

audience is stupid and so they try to make it like baby food," he explains. "They just puree everything so it tastes bland, but it's easy to swallow. That would be the movie industry in a nutshell. [And] TV is crap, man. You'll be writing for it and we just had this joke of like, 'Just drag the body through the mud.' You have to get it done. And you try to do something cool and the network says, 'No.' Again, it's the baby food."

Around the end of the century, Smith came up with the story idea of a morgue worker who falls in love with a tattoo on a severed arm. He didn't need a focus group to tell him how well that idea would fly in Hollywood, so he decided to convert it into his first novel, *Moist*. He's never regretted his career shift for one minute, as he's found an extraordinary amount of freedom in writing crime fiction novels. Hell, he even married a former publicist from Random House, so he's pretty much surrounded himself with tons of written words.

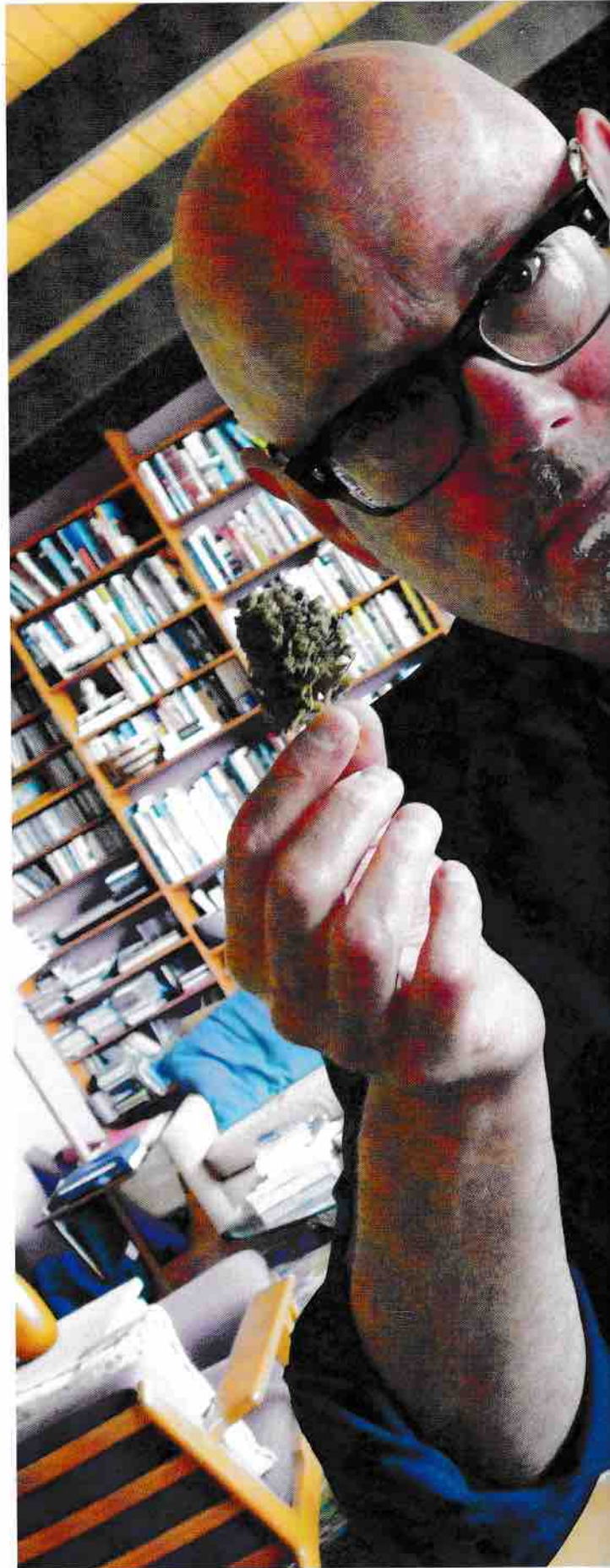
And pot. Funny how that came into the picture.

**MARK** GREW UP IN THE MIDWEST, hardly a prime destination for pot connoisseurs. Even when Mark managed to get out of the house in the '80s, it was all about *Scarface* and mountains of coke. So Mark Haskell Smith would have to wait until the end of the century before reacquainting himself to marijuana. Around the same time he discovered the Cannabis Cup, he also befriended a crew of South Americans who routinely threw dinner parties, capped off with a massive spliff passed around the table. Originally, the character of Miro Basinas in *Baked* would host parties similar to those Smith's South American friends threw, with different varieties of marijuana standing in for food servings.

However, as Smith continued to research, he became increasingly more and more fascinated with the advancements pot growers have made in diversifying cannabis since the '70s and decided to focus on one of them as the main character. "I really like [characters] who are smart, but they choose, for whatever reason, to [live] outside the mainstream," Smith elaborates. "Lots of people who choose to be artists or writers or musicians, whatever, they're choosing to do something that is a risk, but they're all highly intelligent. Miro is just one of those people."

Many of *Baked's* other characters are based on people Mark knew of, or whom one could easily assume existed within the world of medical marijuana. Lieutenant Cho, the dyspeptic chief detective attempting to piece together Miro's shooting with a string of bodies left in Shamus's murderous wake, was modeled after a PI Mark followed around in Honolulu, in advance of a TV crime show that never got made. "They were mostly busting crack and crystal meth labs and stuff. But they didn't care about ganja at all," he swears. "They arrested this guy for selling weed, not because he was selling weed, but because he was selling fake Thai stick. And they said that that was worse, because it affected tourism. So actually, the punishment for selling the fake stuff is worse than selling [the real]."

Counterbalancing Miro in *Baked* is Vincent, who hopes to duplicate his "Compassion Centers" nationwide and sees Miro's Elephant Crush as crucial to growing his business. Believe it or not, Vincent was not based on anyone Smith knew personally, although since writing the book, many of Smith's friends in the field swear he actually exists in the industry. Smith can believe it. "A lot of the dynamic I was trying to explore was kind of the mom-and-pop store versus the corporate culture," he explains. "I used Vincent to [symbolize] a corporation who's trying to do what corporations do, which is claim market share and make money, no matter who's in the way. And if you're valuable to them, they'll try to eat you and control you and if they can't have





Say 'hello' to MHS's little friend

# IN THE WEEDS:

Los Angeles Landmarks in *Baked*

**Rambo's Tacos,  
Echo Park:**

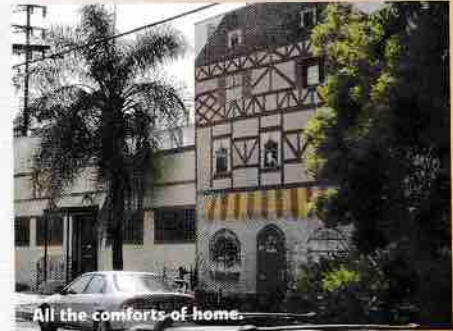
*"Tom didn't remember the movie that well, but wasn't Rambo a PTSD sufferer? A Vietnam vet with a one-man vendetta against a corrupt sheriff in Oregon? What did that have to do with quesadillas?"*



We're not sure ourselves, but in case you were wondering, yes, there *is* a Rambo-themed taco truck and kitsch-loving hipsters and food truck aficionados alike embrace it. Like everything else, the price of a taco (now \$1.25) has gone up somewhat, but it's worth it to support a distinctively Mexican version of camp.

**Clearwater Avenue  
and Ripple Street,  
Frogtown:**

*Baked* refers to Frogtown as "perfect for drug drops, executions and other activities that require a discreet but urban environment."



So there's no better place for Shamus to begin his killing spree than this cul-de-sac near the LA River. The cheesy Old World Bavarian murals on the warehouse walls only add to the homely industrial ambiance and a small battery of homeless live in the River's cospes.

**Larga Avenue,  
Atwater Village:**

Granted, the bullet that starts the book off is fired two blocks away on Perlita Avenue, but this house is where MHS lived at the time of the McGhee rampage. Mark imagines the beginning scene to take place on a property like this.

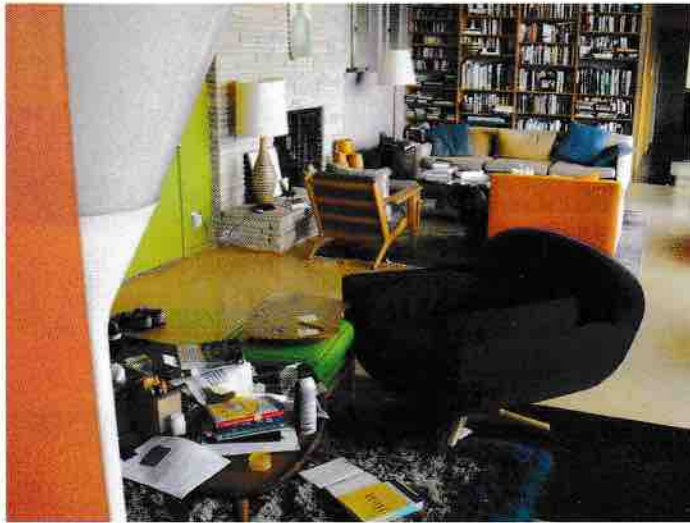


you, they'll try to make it so no one else can."

For his part, Smith is optimistic about the dispensary model. For while he sees no realistic way to keep criminals or scoundrels out of the game, he points to well-established NorCal clinics such as Harborside and Berkeley Group as viable models for pot's reinvention as medicine. "John Q. Public can walk in there and go, 'Oh, okay. This looks fine. My kids could walk past here on their way to school and not get shot or whatever.'"

Turning back to the embattled dispensaries of Eagle Rock, Smith believes many of their problems stem from these sorts of concerns. Since Pasadena and Glendale have imposed moratoriums on dispensaries, many entrepreneurs have occupied storefronts abandoned in the wake of the economic downturn and are only beginning to perform the sort of community outreach needed to reassure their neighbors. It hasn't been easy—one of them, Hemp Factory V, was shut down after pesticides were found on its meds. The LA city council's tough new restrictions on dispensaries have put many of them out of business for the time being. Smith sees these as minor setbacks toward eventual legalization, whether or not the legalization initiative passes in November. I pose to him a scenario where Humboldt County becomes a pot tourism destination similar to Napa Valley, with bed-and-breakfasts catering to canna-connoisseurs. "It's coming," he agrees. "There's gonna be a huge backlash from the churches and the conservatives. But if it doesn't happen in November, it'll happen in a couple of years."

So what business models appeal most to him? Well, Smith has spent time in Amsterdam and favors two coffeeshops: the three-store complex Dampkring and the far smaller Kandinsky, which caters mainly to locals and served as the model for Orange, Miro's Cannabis Cup sponsor in *Baked*. Closer to home, Smith likes the Organic Healing Center, a no-frills center near his house that stocks



▲ This is where the magic happens, baby.

◀ Smith's sardonic trophy-on-the-wall.

his favorite sativa. As for specific strains, Smith has learned a thing or two about 'em, particularly Hazes. At the last Cannabis Cup, he sampled Super Lemon Haze and a Congolese Sativa/Super Silver Haze combination named Jon Sinclair, alongside some recent domestic faves such as the Gourmet Green Room's Zeta ("It tasted like lemons and sage. You want to have a roast chicken with it.") and a Blueberry/Haze/secret ingredient hybrid a gardener in Northern California grows, some of which is situated close to his writing desk, incidentally.

But again, there are the growing pains. As he's found, many growers he's spoken to are beginning to worry about just this sort of hybridization, which has the unintended consequence of corporatizing what was once a highly idiosyncratic enterprise. The West is no longer as wild as it once was, many a grower will bemoan. And maybe they're right. "The one thing about Starbucks is you know you'll get a good cup of coffee there, no matter where you go and the same cup of coffee," feels Smith. "And when I talk to a lot of the growers, some of them are really concerned about how strains are getting homogenized. They've been crossed and crossed and crossed so much that they're losing their individual effects."

**MARK** AND I ARE EATING AT A TACO TRUCK somewhere in Atwater Village. It's not the infamous Rambo's Tacos featured in *Baked*, but it has a good vegetarian burrito. The schools have let out for the day and three Latino high schoolers are dragging a Pink Panther plushie down the street, its arms and legs dragging on the concrete. Mark smiles at this spectacle. "That's the thing I love about LA. Scenes for stories jump out at you everyday."

His next book, however, isn't a novel. Rather, it's his first non-fiction book; a chronicle of marijuana gardening entitled *Heart Of Dankness: Underground Botanists, Outlaw Farmers and the Race for the Cannabis Cup*. And wouldn't you know it, Broadway Books had the foresight to set the release date to 4/20/2012. He's leaving in a few days for Amsterdam to talk up DNA and the Green House Strain Hunters Franco and Arjan, amongst other personalities in the field, both big and small. Smith clarifies that this won't be a grow guide, but rather a glimpse into the personalities and philosophies of the growers who have shaped the terrain and modern genetics of marijuana. "All of them are trying to find pure genetics to make really interesting, diverse strains of cannabis, so we have more flavors. It's like Baskin-Robbins; if you could only get Kush and Haze, you'd be like, 'Well, what about the fudge?'" Smith poses. "The guys at DNA said something really interesting to me: 'Well, it's all strong. So now we're interested in flavors and effects and different kinds of highs.' He also plans to hit up some growers in NorCal, one of whom Smith will be trimming for this fall. In spite of the legal handicaps marijuana growers in California still suffer, Smith insists that domestic growers have a leg up on their European counterparts, "and it's all done totally below the radar."

Surprisingly enough, Smith never writes stoned, or even drunk. "Tea and coffee are the writer's best friends," he asserts as we head back to Shallot Terrace. Though he assures me he'll be blazing for tonight's installment of *American Idol*. So will plenty of others, but the question, of course, is whether those tokers might read a novel from time to time. While Smith can only guess, he shares with me, "What I discovered, after writing *Baked* and researching it and then working on my new book, is that everyone smokes cannabis. *Everybody*. People that I didn't think smoked, smoked. And so I hope so." 🍷