M/V van de dag
Chris Burggraeve
Ex-topper van AB InBev stort zich op Amerikaanse cannabismiljarden

Chris Burggraeve, the Belgian ex-marketing director of AB InBev, joins the battle for (legal) cannabis billiards. “It is one of the fastest growing consumer markets in the US, comparable with the arrival of the mobile phone,” it sounds. He stood at Toast’s cradle, which sells pre-rolled joints, and recently invested in Greenrush Group. That is an online marketplace where we bring consumers into contact with official cannabis shops’, says Burggraeve (qz). In this way, consumers gain access to thousands of products. Not only rolled joints or dried flower tops. Also cannabis vaporizers, balm against muscle pain and chocolate candies with slightly intoxicating action. With Toast, set up between the snowy peaks of Aspen (Colorado), Burggraeve directs itself directly to the cannabis user with tobacco-free joints (‘Slices’) with the look of ordinary filter cigarettes. One puff compares the company with a sip of champagne. A complete ‘slice’ with a glass. ‘We want to reinvent the dark cannabis scene. What we have in mind is not smoking a joint and then falling backwards,’ says Burggraeve. ‘We want to create the ideal state of mind for social interactions.’

The cannabis market is growing at a fast pace. In the US alone, the medical and recreational use market accounted for 6 billion dollar sales last year. That will multiply between now and ten years to 30 billion dollars as more American states follow the example of Colorado, Nevada and California and legalize cannabis use. Meanwhile, in the US the Green Rush is mentioned, for which Peter Thiel, the founder of PayPal, has also chosen a position. ‘We are at the beginning of a revolution. It can not be stopped because consumers want it’, says Burggraeve. A survey shows that almost two-thirds of all Americans are pro-legalization.

‘It is a sensitive consumer product’, he acknowledges. ‘But I do not see why cannabis is different from officially permitted stimulants such as coffee or alcohol. I want to shape the cannabis industry - with a lot of cowboys and dark sides - but in a socially responsible way.’

According to Burggraeve, the step from hops, malt and yeast to the cannabis plant is more evident than we suspect. ‘It appeared on my radar years ago, during my period at AB InBev. If you think about which products can replace beer as social lubricants you also end up with cannabis. I think the beer industry has been shaken up, he says. Constellation Brands, the distributor of Corona beer, recently invested in the marijuana company Canopy Growth, which has a market value of more than 3 billion dollars.

Whether Burggraeve is a cannabis user? ‘I’ve tried it here in the US. You have to be able to understand why people use this and how you can improve their experience.’ Burggraeve is also advisor to the investment company Verlinvest, chairman of the Belgian-American Chamber of Commerce in New York and an investor with a number of Belgian tech companies.