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Hanging with the Vapers

E-cigarettes, once simply a means to quit smoking, have spawned a new culture, with meeting places, collectable pipes and a rainbow of fruity flavor.

By Caren Chesler | April 17, 2015 | Appears in the May 2015 issue

Ryan McLaughlin has a new favorite flavor, and he can't wait to tell his friend about it.

"I just bought the looper yesterday," says the 25-year-old from Hazlet, "and I'm in love with it."

"The looper" is shorthand for Fruit Loops, one of a seemingly infinite variety of flavored liquids used in e-cigarettes. McLaughlin and his friend, Jim Seidel, 25, of Manasquan, have just strolled into Evaporate, an Asbury Park gathering place, known as a vaping lounge, where e-cigarette users—or vapers—can sample and purchase the nicotine-laced, flavored juices.

Behind its glass storefront, Evaporate resembles a modern coffee house. The look is industrial chic, with polished, dark wood flooring and sparkling pendulum lights. There's cozy seating up front and a long counter with bar stools toward the rear. Patrons write messages on a giant chalkboard. Behind the bar, helpful staffers offer samples of vaping juices with names like Betty White (tasting of pomegranate and apple) and Honey Do (honeydew and other melons). Their customers inhale deep puffs from their vaporizers and exhale dense, odorless clouds of grayish-white smoke. (But don't call it smoke; e-cigarette advocates prefer the word vapor.)

Chris Cook, 28, and his partner, Irina Gasparyan, opened the shop on Bangs Avenue last year. Like many users, Cook had gotten into e-cigarettes to quit smoking. It worked—and he decided to start a business where other e-cigarette fans could sample juices and congregate with fellow users.

It's hard to estimate the number of vaping businesses that have opened in New Jersey over the last few years. The New Jersey Vapor Retailer's Coalition counts about 50 shops as members, but the group doesn't represent all Jersey shops. Vaping shops can be found in suburban communities like Morristown, Ocean Township and Marlton, as well as urban areas like Newark and Jersey City. Some merely sell vaping products; others offer the comforts and the communal spirit found at Evaporate.

Vaping requires a battery-powered device that heats a liquid into a vapor (also called aerosol) that can be inhaled. The simplest, first-generation devices, introduced about 10 years ago, look like cigarettes, cigars or pipes, and can be purchased with cartridges of e-liquid at convenience stores and gas stations for about \$15 to \$20 a pack. But those who have gotten into vaping as a lifestyle are more likely to opt for new-generation vaporizers, referred to as mods. They come in a variety of shapes—some resembling everyday objects like pens and lighters—and are sold for about \$30 and up in kits that include a battery charger and starter bottles of liquid. More sophisticated models, with bigger, rechargeable batteries and juice tanks, or bells and whistles like digital temperature regulators, can cost as much as \$200; handmade, collectible pipes can run as high as \$1,500.

The liquid that goes into the vaporizer is a mix of propylene glycol, glycerin, artificial and natural flavorings, and tobacco-derived nicotine. Except for the nicotine, those are the same ingredients used in theatrical fog machines. Indeed, walk into a

busy vaping lounge and the air might be filled with the same haze you would experience at a Halloween fun house.

A 30-milliliter bottle of liquid, good for several hundred puffs, runs \$15 to \$25. The amount of nicotine in the liquid varies from zero to 24 milligrams per milliliter. Most people trying to quit cigarettes start with a 12- to 24-milligram e-liquid, depending on their daily cigarette usage, and work their way down, explains Craig Doka, co-owner with his brother, Ryan, of Status Vapes in Morristown. (The average cigarette contains between 13.7 and 23.2 milligrams of nicotine, according to the National Cancer Institute.)

Vaping has become so popular in New Jersey and elsewhere—that the Oxford English Dictionary declared vape the 2014 Word of the Year.

“It’s such a big cultural movement,” says Gasparyan. “People start to form social groups that meet up in the vaping lounge.”

E-cigarette users seek the camaraderie of groups in part because vaping—like cigarette smoking—is shunned in public places. In fact, it is illegal to use e-cigs in public places—including vaping lounges—under a 2010 amendment to the Smoke-Free Air Act of 2006. The 2010 amendment also prohibits the sale of e-cigarette products to anyone under 19—the legal age for tobacco products.

It’s not unusual for vaping lounges to receive fines up to \$1,000 or warnings from the state Department of Health. One store, Good Guy Vapes in Clifton, claims to have received five citations, amounting to \$3,750, since opening in September 2013. The store is part of a chain of vaping stores in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Illinois. Co-owner Shoab Iqbal, 31, of Boonton, says last spring it appeared that health department officials were sitting outside the shop waiting to pounce.

“They’d come in with four or five guys at a time after hours, when I was counting the register,” says Iqbal. “They never actually saw anyone vape. They said they saw vapor in the air.”

Despite the resistance, vaping is on the rise. Sales of electronic cigarettes nationwide were up 14 percent in December compared to the same month in 2013, according to the Balvor Retailer Composite. And basic e-cigarettes account for just \$1.4 billion of the \$2.5 billion U.S. vapor market.

E-cigarette usage in the United States has increased from about 3 percent of adults in 2010 to 8.5 percent in 2013, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some 2.5 million people now use the devices, according to the CDC. Of course, the tobacco market, which claims about 42.1 million smokers, dwarfs the e-cigarette market. Still, even Big Tobacco smells the growth potential of e-cigarettes. Lorillard Inc. owned the Blu e-cigarette brand until its recent merger with Reynolds American Inc.—and Reynolds has its own e-cigarette brand, Vuse.

The products were initially marketed as a means of quitting cigarettes. Indeed, Evaporate owner Cook smoked a pack and a half a day for more than a decade before switching to e-cigarettes. These days, he vapes with juices that have just 3 to 6 milligrams of nicotine per milliliter, which is pretty low.

“We used to stare at the 3-milligram bottles and wonder why people would buy them,” says Cook. “Now we can’t keep them on the shelf.”

In addition to consuming lower levels of nicotine, some vapers say they indulge with less frequency. Cook says he might have a couple of puffs on his e-cigarette and then put it down for an hour before coming back for another puff or two.

The vapor also tastes better than smoke, say users. When they start vaping, they typically want liquids that are flavored like cigarettes. But tobacco flavors aren't very appealing as vapors, says Cook. So users start trying dessert, fruit, candy and cereal flavors—like Fruit Loops.

“You'd be surprised at the number of adult men who come in asking for fruit or candy flavors,” Cook says.

The vaping culture has its roots in California, where the owners of e-cigarette shops quickly realized that flavored juices drive sales. They went from selling a handful of devices and juices to providing comfortable venues for juice tasting and consumption. Some offer Wi-Fi and convenient places to charge computers; some even have streaming movies and high-quality audio systems. Others have cold or hot drinks—although they don't sell alcoholic beverages.

The idea is to create a supportive atmosphere where vapers want to hang out. “In Vegas or L.A., the ‘stay time’ is an hour or longer,” says Ronald Rotatori, who owns G Spot Vapor Shop and Lounge and the G Spot Hookah Café in Wildwood. “They're taking their time, maybe having a snack, something to drink, maybe looking at different devices.” That's better business than just selling devices. “A person will buy three to four devices a year,” says Rotatori, “but they'll buy e-liquid every week.”

In New Jersey, the transition to California-style vaping shops is in full swing. Will Merget, 35, wanted his business, BlueDream Vapor Lounge in Voorhees, to be a place where people could sit with their laptop or their lunch and not worry about being hassled about buying products. BlueDream offers complimentary Keurig-brewed coffee, free samplings and Wi-Fi.

Blue Dream also provides e-cigarette services like free wick replacement for rebuildable atomizers. Watching the technician service the device is part of the experience, Merget says. He likens it to a nail salon, where clients get one-on-one attention, as opposed to a cell phone kiosk in the mall, where clerks disappear into a back room to fix your screen.

“That’s how Starbucks did so well,” says Merget. “Not only did they cater to people buying coffee, but they gave someone an environment to relax and enjoy their coffee. I base my brand on the same idea.”

Like Starbucks, the more ambitious vaping lounges emphasize variety, stocking flavors from as many as 25 different brands. Some of the juices are supplied by Jersey flavor labs; Morristown’s Status Vapes, for example, carries e-liquids from Terra Clouds in Dover, Fluffy Clouds in Summit, and Dripula in Wharton, as well as a house brand supplied by a lab in South Jersey.

Not much is known about the potential health risks of vaping for users and those exposed to their secondhand haze. The American Lung Association has expressed concern about the lack of information about e-cigarettes and how they are promoted as a way to quit smoking. And as far back as 2009, a study by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found that at least one e-liquid sample tested contained the same carcinogenic and toxic ingredient found in antifreeze. Last year, the *New York Times* reported on a pair of studies indicating that some e-cigarette vapor contained formaldehyde, a known carcinogen.

E-cigarette manufacturers have been criticized for using television advertising, which traditional cigarette companies have been banned from doing since 1971, and for targeting the young. Indeed, middle and high school students more than doubled their use of electronic cigarettes between 2011 and 2012, according to

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some 1.78 million students used e-cigarettes in 2012, says the CDC, despite research showing nicotine's potential negative effect on adolescent brain development and the risk of nicotine addiction.

The FDA is considering a proposal to require e-cigarette makers to register their products with the agency. The proposal would also require a nicotine-addiction warning label and create a minimum purchase age of 18 for e-cigarettes. Currently, many vaping liquids are sold with voluntary warning labels, but there is no uniform language. One source says childproof caps on the liquids may also be required in the near future.

Whatever the possible risks, users maintain that e-cigs are preferable to conventional cigarettes. They don't cause chest pain, coughing, shortness of breath or a weakened immune system, say these advocates, nor do they contain the smorgasbord of potentially noxious or cancer-causing substances found in traditional cigarettes, including arsenic, cobalt, lead, 2-Nitropropane and 5-Methyl-Chrysene. Advocates also claim that nicotine, although addictive, is not a known carcinogen.

Society also might be more tolerant of vaping. Cook says Navy men who dock at Naval Weapons Station Earle in Monmouth County come to his shop after months at sea to stock up on vaping supplies. Vaping, they tell him, is more acceptable aboard ship than cigarettes.

Vaping has even hit the malls. A Florida e-cigarette company, Vapor Corp., recently opened a kiosk in the Garden State Plaza in Paramus. It's called a vapor lounge, even though patrons can't sample juices or light up in the mall. Rather, the kiosk is intended to appeal to the novice who may be uncomfortable walking into a vape shop, explains David Henninger, senior vice president of business development at Vapor Corp. "It may seem intimidating to

them,” he says. “We wanted to make it very friendly to the vape-curious.”

The popularity of vaping hasn’t been lost on Governor Chris Christie, who has twice proposed taxing the products at the same rate as conventional cigarettes—\$2.70 a pack—although it is unclear how that rate would be applied. The proposal was defeated last year, but Christie has included it again in this year’s budget plan.

At the same time, Trenton is looking at easing the regulations affecting e-cigarette use. A state Assembly proposal would exempt businesses from the Smoke-Free Air Act if they derive at least 51 percent of their income from the e-cigarette trade. The bill—sponsored by Declan O’Scanlon Jr. (R-Red Bank), Joseph Lagana (D-Paramus) and David Rible (R-Wall)—has yet to be heard in committee. Advocates argue that vapor is not smoke and that, at a minimum of \$10 a bottle, people buying vaping juice should be able to taste those juices before purchasing.

“We’re looking for a change in the law that’s similar to the way certain cigar lounges can operate, where you can test the product in the shop,” says Rich Levesque, vice president of public affairs with the MWW Group, an international lobbying firm with offices in Trenton and East Rutherford. Levesque is a spokesman for the Vapor Retailer’s Coalition. “We understand people don’t want smoking or vaping in restaurants. We’re not looking to change that law. What we’re saying is that within our establishments, our customers should be able to test the products.”

For many e-cigarette users, vaping has morphed from a nicotine-patch substitute to a hipster hobby. And like other hobbies, it has attracted collectors and tinkerers. For these enthusiasts, half the fun is modifying their devices for optimum performance.

On a Saturday afternoon, Evaporate employee Rob Camlin of Toms River stands behind the counter and pops the cap off the atomizer of an electronic cigarette so he can replace the two wire coils with thinner wire. The coils heat the liquid and turn it into vapor. A thinner wire ensures that the device won't burn too hot and potentially produce a harsh vapor.

“Figuring out how to modulate it is like an equation, almost like an art,” says Camlin as he winds a piece of wire around the tip of a screwdriver to create a new coil. “A lot of people like coming here and want us to do it, because we have the tools and materials readily available. But this is something people do at home, too.”

Kevin Prichard, 32, a computer technician from Hazlet, started vaping a year and a half ago to quit smoking. He now puffs e-liquid with zero nicotine and has started making his own devices. He and his father, Reuben, 68, a retired Bell Laboratories engineer, invested in a computerized milling machine to fabricate vaping pipes out of African blackwood. They sell for about \$225 a piece.

“It's not rocket science,” Prichard says. “When they first came out, people were making their own devices out of modified flashlights. But with anything, you have your standard equipment, and then there's always the tinkerers.”

Ian Koenig, a 33-year-old waiter from Asbury Park, is just happy that e-cigarettes have helped him quit smoking. These days, he's reduced the nicotine content of his juice from 24 milligrams to 6—although he vapes all the time when he's not at work.

“It isn't great for you,” he says, “but it's the lesser of two evils.”
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