cannabis blog that has followed the development of legalization there since 2016, after Congress blocked the city from implementing adult-use retail sales. Tierney's reputation as a staunch consumer advocate for craft cannabis and social equity in the marketplace led to Gentleman Toker becoming one of the most popular sites for brands entering the new gifting economy to advertise. These days, Tierney shares his opinions on the latest news and interviews guests across the cannabis, hemp, and psychedelic spaces on The Gentleman Toker Podcast.

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You're listening to thinking outside the bud where we speak with entrepreneurs, investors, thought leaders, researchers, advocates and policy makers who are finding new and exciting ways for cannabis to positively impact business, society and culture. And now, here's your host business coach, Bruce Eckfeldt.

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1:06

Welcome everyone. This is thinking outside the bud. I'm Bruce Eckfeldt. I'm your host. Our guest today is Joe Tierney. He is founder and editor in chief at the gentleman toker, we're going to talk about the world of cannabis we're going to talk about really what's going on a couple of these markets and how Joe and his team and gentlemen Tucker, are really help get content out there and really kind of educate folks about what's going on, really on on the ground in these cities. And really help people understand how to navigate things. Also really kind of where we are with policy and where policy is going. You know, unfortunately, this cannabis market is so driven by regulations and legalities. And this happens at the federal level, it happens at the state level, it happens at the municipal level, just like there's multiple things going on. And unless you really kind of have your finger on the pulse of things, knowing what's in play and where things are going to go can be quite complicated. So we're gonna talk about Joe about all these things, and really the work that he's done, and really where he sees the industry going and where we might be in front of the cannabis in the next couple years. So with all that, Joe, welcome to the program.

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Thanks, Bruce. Appreciate you having me on today.

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It's a pleasure to have you. So before we dig into gentleman toker, and what's going on today, let's do the backstory. How did you get into this space? What was your connection to cannabis? Tell us the background. Okay, great.

2:22

So, you know, I didn't really see cannabis legalization happening in my lifetime. I was very skeptical of it. And then when Colorado legalized adult use, it was much like a lightning bolt, you know it for the first time like I, you know, I had a career, I was working in the print industry, I had been doing that for like 13 years, you know, and had a decent career set out for me. But there's never anything that I really wanted to do. And then when we became legal, I was like, oh, I want to do that. So, you know, right after Colorado legalized, and then Washington State legalized and stuff, I, I started traveling out to the states to see what the legal markets looked like compared to, you know, the unregulated markets where I was from, and got to see what those level of products looked like, and what the prices were like and everything. Then I actually went out, I tried to get a job at a fulfillment center. They were, well, they, they were a packaging place. So they made joints and stuff like that. So I tried to use my manufacturing experience to be like, hey, now you can, you know, like, I can come help you guys. And I was willing to take like a big pay cut, like half my salary, and move all the way out to the West Coast. And he still found somebody cheaper. So I was like, alright, well, that's that's how competitive it is. And I remember a lot of states when I or a lot of businesses were just like, Well, do you live in Colorado? Do you live in Washington State, and I didn't. So that was a lot of hurdle to overcome to get a job out there. Meanwhile, back where I live to Washington, DC was just getting ready to legalize, they had passed legalization, and it was going to be enacted the following year. So I moved to Washington, DC I was like the

shortest moved cannabis refugee, right? Because I moved from like 10 miles away in Alexandria, Virginia, okay, to DC to where they had legal cannabis. And then after I moved to DC, I became a medical patient. And you know, the program was really limited at that time, you could only pick one dispensary out of the five existing to work with one that I had, you know, all of them were very limited on products and selection, the one that I had, I'd show up and they'd be like, well, these are the three strains we have today. You can buy one gram of each, and then we'll see you tomorrow. Really? Yeah. It wasn't great, right? So I started comparing my experiences in terms of the product quality and the prices and the limited availability to what I had seen out west and I'm like, What's going on here and eventually all that culminated in a website that I started, just as the Washington DC gifting market became a thing so If you're unfamiliar with what happened with DC, yeah,

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walk us through how DC works. It's a little interesting.

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Oh, yes, please. So all right. So DC tried to legalize. And what happened was Congress got in the way. So DC doesn't have control of its own purse strings. Right. So the they made their plans to legalize and they've tried to put forward many laws over the years that Congress got in the way of cannabis legalization is just another one of those casualties. So they put it up and said, Hey, we want to legalize Congress said, No, we don't think so and put a rider in the federal budget that said, you can't spend any of your own money to create a tax and sales retail program. To which DC said, Well, we're gonna legalize anyway. And we just won't do that part. And it actually led to a standoff between Mayor Bowser the city council and members of Congress that, you know, hey, we can jail you. They threatened to jail them, if they went forward with legalization and Bowser and the city council stood their ground. And what we ended up with was legalization, but no sales. Yeah. However, there's a provision in the law that allows for gifting, you're supposed to be able to give another adult 21 or older up to one ounce of cannabis. And so what people ended up doing is, you know, in many of them consulted lawyers, I want to make that I'm sure a lot of lawyers told them that this was

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this is DC, by the way. Oh, yeah.

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We got nothing but lawyers,

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a Rocket Lawyer in DC.

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So they talked to these lawyers, and the lawyers said, Yeah, this is a thing. And so people began selling like a T shirt or a hat or whatever, and then gifting you an eighth or whatever, for patronizing their small business as a thank you gift, right. And that blew up. I mean, it got to be, you know, some estimates. I've heard all kinds of crazy estimates, but the most recent one I heard was \$400 million. And then I compare that to Colorado, and what they were bringing in the early years of legalization, and I'm like, Okay, that seems Yeah, it seems pretty close.

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Yeah. And so, so So you literally every time you have to buy weed, you have to buy a t shirt or hat or something like that. I mean, this you end up with this a drawer full of of swag.

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Oh, yeah. And some people do? Yeah, absolutely. They're like, I just have so many of these. I don't need any more of these things. Right. But you know, sometimes it's just lip service. You know, sometimes, I remember one company was like, oh, yeah, we sell you use books. And then like, I didn't get a book of my order. And then, you know, some people don't even pay lip service at all. Yeah, but the ones that are, you know, trying to differentiate themselves now and do it right, you know, as per the law are definitely sticking to the whole gifting scheme.

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Yeah. So what was your original what was I guess the original focus for gentleman toker in terms of like, what you want to achieve? what content you're recovering? How do the like? How did things get started?

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So basically, I was hanging out with some folks at these, you know, early gifting events, and one of them was like, Yeah, you know, it'd be really cool if we could get our products compared to like, the medical products that you have as a medical patient here in DC, Joe, and I'm like, that's a really cool idea. And so I started gentlemen, toker.com to cover both, you know, and push the, I always saw it as like the unlicensed market was going to be a temporary thing, right, I would have never expected never expected it will last seven years, which is a real testament to how slow government moves, when it's motivated to do so. So, you know, I thought it was gonna be a temporary thing. So I'm like, Okay, let's try and show the licensed folks what they should be doing, what their products should like. I mean, we're talking about and there's plenty of bad things that folks can say about vape carts at this point. But the vape carts that I had access to in those days as a DC medical patient, were literally powdered concentrate on a vape battery, like no liquid at all, it's just a little bit of powdered concentrate in there. Like it was crazy. So I'm like, Alright, let's show you guys what these things shouldn't look like and what they should costs. And then I can also show you the best of what the Gift Market has available. And you know, it just built up steam rather quickly. I'd say I was writing about it for six months, and then the Washington Post hit me up and we're like, hey, we want to quote you in an article and they it was great. Yeah, it was about like, hey, it smells like weed everywhere in DC and they wanted my opinion on it. I'm like all right, whatever. Yep, it does. Literally anything I can do to get in there like I recognize that this was a big opportunity for me but I wouldn't understand later until it really transitioned to a business like how big that was for me I mean getting a link in like you know mainstream media cannot be understated Yeah, so yeah after that then you know site traffic built and I had a lot of you know, what's the Washington Post came then a bunch of other media came we were like, hey, we want to talk to you we want to talk to you and yeah, all those backlinks really

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solid for what they looking for kind of like industry analysis was this perspective. I mean, were you kind of an expert in the field like I guess how did you end up position yourself or Why were people coming to you? Yeah, well,

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initially, you know, they wanted my perspective on it. I'd say, you know, over time the media started to build me as an expert. I don't know if I really take the expert label, like, I know my stuff. But I don't walk around like I'm a

read expert, you know? That sounds snobby. I'm not about that. But I was recognized as somebody that cared about these issues, in terms of the quality of the cannabis that was available in terms of the price that was available in terms of how the MediCal program should work. I was an outspoken advocate, I guess. And also, you know, just kind of tangentially or, as a byproduct of all this in covering it. And working with a lot of these folks, I did become really well versed in the i 71, you know, gifting angle and where they were coming from

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interesting. And so how did this evolve? How did it become a business give us a little are the kind of the major transition points for you as things evolve?

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Sure, well, as traffic built and became pretty steady, it made sense to open things up to advertising, right. So in the early years, I wrote a lot of reviews, there were occasional articles and news articles when I thought it was important. But the focus early on was on reviews, I don't sell reviews never did that, what I would do is, you know, if your weed was good enough to earn my review, that's how I did it, right. Because when you're dealing with a lot of unlicensed folks, there's a lot of great folks that want to be in the cannabis industry that licenses are out of touch. But when you open it up to everybody, everybody includes some crazy people, right? So back, there are some people out there that I did not want to work with, right. So if I agreed that you were a good person to work with and that your cannabis was good quality, then I would write a review, if you had a review on the site, then you were able to buy advertising on, you know, the high traffic pages. And so that's how that built. And you know, that was certainly the the backbone of what I built was based on the i 71, gifters, and advertising and then that became, you know, people wanted to expand on my model change on that model, I was sort of like the first and most successful early on, but I ended up enabling, like my biggest competitor by sending them a backlink, because early on, I just wanted to write reviews, and I still thought the whole thing was sketchy. So like, I was not sure that this was like legit at all. So they were like, we want to just list everybody. And I was very limited in terms of like very picky about, okay, I've checked out your products, I know that you're not Yeah, that customers are going to have a good experience dealing with you, you're professional than I would agree to work with you. Whereas they were like, we just want to open it up and let anybody advertising wants to advertise. And that actually became a lot more popular, because one of the other things I tried to do is get people to read, I was like, early on, people didn't have this information. And I was like, I've got this information, I can give it to you. But you have to read for it. And you know, I felt good about that at the time, but it wasn't like a business savvy decision. So when they started just putting everybody's stuff up, you know, here's everything you want to know, that was a conflict with my own model good on them, I should have adapted sooner to what people actually wanted,

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and how to do evolve to where you are today.

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So you know, after a couple of years, and with how fast product turned over, right? Like I'd write about something and say, Oh, this is a great strain, and it'll be gone in two days. And then they're like, Well, what about this other stuff? I'm like, I don't know, I didn't check it out, I realized that there was way too many brands, I mean, I 71 blew up there was probably at one point, you know, like 500 brands or so. And that range from professional operations to just some guy working out of his garage, you know, but there was way too many brands way too many flowers coming in and out. So I thought what was most important is to change my focus

towards teaching people how to evaluate flower for themselves, and what makes good quality. So I did a bunch of articles based on that. You know, I've talked about that a lot when I do my own podcast, which is what it's evolved to now. You know, I did the customer education for a while we still do some news and stuff like that on the site. We still do consumer education, but my focus has turned more to doing our own podcast for the site. Because I just really like talking to all of the people that I've met since you know legalization has happened I find it like fascinating how many different perspectives there are. There's not like one camp that thinks we should do it one way and one camp that thinks that should go another way. It's like a you know, everybody's their own camp. You know, what I want to see happen?

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Yeah, and how I guess yeah, what have you noticed around in terms of the content you're creating or the content is getting consumed? What are people looking for? And what do people what information do people want to get out there? Like what what have you noticed on both sides of the kind of the model here?

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Hmm, in terms of what people are looking for in information these days? You know, I try to think about what I think is important. And then what I think is interesting and And I hope that that enthusiasm reaches our target audience, right? Like, obviously, we pay attention to social media trends. So we've done some pieces, like the kind of explain what's going on with PG Rs. Right? That's the one that consumers get, you know, a little wind about and but it really needs a lot further understanding to understand the difference between natural PGRs and artificial PGRs. And what you should be concerned about what you shouldn't. So we've, we've done a research piece into that we try to keep that linked to our culture, I think it's really important to honor and as much as we can learn about the history of the folks that kept the lights on for cannabis during the years of prohibition. So some of our favorite articles and episodes have been about people that have that connection to before things were even starting to get legalized and hearing about how crazy it was back then, and the sort of things they got into now.

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And in terms of the guests that you're bringing on, like where I'm just kind of curious, what where have you been finding interesting guests? What were our guests reaching out to you like? What's the content source? look like? The you know, who's who has interesting content? And where are they coming from?

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Well, one, a lot of the people or people that I have met either locally or traveling around the country, checking out weed for gentleman's Joker. So, you know, DC seed exchange, one of the newer seed banks in a very reputable one began in DC. And so we had him on the program recently, that was one of my favorite episodes. But really, I try to find people from all different angles. So that's what I'm trying to do with it is, the basic question that I have is how do we legalize perfectly or as best we can try and answer? It's gonna be tough. Right? It's an impossible question. It sure is. But I love hearing all the different perspectives and seeing like, Okay, well, maybe if we take pieces of this, and we take pieces of that, and then you know what I mean, like, now we've got something that

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we're cooking with? And what has it guess where are you in terms of feeling like what the kind of the perfect or near perfect model is? Or at least what are the components of of a model that would be highly successful? What are some of the things you're landing on? What are some of the big open questions for you so?

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Well, I think one of the most important things is to, if you can't leave licenses uncapped, to provide as many licenses as possible, I really reject what we've seen from limited license markets on the east coast in the Midwest, where they are artificially trying to create a monopoly on the industry. And so you only have a dozen cultivators, the prices are all the same, the quality is not great. Licenses are not meant to be a golden ticket to print money, they are the entrance to the game. Yeah. And if you look at like what happened with curaleaf, recently announcing that they were exiting California and Oregon and Colorado, where they can't compete, literally, their whole business model is based on, you know, obtaining licenses in states with limited competition. And once they experienced competition, even their money is not enough to compete. So that would be my biggest thing is reducing the caps on licenses and letting anybody who wants to compete not print money, but compete do so.

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Yeah. Meaning that's the best for the consumer in terms of quality of product and price. Right. Like, we'll make sure that from the market point of view that we've got good quality product at a reasonable price.

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Absolutely. And I love to see interstate commerce, I think that's going to be really huge international commerce. Really I will.

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Well, yeah, so the two two big, very different issues in terms of the interstate commerce, I guess, do either what do you see people kind of modeling or we see people assume that how this is going to play out? Or how do you sort of see it playing out in terms of federal legalization? Will we have this kind of interim phase of Yeah, we're gonna make it federally illegal, but we're still gonna leave it as a state by state market and then start introducing some of this interstate commerce stuff, or is this just gonna be like, Hey, we're going federally legal, anyone can sell anything anywhere? And you know, good luck.

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Oh, I absolutely think they're still going to, you know, respect states that do not want to participate in cannabis, though. I think they'll see that it's those numbers are dwindling as it goes on. Even Texas is looking to expand their medical cannabis program Kentucky is you know, trying to implement a limited cannabis program. So a medical program. So yeah, I think they're gonna continue to let the states do what they want. But for anybody who wants to participate, interstate commerce is going to be a game changer, both in terms of allowing legacy operators a better chance to get in the game. I think distributors, you know, we've seen the distributor model, you know, very popular in California. We don't see it anywhere else. Obviously, you don't need it when you only have 12 license code. debater's in your state or whatever, but on a national level, you know, we just saw an endorsement from a big alcohol would have called distributor organization calling for legalization. And yes, for a chance to, you know, be distributors. And I think that model could work, you know, picking up from small farmers that they like, all over the West Coast, Maine and stuff like that and bring them to dispensaries nationwide that are participating. I can see that working.

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Yeah, yeah, be interesting. I mean, we've got so much investment, you know, money investment time, but into these local markets that as we go federally illegal, I guess, kind of this balance of how do we respect some of that, but also, you know, there's no reason we should be growing green growing weed in Vermont, right? Like, it's like we've got, we've got the ability to grow really, really great quality, you know, cannabis in certain parts of the country here. So you mentioned the international market, what I guess what activity do you see going on here? I mean, obviously, the US is kind of in this funny, we're in a bit of a bubble. And then we've got the state by state, I haven't seen a lot of folks really thinking about or trying to address the international market. What are you seeing in terms of international market? What are some of the interesting markets? What's going on with our like, is this going to be a real global industry? At what point? What's your take?

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Well, the EU is going to be really interested in and keep our eyes on Germany has just announced that they've gotten the thumbs up from the EU to move forward with legalization, with some caveats to come. They telling them what changes they're making to their playhead right now, but there will be some changes from the EU. But once one member state is able to do that, obviously, other states could look to join in on that very quickly. So I think Europe is going to be very interesting to keep an eye on of course, we've been seeing movement in South America for years, Argentina is making big pushes right now and Argentina, obviously, you know, famous for their wines, their steaks, I'm very interested to see what they can do with cannabis. Thailand has been making a lot of big headlines this year. So obviously, the culture in Asia is going to be you know, I don't think we're gonna see broad scale legalization across all of Southeast Asia, but we do have several countries that have a historical use of this product culturally of this plant. And, you know, it'd be interesting to see India, for example, being able to move forward with legalization and what they could do.

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Yeah. Yeah, it's, it's interesting to see how these kind of countries are developing, and then where, you know, who are going to be the players. And, you know, there's, it's this kind of mix of logistically and environmentally who is in a good position to be kind of big producers, but then you layer in the political, cultural kind of angle on it, and then may or may not, like that's gonna gum things up or push this market around a little bit. So we'll see how things evolve. What I guess do you see in the states here, like what are the markets that you're most kind of curious or interested in that are kind of new, they're coming online, or are changing kind of changing a lot? I mean, you mentioned that you're a fan of the unlimited or nearly unlimited license model. What's your take on some of the stuff that's going on in the world right now?

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Sure. Well, you know, from everything that I have been able to research and hear about, about how means program works, it seems like Maine has a really excellent approach to cannabis. They've got a it seems like it's a limited retail market. But there's the medical market is dominated by craft manufacturers. And there's just so many craft growers that are involved in that MediCal program. And that seems to be a really good model, because I'm telling you, I've seen so much fire coming out of Maine. They've really built a reputation here on the East Coast. But I'm really excited about Washington, DC. So that's where, you know, we started the blog and everything here. And seven years later, they've been trying to figure out something to do with it over the last couple years, right, City Council's decided, like, Hey, we should really be cracking down on this. And they've tried several times. And the support has not been there, either from the public or the other council



members, like we've had the you know, that's the one good thing is it took so many years for them to even get around to considering legalization because of Congress's interference, that we've got to see how things played out in other states. And so now people are like, well, maybe we shouldn't just open the doors to the multi state operators, maybe we should save some licenses for social equity equity operators and offer them assistance to get started. Maybe we should have a homegrown program and micro licenses and stuff like that. So the benefits of seeing how legalization has played out elsewhere is certainly informing the conversation here. But after all these years, seven years, they have finally come to an agreement with you know, representatives of the gifting market because they're politically active now and have lobbyists and the medical market that has been complaining all this time that hey, you're letting these unregulated people run around and make our money as well as the government and the cops who look bad. I mean, I think That's where all the enforcement comes from is like, oh, man, the media keeps making it look like the cops aren't doing their job, we got to do something. Yeah. But after all this time they came to an agreement. They're going to allow these gifting businesses to transition into the medical market. They're giving a long launchpad to get that happen. It's something like 315 days from enactment which just was enacted, just you know, very recently. Yeah. And then, you know, there's additional license types. Right now, the licenses are uncapped in DC, which is great, probably won't remain that way. There are provisions in the law that the council can enact restrictions, or set a moratorium on issuing new licenses types. But for now, it's uncapped. And the goal is to get as many of these people from the unregulated market into the regulated medical market, it also enshrines this self certification of medical patients. So you don't need to go to a medical cannabis doctor anymore. You can just write on a sheet of paper that yes, I think I need cannabis, submit that to the agency. And it turns around real fast. I did it it was like 20 minutes and I had my thing, and I'm good for 30 days to go and visit the dispensaries there. So yeah, they've made it really easy for folks to do that if they want to now whether everybody's going to, here's the thing, the I 71 market is immense. And you have people that are running everything from retail storefronts, to people that are operating small delivery businesses that nobody would know about right? And so I imagine what we're going to see is that the storefronts are going to go away to be replaced by medical licensed storefronts and 50% of the licenses were held for social equity applicants and so that's great to see a lot of the people that you know wanted to get into the industry they're now being given their chance. I mean, they had to be doing a lot of things right up front right like they already had to have a business license they had to have been paying taxes all since last year. It's too late to do the right thing now

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yeah yeah they're on there you can back backfill into this Yeah, I get it but now

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I get to watch like a new the industry go legit and you know I thought it was the early days like I don't know how legit all this is and now you know they've been de facto rolled is legit all this time. And now they're gonna be given the opportunity to get licenses. It's amazing. I can't wait to see what happens. That's crazy.

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That's amazing. This has been a pleasure. I appreciate your time. If people want to find out more about you more about gentleman toker, what's the best way to get that information?

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Absolutely. Visit us at [www.gentlemantoker.com](http://www.gentlemantoker.com). Or you can find me on Instagram at [gentleman.toker](https://www.instagram.com/gentleman.toker)

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I'll make sure that the URL and the handle there are in shownotes people get that, Joe, thanks for taking the time today. It's been a pleasure. Likewise, Bruce. Thank you. That's it for this episode of thinking outside the bud. Be sure to subscribe using your favorite podcast app so you don't miss our future episodes. See you next time.

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## About Thinking Outside The Bud

Thinking Outside the Bud is a business podcast devoted to driving innovation in the cannabis space. During each episode, we speak with founders, investors, thought leaders, researchers, advocates, and policymakers who are finding new and exciting ways for cannabis to positively impact business, society, and culture.

For more information and a list of recent episodes, please visit <https://www.thinkingoutsidethebud.com>.

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