ULTIMATE CIGAR BOOK

4TH EDITION

RICHARD CARLETON HACKER

The ULTIMATE CIGAR BOOK

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Richard Carleton Hacker

Skyhorse Publishing

To my lovely and long-suffering wife, Joan, who has encouraged and nurtured the passion I have for cigars. Never once has she shown the slightest hint of jealousy.

"Gentlemen, you may smoke."

—King Edward VII

"If I cannot smoke in heaven, then I shall not go."

—Mark Twain

"I am sure there are many things better than a good cigar, but right now, I can't think of what they might be."

—Richard Carleton Hacker

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Unless credited otherwise, all photographs in this book were taken by the author.

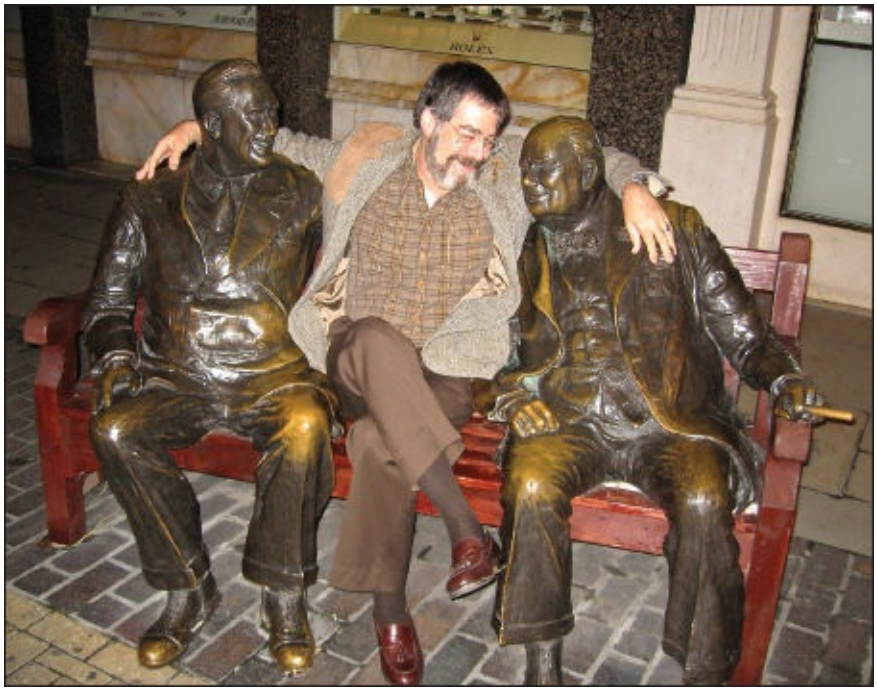
INTRODUCTION

I'd like to think that, like a good cigar-smoking friend, this book will become one of your most treasured companions. After all, just as it takes time to transform tobacco leaves into a cigar, it took years to bring these pages into reality. Originally the first edition of *The Ultimate Cigar Book* was to have premiered back in 1989, well before the now-legendary cigar boom of 1993–1997 burst upon the scene. But the stogie-chomping Old Guy was becoming passé, and in his place I saw newer, younger cigar smokers—both men and women, many of whom had never smoked cigarettes—firing up cigars in cocktail settings, using them not only as symbols of independence and success, but as a means of social interaction well before the advent of Facebook and Twitter.

Clearly, the world of the cigar smoker was changing, and as a writer and cigar devotee, I felt compelled to chronicle it. I had already begun my research, traveling to countries like the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Cuba (with US Treasury Department approval, of course), and interviewing cigar makers, visiting factories, and venturing into the tobacco fields.

But world events, sociological changes, and the number of "new breed" cigar brands that were starting to emerge at that time inspired me to delay publication of the first edition of this book until 1993. During that interlude, I revisited many of the cigar-making factories, re-interviewed many of the people I had already spoken with, and in essence, re-did all my research to try to make this the most complete book of its type. Five subsequent printings, a foreign language edition, greatly expanded second and third editions, and now this new, completely updated fourth edition have continued to carry the information contained within these pages to fellow cigar smokers the world over.

Counterfeit Cuban cigars, the dreaded *Lacioderma* beetle (and how to eradicate this tobacco-eating pest from your humidor), the hobby of collectable cigars, the emergence of women cigar smokers, the proliferation of smokeasies, plus cigar and spirits pairings are just a few of the many discoveries that await you within this new edition.



In London's Mayfair district, the author discusses the merits of a good cigar with Sir Winston Churchill, while Franklin D. Roosevelt, a cigarette smoker, looks on with interest. The life-sized bronze, entitled "Allies," was created by sculptor Lawrence Holofcener (www.holofcener.com) and is located where Old Bond Street and New Bond Street meet. It was commissioned by the merchants of Bond Street as a gift to the City of Westminster to commemorate a half-century of peace after World War II and was unveiled by Princess Margaret on May 2, 1995.

Of course, no book such as this can ever be completely up-to-date. New brands are emerging almost daily while others are fading away. Blends change, trends change, world situations change, and as a result, the cigar industry continuously evolves. So one can never presume to capture or know it all. Part of this challenge is that many of the original cigar-making families fled Cuba after Castro came into power, taking their precious records and memories with them. Consequently, today the history of the Cuban cigar is spread throughout the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Honduras, Spain and other parts of the world. Fortunately, I was able to recapture much of this material, thanks to many of the original Cuban cigar makers and their families.

Indeed, both cigar smoking and cigar making are people-oriented endeavors. Throughout the research and writing of this book, I have encountered individuals who, like the cigars they make, are of the finest quality, with a consistency that is always reliable. Most of them you will meet via their products, which are depicted throughout this book. (For even more information, please go to my website, richardcarletonhacker.com.) After all, just as it takes more than one leaf to make a cigar, so has it taken a number of people to help me make this

book a reality. But if I tried to list them all, it would seem like an Academy Awards producer's worst nightmare. Suffice to say, it is because of *people* that we have some of the finest cigars the world has ever known.

However, I must give special mention to a very special woman, for I am forever grateful for the editorial support and unwavering faith and devotion of my wife Joan, who, upon smelling the aroma of my hastily extinguished cigar on our first date (in what seems like not-so-many years ago but which has now spanned more than a few decades), nonchalantly said, "Your car smells just like our living room at home." That's when I made the pleasant discovery that her dad was a cigar smoker too.

Although today traveling to cigar-making countries is as easy as hopping a plane, it is my hope that, through this book, you are able to share some of my adventures and discoveries with me. So pull up an ashtray, fire up a favorite cigar, and join me as we travel the smoke-filled pages ahead.

Richard Carleton Hacker

CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING …

October 12, 1492. We all know the date. At least, every student in America does. It's been branded into their brains ever since grade school. They even made a couple of movies about it. That was when Christopher Columbus miscalculated by half a hemisphere and accidentally discovered the Americas. But what they don't tell you in school is that seventeen days later, on October 29, Chris and his flotilla of three sailed into the protected waters of Cuba's Bahía de Gibara. Not knowing just what to expect, he sent two sailors ashore: Rodrigo de Jerez and Luis de Torres. It was here—and not on the Bahamian island of San Salvador as has been so often and erroneously chronicled—that the two Spanish conquistadors discovered native men and women smoking what may very probably have been the New World's first version of the cigar. And they were Havanas! Of course, they were not the cigars that we know today; these were made of raw, twisted leaves of uncured tobacco. Dried cornhusks were used for wrappers, and it is safe to surmise that they weren't shade grown. Estimated ring size was as big as your arm. It was recorded that Rodrigo actually took a puff or two, thus becoming the first European cigar smoker in history.

Eight days later, on Tuesday, November 6, fall guys Rodrigo and Luis were again put ashore, this time on the island of San Salvador, and again they found the local natives, who had by now been labeled "Indians" by the unknowing Columbus, smoking the same crudely made cigars.

Columbus took this information, along with some tobacco leaves, back with him to Spain, where Rodrigo de Jerez decided to show off by smoking this unusual weed in public, just as he had done in Cuba. Rod paid a high price for lighting up in an historic no-smoking area. He was tossed in the slammer for three years. Yes, even back then, what has come to be the most gentlemanly of pastimes was being persecuted by anti-smoking factions. Or in this case, the Spanish Inquisition.

But Rodrigo's suffering was not in vain, for soon cigar smoking became the *nouveau culture* of Spanish society. A short time later, this New World custom was taken up in Portugal. However, because of the cost of tobacco, it was

reserved for the upper classes and trendsetting people of style, an image that has remained with the handrolled cigar to this very day. For whatever reasons, the Spanish decided to keep their discovery of tobacco for themselves, and cigars were seldom seen beyond their borders for the next three hundred years.

An early nineteenth century European "cigar boutique."

Nonetheless, by the eighteenth century the making of cigars had become big business in Spain, and in 1731 the "Royal Manufacturers of Seville" was established to organize this growing industry.

With the help of Dutch traders, by 1750 the cigar eventually made its way to Holland and then to Russia. There, Empress Catherine II had her cigars decorated with delicate silk bands so that her royal fingers would not become stained while she smoked. This simple yet ingenious device would subsequently inspire the cigar bands that we know today.

A gentleman's accessory from the nineteenth century: when the knobs are turned the doors swing out, each holding a cigar.

But it took a British naval officer, Colonel Israel Putnam, to bring cigar tobacco to America. In 1762, upon returning to the Colonies after King George III's war with Cuba, "Old Put" (as he was later called during the American Revolution) brought back three "donkey loads" of Havana cigars. Of course, the rebellious Americans were already enthralled with their own native tobacco, which was being smoked in pipes. Cigar smoking would remain largely ignored in the new republic until the early nineteenth century, and would not come into its own until the 1850s.

Although the British occupied Cuba for one year—1763—that short time frame was sufficient enough to open the door to Europe and let in the sweet, earthy aroma of Havana tobacco.

It was a taste and sensation that few people on the Continent, other than the Spaniards and the Dutch, had ever experienced before. The lure of this pungent perfume was further intensified in 1803, when France invaded Spain and Napoleon's soldiers discovered Cuban cigars firsthand. Of course, this was not the first encounter the French had with Havanas. In 1793, while fighting the British, Antoine Depierre commandeered a Dutch merchant vessel en route from Havana and brought it into port. On board were—you guessed it—cigars. They became an instant hit with anyone who was fortunate enough to obtain one. Recognizing a good thing when they saw it, France eventually created a

government tobacco monopoly in 1811, but did not start making cigars until 1816, after their war with Britain. After all, they did not want *their* cigars being unwillingly towed into some foreign port.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, cigar making had spread to Italy and Switzerland. And finally, in 1810, the first cigar factory was started in America. Of course, this was still the era of the clay pipe and snuff, the latter of which—being a finely powdered form of tobacco that was inhaled through the nose—was garnishing most of the best grades of Cuban leaf. Although the cigar was a much more convenient way to "take tobacco," it took a while for it to become socially acceptable. But through the gilded elegance that was to become the Victorian Age, the cigar gradually assumed an aura of prominence and respectability. In 1823, only fifteen thousand cigars were imported to all of Britain. By 1840, that number had jumped to thirteen million. Clearly, cigar smoking was on the rise. And because a cigar was much more expensive than a bowl of pipe tobacco, it was also becoming the symbol of elegance and wealth, a literal smoke signal that you were among the more successful inhabitants of the civilized world.

By 1845 tobacco had replaced coffee as Cuba's principle export, and many of the small tobacco farms that had been started by Spanish colonists were being annexed and combined into large plantations. In 1855 alone 360 million Havana cigars were exported. As Cuba's prosperity continued to climb with the ever-growing fame of Havana tobacco, Spain began to fear that she might lose her "New American" province. And indeed she might. During the early 1850s there had already been a movement afoot in the US to annex Cuba (I'd like to think propagated by a group of governmental cigar smokers), and in 1854, President Franklin Pierce actually tried to buy Cuba from Spain. Had he been successful, our nation's 14th President might have been better remembered, at least by American cigar smokers if not by historians.

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, cigar bands came into their own, and many of the bands that we see on today's legendary Cuban brands, such as Punch, Partagás and Romeo y Julieta, remain largely unchanged today from those embryonic years, although some of their American counterparts, such as Romeo y Julieta, have taken a decidedly modern twist, while some newcomers, like Flor de las Antillas, which was introduced in 2012, have a retro-look that makes it appear the cigar has been around since the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless, it soon became fashionable for wealthy smokers of the nineteenth century to have their portraits put on their cigar bands, an affectation

the cigar makers of Cuba, America, and Europe were only too happy to oblige. But it didn't stop there; non-Cuban manufacturers began taking liberties with some of the better-known Havana labels as well. These early forms of counterfeits became so prominent that in 1870 the Havana Cigar Brands Association was formed in order to protect the names of Cuban-made smokes.

From the collection of the original Austria Tabak Museum in Vienna, this salesman's sample case enabled tobacconist customers to order cigars by simply pointing to a shape, rather than leafing through pages in a catalog.

A worldwide recession in the late nineteenth century caused many European countries to start developing their own cigar industries, a revenue-producing move that effectively began reducing the number of Cuban cigars being imported to these nations. Nonetheless, by 1873 France was selling one billion cigars a year, of which ten million were imported.

By this time, England had become *the* market for Havana cigars. Consequently, the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw new shapes evolve, inspired in part by some of Britain's most prominent smokers. For example, during the 1880s, London financier Leopold de Rothschild instructed the famous Hoyo de Monterrey factory in Havana to make a short cigar with a large ring size so that he could enjoy the richest flavor possible without having to take the time to smoke a full-length cigar. As an aside, when the first Honduran-made cigars were brought into the United States after the Cuban embargo, it was Hoyo de Monterrey that reintroduced American smokers to the famous Rothschild shape. Today, the classic Rothschild (4½x52)

is still being made, not only by the same Hoyo de Monterrey brand that originated it, but by countless other cigar companies as well, many of whom have sought to honor this century-plus old shape by giving it new names, such as Robustos (Davidoff), Romanos (Dunhill), Pluton (Pléiades) and Consul (Joya de Nicaragua). In fact, the robusto, which has evolved into a 5x50, has become one of today's most popular shapes, and for the very reason Rothschild originally had it created—it packs a lot of power in a relatively small package.

British-inspired shapes continued into the twentieth century, when the Earl of Lonsdale commissioned Havana's Rafael Gonzales factory to create a special shape exclusively for him, with the Earl's portrait placed prominently on the inside label of the opened box. For a while, the new Rafael Gonzales Lonsdales were the most expensive cigars to come out of Cuba. Today, the elegant Lonsdale still remains a popular shape among cigar smokers, whether they are titled or not. And the Earl is immortalized by still having his photo and signature on the inside of every Rafael Gonzales lid.

Meanwhile, cigar making was gaining momentum in America, and aficionados like US Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant and humor writer Mark Twain were helping to focus attention on both the Cuban-and the American-made products. One-man cigar-making rooms and larger multilevel factories began springing up in almost every state in America. Many of these factories were built on an East-West line, so that the leaf graders and cigar rollers would always have northern light, just like an artist's studio. But many early American cigars were not always works of art. It wasn't until after 1875 that ongoing experimentations with improved strains of filler leaf began to give US cigars a taste and a character of their own. Soon, the best US tobaccos were coming from Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, Florida, and, of course, Connecticut.

With better tobaccos, American cigar making began to take on new momentum, aided by a steady flow of skilled immigrants from Cuba and Europe who had worked in cigar factories in their homelands. Seeking a new life in the New World, they were also helping to solidify a new American industry. Spain, now fearful of losing Cuba to American imperialism, unwittingly furthered the cause by creating a stranglehold of taxation, which resulted in the Cuban Revolution of 1895–1898, to free itself from Spanish rule. So intense were the atrocities committed by Spanish soldiers, thousands of Cubans fled their homeland *en masse* and sailed for the nearest shore, America. Or more specifically, Key West and Tampa, Florida, which soon became known as "Little Havana."

Meanwhile, over in Europe, Otto von Bismarck's controversial plans for German unification caused many skilled printers to flee the Fatherland and head for America in the latter part of the nineteenth century, where they brought their unparalleled skills of chromolithography, a technique that virtually revolutionized the cigar label business by permitting as many as thirty different colors to be printed on a single sheet (today, these early labels are highly collectable). Soon America's cigar-making centers were concentrated in New York and Florida, the two main entry ports of immigration. As a result, not counting the dry Dutch-type cigars of Europe, Cuba and America had become the main sources for humidified hand rolled cigars during this time period.

By 1890, "Made in Tampa" had become a tremendous selling point for any US cigar, as it was naturally assumed that only the most skilled Cuban workers were making cigars there. A Tampa-made cigar was almost the same as saying a Havana cigar. In fact, most American cigars were made with Havana tobacco, either used as filler with American wrapper and binder, or made with 100 percent imported Cuban leaf for wrapper, binder and filler, in what came to be called a "clear" (or totally Cuban leaf) Havana cigar.

A popular cigar-making subdivision of Tampa was Ybor City, which was started in 1885 by Vincente Martínez Ybor, a "free Cuba" sympathizer who was forced to flee to Florida during his country's revolution. By 1898, there were over 500 cigar factories in the Tampa, Ybor City, and Key West areas, and another 7,000 factories in the rest of the country. Indeed, America had become a cigar-making/smoking nation! At one point, the annual sale of cigars was used as an indicator of the country's economic condition: on October 9, 1899, a New York newspaper stated that "the rise in the sale of stogies, being a workingman's smoke," was proof that the economic depression of 1880–90 was over. As for Cuba, even the four-month long Spanish–American War of 1898 did not noticeably affect sales; although exportation of Havana cigars dipped by 25 percent, enough had been stockpiled during the embargo (yes, this was the *first* Cuban embargo) so that smokers did not even notice a shortage. However, the embargo of 1898 did force American cigar makers—who by now were buying practically all of the leaf and cigars that Havana was exporting—to start seriously considering another type of tobacco for their wrappers.

Often mistaken for pipes, these Victorian cheroot holders were extremely popular during the late 1800s. The cheroot holder on the right was specially made for Colt's Patent Firearms Company and is dated 1877.

A wooden Henry Clay cigar cabinet from the Nineteenth century. Each cedar book slid out of the cabinet and opened to reveal an assortment of sizes.

Thus, the excellent quality of our homegrown Connecticut broadleaf finally came into its own.

During this time a good American-made cigar, using Havana leaf, cost five cents apiece, while an imported Havana cigar would set you back ten to fifteen cents each, depending on the brand and size. On the other hand, you could still pick up a stogie for a penny. Of course, supply and demand had a big effect on

costs, and during the Alaskan gold rush of 1898 a tobacco-starved man in Dawson paid $750 for a box of cigars that very likely were not the best.

By the early twentieth century, the cigar store Indian had become a familiar figure in America. This one was photographed circa 1907 in New York City. Many were destroyed for scrap during World War I.

Photo: Herb Peck, Jr.

As it has done since its inception, the cigar was having its effect upon society. During the Victorian era it was generally considered impolite to smoke in public, and especially in front of women. In fact, in 1880, Boston passed a law prohibiting anyone from carrying a lit "seegar" on the city streets. Of course, this was not the first anti-smoking law, and it certainly would not be the last. Hence, the smoking room came into being, and it soon became a much-coveted ritual for the men to retire after dinner and partake of a good Havana and a glass of port while the ladies were left to their own endeavors.

Although cigar smoking was immensely popular during Victorian times, it was publicly kept in the shadows, largely due to Queen Victoria's adamant disapproval with anything even remotely connected with tobacco. Thus, it was literally an enlightened world when her son, King Edward VII, uttered these now famous words in 1901, after his coronation: "Gentlemen, you may smoke." Small wonder that King Edward is still one of the most popular cigars in England, as

the sense of history so prevalent in that country will not let them forget the sovereign who publicly lit the smoking lamp. But that gratitude was not confined to England alone; by 1940, King Edward was the number one selling cigar in the world.

Another immortal quote was made on American shores in January 1920, when Thomas Riley Marshall, Woodrow Wilson's witty Vice President, grew tired of listening to an oratory in the Senate about what America needed. "What this country needs," Marshall told the Senators, "is a really good five cent cigar." It is perhaps the plague of vice presidents throughout our country's history that they are often ignored. Consequently, although many people have quoted this line, few knew where it came from. Now you do.

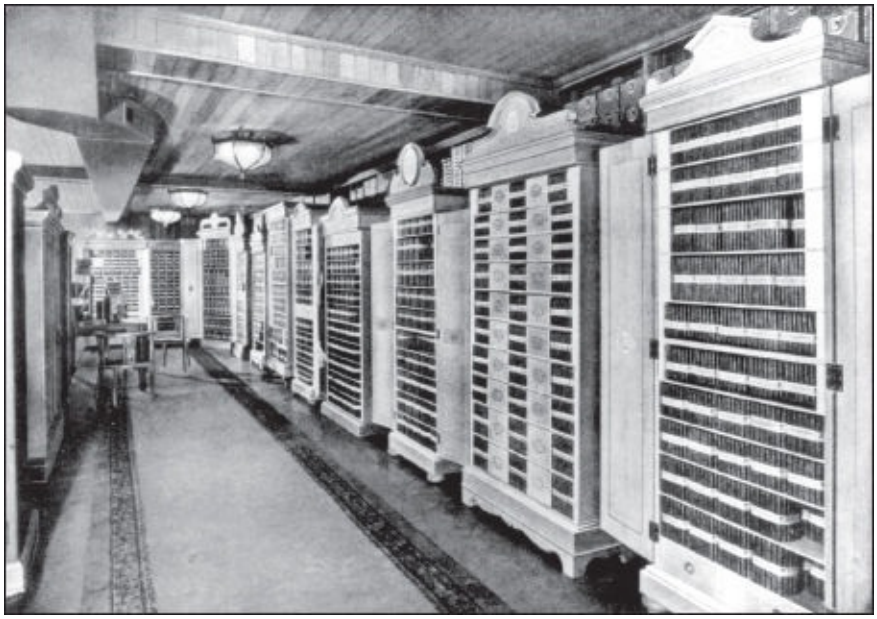
An ardent cigar smoker, Edward, Prince of Wales (shown here in an 1875 photo), achieved everlasting fame upon his succession to the throne in 1901 by uttering his famous phrase, "Gentlemen, you may smoke."

Photo: Swisher International

Vice President Marshall got his wish; by 1921, five cents bought a quart of milk, a cold beer, or a good cigar. Unfortunately, the necessity of keeping cigars humidified was not universally recognized, and part of the reason Tampa cigars were so popular (in addition to their tobacco and construction) was the fact that Florida's humid climate kept them fresher than cigars made and shipped from inland locations. Tobacconists normally kept their cigars out in the open, in glass

display cases so that customers could see the variety of brands and shapes that were stocked. Later, when electricity became widespread, sealed boxes were kept in a humidified storeroom, but single cigars were still sold "out front" from the cases. Back then, a good box of cigars cost anywhere from five to ten dollars.

Mass produced nostalgia — King Edward, Optimo, and Marsh Wheeling. Although the boxes have changed very little since their inception, the cigars inside have all given way to machine manufacture and the use of homogenized leaf. King Edward remains the most popular cigar in England, Marsh Wheeling is the oldest in America, having started in 1840, and at one time Optimo was all-Havana.



The magnificent, Havana-filled maturing room at Dunhill's in London, circa 1928.

Photo: Alfred Dunhill, Ltd.

One of the first companies to recognize the need for humidification and the importance of aging cigars was Alfred Dunhill of London, who opened his Duke Street store in 1907.

After arriving in England from Havana, most of the Dunhill cigars were aged in special cedar-lined "holding rooms" for a minimum of ten months before they were permitted to be sold to a customer. Later, in 1920, Dunhill began offering their cigars in hermetically sealed tins, which their catalog claimed was perfect for preserving the freshness of cigars for "… the Traveler, the Yachtsman or the Smoker resident abroad… ." Dunhill also maintained "customer gift cabinets," containing anywhere from 500 to 3,000 Havana cigars. Those were the days when, if you got a gift like that, you knew who your friends were.

British resolve was never more evident than on April 17, 1941, when Aflred Dunhill manned the "customer service" desk the day after his famous shop at 30 Duke Street was leveled in The Blitz. Although much of London lay in rubble, you could still buy cigars at Dunhill's.

Photo: Alfred Dunhill, Ltd.

World War I seriously impeded (but never stopped completely) the flow of Havanas to Europe. But America had a self-contained industry, as tobacco was grown and cigars were made right within our own country. However, after Armistice was declared in 1918, the cigar world was dealt a far more devastating blow by the growing popularity of cigarettes. Cigar sales began to decline in the 1920s as more and more people turned to the less expensive, mass-produced cigarette. Clearly, something had to be done to lower prices, increase production, and win back customers. Taking a clue from the cigarette factories, mechanization seemed to be the answer, and by the 1930s, the cigar-making machine was being adopted by many companies.

Some firms, such as Cuesta-Rey and Swisher, were pioneers in this endeavor and began producing machine-made cigars much earlier. (As an aside, the original cigar-making machine was invented by Oscar Hammerstein, grandfather of the famed lyricist of that same name.) The machine-made cigar was not an American phenomenon, however, for this technique was also being used in Europe. Quality did not suffer, for these were all-tobacco cigars, many of them still being made with Havana leaf. And production was increased; by the end of the 1920s, Jno. H. Swisher & Son, one of the largest cigar companies in the world, was turning out one hundred million cigars a year.

Tobacco was still relatively inexpensive, and with the new mechanized mass production in place, the price of cigars dropped just in time for the Great Depression in 1929. Cigars could now be purchased three for a nickel and boxes were being made out of cardboard instead of wood. Suddenly almost everyone could afford at least one cigar a week, and the golden image of the elegant, sophisticated cigar smoker quickly tarnished and faded, as it became a smoke for the everyday working man. Only the expensively handmade Havana still retained its attraction for the connoisseur.

Cigars were a favorite treat to send to U.S. troops during World War II. Here, a group of GIs in the jungles of the South Pacific gather around a freshly opened box of King Edward cigars.

Photo: Swisher International

But even the Havana cigar was not immune to the ravages of World War II. Cuba suddenly found itself unable to sell cigars to England, one of its biggest

markets, because of a freeze on the US dollar (Cuba's medium of exchange at the time) by Great Britain. England, desperate for cigars, shifted its attention to Jamaica, a crown colony in the Caribbean. That meant the British pound sterling was legal tender. Although expensive, Jamaicans were the only full-sized cigars England could get. Otherwise they were limited to the small Dutch-type cigars made with tobaccos from Burma, India, and Brazil, or a scattering of homegrown brands such as Carvallo, Manikin, and King Six, produced by the few cigar-making companies in England.

But the British have always been known as great cigar smokers, not cigar makers. The course was clear. Jamaican cigars soon came into vogue in Great Britain, not only during the war years, but afterward as well. In fact, it wasn't until 1953 that England finally began importing Havana cigars again. Of course, this was the best thing that could have happened to the Jamaican cigar industry, which had been started by some entrepreneurial Cubans in the 1850s but had been languishing until then. Suddenly, brands like Temple Hall, El Caribe, and Flor del Duque were in the smoker's spotlight. In addition, a group of cigar makers from Cuba opened up new factories of their own in Jamaica (using Jamaican leaf for the filler and binder but importing real Havana for the wrapper), and kept them in operation until Fidel Castro forced them to get rid of their holdings after the revolution. Of all the original Cuban brands made in Jamaica during the war years, the only one still being made today is Macanudo, only now it is a Dominican Republic product, even though in 2014 a limited run of Macanudo Estate Reserve cigars was produced using newly-purchased Jamaican tobacco in the filler blend.

After World War II, things began to change, not only for the world at large, but also for the world of cigars. Even after the importation of Havanas was resumed, many British smokers continued to appreciate the flavor of good Jamaican tobacco. In postwar America, the first cigar price rise occurred; they went up to ten cents, and then twenty-five cents apiece. The increased use of high-speed machinery was tearing the delicate wrappers on some cigars, and homogenized tobacco leaf (HTL) began to be used on American-made cigars (even those still using Havana tobaccos), initially just for binders, but eventually for wrappers as well. By the 1950s the totally machine-made, mass-produced cigar had been created. Even Cuba, anxious to be competitive with the sudden appearance of these low cost products, began producing machine-made cigars of her own. This dramatic change in manufacturing literally cut the price of a Havana in half, and the smoker who agonized over buying a handmade Cuban

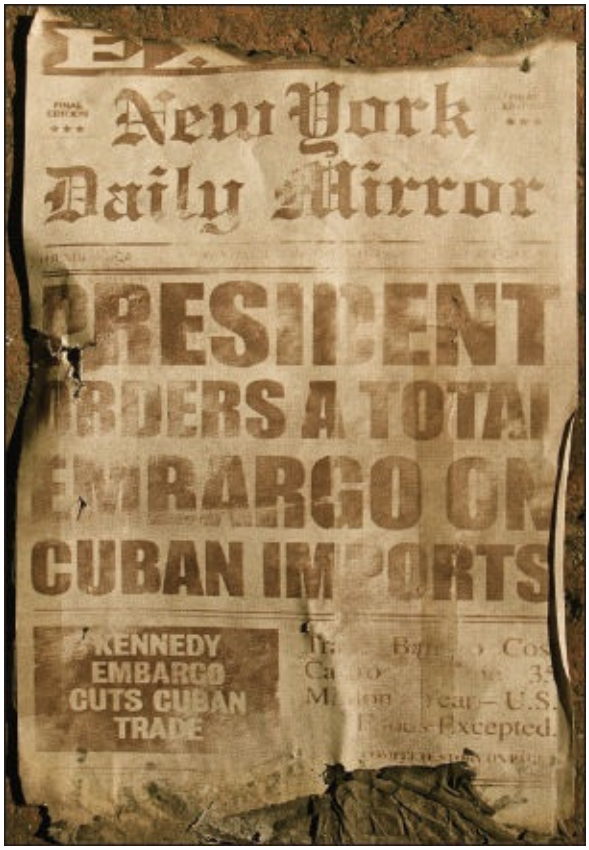
cigar for seventy-five cents now found that he could buy a machine-made Havana for half that price. The average man could finally afford a Havana.

This, more than anything else, is what made the Havana cigar popular in America.

Unfortunately, the American smoker's love affair with Cuban cigars was to be short-lived. The Cuban revolution started on July 26, 1953. Six years later, Fidel Castro came into power. Those who knew of his Communistic leanings foresaw trouble. But others did not. After all, America had supported Castro's overthrow of the Fulgencio Batista regime. And Havana tobacco was an integral, one hundred-year-old tradition in US cigar making. For many, it was unthinkable that there should be any rift in American-Cuban relations. Still, those who read the newspapers knew that President Eisenhower was demanding an embargo. But it took President John F. Kennedy to pull it off.

By 1946, Winston Churchill had become one of the most visible cigar smokers in the world. With cigar in hand, he looks as if he is about to pause and inspect the boxes of "Churchills" being offered.

Photo: Churchill Cigars, Switzerland

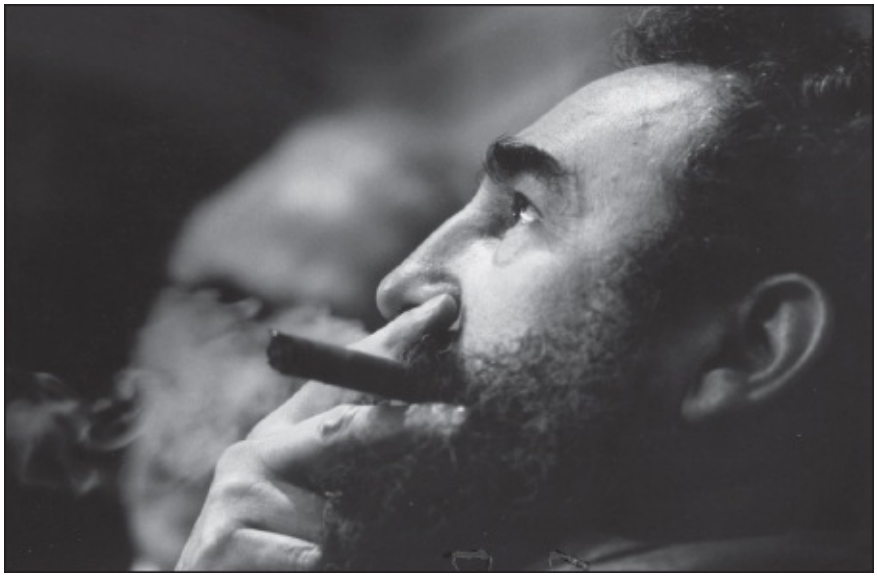


News clipping courtesy of Berger & Argenti Cigars.

In 1962, President Kennedy declared an embargo (which the Cubans continue to refer to as a blockade) on all imported Cuban goods. But twelve hours before he made that world famous announcement, he gave his press secretary Pierre Salinger orders to purchase one thousand H. Upmann Petit Coronas. Salinger went over and above the call of duty by actually rounding up twelve hundred of the small Cuban cigars for the chief executive.

The embargo caught many cigar makers and cigar smokers off guard. Havana tobacco, always inexpensive, suddenly soared in price. Prior to the embargo, Cuban-grown tobacco sold for $150 a bale. By the end of 1962, the price had shot up to over $1,000 a bale, when one could be found for sale. Panetela panic set in. Smokers snatched up what remaining stocks of Cuban cigars they could find. But some companies had planned ahead, and had stockpiled huge stores of Cuban leaf. As a result, for many years after the embargo it was still possible to purchase cigars made with Cuban tobacco. As late as 1971, I can remember buying Honduran Hoyo de Monterrey cigars that were still being made with pre-embargo Havana filler. This helped many companies survive the immediate post-embargo shock and gave them time to rethink their roles in the new era of

the non-Havana cigar.



By 1977, when this photo was taken, Fidel Castro was feeling the effects of the American embargo, a political act that has dramatically changed the cigar industry today.

Photo: David Hume Kennerly

And although the embargo destroyed a great many brands, it also helped build others. Bances suddenly became one of the most popular cigars in the country because, although it was made in Tampa, it was an all-Havana cigar, thanks to pre-embargo stockpiling by the company. In fact, up until the 1990s, Martinez y Cia Havana Blend cigars were still being made with short-filler Cuban tobacco from 1959; originally the filler was 100 percent Havana, but with ever dwindling supplies, it eventually dropped to 20 percent. Nonetheless, this modest brand remained one of the last Havana-filled cigars that could still be legally purchased in America.

But even back in 1962 everyone knew that what little stockpiled Havana tobacco there was among a few companies was not going to last forever. And an all-tobacco, long filler cigar that was made in America by hand would be much too expensive to produce. The low-wage, handcrafted days of the nineteenth century were long over. Cigar companies had to frantically search elsewhere. The same problem confronted many of the Cuban cigar-making families who were fleeing their homeland in the wake of Castro's socialized takeover of their properties and their industries. With Cuba closed off to the American market—previously the biggest customer for both leaf and cigars—where could the cigar makers go?

The Spanish provinces of the Canary Islands, rising out of the Atlantic Ocean off the northwest coast of Africa, suddenly became the immediate Mecca that many sought. Of course, there was no cigar tobacco grown there, but that didn't matter; tobacco could be shipped over from plantations already established in Jamaica, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic. More important was the fact that, since the seventeenth century, the people on the Canaries had been making cigars for Spain. The factories were already in place. The expertise was there. And the workers spoke Spanish, so communications with the Cubans would be no problem. Thus, with the appearance of Montecruz, Don Diego, Don Marcos and later, the first non-Havana H. Upmann, the saga of the Canary Islands cigar, handmade on a rocky island that had to import its tobacco, was born.

Cigar makers were also casting renewed and amorous glances across the waters towards Jamaica, which had the same lure of skilled workers and preexisting factories, but with the added charm that this country grew its own tobacco. In fact, it was Jamaica, with its ever-popular Macanudo, that eventually helped start the cigar maker's exodus away from the Canary Islands.

Other areas in the Caribbean were being courted as well. The Dominican Republic was especially alluring. The ancient Taino Indians of this vast tropical island had been growing and smoking tobacco since B.C. (Before Columbus). Local cigars had been manufactured since 1902. And more recently, a thriving cigar-making industry had flourished in the village of Moca from 1930 until 1960. Many of the original workers from Cuba, as well as Central and South America, were still there. Many more had relocated to the nearby city of Santiago. But of even greater significance was the fact that the verdant Cibao Valley, bisected by the waters of the Rio del Yaqui del Norte, harbored some of the most fertile and productive soil for tobacco farming than any other area in the vicinity, with the possible exception of Cuba. In fact, the unmistakable quality of Dominican-grown tobacco was already finding favor and flavor in many of the Canary Islands cigars. The only problem was, the Dominican Republic, like so many of its Caribbean cousins, had a penchant for revolutions. With a charter membership in the Dictator of the Month club, it would be a problem trying to establish a new industry when the government itself was not established. Nonetheless, the modern day Dominican cigar started to become a reality by 1972. Today, with a democratically inclined government now in place, the Dominican Republic has become the world's leading producer of premium cigars, exporting more than eighty million handmade cigars a year (most of which go to the United States), and another eight million machine-made cigars.

With the rebirth of the cigar industry in the DR, coupled with the unfortunate timing of Spain pulling back on subsidies for tobacco products made on the Canary Islands, many cigar manufacturers began moving their operations to the Dominican Republic. But the Dominican Republic wasn't the only gold nugget in the cigar industry's newly discovered Mother Lode. Off to the west, and in the same tropical temperate zone, lay Honduras. Like the Dominican Republic, Honduras had its share of political unrest. But it also had a unique quality of soil, an attribute that was apparent to tobacco growing experts who visited the mountainous jungles as early as 1960, when the possibilities of a Cuban revolution and a subsequent embargo were first being discussed. Consequently, by 1962 pioneers such as tobacco expert Angel Olivas and the late cigar maker Frank Llaneza were combining their talents to produce cigars in Honduras, assisted by experienced expatriate Cubans eager to resume their trade.

But for many years, the development of Honduran cigars was hobbled by a nationalistic law that forbade the use of anything other than Honduran tobacco. Fortunately, this shackle was cut in the mid-1970s. Thus, the full potential of the Honduran cigar was realized with the discovery that tobaccos from other parts of the world could grow, and grow well, in Honduran soil. The new rules also permitted tobaccos from other countries to be imported and used in the cigar-making process. A new government, realizing the importance of this burgeoning industry and receptive to the marketplace, established a free zone similar to ones that had previously been set up in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, enabling cigars to be made for exportation without the hindrance of heavy taxation. The result is that today Honduran cigars can compete in quality and price with any cigar in the world. Moreover, they have their own distinctively rich taste that has made them the second most popular cigar in America, with more than fifty-three million being exported annually, of which over thirty-five million are high-grade premiums for the US market.

For many cigar makers and cigar smokers, the tobaccos of Nicaragua are very much akin to those of Cuba.

On a lesser scale, but equally impressive in the excellence of its tobacco, Nicaragua now produces some of the best cigars in the world. Specifically, the soil that straddles the borders of Nicaragua and Honduras is as close to the rich red earth of Cuba's Vuelta Abajo as anyone has seen. Unfortunately, political problems had been getting in the way of cigar progress. The 1979 revolution did not help much either, nor did the US embargo of 1985–1990. And in spite of a new government and attempts at trying to heal decades-old wounds, the recovery process in Nicaragua is slow but has recently been given emphasis by America's growing penchant for Nicaraguan tobaccos, due, in no small part, to its affinity with Cuban tobacco.

This is Concepción, which at 5,282 feet above sea level, is still a very much active volcano that looms over the tobacco fields of Ometepe, with huge white clouds of thick steam perpetually cloaking the crater.

With pioneering cigars like Joya de Nicaragua in 1965 and cigar making families like Padrón and Plasencia to help show the way, numerous factories have been opened up since then to satisfy a growing demand that is making cigar history with first-time all-Nicaraguan brands like Davidoff, Montecristo, and Cohiba, all of which clearly demonstrated the excellence that this country is capable of producing.

Up until the mid-1970s, most of the cigars being made in these "newly discovered" countries by Cuban exiles were purposely given new names, since it was assumed that when the cigar makers left Cuba, they forfeited the use of their original Havana brands, which were now being made by the Castro regime. But in 1975, in a landmark case involving ownership of the H. Upmann name, the US courts ruled that many of the cigar-making families and former owners of the Havana factories still retained the US rights to the brand names they had either inherited or purchased prior to Castro's takeover. From that moment on, we began to see a reemergence of what was then called the "exile brands"—famous-name cigars that are still being made in Havana, but are now being made in other countries as well.

This is Ometepe tobacco leaf. It is oily, elastic, and retains moisture extremely well. I was able to take a fresh cut leaf from the field and fold it over six times without breaking it. It is used to bring a rich sweetness to filler blends and only grows on one Nicaraguan volcanic island.

I took this photo on the island to show the first two cigars to use Ometepe tobaccos. Now, of course, it is seen much more frequently.

Which is why today we have both Cuban and Dominican versions of Romeo y Julieta, H. Upmann, and Partagas, for example, and Cuban-Honduran pairings of famous name brands like Hoyo de Monterrey, El Rey del Mundo, and Punch. This dilemma is made substantially less confusing for consumers by the fact that no competing "exile brands" are allowed to be sold alongside Cubatabaco's products. In Switzerland, for example, you will not see a Cuban Por Larrañaga and a Dominican Por Larrañaga being sold side by side. The Dominican/Honduran brand would never be permitted into that country. However, the Dominican/Honduran brand could simply change its name while keeping the same filler-binder-wrapper blend. Thus, while the Honduran Punch cigar cannot be sold alongside the Havana brand with that same name, the Honduran-made San Pedro Sula is the exact same cigar with just a different

name. Hence, it now qualifies for European sales and is one of the top non-Havana cigars currently being sold in Germany.

Of course, this dual-nationality of identical cigar brands is entirely academic for American smokers, as entire generations have now grown up never having seen or smoked a Havana cigar. But many Europeans, especially those who travel to the US and have access to both Havana and non-Havana versions of the same brand, sometimes find the situation confusing and have to be careful in what they buy. Just glancing at the label isn't always enough, as identical or at least similar artwork is often used by both the non-Havana factories and Cubatabaco on boxes and bands. Only special stampings on the box (as we shall discuss in Chapter 4), the word "Habano," and of course, the price (non-Havana cigars are usually less expensive than Havanas) can properly identify which cigar is from what country without actually lighting one up and tasting the difference. But even taste is not the ultimate test, for many of today's finest Dominican and Honduran cigars often equal or surpass some of the present-day Cuban products, although each country has its own flavor characteristics.

Unfortunately, during the 1970s the quality of some Dominican and Canary Islands cigars began to suffer as factories relocated to different countries, and problems with workers and poor harvests manifested themselves on tobacconists' shelves. Moreover, a number of Third World companies would occasionally make a limited run of cigars, give it a Spanish-sounding name, and sell it to an anxious importer in the United States. The problem was, if you liked that cigar, you might never find it again. Although this situation still occurs, today's experienced cigar smoker is usually much more knowledgeable and selective in choosing a brand that has staying power.

By the 1980s cigar smoking had dipped from its heyday in 1964 when the Surgeon General's Report first told people it was healthier to light up a Corona than a cigarette. In that year alone, cigar sales jumped from 7.2 billion to nine billion "sticks," as they are often called in the industry. But other notable things —besides the embargo and a favorable health report for cigars—were happening in that fateful decade. In the late 1960s Dunhill had reintroduced their own brand of Havanas for the European market, and that *grand maître* of sophisticated smoking, Zino Davidoff, had been granted permission by Cubatabaco to start his own brand of exclusive Havanas. But by the end of the 1980s, the romance with Cuba was over for both companies. It all began in 1989, when Cubatabaco abruptly canceled its contracts with every exporting firm with which it did business. New rules were suddenly imposed, whereby Cubatabaco

insisted on a 51 percent ownership with anyone who imported their cigars. With the cost of Havanas rising almost yearly, it was felt that Cuba was not getting its fair share of the market price. In addition, Cuba was adopting a new policy of no longer making other people's cigars. With farmland at a premium, they wanted to preserve their limited supply of precious tobacco for their own brands.

Dunhill responded by amicably phasing out their line of Havanas, and concentrating solely on their newly introduced aged Dominicans for the world market. The Davidoff organization was a little more dramatic. On Wednesday, August 23, 1989, headlines in newspapers around the globe screamed that Davidoff, long a champion of Havana's finest, had just voluntarily burned 130,000 of its Cuban cigars—roughly three million dollars' worth. A lack of quality was the reason given. The cigars were no longer fit to bear the Davidoff band, it was ascertained. Thus emerged a new line of Davidoff Dominicans and Zino Hondurans, which freed up even more precious Havana leaf for Cubatabaco. Still, both Davidoff and Dunhill retained huge pre-1989 inventories of their Cuban cigars. When visiting the Davidoff warehouses in Basil, Switzerland, in 1989, I mentally inventoried what I estimated to be a three-year supply. When meeting with Cubatabaco in 1992, I learned that, even though there were still a few Davidoff Havanas left on the island, by contractual agreement none could be sold after December 31, 1992.

Aside from the dissolution of these two famous Cuban brands, which did much to draw the cigar connoisseur's attention to the excellence of the Dominican product, the 1980s were noticeable for one other questionable hallmark in the annals of cigar smoking. After almost five centuries, "health warnings" were finally mandated in America for cigars. George Burns, who outlived the doctor who told him to give up his El Productos, must have laughed. And so must have the spirits of other long time cigar smokers like Don Arturo Fuente, founder of the company that bears his name, who smoked twenty-five cigars a day and lived to be eighty-five years old. Oh yes, one more thing happened in the 1980s: Castro stopped smoking, which no doubt freed up even more Havana tobacco for the sixty million cigars Cuba was then exporting annually.

The 1990s were not kind to Cuba. The collapse of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991 left the island, never truly prosperous in recent times, in economic chaos. Today, everything is rationed, including food, clothing, and gasoline. And while there are ration coupons, there are no goods to exchange them for. Vegetables are available at the agromarket, but they carry a premium

price due to their scarcity. Beef is a government-controlled monopoly. Moreover, the last time I was there, Cubans were permitted only one roll of toilet paper a month, and one box of matches. And one small cigar, a subspecies of Havana that is loosely rolled and harsh tasting, hardly fit for smoking, let alone exportation.

Ironically, some people in Cuba are actually able to save money because there is nothing to spend it on. Naturally, a thriving black market exists for all the necessities of life, including cigars. Once, while walking the streets of Havana, I was stopped by a young boy on a bicycle who offered me a box of Bolivars at a fantastically reduced price. Of course, I had no way of ascertaining that these really were Bolivars, and not some left-over leaf cuttings that someone had stolen from the floor of the cigar factory's warehouse and then rolled in a back room by candlelight. But the most interesting thing about this encounter is that it took place right outside of the Cubatabaco offices. Needless to say, the Cubatabaco official who was with me at the time was highly embarrassed.

Even in good times, Cuba has always had a problem being able to supply enough leaf to meet world demands. In the 1980s, Cuba was exporting ninety million cigars. By the early 1990s that number had dropped to sixty million handrolled cigars (with an additional 20 million machine made cigars being exported).

By 1996, the number of handrolled cigars had only risen slightly. And up until recently, a great many acres of their coveted tobacco farms have been converted to growing more food for a starving nation. However, realizing that cigars were now their fourth most important export, in 1991 an additional 17,000 acres of tobacco were planted in the Vuelta Abajo, a 17 percent increase over the 1990 acreage. This translated into more emphasis on wrapper leaf, which, after harvesting and aging, was not ready until 1994.

The Partagás factory in downtown Havana was a popular tourist attraction, but is now being renovated.

In addition to the fact that there is only so much available land on which to grow tobacco, and the time it takes to grow that tobacco, age it, and make it into cigars, Cuba is also plagued by nature. Hurricanes typically destroy many of Cuba's precious aging barns full of the winter's tobacco harvests, which are scheduled to be made into cigars. To compound their tobacco problem, Cuba is now selling Havana leaf to other countries, such as Germany and Austria, for the manufacture of Havana cigars in Europe. In Germany, the best examples are the machine-made Saint Luis Rey and Romeo y Julieta small cigars and cigarillos, which are made of 100 percent imported Havana leaf. Havana cigars are also being produced in Australia, as well as in Canada, where a machine-made all-Havana Bances is made for that nation only.

In spite of all this, or because of it, the world still has an almost insatiable thirst for the coveted Havana cigar. To help in its marketing efforts, in 1994 Cubatabaco turned the responsibility of its foreign sales over to Habanos S. A., a private company. Cubatabaco, however, retained control of sales in Spain, Britain, and France, the three largest markets for Havana cigars. As an aside, it is interesting to note that approximately six to ten percent of all Cuban cigars are estimated to end up in the US, where, of course, they have been illegal for over fifty years. (Of course, all of that may be on the verge of changing with the relaxation of the importation laws, which began to occur in 2015.) Nonetheless,

often these contraband cigars are not always of the best quality, and many are rolled outside of the government-controlled factories. Although it is difficult to confirm, recent estimates are that Cuba currently produces in excess of one hundred million premium handrolled cigars a year, which amounts to about seventy percent of the total world sales of premium smokes. This, however, is substantially less than the three hundred million cigars that the government has set as its annual goal, unless, of course, you count Cuba's machine-made stogies and those Havanas of lesser quality.

Because of the ongoing problem of not being able to get enough Cuban cigars to meet demand, as well as the simple fact that Cuban cigars are generally more expensive, European countries, as well as those in the Middle East and Asia are importing cigars from the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Nicaragua. So now, alongside the Bolivars, Quinteros and Quai d'Orsays, for example, there are cigars from Arturo Fuente, La Aurora, and Ashton, although many of these Asian and European-bound non-Havanas have a stronger filler blend than those destined for America. And interestingly, the Meerappfel family, long famed for their African Cameroon leaf, is now selling a Dominican cigar, La Estancia, that has fifty percent of its filler composed of Cuban tobacco, in order to produce a Cubanesque flavor while keeping the overall cost per stick at a reasonable level. Of course, thanks to their Havana filler recipe, these cigars are not available in the US.

This is not to imply that the Havana cigar is losing favor in England, Europe, and Asia. Far from it. The Havana is still looked upon as *the* cigar for connoisseurs. But very often a serious cigar smoker may elect to light up a Dominican-made cigar during the week, while saving Saturday night for a Havana, which, by the very nature of its higher price, is smoked sparingly. American cigar smokers, by contrast, almost immediately head for a Havana tobacconist's shop as soon as they set foot on foreign soil, and who can blame them?

Unfortunately, in America—as in most of the "civilized" countries—prejudicial laws have taken away much of the impromptu pleasures of enjoying a favorite cigar whenever and wherever we want, as cigar smoking in most enclosed buildings—including restaurants—has been outlawed. No longer can we nonchalantly light up a Churchill after dinner in a restaurant to accompany a cognac. Nor can we casually puff on an elegantly shaped Lonsdale as we stroll the city street on a warm summer evening, which is more than likely to garner a wrathful gaze from rude passers-by. And in cities like San Diego and Santa

Monica, California, it is illegal to even smoke on the beach, and in many locales you may not even smoke a cigar in an open-air sports arena.

Many Europeans are shocked that the United States, the beacon of individual freedoms, has such vehement anti-smoking restrictions. Conversely, among many Americans there is the erroneous belief that other countries are free of the rabid anti-smoking paranoia that has plagued the United States for so long. Unfortunately, this is far from being true. Even Cuba now has anti-smoking laws.

And yet there are still people who are oblivious to the fact that cigar smokers do not inhale, and that the product contains only *natural* tobaccos with no chemical additives. In an era of environmental awareness, has anybody ever mentioned that cigars are biodegradable? Indeed, they were among the first "sustainable" products, and they are certainly organic, even if not certified as such (although some "organic cigars" actually do exist). But then, who else but another cigar smoker could possibly realize that a cigar can both stimulate the brain and relax the body at the same time.

"It's mental health, there's no doubt about it," says David A. Boska, M.D., a physician whose list of cigar-smoking patients encompasses numerous entertainment and sports celebrities, as well as government officials, including the late John F. Kennedy when he was President. "Cigar smoking is a very pleasurable thing," the doctor says. "You don't get hooked on it like you do with some relaxant drugs, which usually don't last very long anyway. It takes a while to smoke a cigar. And gratification is instantaneous. I also happen to think that group therapy is very beneficial if you happen to have a few friends that you like to smoke a cigar with."

Perhaps that helps explain the resurgence of the Victorian Smoker, an event that started in nineteenth century England to create a safe haven for cigar connoisseurs, where they could escape the wrath of nonsmokers and enjoy their tobacco in peace. The Gentleman' s Smoker (although it is not always limited to just men, I am happy to report) or "cigar night" as it is often called, is once again enjoying a rebirth in America. This cigar-smoking phenomenon was once popular in Europe as well during the cigar boom of the 1990s, as people discovered the joys and camaraderie of smoking good cigars with good friends.

These Smokers died out rather abruptly with the collapse of the cigar boom, and its demise was very similar to the sudden economic crash a decade later. The cause and effect of the Great Cigar Crash was rising prices, a shortage of premium tobaccos, and frankly, the disenchantment of many cigar smokers with

the entire smoking "scene." But now, with time to reflect, and new generations of smokers rediscovering—or discovering for the first time—the pleasures of the cigar, we are again seeing a rise in cigar consumption. Nothing like the 300 percent growth per year of the 1990s to be sure, but then, that type of escalation could not endure forever. Instead, what we have is a gradual return to normalcy and a realization that a good cigar is still one of the best antidotes for a stressful and uncertain world. And that, of course, is what prompted me to rewrite this book, which originally helped start the cigar craze years ago. Thus we have the return of the cigar bar and the Smoker.

Both are simply gatherings of cigar aficionados who share an appreciation of life and all that it can be. These gatherings can be either formal or informal, and often center around a dinner, or a wine, bourbon, or cognac tasting. Oftentimes they serve as fundraisers for charities. Or they can merely be a simple gathering of friends with gently swirling clouds of blue-gray smoke as the only common bond necessary. Very often a local tobacconist will have a Smoker to introduce a new cigar. Or a restaurant owner will organize a Smoker on an "off night" (where legal, of course). You don't really need a purpose to have a cigar gathering. All you need are a few people and a lot of cigars. Whatever the reason, the growing number of special "cigar nights" that has now re-established itself as part of our culture is proof that you cannot legislate pleasure.

In a way, that view is being borne out by the fact that, beginning during the latter half of 2014 and most noticeably erupting on January 15, 2015, there have been rumblings about relaxing the hard and fast rules of the Cuban embargo, thus opening the gates to freer travel between the United States and Cuba, and permitting Americans to bring back up to $400 worth of souvenirs, which unfortunately only includes $100 worth of tobacco. That doesn't buy a lot of cigars, even at Cuban prices (which aren't as inexpensive as one might think). Other changes are now in the offing, for it is a relative certainty that, should trade restrictions be completely relaxed, non-Cuban cigar makers will again be hoping to buy Havana leaf for their filler tobaccos. But just as during the pre-embargo days, it is unlikely that Cuba will be selling their best leaf; they will naturally want to keep that for themselves. Also, there is still the unresolved labyrinth of multiple brands, for the US already has firmly entrenched itself with non-Cuban Montecristos and H. Upmanns, to name but a few duo-nationality cigars. Plus, it is my prediction that, once Cuban cigars become legal in the US, there will be an initial feeding frenzy and Cuba, in turn, will gradually raise prices until smokers will start to think twice about paying top dollar for a Cuban-

made Bolivar when they can get a Dominican-made version for substantially less. Of course, the non-Cuban cigar will have to change its name if it is compete alongside the Havana product in order to avoid confusion. Nonetheless, it will be an interesting scenario to watch unfold, and it shows that the cigar world is constantly evolving, just as the number of cigar smokers is gradually increasing.

The late Pulitzer-prize winning cartoonist Jeff Macnelly often got a good word in for his fellow cigar smokers via his syndicated comic strip, "Shoe."

Although there are no hard and fast statistics, it is estimated that there are approximately a little over twelve million premium cigar smokers in the United States. And this number is not composed of just men. Women are now part of this former male-only bastion. They are attracted to cigars for the same reasons: enjoyment and relaxation from the daily stress of life. But there is another element of cigar smoking that is unique to women: By learning to correctly smoke and appreciate a good cigar, they find that they are on an equal level with a man. This can prove invaluable for businesswomen and others who must interact with men on a regular basis. It also helps women understand and appreciate a man's fascination with cigars. Thus, communication and understanding between the sexes is enhanced. And the ranks of cigar smokers are increased even more.

The packaging on many of today's cigars rivals those of the nineteenth century.

The author knew the late George Burns, one of Hollywood's most celebrated comedians and the only star to put his cigar print alongside his footprints in front of TCL Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard. When Burns' items were auctioned, Hacker acquired one of his humidors, shown with some of the El Producto Queens that Burns gave the author during their visits.

Today, although we are smoking less, we are smoking better cigars and enjoying them more. In retrospect, the Cuban embargo was the best thing that could have happened to the cigar smoker, not only in America, but throughout the world. Directly or indirectly, it has enabled us to discover the enjoyment of cigars that might otherwise never have existed: the mildness of a Connecticut wrapped Dominican, the spicy fullness of a Sumatra cloaked Honduran, the gentle earthiness of a Nicaraguan, the rich flavor of a Havana, or the heavy undertaste of a Mexican Maduro. In addition, both new brands and old have fostered further refinements, such as the appearance of carefully aged vintage cigars, the creation of smaller shapes for those moments that do not always lend themselves to a lingering smoke, and the welcomed trend of hybrid tobaccos and bigger ring sizes for fuller flavors. Moreover, prices of premium cigars, although relatively high in comparison with mass-market cigars, are comparatively inexpensive when judged against the pleasures they provide. Just as it did back in the 1920s, a good cigar can still cost as much as a quart of milk or a bottle of imported beer. Besides, where else can you buy up to an hour's worth of peace and relaxation for so little money?

Just prior to the original publication of this book in 1993, a reporter from ABC News asked me to comment on the popularity of cigar smoking. It was a question that is just as easy to answer today as it was then: The world we have created—or that has been created for us—is a much more hectic place to live than it ever has been before, filled with stress, problems with our lives, our jobs, the economy, and the environment. We are all looking for a haven, a fortress where we can be free—even momentarily—from the dragons and demons that we must fight daily. The cigar has become that fortress, a sanctified place where we can regroup our internal forces. With just a single cigar, we can escape from the cares of the world, if only for an hour or so.

That is the beauty of cigar smoking. That is the legacy we have inherited, and the secret to the enjoyment of life.

CHAPTER 2

CIGAR MAKING: FROM SEEDLING TO CEDAR

One of the more fascinating things about cigar making is that its basic art of construction has not changed in well over one hundred years. That is why a handrolled cigar is the perfect complement for those of us who appreciate the artistry of hand craftsmanship. Even machine-made cigars must still rely on various degrees of hand labor. Premium cigars, however, are an anomaly, for even though each one is individually made by hand, we do not want them to be different in terms of construction and quality. If anything, we want them to be the same. To fully understand the intricacies of a good cigar, we must first go to the very roots of cigar making. And those roots literally emanate from the tobacco plant itself.

Each geographic area in which a tobacco seed is planted will give that plant—and the subsequent leaves that ultimately end up as a cigar—a distinct characteristic. That is why a Honduran cigar tastes different from a Dominican cigar, which tastes different from a Havana. However, given the world as a whole, there are extremely few areas that have the perfect combination of soil, temperature and rainfall to produce a tobacco crop worthy of making a high-grade cigar. Most of these microclimates are in the Caribbean or in the nearly identical latitudinal regions of Mexico and Central America.

Certainly one of the most famous tobacco growing and cigar-making areas today is the Dominican Republic, a fascinating island paradox that is home to both the 10,000-foot-high Pico Duarte mountain and the crocodile-infested Lago Enriquillo which lies 144 feet below sea level. It is a land where they produce cigars worthy of an emperor's humidor, and yet the government periodically—and without warning—shuts down the power system to entire areas of the country in order to conserve electricity.

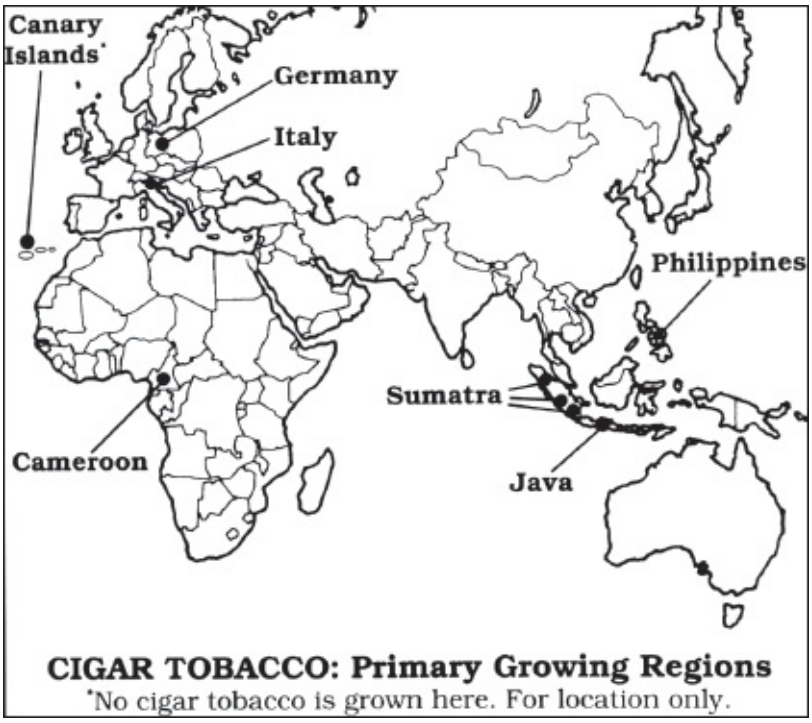
Consequently, the large scale Fuente factory, for example, has learned to keep a diesel generator with 20,000 gallons of fuel on standby at all times, so that its cigar making operations will not be interrupted.

In the Dominican Republic, which produces the majority of the world's premium cigars today, there are two primary fertile valleys for tobacco, the Real, which was named by Columbus and means "Royal" in Spanish, and the Cibao. These valleys, which posses a variety of soil textures, yield two of the most luxurious, long leaf filler tobaccos ever rolled into a cigar. Specifically, they are Olor Dominicano (a native Dominican seed), and Piloto Cubano, a strain that originated with precious Cuban seed that was transported to the Dominican Republic by cigar makers fleeing Castro. Thus, when you hear about "Dominican-grown Cuban seed," or "Cuban seed Dominican tobaccos," they are referring to Piloto Cubano. There is also a lesser-quality Virginian tobacco grown in the Dominican, but this is mainly used for local consumption and doesn't apply to high-grade cigars.

Ironically, up until 1993, the incredibly rich growing areas of the Dominican Republic produced filler and binder. And for the most part, there is still no major supply of Dominican wrapper, as the right combination of soil and seed has yet to be found on a continuing basis, brands such as OpusX notwithstanding.

That is why most brands made in this famous tobacco-growing country must import their wrappers from other areas, such as Connecticut in the USA, Cameroon from Africa, and with growing frequency, Java and Sumatra from Indonesia as well as San Andrés tobaccos from Mexico. The quest for a Dominican-grown wrapper goes back to the 1980s, when there were attempts by General Cigar Corporation to grow Connecticut seed wrapper in the Dominican for some of its flagship brands. Unfortunately, this exercise did not prove commercially viable. However, in 1992, I witnessed the first experimental planting of Cuban seed wrapper in the Cibao Valley by the Arturo Fuente family. This historic moment was captured in the photo you see elsewhere in this chapter, showing thirty-five- to forty-five-day-old seedlings being planted in the fields. Of course, no one knew it was going to be an historic moment at the time. But as it happened, 1992–93 was an especially good growing season in the Dominican Republic, and even though some plants were lost in heavy winter rains, enough were saved to eventually create excellent rosado wrappers that have since become the Fuente Fuente OpusX, the first Dominican cigar that could finally be called a "puro." That is, a cigar in which the filler, binder and wrapper are all grown within the borders of a single country. Since then, other companies, such as Davidoff, have followed suit.

CIGAR TOBACCO: Primary Growing Regions



CIGAR TOBACCO: Primary Growing Regions

*No cigar tobacco is grown here. For location only.

To the west, across the Caribbean Sea, is Honduras, second largest producer of non-Havana premium cigars in the world. A rugged country, with jagged, prehistoric-looking mountains covered with jungle, one would not be surprised to encounter the outlaw inhabitants of Jurassic Park roaming this tropical wilderness. Only 20 percent of the land is cultivated, but it is here that some of the world's richest tobacco is grown, primarily in the Jagua and La Entrada valleys. Yet it has only been fairly recently that Honduran cigar makers have been allowed to grow and import tobaccos that are not native to this land of the Mayan civilization. Thus, we are now able to enjoy rich Honduran cigars whose flavor is given additional subtleties with wrappers, binders, and fillers from other countries.

Honduras' sometimes argumentative neighbor to the south is Nicaragua, the largest republic in Central America (roughly as big as England and Wales combined), a land of volcanoes and other eruptions of a more political nature. In Nicaragua there are two fertile valleys, the Jalapa and Estelí, where some of the world's most exquisite filler, binder and wrapper are grown. Recently the area of Condega, near Estelí, has also seen increasing tobacco cultivation. This area is located near the Nicaraguan–Honduran border, and possesses soil that many farmers say is as close to Cuban earth as you can get without going to Cuba. There is also the island of Ometepe, which is composed of two volcanoes (one dormant, and one still quite active) rising out of the great expanse of Lake

Nicaragua. It is here that a very exclusive, sweet, and pliable tobacco is grown and primarily used for filler. All of this soil-rich diversity is why, when Nicaraguan cigars are good, they are very good. Therefore, it is frustrating to realize that there are some potentially fantastic tobacco-growing regions in Nicaragua that cannot be cultivated because of ongoing tensions in the area. Hopefully, this situation will change.

Mexico also has areas capable of producing some excellent tobaccos. Perhaps the most famous is the valley of San Andrés Tuxtla, located in the State of Veracruz, southeast of Mexico City and one hundred miles south of Veracruz Port, on the Gulf of Mexico side of the country (I tell you all this in case, after smoking a Te-Amo down to the band and tossing back a few Herradura Añejo tequila "shooters," you suddenly become inspired to visit the birthplace of your cigar). Here you'll find the oldest cigar factory in Mexico, La Prueba de Balsa Hermanos, which was started in 1852. Cigar tobacco is also grown on the Pacific side of the country, in the neighboring state of Oaxaca's Valle Nacional. To the north, in Guadalajara, is the well-known Ornelas factory. Another tobacco-growing region is in Nayarit, near the coast above Puerto Vallarta. Mexico is noted for its superb binder leaf, as well as producing a sturdy and spicy wrapper that lends itself ideally for Maduro. Of course, the country grows filler tobaccos as well. And it is a good thing they do, for up until 1996, the government required all cigars to be made of 100 percent Mexican-grown leaf, although now things have eased up a bit.

Although the United States produces tobacco in numerous areas of the country, two of its most celebrated crops come from Connecticut, specifically, the Housatonic Valley region. Here, the finest shade wrapper (100 acres) and broadleaf (800 acres) are grown, and a comparison of these two acreages will give you the ratios of both tobaccos for an enthusiastic world market. Because of the unique sandy soil in this one area, Connecticut shade-grown wrapper has an unforgettable taste that has never been duplicated in any other part of the world, not even in Cuba, where the seeds are now being planted on an ongoing basis. The entire growing area of the Connecticut River Valley, which stretches from Hartford north to the Massachusetts state line, possesses a two-mile wide strip of incredibly rich topsoil, deposited there centuries ago by an ever-narrowing river. Because of the richness of this farmland, Connecticut shade has become one of the most popular wrappers in modern times.

In spite of all these excellent tobacco growing regions, the fantastically fertile island of Cuba, the largest in the West Indies, continues to shine like a star jewel

in the cigar maker's crown. Located just ninety miles south of Florida, Cuba has maintained its reputation as the ultimate cigar-producing country since the days of Columbus. In fact, through the years, the resilient lore of the Cuban cigar has managed to survive catastrophes both natural and manmade, including wars, diseases, and embargoes. Just what is it that makes the legendary cigars from this particular island so unique? It is not the cigar makers or the factories, for I have seen equally skilled workers—many of them exiled Cuban cigar makers themselves—in the Dominican, Nicaragua, and Honduras. And I have seen much more modern cigar-making facilities in other parts of the world. Besides, you can always train or hire experienced cigar rollers. Nor is it the weather, for many famous cigar-making countries have identical climates, with an abundance of warm, humid, sunlit days and cool, breezy nights. And the weather can change. But not the soil. And therein lies the main secret of the Cuban mystique. There is no other place that has such an abundance of coarse, rich red earth (although Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and one small valley in the Dominican Republic come extremely close). It is the soil that provides the final ingredient in the magic elixir that gives Cuba the perfect ecosystem for tobacco.

All Cuban cigars are puros, in which the wrapper, binder, and filler tobaccos are only grown in Cuba.

When one speaks of Cuban tobacco the words, "Vuelta Abajo" usually give most knowledgeable aficionados a sudden rush of adrenalin. This one area, an abundantly lush valley located on the western end of the island in the Pinar del Rio province, is world renowned for its shade-grown wrapper and filler, the two most taste dominant tobaccos in any cigar. But there are three other well established growing regions in Cuba besides the constantly spotlighted Vuelta Abajo. Moving from west to east along the island, they are: Partido, which also grows filler and a very excellent wrapper (although not as good as that in the

Vuelta Abajo); Remedios, in the central part of Cuba, which grows filler and binder; and two sections of Oriente on the easternmost section of the island, both of which also grow filler and binder. However, of these four tobacco-producing regions, only the Vuelta Abajo is capable of growing crops for all three ingredients of a cigar: wrapper, filler, and binder. Even if the same Cuban seeds were planted elsewhere on the island, the harvested tobaccos would not be of the quality that this one microclimate is capable of producing. At one time, the topsoil of the Vuelta Abajo, particularly in the Pinar del Rio area, was over two feet deep.

It is a little-known fact that in the years just prior to the embargo, most of the Havana leaf being exported to the US for stateside cigar making was taken only from the Remedios area. Cuba kept the high-grade Vuelta Abajo tobaccos for their own brands. That helped establish the mystique of the Havana-made cigar, and is the reason why the taste of a good handmade long-leaf Havana has never been duplicated outside of Cuba. However, it should be pointed out that there are certain machine-made Cuban brands now being manufactured in other countries, such as Germany and Canada, using carefully selected imported Havana tobacco. It should also be mentioned that, in the past, all Cuban filler, binder and wrapper tobacco was sungrown, but today the wrapper leaf is almost all shade grown. Which is another reason why a Havana cigar made today does not taste anything like the pre-Castro cigars of yesteryear.

But whether grown under sun or shade, today the demand for filler, binder, and wrapper leaf grown in the fertile farmlands of the Vuelta Abajo has never been greater. Therefore, on a visit to this legendary area, I found it somewhat reassuring to discover that, even with Cuba's faltering economy, when more and more land is—at best—being rotated between tobacco and food crops, this one naturally enhanced section is being preserved for tobacco as much as possible.

Of course, there are other noteworthy areas in the world that are famous for their tobaccos. Ecuador, because of its almost perpetual cloud cover, produces some of the finest natural shade-grown wrappers in recent history. The subtle spiciness of Cameroon comes from the foggy, humid regions of West Africa (although Cameroon seed is now also being grown in other countries as well). It makes a thin but very flavorful wrapper, the supply of which, unfortunately, is rapidly becoming almost non-existent due to internal problems within its native country. And of the Cameroon that is grown, less than seven percent is suitable for the manufacture of premium cigars.

Which brings the focus for a replacement leaf to Indonesia, a nation made up

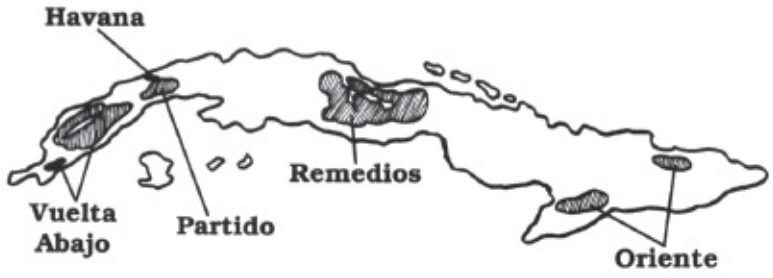
of more than 13,000 islands, of which fewer than 6,000 are populated. Although rice is Indonesia's main agricultural crop, it may soon be overtaken by tobacco. From the fog-carpeted valley floors beneath Mt. Bromo in Java, to Sumatra, a large island in the western part of Indonesia, come delicious wrapper leaves that are now used for both humidified and non-humidified (i.e., Dutch-type) cigars. Another popular region for both "wet" and "dry" cigars is Brazil (mainly in Bahía), which is also finding increased use in filler blends. Other popular cigar tobaccos occasionally come from Jamaica (which grows filler and binder but no wrapper) and the Philippines, with lesser known regions, including India, Costa Rica, and China, scattered throughout the world.

The largest tobacco growing area in China is near Qujing City, in the Yunnan Province, located in the far southwestern region of the country. Although tobacco has been grown in that country before, it was more or less a dormant industry for cigars until recently. China started renewed tobacco planting operations in 1942, but did not start opening up its product to the outside world until 1988. Much of their government controlled tobaccos are flue-cured and used for cigarettes, but, recognizing the growing importance of the worldwide cigar market, the Chinese are now producing a mild and very sweet tasting cigarillo. They are also attempting to break into the premium cigar field with brands such Great Wall, but so far with very limited success, primarily due to the rather flat taste of the tobaccos. Whether any of these Chinese cigars will ever become a European or American staple remains to be seen, but it is an interesting trend for international cigar smokers to follow. Wouldn't it be ironic if it took a cigar to finally break down the trade barriers and bring the East and West together?

These shade grown seedlings in Honduras are ready to be transplanted in the fields.

No matter where in the world tobacco is grown, everything starts with the seed and the soil. Inasmuch as the world's most popular cigars come from the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Cuba, let's follow the life of a typical cigar (I realize that's a paradox, as no cigar is really typical) in any of these three countries, from seedling to cedar box.

First, it is important to realize that the tobacco seed determines the size, color, texture, and type of plant you will get, while the soil and the climate are what create the taste, aroma, ash color (as we'll discuss in Chapter 4), and burning qualities of the end product. That is why *where* the tobacco is planted is just as important as how it is planted.



The Four Tobacco Growing Areas Of Cuba

The Pinar del Rio province of Vuelta Abajo produces the best wrapper, binder and filler, and is the only area in Cuba where all three types of tobacco can be grown. The Havana Province in the Partido region only produces wrappers. Santa Clara Province in the Remedios region (which is also called Vuelta Arriba) grows 95% filler and 5% wrapper. In the Oriente Province, only filler is grown, although some of this leaf is classified as binder.

Life for a budding cigar begins in September and October, when the pinhead-sized tobacco seeds are first planted in protected, transportable trays or beds. It takes approximately forty-five days for the seeds to mature enough to be transplanted in the fields. During this initial growth period, the seedlings are carefully watched over and nurtured by the farmers, much as a nanny guards her youngsters in a nursery. Ironically, cigar smoking is not permitted around the tiny tobacco plants, for fear that a virus could be transmitted to the seedlings by a microscopic residue of ash. Interestingly, there is not as much danger of infection from Maduro cigars, where the extra intense heat of fermentation has most likely killed any potentially harmful organisms in the wrapper.

After about forty-five days, the strongest plants are relocated to the tobacco fields, where they are carefully transplanted in rows, at very precise distances from one another. Shade-grown tobacco is planted under a suspended ceiling of cheesecloth or synthetic mesh, to screen out the direct rays of the sun. Sungrown tobacco, on the other hand, is planted without this artificial cover.

These Piloto Cubano seedlings are 35 days old. Eventually, they will become shade-grown tobacco.

(Dominican Republic)

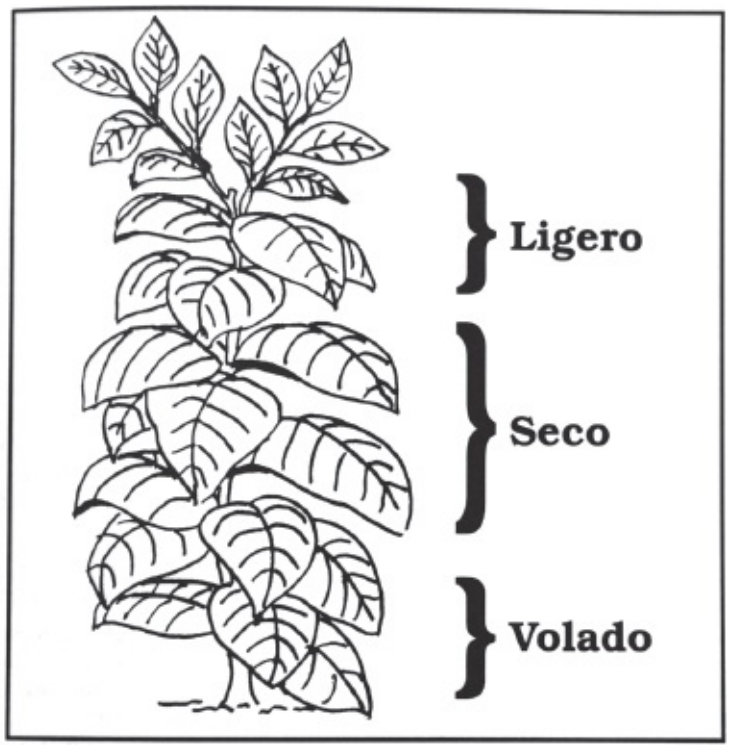
Given enough sun and water, and depending on the texture and density of the soil, the plants mature at a rapid rate, and in roughly another forty-five days, they are ready for their first harvesting, or priming, in which certain leaves are stripped off of the main tobacco stalk. These are the leaves that will be ultimately dried, aged, and made into cigars.

There are three basic types of leaves on each tobacco plant. Going from the bottom to the top, they are: Volado—the mildest of the leaves in taste; Seco—a medium flavored leaf, which comprises the largest middle portion of the tobacco plant; and Ligero—the strongest in taste. Thus, the closer you get to the top of the plant, the thicker the leaves become and the heavier the taste. Normally, it takes a blend of all three of these leaves, in varying proportions, to make a cigar.

Planting the seeds taken from the greenhouse beds. ***(Nicaragua)***

After 35 to 45 days, the seedlings are planted in fields, at a precise distance apart from one another. Notice the second man from the left, who uses a stick to mark the spot where each seedling is to be planted. A long string, barely visible in this photo, marks the row. Excessive water in this Cibao Valley field was caused by a heavy downpour the day before. (This photo, taken in 1992, depicts the very first planting of OpusX wrapper.)

(Dominican Republic)



The three basic leaf classifications of the tobacco plant. Volado is the mildest in taste. Seco has the greatest concentration of flavor and aroma. Ligero is the strongest in both texture and taste.

Adding more Ligero produces a stronger tasting cigar; using mainly Seco and adding Volado lightens the taste considerably. But a cigar made of only Seco tobacco would normally be too bland and characterless.

Usually two to four leaves are taken from a plant during each priming. During the course of a tobacco plant's growing season, which can last until February, there will be a total of five to six primings per plant, starting with the bottommost leaves, as they are the first to mature. This permits more strength to go into the upper leaves as time passes. Because they are neither light nor heavy in texture and taste, the center leaves around the Seco classification are among the most versatile for cigar making, while the thicker, heavier Ligero leaves on top are ideal for wrappers. Because the upper leaves are permitted to stay on the plant the longest, they receive more nutrients, which results in a heavier textured leaf and a stronger tasting tobacco.

Most of the leaves used for Maduro wrapper—which requires a much more intense fermentation period (as we shall see later in this chapter)—comes from the upper portions of the plant, which can take the heat, so to speak.

The three distinct shades of the three basic tobaccos used in cigar construction: (l.) Seco, (r.) Ligero, and (bottom) Volado. The strength of their flavors corresponds to the depth of the color of the leaves. For reference, these are all Dominican tobaccos.

This worker is picking off the top flowers of shade-grown tobacco that will eventually be used for wrappers. The flower is never used in a tobacco plant, and by removing it as soon as it appears, more strength goes into the leaves. These plants will spend approximately 85 days in the fields during which time they will grow to a height of 5½ to 6 feet.

(Cuba)

For all its thick, exuberant foliage, each tobacco plant will only yield fourteen to eighteen leaves of a quality suitable for cigar making. Sometimes, weather and climate change permitting, there can be a second planting in December, which pushes the harvest season all the way into March and April, thereby providing a much-needed bumper crop of tobacco for the cigar factories. But because Mother Nature is involved, a lot can go wrong with the crop between seed planting and priming.

One of the most universally feared diseases among tobacco farmers is Blue

Mold, which can best be described as the AIDS of the tobacco industry. It can appear almost overnight, scarring the tobacco leaf beyond use and completely destroying the plant. Transmitted by microscopic airborne spores, Blue Mold often starts on the underside of a leaf and rapidly spreads from there. There is no problem with Blue Mold as long as the weather remains clear and dry, because in order to thrive, this dreaded enemy needs lots of rain, cold days and very little sun—not your typical Caribbean weather. But once it occurs, the stage is set for disaster. Sudden moisture in the air and a drop in temperature can trigger a Blue Mold epidemic that can spread like a prairie wildfire, destroying a country's entire harvest. Crop dusting and fumigation are the only defenses against this plague, but they are not always effective.

In Cuba, for example, they regularly spray every young seedling against this dreaded fungus, but in 1980 Blue Mold still managed to destroy virtually all of that nation's tobacco crop, putting 26,000 workers out of business and resulting in a $100 million loss of revenue because all exports of cigars were virtually halted. In 1984 this plague attacked the Dominican Republic and in 1985 it hit Central America, in both instances with devastating results. And in 1992–93, after one of the coldest, wettest winters in history, accented by a debilitating shot from Hurricane Andrew, Blue Mold again struck at Cuba's tobacco heartland. Honduras got hit with this plague in 1996.

A healthy Havana leaf from the Vuelta Abajo. This is the start of what could ultimately become a great cigar.

(Cuba)

Consequently, in Honduras, where the growing season normally runs from September through March, many farmers now start planting in the off-season—sometimes as early as July—in order to take advantage of unusually good weather and to keep most of the maturing crop away from the potentially cold, wet months of winter. The downside of this practice is the danger of wearing out the soil by too much concentrated planting.

Black Shank is another self-descriptive tobacco disease, which attacks the stem and turns the entire inside of the stalk black, eventually destroying the entire plant. Equally descriptive in name and despised by farmers is the Mosaic Virus, which produces a blue, mottled appearance on tobacco leaves. One of the most effective methods of controlling this scourge is having the workers wash their hands in milk when the seeds are taken from their beds and replanted in the fields. I guess all those ads were right; milk really does make a difference!

And let's not forget the common nemesis of farmers everywhere, bugs—specifically, aphids and the dreaded tobacco beetle, *Lacioderma*, which many of us have had the misfortune to encounter in our humidors. These little beasties lay their eggs right in the tobacco leaf. Within twenty-two days the larva hatches into a worm that gorges itself on the leaf before finally metamorphosing into a pinhead-sized brown beetle and flying off. Of course, by then the tobacco leaf has been destroyed.

Tobacco bugs have gotten to this Ligero leaf. The left portion of the leaf will be stripped away, so that the right side can still be used.

(Cuba)

Other unseen dangers await the tobacco grower. Back in the early 1960s, when the Honduran cigar industry was just getting started, tobacco fields were cleared and planted right up against the thick, untamed forestland. Nobody realized that within this vegetation dwelt millions of caterpillars, which looked upon the tobacco fields as one fantastic all-night diner. Soon, hordes of these creatures advanced out of the jungle, crawled en masse across the shade cheesecloth, and began to devoir entire tobacco plants, right on down to the stems. These Honduran crawlies had never seen such a succulent feast spread out before them in such a manner. Eventually, the farmers had to clear the jungle well beyond the borders of their cultivated land, and then fumigate the entire area.

With all of this potential devastation, it is a wonder that any tobacco manages to survive at all. But survive it does, thanks to constant surveillance by farmers, the use of pesticides, and in some cases, even picking bugs off of the plants one by one, as I have seen them do in Cuba. When each leaf is finally separated from its stalk (primed), the farmer can breathe a sigh of relief, for there is less chance of losing the crop once it is literally "in hand," so to speak.

Once the leaves are primed, they are classified by size and texture (not color, because at this point every leaf is green), and carefully braided together with palm strips. These rows of freshly picked tobacco leaves are then taken to curing barns in the fields, where they are draped over long poles, called *cujes*, and hung up out of the sun.

Here, the leaves are fanned and caressed by the warmth of gentle Caribbean breezes for a period of three to eight weeks (depending on type of tobacco and the weather), during which time they gradually lose their moisture content.

A worker holds leaves that have been stricken with spotted plague, and which have been removed from otherwise healthy plants.

(Cuba)

During this natural air-curing process, the leaves slowly change in color, going from green to patches of yellows and then to brown, which eventually spreads over the entire leaf. If a lighter color is desired, the leaf is removed from the open air drying racks while still partially green and taken to a sealed room where artificial heat is applied. This controls the rate of final coloring and keeps the leaf from becoming too dark. As each leaf dries in the curing barn, it is pushed together to make room for more leaves coming in from the next priming. This procedure goes on until the entire barn is crammed full of air cured leaves, a welcome sight to any cigar maker. Or smoker, for that matter. But the tobacco is still a long way from becoming a cigar.

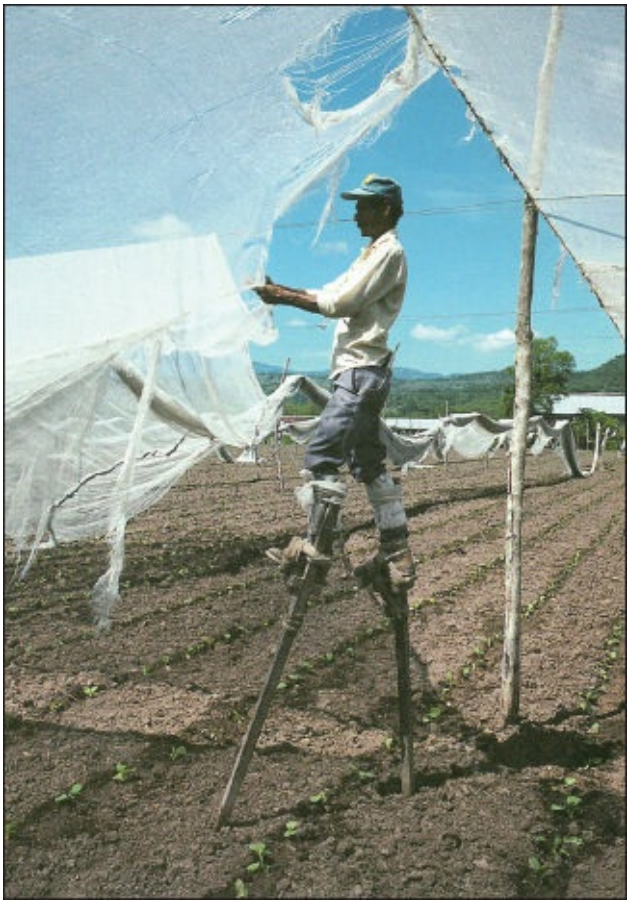
From the curing barns, the leaves are shipped to packing houses, where workers separate and grade them by size, texture, and now, color. This grading and inspecting process will be constantly reoccurring throughout the entire cigar-making procedure, and is one of the reasons we have so many high-grade cigars today, instead of just "cheap smokes." As an example, when buyers come to the packing houses to inspect the tobacco, some of the many factors they

check for include color, size, thickness, elasticity, texture, prominence of veins, oiliness, holes, spots or other blemishes, aroma, and taste of the leaf both lit and unlit. It is not unusual to see a buyer take a raw leaf from the bale, roll it up, and smoke it in order to get the pure essence of what he will be paying for. In a way, it is like test driving a car before you purchase it. Broken leaves are set aside, to see if there is still enough area to be used for binder, wrapper, or filler, depending on the type of tobacco. To paraphrase a popular public service slogan, a good plant is a terrible thing to waste. Once graded, each category of leaf is tied together with a strip of palm tree leaf into twenty-leaf bundles, called "hands." From here, a most unusual process of fermentation takes place.

Open-air curing barns are typical of the Dominican Republic. In Cuba, enclosed curing barns are used.

Photo by Domingo Batista

An older-style curing barn in Cuba. Pre-revolutionary barns were made of thatched palm leaves, but as they succumbed to the elements,not the least of which were hurricanes, they were replaced with tin structures. This transition barn has thatched sides and a tin roof. Most of Cuba's current barns are now made of wood and are enclosed.



A worker stands on stilts called zancos to spread cheesecloth covering over fields of tobacco seedlings that will one day become shade-grown Honduran wrappers. In the evenings, this covering is raised to let heat escape so the plants can cool.

In the Dominican Republic, cured tobacco is transported in serones, coarse bales made of woven palm tree Cana leaves.

These rich, barrel-cured Havana filler leaves from the Vuelta Abajo will eventually go into Cohiba cigars.

Once brought into the shed, the green tobacco leaves are laced together for air-drying.

Hanging the fresh cut tobacco leaves for drying. ***(Nicaragua)***

This is definitely a job for the sure-footed.

Plenty of air circulation is needed in this hot and humid Caribbean climate in order to properly dry and cure the leaves.

At the factories, the hands of tobacco are gathered into huge, free standing piles, called "burros," or bulks, which are square in shape, weigh from 8,000 to 10,000 pounds apiece, and stand anywhere from three to six feet high. By stacking so many hands of tobacco on top of one other, air is unable to circulate and is trapped inside.

When the leaf loses its upward arc and the main vein turns from light green to white, it is an indication that it is ready to be primed.

(Dominican Republic)

Photo: Domingo Batista

The cured and dried leaf, already tied in a hand.

Nestor Plascencia inspects the condition of the air-dried leaves from his farms. This is a skill done by sight, touch, and smell.

As a result, a natural heat slowly builds up within the bulk, releasing moisture, plant saps, and ammonia nitrate from the tobacco leaves. Indeed, upon entering the warm fermentation rooms, the heavy, stinging odor of ammonia is almost overwhelming. This natural fermentation process, which is known as "sweating," physically changes the makeup and characteristics of the tobacco. The color slowly darkens, starches in the leaves gradually turn into sugar (which is why we sometimes taste a subtle sweetness when lighting up a cigar), and the entire leaf gains character and finesse, just as a caterpillar emerges from its cocoon as a delicate butterfly (not those Honduran caterpillars, however). It is imperative that each bulk be made up of exactly the same grades and textures of leaf, or they will not all cure at an identical rate and the bulk will be ruined. Water acts as a catalyst in fermentation, and on those days when it is raining, every bulk in the fermentation rooms dramatically increases in temperature.

To keep track of the fermentation process, a long thermometer is thrust into the bulk and the temperature noted at precise intervals. Rarely is the temperature allowed to rise above 160 degrees Fahrenheit, for the higher the temperature, the darker the tobacco will become and the more strain will be put on the leaf. In Cuba they do not let the temperature get above 120 degrees for most of their leaf. Normally, in the Dominican Republic and Honduras, the temperature for filler tobacco can go from 120 degrees to 160 degrees, while the temperature for wrapper leaf is monitored to fall within the 90-to 120-degree range. That is because wrapper leaf is generally a lighter and softer tobacco and cannot withstand such a hot and heavy fermentation.

The one exception to all of this is Maduro, which must reach a temperature of at least 165 degrees—and usually much higher—in order to darken properly. Thus, a Maduro cigar requires a relatively thick, sturdy leaf, usually from the Ligero portion of the plant. On the other hand, if a Seco leaf can be properly fermented into a Maduro, you will have a noticeably mild tasting cigar. Two of the best leaves for fermenting into Maduro are Connecticut sungrown and Mexican leaf from the San Andrés valley. The longer these tobaccos are fermented, the milder the taste. A long fermentation period also has the effect of darkening the leaf. Thus, the generalization that all Maduro cigars are strong tasting is not true. One has only to light up an otherwise visually imposing Macanudo Maduro or an Ashton #60 Aged Maduro to prove this point. Sometimes water is added to Maduro to help raise the temperature, and very

often the leaf is put in a pressure cooker to artificially increase the heat and moisture to better control the coloring. As an aside, Cuba produces very little Maduro.

After the leaves have been cured in the fields, they are brought to warehouses where they are sorted by hand. Many workers roll their own cigars out of the same product they are sorting, as evidenced by the woman on the right.

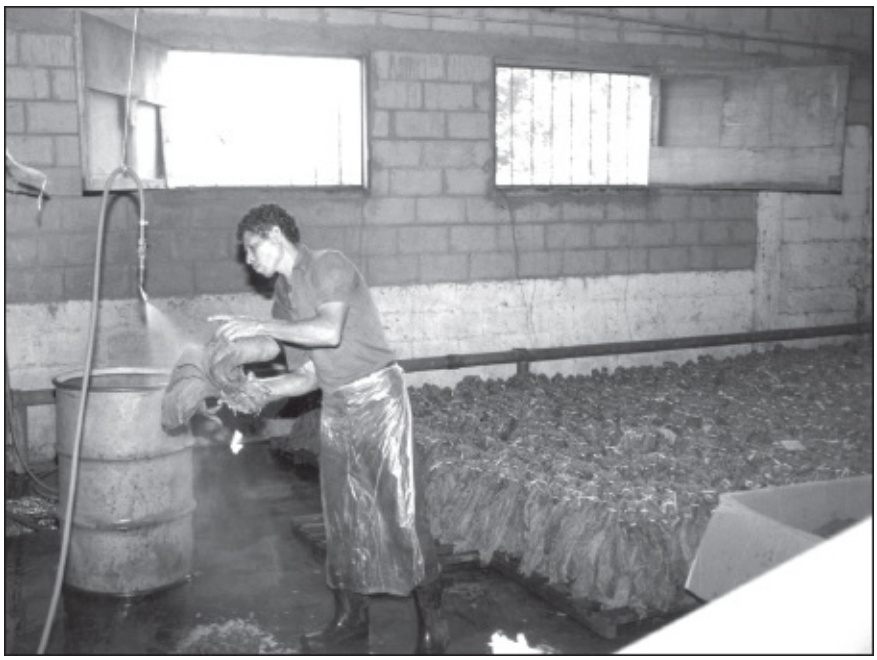
(Dominican Republic)

No matter what type of tobacco is fermenting, as soon as the heat reaches the desired temperature, the bulk is "turned," or rotated, which is done by taking all the top leaves and placing them on the bottom (in essence, starting a new pile), so the bottom leaves invariably end up on top. As each hand of tobacco is taken off the bulk, it is shaken vigorously to dissipate the heat stored within the leaves.

Then the fermentation process begins all over again, only with each turning of the bulk, the temperature does not rise as rapidly or as high as it did previously. It can take anywhere from six to ten turns to properly age and color a bulk. This process can go on for twenty to sixty days, depending on whether the leaf is Volado, Seco, or Ligero, with Volado taking the least amount of time and Ligero requiring the most fermentation. In the case of Maduro wrappers, the fermentation process can continue for six months or more, which explains why these cigars are usually more expensive; they simply take longer to make.

Once the fermentation process is completed, each leaf is meticulously

separated from the bulk, sorted, inspected and graded. In the case of wrapper leaf, the distinction is made according to the color it received during fermentation (i.e., Claro = a light golden brown; Colorado = medium brown; Maduro = dark brown; Oscuro = brownish black). Each leaf type is packed in bales made of bark from the Royal Palm tree, tied with palm fronds, marked as to the type of tobacco, its origin, and the date of storage, and then put in the cigar factories' warehouses for aging. Here, the tobacco sleeps for anywhere from one to three years, and sometimes even longer. Most factories keep a minimum of eighteen months' worth of tobacco on hand. That way, they are assured of having enough raw material to get through a less than bountiful growing year, or a losing bout with one of the plagues. Naturally, this ties up a tremendous amount of inventory and capital, which cannot be turned into a profit until it is made into cigars and sold. But to produce a cigar that remains consistent, year after year, there must be enough available tobacco to blend the old in with the new, much like a fifty-year-old cognac can be a blend of twenty-five and seventy-five-year-old cognacs, so that the taste will average out to fifty. It is the same principle with cigars, for the minute our favorite brand changes taste, we utter the death cry, "It's not the same anymore!" and abandon it forever.



This worker is casing Primero Rosado, a Number 1 cured wrapper that is ready to be worked. Notice how he opens the leaves of the hand for total coverage of the water spray.

(Honduras)

Leaves are graded by color, texture, and size.

(Dominican Republic)

Photo: Domingo Batista

The cured leaves are brought to the warehouse for their initial grading.

(Dominican Republic)

Photo: General Cigar

During less demanding years when cigar consumption was languishing,

companies like Consolidated Cigar Corporation (now Altadis), General Cigar, and A. Fuente used to have huge stores of tobacco that went as far back as the 1980s. Unfortunately, the overwhelming demand for cigars during the boom years of the 1990s depleted this decades-old reserve supply of vintage tobaccos. With the end of the boom followed by a dip in cigar consumption caused by the Great Recession these stores of aged tobaccos have been allowed to build up again.

During fermentation, the temperature is constantly checked to make sure the bulk is turned at precisely the right moment.

(Cuba)

Today, with a notable increase in cigar consumption—although nowhere near the three hundred percent annual growth that it knew during the boom—supplies of aged tobaccos are back, which bodes well for the future of super-premium cigars. However, it has raised a very interesting philosophical question for the cigar companies: Do you continuing aging your tobacco as non-profit-producing inventory that ties up precious cash, or do you release it sooner in

order to make cigars that will turn into instant revenue due to escalating demand? The answer is what separates the good cigars from the bad.

Arranging tobacco in a bulk for fermentation.

(Dominican Republic)

Certain numbers oriented people have elected to create cigars as quickly as possible, so that their expenditure in leaf is quickly multiplied into profit. But those companies who refuse to age their tobaccos and choose instead to make a quick killing—or rather, a quick cigar—rarely get repeat orders for their green, harsh-tasting products, either from tobacconists or their customers. That is why we see some brands disappear almost as fast as new ones come on the scene. On the other hand, the responsible manufacturer who takes long-term pride in his product puts the emphasis on quality and will opt to wait and let fermentation take its natural course. That is why the three largest firms mentioned above as well as a great number of other manufacturers are experiencing unprecedented demand for their brands.

For the most part, warehouses full of eight-and ten-year-old tobacco bales are pretty much a thing of the past, with a few notable exceptions like General Cigar (which has massive inventories), and the Padrón and Fuente families (although the Fuentes lost a lot of forty-year-old tobacco in a catastrophic warehouse fire a few years ago). However, responsible cigar manufacturers are still holding back production so that their tobacco can properly cure. After all, it takes time to adequately age a leaf. But it is time well spent. As justice will have it, cigars made with properly aged tobaccos actually reap far more returns on investment, for

once a cigar has a reputation of excellence, it gains a steady following that translates into loyal customers and repeat sales.

During this all-important storing/aging process, there is still a very mild form of fermentation going on, but nothing like the dramatic changes that had previously occurred. At the precise time, the aged bales are opened, inspected, and the hands of tobacco are shaken out and rehumidified in a fine mist spray. This is called the "casing" process. Although from a casual glance it appears as uncomplicated as spraying your backyard with a garden hose, the texture of each leaf is different and requires varying amounts of moisture. The wet tobacco is then hung on racks so that the water will gently trickle down the entire body of the leaf. As anyone who has ever over-humidified a cigar knows, tobacco leaves are highly absorbent, and they take to the casing process well. Soon, the stiff, brittle leaf that came in from the aging warehouse is transformed into a thin, pliable membrane that can easily be wrapped around your finger. In a way, the tobacco has been brought back to life after a long sleep.

Once they are moisturized, the leaves that are to be used for binder and wrapper go through the stemming operation, where the central vein in each leaf is completely removed, either by hand or by machine. This separates the leaf into right and left hand sides, which is extremely important in the case of wrappers for handrolled cigars, as there is a definite pattern that must follow the natural form of the leaf. For long leaf filler tobacco, the stemming operation takes place at the warehouses, before fermentation. In this case, only 25 percent to 75 percent—depending on the country—of the bottom of the stem is removed, to hold the leaf together during fermentation.

After casing and stemming, the leaves are inspected again, then graded, and finally hand sorted into wrapper, binder, and filler tobaccos. These three categories of leaf are then sent to the blender, where they are separated into specific recipes for each type of cigar made at that factory. These recipes are the most closely guarded secrets in the cigar business, and you will have an easier time getting Angelina Jolie's private cell number than you will in getting a blending recipe from any cigar maker.

The creation of a blend is what gives every cigar its character, and most importantly, its taste. Therefore, it is critical that all of the components are brought together in precisely the right proportions for each brand. That means the cigar maker must have an acute knowledge of tobaccos, and what each one can do.

At Nestor Plasencia Segovia factory in Estelí, the old time method of hand stripping the tobacco vein is still used. (*Nicaragua*)

For example, a strong tobacco generally burns slower than a lighter-tasting tobacco, so a strong-tasting cigar will usually last longer than a mild one of the same shape. In the area of Dominican fillers, as another case in point, Olor and Piloto filler leaf look very similar, but they each produce very distinct differences in taste. To further complicate matters, each of these two-leaf categories has multiple subclassifications within their own leaf type. The cigar maker must know them all, not just by name, but also by appearance, how they taste, and how they burn.

And then there are wrappers. When specifying Connecticut, for example, it is imperative to differentiate between broadleaf, US shade-grown, Ecuadorian grown, and so on. It is also important to know that a Cameroon wrapper grown in Ecuador (where much of this wrapper comes from today) will have a different taste and burn rate than a Cameroon leaf from Africa, which is distinct from the Mexican-grown Cameroon.

After fermentation, the leaves are again cased. At General Cigar, a "conditioning wheel" is used to spray moist air into the hands of tobacco so that they will be pliable enough to be worked.

(Dominican Republic)

And by that same token, in Cuba a wrapper grown in the Partido region can taste different in a finished cigar than a wrapper that was grown in the Vuelta Abajo.

All of this is simply to show the vast potentials that exist for creating a plethora of cigar brands, each with its own individual characteristics. Within that seemingly endless realm, you have the three components that go into the makeup of every cigar:

Filler—This is the "heart" of a cigar. Filler can be made of either long leaf, that is, strips of tobacco that travel the length of the cigar in one piece, or short filler, smaller cut up pieces that are usually used for machine-made cigars. Long leaf filler has the capability of producing a long ash, whereas short filler, by the very nature of its smaller pieces of tobacco, normally cannot form a long ash without crumbling. Long-leaf filler is more expensive, and has come to be associated with premium (i.e., high-grade) cigars. However, there are many excellent cigars, such as those produced by the Grave, Topper, and Finck companies in America and Villiger in Switzerland, that use short filler. And some cigars use a unique mixture of both long and short filler, which is sometimes called a Cuban Sandwich (see CigarSpeak in Chapter 9).

Then there is "chopped" filler, which is finely cut tobacco, often used in the better grades of Dutch-type dry cigars. "Scrap" filler, on the other hand, is the

leftovers of all the above, and is usually found in less expensive cigars and in many counterfeit Havanas. The filler of a premium cigar can be composed of anywhere from two to as many as five different types of long leaf tobacco. It becomes impractical to try to pack any more than that into the relatively limited confines of a cigar's body. Besides, the more varieties of leaf you use, the less total proportion of each there will be. Most blenders use two or three tobaccos quite effectively, although some utilize as many as four or five different long leaf tobaccos in their filler blends.

Stripping involves the removal of the center stem, which has the texture of strong twine. Tobacco is stripped by hand or by machine, as in this General Cigar operation. Machine stripping is faster, but some leaves, like Java, must be hand stripped so that they do not tear. It is for this reason that some companies employ both methods of stripping.

(Dominican Republic)

The tobacco leaves are sorted after they are brought in from the curing barns in the fields.

After stemming, the leaves are sorted by color and size. (Note the sorted tobacco leaves placed on the sorter's thighs. It is this practice that gave rise to the legend of Cuban cigars being rolled on a woman's thighs.) In this leaf separation room of Havana's Partagás factory, wrapper leaves are being sorted into their own internal classifications, such as Marevas, Robusto, Chicos, and Pirámides. A Marevas leaf, for example, will be used to make the Montecristo shape, but will also be used for the Bolivar Petite Corona, as these two cigars use the same shape, color, and size leaf.

(Cuba)

Binder—This is the "blanket" that holds the filler in place. It is a specialized leaf, for it must be strong enough to do the job, yet it has to impart a complementary flavor to the filler and wrapper. One of the many hallmarks of a premium cigar is that it boasts a binder made from a natural tobacco leaf, as opposed to many less

expensive mass-market cigars that use homogenized binders, which are made from leaf particles and cellulose. Thus, the phrase, "all-tobacco," has a very real and important meaning when you see it imprinted on a box of cigars.

Wrapper—In many ways, the wrapper is the most important part of a cigar, not just because it provides 30 to 60 percent of the flavor, but also because it is the embodiment of the cigar's total character. To a smoker's eyes, the wrapper *is* the cigar. The quality of the leaf, the color, the texture, and the aroma all combine to give us a very distinct impression of a cigar even before we light it up, no matter what the binder and filler underneath that wrapper may be. If the wrapper leaf is not appealing to all of our senses, chances are we will not smoke, let alone buy, that cigar. That is one of the reasons why good, well-veined, evenly textured wrapper leaf is so expensive; it literally and figuratively holds everything together.

Using the above three components, a skillful cigar maker can create a masterpiece out of tobacco leaf, just as a talented painter can turn a blank canvas into a work of art. If you consider the filler to be the colors red, blue, and yellow, the binder white and the wrapper black, then the cigar maker's cutting board becomes an artist's palette from which he can create an endless number of masterpieces, using every imaginable hue in the rainbow, or in this case, every possible combination of taste, aroma, and burn rate. That is one of the greatest beauties and challenges of cigar making. Somewhere out there is a perfect cigar for everyone, and it never has to be the same cigar!

In creating their products, some cigar makers will hit upon a perfect filler-binder-wrapper combination and use it with minor variations for each of the brands within their line. That way they can produce a family of cigars with basically similar characteristics, and very often a smoker who likes one of their brands will also like another. Other factories, such as My Father Cigars, will create a distinctly different blend for each of their brands, opting for a wider spectrum of tastes among their various cigars, and hoping, therefore, to appeal to a wider spectrum of customers. And still others will create a highly popular blend and use that exact same blend on different cigars, only changing the bands and the boxes in order to appeal to brand loyal smokers. (I therefore find it especially fascinating to note the different ratings many of these exact same cigars often get in independent tastings.) None of the above practices is any better than the other; in fact they are the very reasons we have so many excellent cigar choices today. But because there are so many brands from which to choose, one of the biggest challenges for factories is establishing and maintaining a consistency of

appearance, draw, and taste for each of the brands they produce. Consistency is one of the most important characteristics of a good cigar. And that is where the cigar maker comes in.

Basically, there are three different ways to make a cigar, even though the advertising literature of various companies may sometimes give them different labels or use more generic descriptions. They are:

Handmade—The entire cigar is bunched, rolled, and trimmed by individual hand labor. It can be one person working alone on a single cigar, or the work can be divided between a buncher and a roller working on the same cigar. The main criterion is that the entire cigar is completely made by hand from start to finish.

Machine bunched/Handrolled—The filler is bunched by machine, and then the filler/binder combination is turned over to a cigar roller, who puts the wrapper on by hand. This technique is often simply referred to as machine bunched.

Machine-made—The filler, binder and wrapper are completely assembled by machine.

Slightly complicating our acceptance of these definitions is a law that states any cigar that is machine bunched can legally be called a handmade cigar because the wrapper is still put on by hand. In fact, if you take a machine-made cigar and only stop the mechanized production long enough to manually put a tobacco cap on the head, in some instances you can still legally refer to it as a handmade product. But legal loopholes and advertising puffery aside, in order to keep things in their proper perspective throughout this book, I shall refer to the above three categories in their purest definitions, just as I have categorized them. Fortunately for the consumer, many people in the cigar industry are now starting to adopt these same definitions.

To my mind, the handmade cigar is a cigar in its purest form. It is the way Cuban cigars were made before there were any Cubans. It is the way the best premium Dominican, Honduran, Nicaraguan, and Mexican cigars are made today. It requires more work and opens itself up to more failures than any of the other two methods (ironically, a machine-made cigar is the most consistent of them all, because everything is regulated and controlled), but in my opinion, the handmade cigar is also the most aesthetically rewarding cigar to smoke.

The handrolled cigar begins with the cigar maker taking a prescribed amount of the filler blend recipe and forming a cylindrical "bunch" of these tobaccos in his hand. This is not as easy as it sounds. The filler is not rolled, but is actually

crimped in the hand, so that the different tobaccos fold over one other. In essence, the tobacco leaves are gathered up like an accordion, which has the effect of creating numerous horizontal air canals, which translates into an easy drawing cigar. This method also ensures an even distribution of all the leaves used in the blend.

There is also an old Cuban technique called *entubar*, in which each leaf within the bunch is rolled into itself, like a mini-tube, thus insuring a smoother draw that maximizes the flavors of all of the tobaccos in the bunch. Much more labor-intensive than the accordion fold, but either way, when you light your cigar, you are tasting the entire spectrum of tobaccos in the filler.

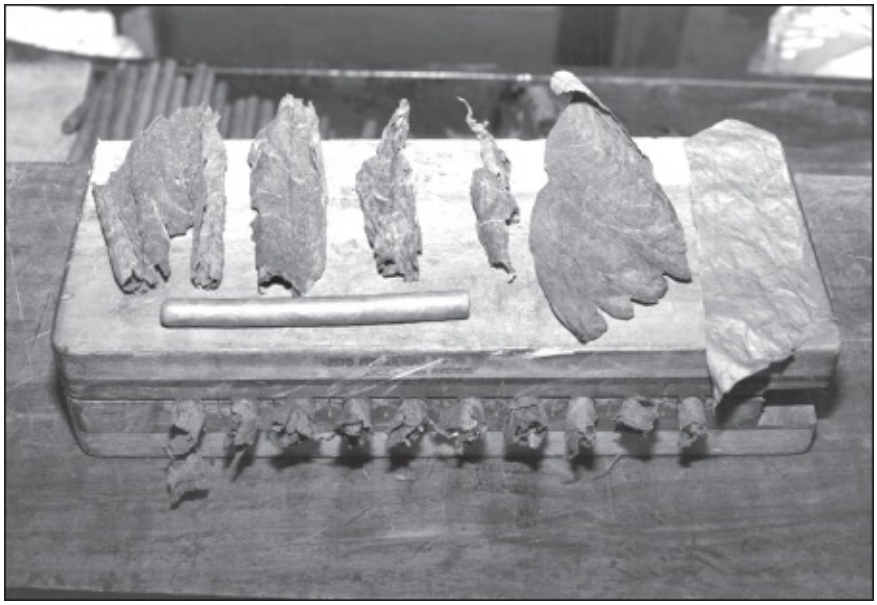
A poorly made cigar will have its filler "booked." That is, the leaves have been laid one on top of the other and folded over like the pages of a book. This has the effect of concentrating a lot of tobacco on one side (the spine of the book, so to speak), which means you could only be smoking a concentrated portion of the blend. In addition, the more tightly packed tobacco along the spine of the book can cause your cigar to burn unevenly down one side, while the looser "pages" of tobacco create overly wide air channels that can cause you to hyperventilate and your cigar to burn hot. Not a good thing for either of you. Obviously, filler should not be booked; an accordion or *entubar* fold is what you'll find in a good cigar.

The filler is then placed on the binder leaf and rolled, either by hand or utilizing a rubberized rolling guide known as a Lieberman (the fellow who invented it) or a Timsco (the company that sells it). This creates a "bunch," which is simply a cigar without its wrapper.

The bunch is placed in a wooden mold shaped to the exact size of the cigar shape the roller is making. Each mold holds approximately ten bunches. When the molds are full, they are stacked in a bunch press, which puts pressure on the molds and squeezes the bunches into shape. The partially completed cigars stay in the bunch presses for fifteen to forty-five minutes, depending on the size of the bunch and the practice of the factory. At various intervals, the bunches are given a quarter turn within the molds, in order to prevent tobacco ridges forming where the two mold halves come together; these ridges would be visible underneath the wrapper, which is not what you want to see in a well-rounded cigar.

(Left) Long filler tobacco leaves being bunched for a premium cigar. (Right) Quality short filler is made from long filler-leaf tobaccos. In this photo, the short filler contains four grades of Mexican tobacco plus Cuban seed and Olor, with a touch of Brazil for additional flavoring. This pre-blended tobacco will be put into the filler canal of a cigar-making machine.

Next, the formed bunch is removed from the mold by the cigar roller, who places it on a wrapper leaf that he has expertly and swiftly trimmed to the proper size with a flat, rounded "Cuban knife," also known as a *chaveta*. The wrapper has been placed upside down on the cutting board (*la tabla*) so that when it is rolled, the smooth outer surface of the leaf will be showing. Experienced rollers will roll the leaf tip, which contains the mildest concentrations of oils and flavors, into the foot or tuck end of the cigar, while the base of the leaf is formed into the head of the cigar. Thus, the smoke and taste of the tobacco will all work toward the fuller flavored part of the wrapper as the cigar is being smoked.



The components of a long filler cigar (L. to R.): Four types of filler (this can vary from two to four or even more, depending on the brand), the binder and the wrapper. A completed cigar is in the foreground. The tobacco was photographed on top of a filled bunch mold.

(Dominican Republic)

In an experimental station at the Altadis factory in La Romana, a worker is taking the various components of a filler blend and separating them by percentages in compartments, in order to achieve more consistent control of the blends that go into each cigar.

(Dominican Republic)

Using a thumbnail-sized round piece of tobacco cut from a portion of leftover wrapper leaf trimming (so the color will match the wrapper), the cap is

smoothed down over the head of the cigar and glued in place with a flavorless natural gum from the Tragacanth tree. Some cigar makers, for reasons best known only to themselves, insist on adding a sweetener to this substance, in the mistaken belief that it enhances the flavor of the tobacco. The cigar is then placed in the wooden groove of a "tuck cutter" and deftly trimmed to its proper length.

This entire cigar-making procedure, from rolling the bunch to trimming the tuck, is done with such unbelievable swiftness that it blurs in the camera's lens unless an exceptionally fast shutter speed is used. Therefore, it's not surprising to learn that a skilled cigar maker can roll as many as 700 cigars a day, although factories like Honduras American Tobacco, S. A., makers of such excellent cigars as Punch, Hoyo de Monterrey, and Rey del Mundo, purposely hold their best rollers down to no more than 500 cigars a day in order to maintain quality. In the huge Arturo Fuente factory in Santiago, Dominican Republic, some cigar rollers can also turn out up to 500 cigars a day, but the average cigar maker there will only produce from 150 to 200 cigars per a ten-hour workday. And when it comes to special hard-to-do shapes, such as the Hemingway series with its perfecto tuck, even the most highly skilled worker can only create an average of seventy-five of these unique cigars daily, which is one of the reasons they end up costing more than an easier-to-roll Fuente 8-5-8 Flor Fina, for example. In Cuba, the average worker turns out approximately 135 of the larger sized cigars per day; smaller cigars get completed at a faster rate. Which is not to say that smaller cigars are easier to roll. In many ways they are more difficult to make, not only in the physical sense, but also because it takes quite a bit of skill to fit more than one or two leaves into the filler blend (which means the wrapper and binder must augment the slightly reduced taste of the filler).

Once the leaves are sorted into filler blends, they are taken to the rollers.

(Dominican Republic)

Speaking of taste, because a small ring size burns hotter than a large one, a roller may decide to leave out some of the stronger-tasting Ligero to compensate. A smaller ring size also increases the possibility of "plugging" a cigar with a wayward piece of tobacco, thereby interfering with the draw. On the other hand, a large cigar is even more challenging, partly because any defects in workmanship or tobacco leaf can show up more readily. It is also more difficult to construct a large bunch so that all of the different leaves in the filler are equally distributed along the entire length of the cigar, which must be done in order to prevent one particular tobacco from dominating the taste. That is why a cigar roller who has gradually worked his way up into being able to make the larger sizes is paid more than a worker who only makes smaller shapes. Even if his skills are temporarily needed to make coronas, for example, a worker who has graduated up to making Churchills must still be paid his Churchill rate while making the smaller cigar.

Indeed, there is a form of class system among cigar rollers, and oddly enough, nowhere did I find this to be more in evidence than in Cuba, where the most skilled workers sit closest to the front of the *galera*, while the less experienced are at the back of the room. Cuba has seven categories of cigar makers; the lower the number, the fewer and less complicated the shapes that can be made by each worker in that category. And yes, even in Cuba, a category seven worker will be paid more per cigar than a category five individual. That is one of the reasons a

complicated shape such as a Pyramid or a Double Churchill—whether it is made in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, or Honduras—costs more. It simply is more expensive to produce. The other reason, of course, is that it takes more tobacco to make these big-bodied cigars.

Most factories have training programs so new cigar makers can gradually replace the old ones. Given the increased demand for cigars, these in-house cigar schools have assumed a rigorous new importance as additional rollers are needed to boost production. But in some factories, *las tablas* that were formerly reserved for students are now occupied by experienced rollers who each can turn out hundreds of additional cigars per day. In Cuba especially there is a critical shortage of rollers, as more and more people try to leave the island and fewer young Cubans want to enter into such a mundane job.

Preparing the wrapper. Notice the five remaining bunches in the cigar mold to the cigar roller's right, and the trimmed bits of the foot in the tray in front of her.

Photo: Nestor Plasencia factory in Estelí, Nicaragua

Smoothing and finishing the cap on a Churchill. The tobacco must be kept moist so that it will be pliable and easy to work. ***(Nicaragua)***

The marble head, or rounded cap, is the traditional way of finishing a premium cigar.

A perfecto tip requires extra skill to make (which is why you rarely find them on counterfeit cigars), and is the easiest to clip.

The Curly Head, made by twisting the extra long leaf left on the cap, is an old Cuban style that has been resurrected by many of today's cigar makers. Because it involves an extra, time-consuming step, it is usually found on only the best cigars. (Notice the white bloom on the head.)

But no matter what the country, apprentices traditionally undergo one to two years of training, after which time the one out of 100 who qualifies can usually make up to 150 cigars a day. But not all the shapes. It takes a minimum of six months to learn to make even the most basic of cigars, at least six years to become skilled, and a full twenty years or longer for a cigar roller to become a master *torcedor*. Unfortunately, in an effort to increase production, the learning curve has been dramatically accelerated in some countries and, especially in Cuba, many rollers are being given complex shapes to make after only five years' experience. This is why we sometimes get cigars that are rolled too tightly, packed too loosely, or made undersized.

Cigar rolling is tedious, monotonous work, and many of the nineteenth and early twentieth century factories had a *lector de tabaqueria* reading out loud to the craftsmen to keep them from rolling their eyes instead of their cigars and mentally slipping off into oblivion. Many times, the choice of literature was the classics, like Homer's *Odyssey* or passages from Shakespeare. As a result, cigar rollers used to be some of the "best-read" individuals in their neighborhood. Of course, the radio put an end to the cigar reader in most factories, but in Cuba this nostalgic worker's perk is still being practiced. Except now they listen to the latest news being read from selected South American publications. Or government programming. Only at the Arturo Fuente factory in the Dominican Republic did I hear music being played to the workers instead of localized versions of radio talk shows. And a surprising number of cigar-making companies elect not to have any audio entertainment at all, now that workers have their own personal listening devices to keep them entertained.

At the Fuente factory, a roller bunches the filler. Notice the bunching presses in the background.

(Dominican Republic)

At the Altadis factory, hand rollers work with hydraulic bunching presses located at each station, thus co-mingling updated innovations with traditional cigar rolling methods. In this way, many companies are preserving their handmade craftsmanship while looking ahead to the twenty-first century.

(Dominican Republic)

The wrapper is rolled around the bunch.

(Dominican Republic)

The Lieberman machine, a rubber mat that is rolled by hand, assures overall consistency in bunching. Notice the bunch, near the cigar roller's hands, starting to pick up the binder leaf.

The completed bunches are placed in wooden bunch molds.

Some wooden molds are not available for special figurado shapes. This Avo (7x36/54) Pyramid, for example, is bunched in a paper mold.

(Dominican Republic)

But whether handmaking cigars to the accompaniment of a reader, the radio,

an MP3 player, or the human sounds of silence, every worker in every country has one common characteristic: they all genuinely seem to take great pride in their work. In Cuba, for example, no matter which factory I visited, I was greeted by the enthusiastic clatter of *chavetas* being pounded on *las tablas*, which remains this cigar-making nation's traditional and inspiring salute to visitors. Of course, it was pointed out by the lector, at the time I was the only Norte Americano to have visited their factories in quite a while. And the fact that I was writing yet another book about cigars produced another round of *chaveta* rattling.

But even in the other Caribbean countries, every worker smiled when I stopped to take a closer look at their handicraft, and most of the people either blushed or beamed when I photographed the cigars they were making, as if I was taking pictures of their children. Another reason everyone seems so happy, I suspect, is that they all have jobs, no easy feat in a Third World country. Indeed, the cigar industry is a major factor in the employment rate of nations such as the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Honduras. Those who have the dexterity and talent can have a job for life, and it is not unusual to find a *torcedor* in his seventies who has been with the same cigar-making family or factory for more than fifty years.

Once completed by the rollers, the cigars are tied in bunches of fifty, and affixed with a slip of paper giving the cigar maker's name, the name of his supervisor (who has been constantly inspecting the cigars as they were being made) and any other pertinent information the factory may require, such as types of tobacco used, the shape of the cigar, or its brand. This is done as a check; in case any cigar in the bunch fails to measure up to standards, the foreman will know whom to confront. Because each roller is paid by the number of cigars he or she makes, cigars that are rejected are deducted from the worker's pay. The cigar bunches are then weighed to make sure the proper amounts of tobacco have been used, and are passed through a ring gauge to determine that they are the proper diameter for their shape. And once again, they are given a close visual inspection.

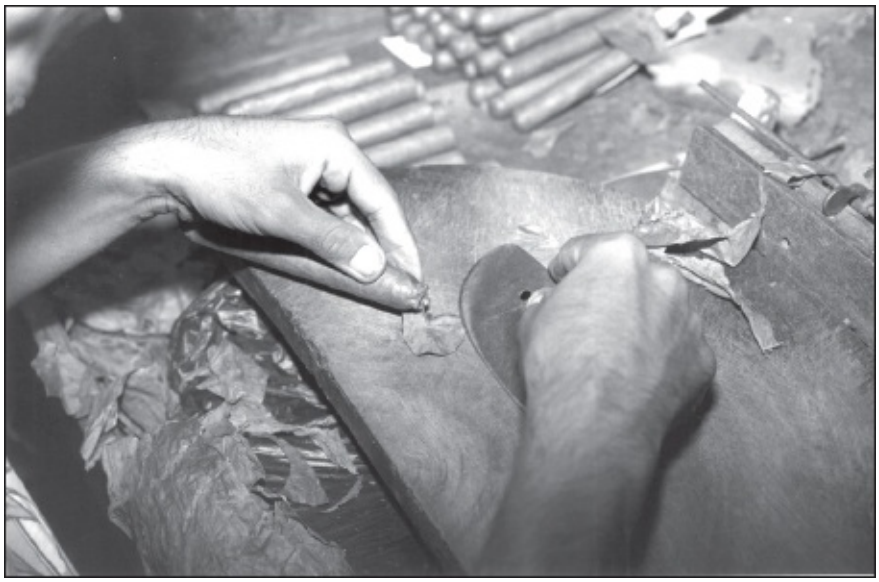
When the bunches are ready, the roller spreads the wrapper leaf on the cutting board and trims it with the sharp chaveta.

(Cuba)

Because the tobacco has to be overly moist in be worked by the cigar maker, the completed cigar must now be reduced in its moisture content so that it can be smoked. In addition, the various tobaccos within each cigar must "marry," or blend together, much as a chef's special sauce must be allowed to simmer on the stove to blend all the spices. Only instead of a stove, the cigars are placed in an aging room. It is here, in these traditional, temperature controlled Spanish cedar chambers that the cigars are allowed to rest for a minimum of three weeks while their humidity levels are evened out and the flavors from the filler, binder, and wrapper are permitted the luxury of getting to know one another. Some cigars, many of which fall into the "vintage" category, are aged longer than others. Dunhill Aged Cigars, for example, are aged for a minimum of three months. The Fuente Hemingway and Chateau Fuente cigars are aged for at least six months, as are the Ashton Cabinet Selection Vintage cigars. Fuente's limited edition Don Carlos cigar and the OpusX are aged for a minimum full year, as is the Cuesta-Rey's Diamond Crown. Davidoff's Dominican cigars are aged in their warehouses in Connecticut, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam for as long as one and a half years. On the other hand, Padrón does not age their completed cigars, but opts to box them for shipping and letting them age in transit.

Producing the Perfecto-style foot of a Hemingway cigar.

(Dominican Republic)



The very skillful process of cutting and shaping the flag of tobacco that will become a "finished head" of a premium cigar. It takes an experienced cigar maker to create this style of head.

(Honduras)

The completed cigar is trimmed to size in the tuck cutter.

(Honduras)

Cuba used to age their hallmark cigars, such as the Partagás and Montecristo, up to a full year or more in cedar cupboards that date back to the last century.

Unfortunately, many Havana cigars are now aged in those same cupboards for as little as six days, due to an insatiable demand for Cuban cigars and that country's crucial need to turn her tobacco crop into cash as quickly as possible. Thus, they can't really afford to let most of their cigars age any longer, with the exception of a few brands, such as their flagship cigar, Cohiba. This has had the disastrous effect of some smokers buying fresh Havanas and smoking them "green."

As an example, when I was in Cuba I purchased a box of Romeo y Julieta No. 4s directly from the factory. Just how directly I was soon to discover. In my excitement to actually have a full box of Havanas in my possession (forget the fact that I was still in Cuba; I was excited), I opened the box and lit one up that evening while sitting by the pool of the Havana Riviera (the former Riviera Hilton). It was a perfect moment. The Cuban moon was full, rising slowly over the skyline and starting to reflect upon the water.

Every cigar is individually inspected after they are made and before being aged. ***(Nicaragua)***

Once the cigars are inspected, they are rebundled and weighed, as another check for the proper tobacco contents.

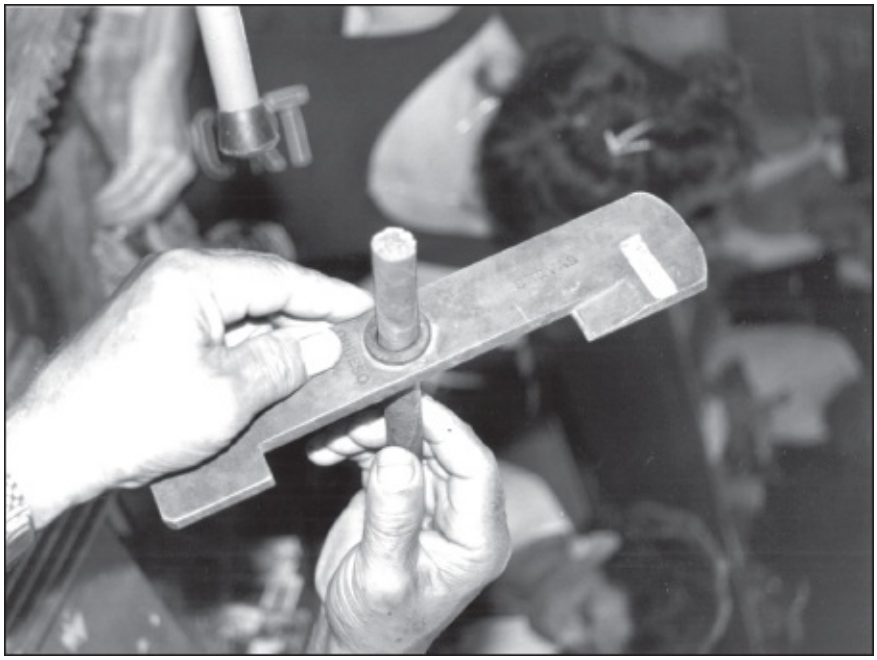
(Dominican Republic)

The night air was cool, with just a touch of breeze, and in the background I could hear the surf quietly lapping against the breakwater that lined the scenic Malecón highway. I struck a match. I warmed the foot of the cigar, gently turning it. Then I took a puff. My palate was met with the hollow harshness that comes from a freshly rolled cigar. Correction: a *too* freshly rolled cigar. It had not

been aged. Out of desperation, determined to completely smoke my first Havana in Havana, I struggled through the cigar and accomplished my goal, but it was not a pleasant experience. I never reopened that box until back in the States three months later, when I removed the No. 4s from a humidor where I had been storing them. The sight of the cigars instantly brought back pleasant memories of my trip. So, bracing myself for the worst, I went out on the porch and lit one up. To my pleasant surprise, this time the Romeo y Julieta was a much tamer smoke. It had time to mellow in my humidor, and that made all the difference between a barely tolerable cigar and an enjoyable one. A year later I smoked the very last cigar from that box and found it to be rich, creamy, and full of flavor. Additional aging had done it. The moral of this story is, when smoking Cuban cigars, chances are it will be much more rewarding if you come across a box that has been allowed to age in a dealer's humidor for at least a few months. Or plan on aging them yourself before firing the first one up. On the other hand, Dominican, Nicaraguan, and Honduran cigars are already well aged and ready to enjoy when they arrive, although in Chapter 4 we'll talk about aging them even further.

After the cigars have been aged in the factory's marrying room, they are again inspected, and then sorted by color. There are approximately sixty different shades of brown, and each cigar must be separated by color before it is boxed. It is a great source of pride for both the cigar maker and the cigar smoker to be able to open a box and see the exact same shade of wrapper on every cigar.

It doesn't make the cigars smoke any better, but it is an indication of the pride each company takes in its product. Although some Havana brands are not color sorted in the purest sense of the word, they should at least have the darkest cigars on the left hand side, going to the lightest wrappers on the right. And it is a common Cuban practice to put the best cigars on the top row, so if buying a box of Havanas, check the bottom row as well.



A cigar is checked for the correct ring size. The cutout notch in this Cuban gauge is used for measuring length. Ring gauges can be made of wood, brass, or plastic.

(Cuba)

A Cuban quality control inspector in the La Corona factory randomly selects cigars and forces them open to visually ensure that the required leaves in the blends are all there and in the correct proportions, and that the filler tobaccos have not been twisted, which would interfere with the draw.

(Cuba)

Once the cigars have been grouped into the same color categories, they are banded. Each band must be put on (by hand, of course) at exactly the same height on every cigar, so that they will all line up perfectly when the cigars are boxed. Some cigars, especially some of the special presentations or limited editions like the Davidoff Gold Band and the OpusX Angel's Share, are double banded, which I always thought was an elegant extra touch. However, recently this extra banding has been taken to extremes, with some of the bands covering up more than half the cigar, which defeats the purpose of having a beautiful wrapper. Obviously the only solution is to remove this extra band, which makes one wonder why it was put on in the first place.

Finally, the cigars are carefully slipped into cellophane sleeves to keep them from becoming damaged during transit. Some cigars, including most Cubans, are shipped in cedar boxes "naked," or without cellophane, as cello will considerably slow down and even halt the otherwise continuous aging process. Personally, I prefer uncellophaned cigars and make it a practice to remove the cellophane from every cigar the instant I get the handmade box home (this will enhance the aging process in your humidor).

Yes, even the boxes are made by hand, usually by the same factories that make the cigars. There are two types of cigar boxes: 1) a cedar plywood "dress box," in which you rarely see the wood because every available space is covered with a multitude of labels and separate edging designs, and 2) an all-cedar "cabinet box," which utilizes German-made brass hinges and nails so they won't rust while being stored in a dealer's walk-in humidor. Most of the cedar used in making cabinet boxes for Caribbean cigars is Honduran-grown African cedar. Other sources for cedar are Mexico, Nicaragua, and the US Plywood for the dress boxes comes from Taiwan, Korea, and Brazil. Cuba grows its own plywood, but must import the heavier cedar from Honduras.

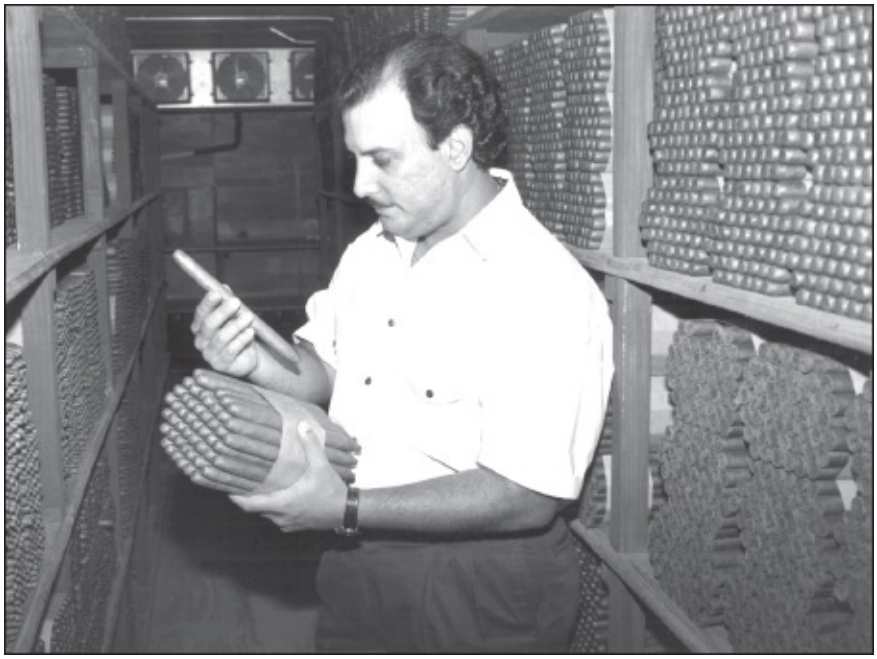
Every band is put on by hand, one cigar at a time. Notice the measurement guide to the left of the cigar, so that each band will be put in exactly the right spot.

As a final step, the cigars are once again inspected, re-checked for matching wrapper colors, and boxed.

(Dominican Republic)

Photo: General Cigar

Color sorting is a tedious yet exacting skill.



A very young Carlos "Carlito" Fuente, Jr., circa 1992, inspects the Hemingway Masterpiece in his factory's cedar-lined aging room that includes electric bug zappers. Another company, Altadis, uses a system of electronically induced sexual energy that lures bugs to their amorous deaths. There is no limit to what some companies will do to preserve our cigars!

(Dominican Republic)

All of Cubatabaco's cigar boxes are made by just one factory in Havana. Some of the most beautiful cigar boxes are made in the Dominican Republic and

Honduras. The fancy routed and shaped boxes for Fuente's Don Carlos and Cuban Corona, for example, could both have a very satisfactory afterlife as jewelry boxes. And many lacquered cedar boxes are impressive enough to put on a silver serving tray. General Cigar uses a handsome mahogany box to appropriately show off their Macanudo Vintage and Partagás 8-9-8 cigars and their Cohiba Luxury Selection is nothing short of a modernistic work of art. Likewise, The Foundry's 2014 Hell-ion and Hal-ion offerings are far from being traditional, with a futuristic spin accented by a sticker that proclaims, "Made with Martian tobacco." Meanwhile, back on earth, smaller companies usually buy ready-made boxes from the United States. But most firms find it is more efficient to make their own.

These early twentieth century boxed Cuban cigars bring top dollar on today's collector market.

The mammoth US cigar boom of the nineties created an unprecedented demand for cigar boxes, which resulted in an overharvesting of cedar, and I remember some companies asking merchants to return their empty boxes so they could be refilled and recycled again. With "recycle" being one of the most popular buzz words today, one wonders why this practice isn't still being followed? Don't be surprised if mahogany is the next new trend for cigar boxes. Some may even try plastic, but many of us will balk at that.

Fortunately there are still enough trees to make paper, for cigar companies often produce their own labels. However, rather than continue with expensive four-color printing, many factories are now imprinting individual cigar names and shapes in one color over a multicolored label that has been preprinted by an outside vendor. Cuba, of course, was the first to put a full colored label on a cigar box back in 1837, when cigar maker Ramón Allones decided that his cigars needed some eye appeal. That label remains largely unchanged today. Cubatabaco prints most of their four-color labels in the La Corona and H.

Upmann factories. Most of the other large factories, like Altadis, maintain a regular print shop for their labels, and Fuente even has their own silk screening department for attractively decorating certain boxes, such as their Hemingway series.

This rare set of Austrian brass cigar shape gauges, which date from the late nineteenth century, were used by Vienna's cigar makers to insure quality control.

With the boxes assembled and labeled, the cigars are carefully placed inside, with a colored ribbon or turned-up piece of cellophane always present on one of the top layered cigars, in order to facilitate its removal. Prior to cellophaning, some cigars have been pressed together to give them a square shape, a practice that originated to keep the cigars from rolling off of the table.

Others are left in the round, which always struck me as being more natural; let 'em roll. And a few, such as Henry Clay, have purposely been given a rough, out-of-round surface on the wrapper. It's all a matter of each cigar's character, with little effect on how the cigar will smoke, although box-pressed cigars will taste slightly different than the same cigar in the round. Then the cigars are given one final inspection, and that person will usually put an identifying stamp or tag on the box before it is nailed shut. By hand, of course.

It is difficult to tell a machine-bunched/handrolled cigar from a handmade cigar, except by price. The draw is the same, sometimes even better, because there is less chance for human error in the bunching process. Machine-bunched cigars are usually less expensive, which is why manufacturers first began to

utilize this procedure back in the 1950s. Because they are often referred to as "handmade" cigars, little differentiation has ever been made between the two. Up until now, that is. Actually, there is a sizable amount of hand labor that goes into each machine-bunched cigar, and some of the best values can be found in this category. An excellent example of a popular machine-bunched/handrolled cigar is the Honduran-made Primo del Rey.

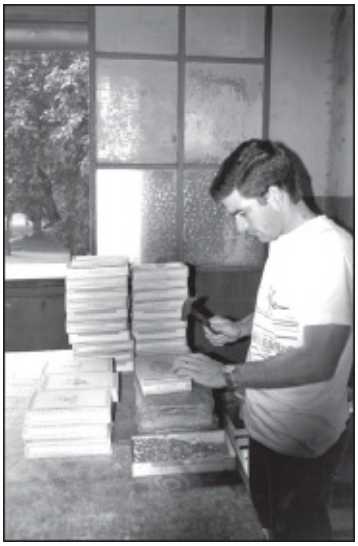
In making this cigar, the pre-blended filler leaf is fed by hand into a machine that automatically bunches it. In the meantime, a worker places a rough-cut binder leaf over a template.

A mechanized blade drops down and trims the leaf precisely to the template form. The machine then picks up the binder, glues it with clear gum arabic, rolls the filler leaf into the binder and tumbles the finished bunch onto a conveyor belt. From there it is picked up by hand, trimmed, and placed into the cigar molds. From that point on, the machine-bunched cigar is treated exactly like a handmade cigar, going to the hand roller, and following the exact same steps of inspections, color sorting, and aging.

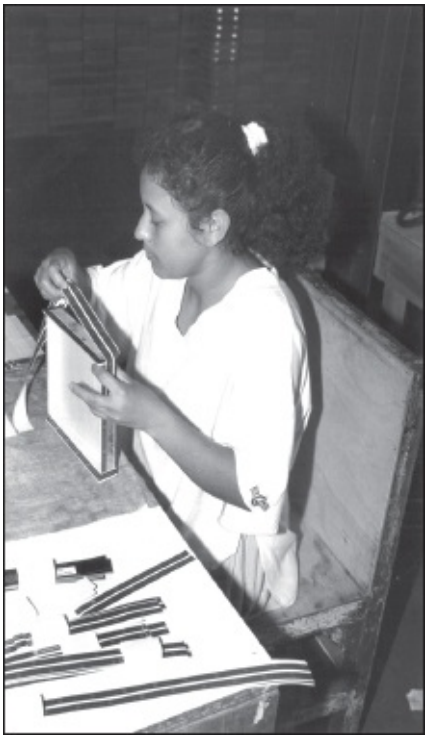
The Making of a Box

Cedar is cut, marked with the date, and air-dried for at least a year. In Honduras, the terrain is so rugged that logs often have to be flown out by helicopter. When ready, they are cut into boards, air-dried and then kiln dried.

(Honduras)



Boxes are assembled by hand with nails, glue, or staples, depending on the company and the brand of cigar.



The multicolored bands of a cedar plywood "dress box" are individually glued on by hand.

(Honduras)

So these cigars could actually be referred to as semi-handmade, although I think machine-bunched/handrolled is a more accurate description.

The third category, the 100-percent machine-made cigar, is normally reserved for low-priced, mass market products such as King Edward, Optimo, Dutch Masters, Antonio y Cleopatra, and El Producto. All these popularly priced cigars are produced by giant mechanized factories located in either America or Puerto Rico. Practically all of them utilize some form of homogenized tobacco leaf (HTL), a process owned by General Cigar Corporation, although there are other variations as well. Basically, homogenized tobacco is an artificially produced product that is composed of tobacco stems and fibers, which are mixed with water and other organic liquids to produce a pulp-like material. In fact, the HTL manufacturing process is a lot like making paper, except for the fact that tobacco is used instead of wood. And rather than take the form of a natural tobacco leaf, HTL comes off of a drying belt and is formed into rolls, which are in turn fed into the cigar-making machines. About 90 percent of all mass market cigars are made with HTL binder and 60 percent of these cigars use HTL wrapper as well.

In making a mass market, machine-made cigar, short-filler is rolled into the binder. From there, the bunch is force molded by a crimper into the desired

shape, which includes forming the head. The shaped bunch is then dropped into a basket, where the wrapper is automatically rolled on. The completed cigar is then mechanically pressed to give it a desired shape. These machines can easily make from 500 to 800 cigars a minute. With this kind of speed, wrappers and binders undergo a tremendous strain, and sturdiness of homogenized tobacco becomes a necessity.

Unlike natural wrapper leaf, which has a definite texture to it, homogenized wrapper appears as a flat matte finish. Homogenized wrapper can be made in any color. Not by fermentation, as with natural tobacco leaf, but simply by adding artificial coloring. Thus, an HTL wrapper can be produced in one continuous sheet of Claro, EMS, Maduro, and even chartreuse, if that is your idea of a good time. Some years ago, an enlightened manufacturer actually printed tobacco leaf veins on his HTL wrapper to give it a more natural look. However, many mass market cigar smokers were not accustomed to seeing real tobacco veins on their wrappers, let alone fake ones, and they began to grow uneasy over these strange lines on their favorite Panetelas. So the practice was discontinued.

A far more palatable option for homogenized tobacco is the addition of flavoring, once a popular trend, and cigars that give the smoker a hearty dose of rum, vanilla, apricot, or cherry are still found on today's less expensive smokes. I suppose one could even fantasize about having a cigar flavored like a porterhouse steak, for the ultimate experience in smoked meat.

Ironic as it may seem, machine-made cigars are often the most uniform cigars that can be made, because their construction is automatically regulated, with little margin for human error. The use of homogenized tobacco is also a tremendous help in controlling the burning rate as well as the color of ash. In fact, one of the whitest ashes possible is found on mass-market cigars. Not that a white ash is of particularly great significance, as we shall discover in Chapter 4. Mass-market cigars also provide one of the mildest smokes in the world. That is because the ingredients used in these cigars are actually designed to tone *down* the taste of tobacco. Which is why so many of the people who favor these cigars, the most notable of whom was the late George Burns, can light up ten to twenty cigars a day with no ill effects. After all, George did live to be 100.

There is a very distinct difference between mass-market cigars, which are machine made, and regular machine-made cigars that are not in the mass-market category. Three notable examples are the excellent short filler cigars by F. D. Grave, the Topper Cigar Company, and the Finck Cigar Company. For the

cigar connoisseur who prefers the Dutch-type European variety, there are some very worthwhile machine-made cigars, such as the various products from Schimmelpenninck, Ritmeester, Villiger, Agio, Gallaher, and Christian of Denmark, just to name a few. Many of these cigars actually fall into the small cigar and cigarillo categories; some are all-tobacco, while others use homogenized binder in conjunction with the same tobacco filler and wrapper as found in a handmade cigar.

Most dry cigars are machine bunched, using short filler. Sometimes this filler is so short, they can put as many as twenty different kinds of tobacco into a single cigar. The bunch is machine wrapped in either homogenized leaf, or, in the case of some of the more expensive cigars, natural leaf. Depending on price and size, the wrapper is put on by hand or machine, and can be either natural leaf or homogenized. A thin coating of tobacco powder is often dusted over the wrappers of some cigars in order to give them a more uniform color. A typical factory worker in Europe can turn out 2,000 Dutch-type cigars a day. But keep in mind, these are much smaller than the humidified cigars of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

Although Habanos S. A. would rather focus attention on its handmade products, machine-made cigars in Cuba are still among the best, because they are produced with all Havana tobacco. Of the thirty-one Cuban brands currently being exported, twenty-six include at least a few machine-made cigars in their lineup, usually in the smaller sizes. Some notable examples are: Quintero Chicos, Partagás Culebras and Petit Bouquet, and H. Upmann Perfectos. All Cuban machine-made cigars are currently being manufactured in the H. Upmann and La Corona factories.

Of course, an obvious question is, if some of the better-quality machine-made cigars are so good, then why even bother with the expense of producing handmade cigars? For one thing, it is difficult to get a machine to properly distribute all of the long leaf filler in a bunch. It still takes a human hand to get an even mix throughout the blend. That is why a handmade cigar always has its own distinctive taste.

Another factor is the ability of the human eye to properly gauge and guide the hands through the cigar-making process; each cigar becomes an individual tribute to this craftsmanship. Then there is appearance; a handrolled cigar has its own distinctive look. And taste, for only the very best tobaccos are used. And then there is that indefinable aura that emanates from every premium cigar, no matter what its size, taste, or nationality, simply because of the fact that it is

handmade. Of course, you pay more for all these extra features, tangible or not, but that has always been the price of handcraftsmanship.

Even machine-made cigars require a significant amount of handcraftsmanship, as evidenced by the before-and-after twists of Villiger's "AWEG" cigars, a style of culebra.

(Switzerland)

Even among the various factories that specialize in premium handmade cigars, there are different methods and philosophies involved. For example, in Cuba, a single skilled worker makes the entire cigar, from beginning to end. This is the traditional method of the historic *torcedores*, a method that is still followed in most non-Cuban factories today. Additionally, in Cuba there are small flags posted by the benches of workers who have excelled in their craft. (Interestingly, I've not seen this "reward" system practiced anywhere else.) In the Honduras American Tobacco factory, makers of such excellent cigars as Punch, Hoyo de Monterrey and Rey del Mundo, for example, a separate bunch maker assembles the bunch and then brings it over to the cigar roller. Normally there are two bunch makers per roller, as the rolling operation in this factory is twice as fast as the bunching. This speeds up production while maintaining quality, as the bunchers can devote all of their concentration to this one aspect of the cigar-making process.

A cigar-making machine at the La Corona factory in Havana. The revolving template is for binder leaf, which will be automatically cut and fed into a bunching machine. In the background, an inspector examines the finished product.

(Cuba)

In the Fuente factory, they prefer to use one buncher per roller, taking care to pair the speed of each team so they are compatible. This family-owned factory has also established a "Hemingway Hall of Fame," where the top twenty rollers who make the Hemingway cigar ply their craft in a room that contains inspirational articles of Hemingway memorabilia. The fact that a single room has

been devoted to the making of one style of cigar is significant, and could only be done by a factory the size of Fuente, the second largest producer of Dominican cigars in the world. In their Santiago factory alone there are 300 *torcedores* in the main *galera*, along with fifteen supervisors and one master supervisor. Plus their own highly efficient Cigar Protection Device: a burly guard packing a semi-automatic Colt Government .45 (I don't know about the cigars, but it made *me* feel safer. After all, these factories are located in Third World countries). And only in the highly efficient Honduras American Tobacco factory did I see some of their most skillful workers making two different cigar shapes at the same time, so that if bunches for one shape were not forthcoming, the roller started on the second shape.

This same Honduran company also has a scholarship program for children of the workers. In the DR's Tabacos Dominicanos factory, where Avo, Griffin's, and Davidoff cigars are made, a strict inventory control is practiced, wherein each worker must personally sign for the filler, binder and wrapper leaves that he or she uses each day, and is held accountable for them in relationship to the number of cigars produced. Other factories also use this technique, and it is especially prevalent today in Cuba, in an effort to halt the smuggling of leaf used in off-premise (i.e., counterfeit) cigars.

Maria Luisa Almanza, who was Chief of Production for the Partagás factory in Havana, inspects cigars that are being box pressed.

But perhaps the most innovative of all is Altadis, the largest producer of premium cigars in the world (H. Upmann, Romeo y Julieta, Don Diego, Montecristo, etc.) Here, in the only factory on the southwestern La Romana side of the island, a number of novel approaches have been implemented in the age-old art of cigar making. The traditional cigar rolling techniques remain intact, but some of the new variations include a mechanical suction test on bunches

(now practiced by a few other companies as well) to ensure that each cigar will produce a satisfactory draw, with different calibrations to compensate for different shapes; a Lonsdale would require more suction than a Rothschild for example. Only after a bunch passes the suction test is it rolled into the wrapper. And rather than tighten the bunch press by hand, hydraulic presses have been installed at each cigar roller's station. These presses are automatically timed to release the bunch presses at precise intervals. Indeed, it is a bit disconcerting to be walking through this giant factory and hear the self-timed hiss of numerous bunch presses opening up hydraulically. In addition, experimentation is currently going on to test the feasibility of replacing wooden cigar molds with plastic ones, and of doing away with the traditional *chaveta* in favor of pizza cutters!

For anyone who has visited any of the cigar-making countries recently, it is obvious that the current smoker's renaissance is having a dramatic effect on an industry that essentially hadn't changed in over one hundred years. Although production has become more efficient, a cigar is not something that can be rushed. And wrappers, especially larger sized leaves, continue to be an ever-growing (or rather, non-growing!) problem. At one point in the Dominican Republic the prices being paid for top grade filler tobacco had gotten so high that everybody was growing it and there was a shortage of curing barns. Thankfully, reality has settled back in. Consequently, farmers, who can remember sitting on bales of tobacco hoping that a buyer would someday come along now find that there is a ready market for their crops.

With the cry going out for more tobacco, more land is being cleared for this precious weed, and longer growing seasons are being implemented. New countries are being explored, just as they were during the Cuban revolution and immediately after the embargo. In addition to already established cigar-making meccas in the Caribbean and Central America, look for increased activity in Costa Rica (which has an untapped wealth of potentially rich tobacco-growing soil just an hour's drive from the capital of San José), Brazil, the Philippines, and, of course, Indonesia, where even Connecticut shade wrapper is now being grown (and sometimes referred to as Sumatra, which it is not).

Nicaragua, where the government controls ninety-eight percent of all tobacco, continues to hold the greatest promise, as we are seeing more cigars from this country than ever before. The same is true of Cuba, where new land is being cultivated and new strains of seeds, including Connecticut shade, are now being grown, and special releases of established brands are being produced specifically

for countries such as Britain in an attempt to increase production and profit. The political turmoil in the West African enclave of Cameroon has resulted in many tobacco recipes switching to other leaf, usually Indonesian. Today authentic Cameroon wrapper can only be found on a few classic brands, such as Partagas and Hemingway.

The end result of all this will be newer cigars, many made with newer strains of tobacco, and perhaps even newer shapes. In addition, as cigar smokers become more sophisticated and demanding and refuse to settle for second-rate tobacco in poorly rolled cigars, the survivors in this new era of cigar wars will be those cigars that continue to offer the best quality for the money.

Whether it is made by new methods or old, created by hand, machine, or a combination of both, today's cigars are a unique gift from the past. In the case of the handmade premium cigar, considering the fact that more than fifty pairs of hands and eyes have guided it down the path to completion, it also represents one of the last great bargains left in a cost-conscious world. But how do we get our money's worth from something that we are about to send up in smoke? That is a question we will answer in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

FINDING THE "PERFECT" CIGAR

Like a first date, or a first car, I'll never forget my first cigar. It was taken from a five-pack of Antonio & Cleopatra Grenadiers and it was the summer of my junior year at Arizona State University. I bought the Grenadiers because they were priced within my meager budget, and in addition to my pipe, I thought they made me look "cool." Besides, they were an easy smoke as I tooled down Camelback Road in my 1954 Austin-Healey four-banger.

Things were a lot simpler back then. I don't recall how many different cigars there were to choose from, but obviously not as many as today. It really didn't matter, because my main criterion was price. For about a year I alternated between the A&Cs and Robert Burns Cigarillos, because those were two brands I could afford. Then I discovered Cuesta Rey #95s. It was the first full box of cigars I ever bought and I went crazy. Not only did you get almost a month's worth of smokes all at once, but also afterward you ended up with a neat cedar box to put things in. From there I went to the newly introduced (at that time) Honduran Hoyo de Monterrey, which was being made with pre-embargo Havana leaf in the filler. In fact, the inside of the box lid read, "Made with real Havana tobacco," because the company had stockpiled bales of it before the embargo struck. By this time I was a copywriter at a local advertising agency, and I really wasn't flush with disposable income. But I saved all week so that I could buy the Hoyo to smoke on the weekend. I had begun to form a philosophy that if I was going to smoke a cigar, it would have to be the best I could afford, and if need be, then I would just smoke fewer of them.

The Fuente Hemingway, named after America's celebrated author who had an intimate familiarity with both Cuba and cigars, is an old Cubano shape – a perfecto with a tapered head for easy clipping and an elongated foot for easy lighting. Top to bottom: Masterpiece, Classic, Signature, and Short Story.

I have long since revised that philosophy to just "smoking the best." For me, price does not always enter into the picture anymore, because very often, some of the best cigars are not the most expensive. When you think about it, and from what we have discovered in the last chapter, it really doesn't cost any more to make an excellent cigar than it does to make a mediocre one. The difference is the quality of the tobacco, how the tobacco was prepared, and how the cigar was constructed and aged. So what it really comes down to is knowing what you like and then picking the best cigars in those categories.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, these really are the golden years for cigar smokers. We have more brands from different countries and types of tobacco than ever before. And in addition to standard shapes such as Churchill, Panetela, and Corona, we are now seeing a resurrection of some of the great old shapes of yesteryear combined with new interpretations, such as the Petite Belicoso, Double Corona, and the rediscovered *figurado* shapes such as the Pyramid and "super Perfecto" (although nobody calls it that; maybe they should). Bigger ring gauges are in, but now I also notice a growing interest in thinner, elegant shapes like the Lonsdale. There are also conflicting trends that include shorter cigars for quicker smokes and larger ones that are guaranteed to provide over an hour's worth of relaxation. Indeed, the number of shapes can be overwhelming, especially since it seems many cigar companies have decided to give each new cigar they bring out a shape name of its own. And they've also changed the old tried and true dimensions. In the past, a standard Churchill was 71/2 inches long.

Today we have "Churchills" that range anywhere from 6¾ to 8 inches in length. It has gotten so that I don't even bother with shape charts anymore. I simply walk into a humidor and pick out the cigar that appeals to me. If I like the way it smokes, I will commit that particular brand's shape to memory, only so I can order it again.

How does one go about picking out a cigar? For starters, never take anyone else's recommendation. I have spent more money on "recommended" cigars I wished I had never smoked than anything else in recent memory. It is like asking someone to order for you in a restaurant. It just doesn't work. About the only person you can possibly go to for advice is your local tobacconist, but only if he is knowledgeable about his product and has an adequately supplied humidor to back up his convictions. That is, the humidor should not just be stocked with cigars that he likes to smoke, but with cigars that he knows to be good. And even then, you have to be specific about what kind of cigar you are looking for. Don't just ask your tobacconist what he thinks is best or what he smokes. His tastes may be entirely different from yours. You've got to tell him what you want. So what do you want?

The long and the short of it, both from Honduras, as defined by Alec Bradley: (l.) a humongous 7 x 70 Texas Lancero (with traditional pigtail cap, no less), and (r.) a 5 1/8 x 52 Mundial Perfecto that packs a

hefty wallop for its size.

First, let's talk about the types of cigars that there are in the world today. We already know about mass-market cigars. That leaves the premium and super premium cigars. Premium cigars, by far the most popular category among knowledgeable cigar smokers, can be either machine bunched or handmade. The greatest majority of premium cigars will be completely handmade, and will come from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, or Honduras. For the money, these are by far the best cigars you can obtain anywhere in the world. Even in Europe, long the Havana stronghold, premium Dominican, Nicaraguan, and Honduran cigars have made inroads, simply because of their consistent quality and tremendous value. It is no longer surprising to find Padrón and Davidoff boxes alongside Quai d'Orsay and Vegas Robaina in shops such as J. J. Fox in London and A La Civette in Paris. You will find all of today's most popular premium cigars pictured throughout this book and, of course, listed in Chapter 8.

Going a step up, one of the newest categories among today's cigar-smoking elite is the super premium, which is to cigars what super unleaded is to gasoline. You may not really need them, they will cost more, but very often they will outperform the premium unleaded. Not always, but very often. Some entries in this rarified field include Davidoff, Zino, Padrón, and the limited edition Dominican-made Partagas and Macanudos. A super premium cigar is normally made with specially selected tobaccos, usually in the filler blend and especially in the wrapper, where it is visually most evident. Super premiums may also come in certain sizes that are not available in the regular line. And very often, the cigars receive extra aging that enhances the flavor.

Another relatively new category is the vintage cigar, which can also be called a super premium, in that it receives special treatment, is made with specially selected tobaccos, and normally (but not always) is aged longer. The vintage cigar's real claim to fame is the fact that it is made with all or part of a tobacco crop that came from an especially good year, much the same as vintage wines. Only with wines, the claim of an excellent vintage is often based on hindsight, as one is never quite certain how the wine has matured until after the bottle has been uncorked. The cigar maker, on the other hand, knows when he has a vintage cigar not only by the way the growing season has turned out, but also by the way the tobacco has matured before it is even made into a cigar. For example, 1986 was such a good year that three years later it was the inspiration for the launching of the Dunhill Aged Cigar series, one of the few vintage cigars (along

with Macanudo and a few others) to prominently put the actual vintage year on the box. Likewise, 1990, ’91 and ’95 were unbelievable vintage years for Dominican tobaccos, and this has manifested itself in even more super premiums joining the “vintage” ranks, including Dunhill’s offering in 2014 of three vintages in one box: 2003, 2006, and 2009.

Vintage cigars usually have special bands and boxes that set them apart from the rest. They will also be among the most expensive cigars you can buy. Are vintage cigars worth the money? Some, like the Macanudo Vintage, Ashton Cabinet, Romeo y Julieta Vintage, and Dunhill Aged definitely are. Others are not. And some cigars, like the Fuente Hemingway series (which is aged six months) and their Don Carlos “Reserva Superior Limitada” and OpusX, along with Cuesta-Rey’s Diamond Crown (all of which are aged for a full year), plus the Punch Grand Cru and the Hoyo de Monterrey Excalibur (both of which offer special shapes and hand selected tobaccos) are not called vintage cigars but certainly could be.

As a point of interest, in the pre-embargo years, when Cuba used to age many of its top branded cigars for a year or more, the “vintage” terminology was never used. It is strictly a “new age” appellation for certain Dominican, Nicaraguan, and Honduran super-premiums.

Now that we know what types of cigars are out there, let’s talk about shape. First, forget the old adage about buying a cigar to fit your face (i.e., a tall, thin man should smoke a long, thin cigar like a Lonsdale, and a short, stocky fellow should stick to Robustos). Life is too fleeting and pleasure too elusive to be concerned with such things. *Smoke the shape that you like*. Don’t become preoccupied with trying to match a cigar to your physique, otherwise what would that say about the man who wants to smoke a Pyramid-shaped Davidoff Special T with its wide bottom and narrow head? And even when you do find a cigar you like, you don’t always have to smoke the same shape. Or brand. I am notorious for this. Much to the chagrin of many cigar companies, I have absolutely no brand loyalty, although I do have a number of reoccurring favorites. As an example, one December a few years ago, I went out and treated myself to a box of Honduran-made Punch Premier Grand Cru Diademas, which I promptly christened as the Official Hacker Christmas Cigar for our household (inasmuch as I am the only one who smokes cigars in my household, I figured that was a pretty safe thing to do). That cedar box of cigars and I became fast friends throughout the holiday season, but by the beginning of the New Year I was ready to go on to something else. I immediately switched over to a box of Joya de

Nicaragua Churchills in a natural wrapper, a somewhat similar shape, but totally different taste. And in February, I changed brands again. Nothing wrong with any of the cigars. In fact, just the opposite—they were all good enough to warrant buying a full box. But with the weather and the months and the seasons, my tastes change and consequently, so do my cigars. For some reason, I find myself smoking more Macanudos and Ashtons during the summer months, while a box of Fuente Hemingways has always been my traditional way of ushering in the fall; their seven-inch Classics have helped me polish off more than one Thanksgiving turkey. And now I am finding that the Dunhill Aged cigars, Avos, and Padróns are delicious any time of year. I also enjoy the Davidoff Grand Cru and Thousand Series, as well as various vintage cigars, but prefer to save them for special outings, when I find that it is more prestigious to show off their bands than it is to wear a Rolex watch. As a result of all this brand hopping, my humidors are overflowing with a plethora of different cigars, and I get great satisfaction from plunging into them as my smoking mood changes during different days of the week or phases of the moon. Years ago I used to favor Lonsdales and Petite Coronas. Today I am a dedicated fan of Churchills, Double Churchills, Rothschilds, and anything else with a big ring gauge. Which is another topic we should get into.

Cigars come in all shapes and sizes, as evidenced by this sampling of classic and figurado styles: (L to R) Villiger's original "AWEG," guaranteed to put a new twist into your smoking; La Gloria Cubana Pirámides in Maduro; privately handrolled Connecticut shade Pyramid with flat head; PG Belicoso; Avo Belicoso; Austria Tabak Anatol with Sumatra wrapper (the natural reed is withdrawn from the center of the cigar before smoking and is used as a wick to light it); (Top) Havana Punch Slim Panetela; (Bottom) a custom rolled Torpedo, flaring out to a 50 ring near the foot. This is one of the most difficult cigars to make.

In America, all cigars are measured in inches for the length, and by a unit of measurement called a ring for the diameter of the cigar. One ring is 1/64 of an inch. Therefore, a cigar that is a 5x34 would be five inches long by 34/64 of an inch (just a little wider than ½ inch) in diameter. However, this ring-and-inches system is not used in Europe. Instead, cigars are measured by millimeters for length, and also by millimeters for the straight-across diameter of the cigar's body. Thus, a 5x34 cigar in the US would translate to a 127x13½ in Europe.

Ring size and length definitely have an influence on how a cigar will taste. Assuming you are smoking a cigar with the exact same filler-binder-wrapper tobaccos, the bigger the ring gauge, the fuller the taste. The longer the length, the cooler the smoke. As an example, let's take two Connecticut shade wrapped Macanudos, a 5x38 Petite Corona and a 7½x49 Prince Philip. Although both cigars use the same tobaccos, the Petite Corona will be a milder smoke, while the

Prince Philip will have a more full-bodied taste. In a way, it's like turning up the volume on the same CD track. Same song, but different perception of the music at 38 than at 49. And in spite of what I said about brand loyalty, if you find a cigar that you really like, but feel it is a little too intense, try it in a smaller size. Conversely, if you want more of the same taste, increase the ring size. Indeed, to the true connoisseur, the thickness of a cigar is more important than its length, which usually is only an indication of how long the cigar will smoke. But a short cigar does not always mean a short smoke. During the hour and a half ride from Puerto Plata to Santiago one time while visiting the Dominican Republic, Carlos Fuente Jr. gave me one of his Hemingway Short Story cigars to smoke. It was a strange looking, tapered little cigar, with a ring gauge that went from 43 at the head all the way up to a 46 and then dramatically dropped off to 16 right at the tuck end, with all of this taking place within a 4½ inch body. My first reaction was that this cigar was not going to last me past the next palm tree, and as I lit it, I surreptitiously began looking around the car for something else to smoke. Half an hour later I was still smoking that same cigar. In fact, it almost became a Short Story without end, for it lasted a full forty-five minutes. That, of course, was because this little cigar had a lot of tobacco packed into it.

If you want to experiment with just how dramatically shape can influence taste, light up a Davidoff Special R, which is a 5x50, and take notes on the flavor as the cigar is smoked. Then, later on, after your palate has had time to clear, do the same thing with the Davidoff Special T, which is a 6-inch Pyramid shape, starting at 32 and flaring out to 50-ring size. Both cigars are filled with the same blend. You'll find that the Robusto starts out full and remains that way throughout the smoke. This is your "control" cigar. On the other hand, the Special T, which starts out with the same ring size as the Robusto, is much milder at the outset (because of its longer length), and tends to get stronger as the smoke is funneled through the narrowing shape as the cigar becomes shorter. By this same token, if you want to taste test a number of different cigars, it is imperative that they each be the same length and ring size, or you will not get a true reading.

As one who likes heavy red wines, rich spicy foods, and full-bodied cigars, I will be the first to admit that taste is subjective. That is why I do not believe in rating systems for cigars. What might be a 10 to me could be a 4 to someone else, especially if they gravitated toward light white wines, delicate vegetable dishes, and mild cigars. Besides, our perception of a cigar's flavor is not just dictated by the tobaccos it is made with. A lot depends upon our mood while smoking, as well as what we have eaten or had to drink before lighting up. If you normally

finish a pasta primavera lunch with a cigar, that same cigar will taste differently when you smoke it after a two-hour Sunday buffet. That is why it is always desirable to have different cigars for different occasions. Besides the physical and gastronomic influences upon cigar smoking, our mental attitude has a lot to do with our perception of any given cigar. For many people, a leisurely cigar in the evening is much more memorable than that same cigar smoked during the day in a stressful business environment.

An exaggerated Perfecto tip.

These Fernando León Family Reserve Preferidos are actually a double perfecto shape.

Tubed cigars, such as these Arturo Fuente "King T" Churchills featuring a Connecticut sun grown wrapper, are handy for travel and make excellent gifts.

A smooth, oily, and blemish-free wrapper foretells of a flavorful smoke yet to come. This is a hallmark of premium cigars such as the Ashton ESG (Estate Sun Grown).

Still, throughout the course of my cigar smoking existence, I keep getting asked how I would rate a certain brand. But now that I have set my philosophies forth, I expect to keep getting asked that question. So I have devised my own system (which we shall use throughout this book from here on), called the Highly Prejudiced HackerScale, or HPH for short. This is not a "better than" rating system. Rather, it is based on a cigar's strength (or mildness, if you are an optimist). The scale goes from 1 to 3, with 1 being mild enough to make you wonder if the thing is even lit, and 3 having the potency to change your hair color. The majority of cigars being made today will fall in the HPH 2 range, which is a medium strength smoke. Remember, this is a *prejudiced* system, based upon my own personal smoking criteria. But now that you know what that is, you can compare it to your own tastes, and make allowances. For example, if you like Zinfandels rather than Cabernet Sauvignons, and I give a cigar an HPH 2

reading, you might want to adjust it to an HPH 2.5 for yourself.

Armed with everything we have read thus far, we are now ready to start taking a really serious look at some cigars. The first thing you will see is the wrapper. Wrapper colors are an integral part of the cigar's persona, but they have been given so many names by so many cigar companies that it sometimes becomes overwhelming. In a desperate attempt to make some kind of order out of this chaos, I have refined these wrapper colors down to seven distinct shades and have listed them in chromatic order, from light to dark. Generally speaking, the lighter the color, the milder the taste.

Claro Claro—A light green, sometimes called Jade or Candela, but more widely known as AMS, which stands for American Market Selection because this was the color most cigar smokers in the US used to favor back in the 1950s.

Claro—A light, yellowish brown.

Colorado Claro—Light brown

Colorado—Medium brown and often called EMS or English Market Selection, because this was the color and strength of leaf that was more popular in England than in the US. Times have changed, however, and today it is equally as popular in America, which probably makes the AMS designation of Claro Claro a little shaky.

Colorado Maduro—A milk chocolate brown.

Maduro—Dark coffee brown, sometimes with a reddish tint, and occasionally referred to as SMS for Spanish Market Selection.

Oscuro—Blackish brown or brownish black, depending on how perceptive your eyes are. In either case, it's the darkest of the dark.

The list goes on and can actually become pretty confusing, with definitions like Colorado Colorado and Double Oscuro, all of which seem like useless attempts to try and reclassify the sixty-plus different shades of brown that the color sorters went through back at the factory. Suffice to say, the simplified definitions listed above should get you through any humidor in the known world.

With wrapper color definition firmly in hand, we next come to the characteristics of each type of tobacco we are likely to find. This is a bit tricky, because we must deal with generalities, being unable to account for the way each tobacco in each brand has been cured and aged. So, realizing that there are

exceptions to all of this, here are the basics:

A few of the more popular shades of wrapper, with country of origin (L to R): Maduro (Mexican seed), Colorado Maduro (Ecuadorian-grown Connecticut seed), Colorado (Cameroon), Colorado Claro (Connecticut shade), and Colorado Claro (Connecticut shade). Even though the last two cigars have Connecticut shade wrappers, there is a 10 percent difference in color, caused by slight variances in leaf structure and fermentation. This is why color sorting is such exacting work.

Dominican—Generally perceived to be mild, around a 2 on the HPH.

Nicaragua—Medium sweet, especially the wrappers, sometimes with a meaty undertone. HPH 2–2.5.

Three distinct wrapper shades and three distinctly different flavors, but don't always judge a cigar by its color. The Bolivar is stronger than the Partagas, which smokes sweeter than the Hoyo de Monterrey.

Honduras—Slightly more full bodied or spicier than Dominican. A HPH rating of 2–2.5.

Havana—Medium to full bodied. HPH 2–3. In addition to all-Havana cigars, you will find that Havana is commonly used as part of the filler blend in many European dry cigars (obviously not in any of the cigars and cigarillos that are imported to America, however).

Jamaica—A little lighter in taste than Dominican, but still an HPH 2.

Maduro—Can be sweet and mild or thundering rich and heavy. Generally speaking, if you like espresso, you'll like Maduro. Most Maduro cigars have a deep, chocolaty flavor, while others are like the dust on a country road. There are three different types of Maduro: fermented, fire cured (in which heat is used to control the coloring, much like Candela processing), and Havana pressed, in which pressure creates the fermentation process. Maduros can range anywhere from HPH 2–3.

Nicaraguan cigars have enjoyed increased popularity in recent years, primarily because of the rich, earthy taste of that country's tobaccos.

Ecuador—Mild, flavorful yet subdued. HPH 1.5–2.

Cameroon—Heavier than Dominican. A spicy taste, with a more pungent aroma. HPH of 2–2.5.

Mexico—Not as refined a taste as Dominican, Nicaraguan, or Honduran. Can run the gamut of extremely mild to rough and gravely. An unusually wide range of HPH 1.5–2.5.

Sumatra—Spicy and mild. HPH 1.5–2.

Brazil—More pronounced in flavor; heavy but not disagreeable. An HPH of 2.5.

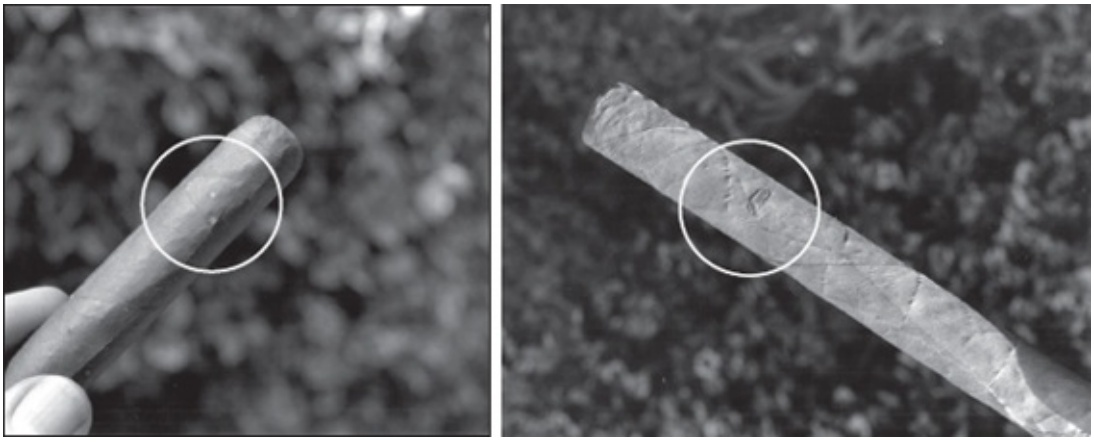
Philippines—Very light and airy; an HPH 1.5–2.

By combining these tobacco descriptions with their HPH ratings, and factoring in the filler-binder-wrapper combinations that are listed for each brand in Chapter 8, you will be able to get a pretty fair idea of what a particular cigar will smoke like in terms of approximate taste and strength. But there is yet another aspect of selecting a good cigar. It is not enough to simply walk into your tobacconist's humidor, decide on the brand, strength and shape, and snatch up the first cigar in the box. There is the cigar's physical appearance and condition to consider as well.

First, forget about the arcane practice of rolling the end of a cigar next to your ear in order to hear a crackle. All this does is risk damaging the delicate wrapper near the foot of the cigar. If you insist on performing this meaningless ritual, at least have the courtesy to buy the cigar beforehand, so as not to damage it for

others. Instead, show your expertise by first taking a close look at the wrapper. A worm hole disqualifies the cigar immediately, but be sure to alert the tobacconist so that he can take precautions to get that cigar box out of there before others are affected. In a premium cigar, the wrapper should be smoothly rolled and evenly colored, with no blotches, although sunspots won't affect the flavor. The wrapper should also have some grain to it, and you should be able to see the veins of the leaf, which not only give the wrapper character, but flavor as well. These veins will not be as distinct on a Connecticut shade wrapper as they will be on Cameroon, for example, where they are noticeably more pronounced. The veins on a Sumatra wrapper will look like a "t" or a "y."

The major veins of any wrapper should run as parallel as possible to the length of the cigar (within reason, of course; after all they are not drawn on with a ruler. Or at least they shouldn't be). This is an indication that the cigar will burn evenly. It will also tell you that the cigar has been properly rolled. And an oily sheen to the wrapper will tell you that it has been properly cured. Also, you may notice a series of tiny bumps on the wrapper. These are called "teeth" and a toothy cigar is not necessarily a bad thing; it is just an indication of concentrated oil pockets that are characteristic of that type of wrapper. However, if the wrapper is starting to unravel, alert the tobacconist, as his humidor is obviously too dry. (This is more of a problem in Europe—specifically France—than in America, as some tobacconists on the Continent, especially those in the smaller towns, have only recently begun equipping their shops with humidification devices.)



Sunspots (shown) are not normally found on super premium cigars, but they are harmless and do not affect the taste. On the other hand, blemishes and wrapper discolorations are common on many bundle cigars.

A patch in the wrapper is not something you want to see, but it does not affect the taste of the cigar. It is simply the cigar maker's way of trying to save an otherwise smokable leaf.

These next two inspections can be done with uncellophaned cigars. Gently feel the cigar, checking for any hard or soft spots that may indicate a poor bunching of the filler, which could interfere with the draw.

But this probably won't make you a friend of the other guy in the humidor who was thinking of buying that same cigar you are now stroking with your sweaty fingers. But it's your money. And your cigar. Now heft it. A loosely packed cigar will feel lighter than a tightly rolled one and may provide an easier draw, although some smokers prefer a more tightly wrapped cigar. That is an individual choice for you to make. If the cigar is packed too loosely, you may take in too much air when puffing and could hyperventilate. That's the light-headed feeling many smokers attribute to the tobacco, but it's possible they were just taking in too much air. Due to the growing lack of experienced rollers and the proliferation of some new and questionable brands, there is a growing concern about getting a cigar that is too tightly packed. Of course, you can always take it back to the tobacconist (with the exception of illegal Havanas, of course (which probably won't be an issue once they are legalized in the US), but one way to guard against this frustrating occurrence is to buy a *figurado*, like a Belicoso or a Pyramid. These cigars are more difficult to make and therefore require the skill of an experienced roller, so there is less chance of the draw being too tight.

You can check to make sure that the filler in your cigar wasn't "booked" by examining the tuck end. The filler should appear to flow around in curves, rather than show up as straight lines. If you see some dark centers in the filler, it is probably Ligero, and that thicker leaf will help hold the ash. When you smoke the cigar, you can actually see the Ligero projecting out from the ash, like a glowing peak.

Because of their cost, many smokers buy them singly, but more often they will purchase as many as three or four at a time. This is also a good way to experiment with different brands of cigars or different sizes of the same cigar. Acknowledging this trend, a number of brands are now packaging their cigars in five-packs. Alec Bradley has a five-cigar Tubo Collection, B. G. Meyer has a four-cigar tin of Slackers (which are really "short Churchills"), A. Flores has a five-cigar tin of half coronas, and there is a Camacho Corojo four pack as well. But when buying cigars by the box, you can often save money, as many tobacconists will give you a price break on a box purchase. Sometimes you can save even more on multiple boxes. Most cigars are packed twenty to twenty-five per box, and it is

a secure feeling in an uncertain world to know that, if nothing else, you've at least got enough cigars to get through the month.

Up until now, we have been talking only about premium and super premium cigars. But there is another category that is worthy of our attention, even though it is sometimes undeservedly frowned upon. That is the classification of "bundle" cigars. The concept of a bundle cigar originated in the 1960s as a way for the consumer to save money by eliminating the manufacturer's cost of color sorting cigars and of putting them in cedar boxes. It proved to be a viable concept and bundle cigars have been popular ever since. Manufacturers were quick to seize upon the idea of using bundles for their "seconds"; that is, cigars that have small imperfections, such as blemishes on an otherwise very smokable wrapper. Ironically, bundle cigars became so popular that factories began making cigars specifically to be put into bundles. Today, both "firsts" and "seconds" are sold as bundles, and the bundle cigar has become one of the best values for the serious cigar smoker. Even the illustrious firm of Davidoff once sold bundle cigars; of course, they were handmade and contained long filler. And for years Cuba made bundle cigars, not only for local consumption, but for high-end smokers as well. The Partagás Derby and the H. Upmann Majestic were two Havana bundles of the past that come to mind. There was also a machine-made Cuban bundle cigar from Ramón Allones called Rondos, a 5½x43 that used a lower grade of tobacco, but sold well due to the bundle cigar's hallmark, lower price.

Of course, there are some drawbacks to bundles. Very often, not only do the cigars not match in color, they don't match in taste. Some are machine made and others use "sandwich" filler, in which the center of the cigar consists of chopped filler that is held together by long leaf tobacco. Because of their nature, many bundle brands are inconsistent, with one batch being great and the next not worthy of lighting up. But with the growing awareness of value-minded smokers focusing more attention on bundle cigars, much of that is changing. Today, many manufacturers are not only crafting the same kind of consistency into their bundle cigars as they have in their boxed brands, but they are making cigars exclusively for bundles. You can find many of these in major outlets such as JR Cigars and Thompson.

The secret in buying a bundle cigar is knowing what to look for. Unfortunately, because of its packaging (and the fact that many of these cigars are purchased on the Internet), it is impossible to examine a bundle cigar as you would a premium. The best you can do is check the package to make sure the cigars around the perimeter haven't been bruised. One bundle brand that has

been around for a while is Jamaica Bay, which is the same mild cigar as the now discontinued Santa Cruz, only without a box or color sorting.

La Unica, which is made by the Fuente factory, started out as one of the most expensive cigars in the bundle category, but proved so popular it now comes in a cabinet box. Honduran bundles are very much in evidence and are growing in popularity. For example, La Primadora is a Honduran cigar that features all long leaf filler, a choice of Natural or Maduro wrapper, and is available in six sizes, ranging from a 5½x42 Petit Cetros all the way up to an 8½x50 Emperor.

Bundle cigars represent one of the best bargains available to the knowledgeable smoker.

And speaking of Nicaraguan bundles, the first brands were brought out in 1992, but I hesitate to mention any of them because their continuous availability is not always assured. And Rocky Patel often comes out with factory overruns that are packaged as bundles. These are only a few of the better brands. For more specific information, ask your tobacconist about his best values in bundle cigars. (Just for the record, Cuba no longer makes bundle cigars, although for a while some Havanas, such as the Montecristo, had to be tied in bundles because Cubatabaco did not have enough cedar to make boxes.)

You might also want to ask your tobacconist about his private brands. These are often excellent cigars made by one of the major companies, but they are given a special brand and band for a specific store, tobacco chain, or direct mail and Internet sales. They are usually priced well below nationally distributed

frontmark cigars made by those same companies and some of them are every bit as comparable in construction and taste as the nationally branded premiums.

And what about Havanas? They remain a proverbial topic of interest, even though American cigar smokers have not had the luxury of being able to taste test and compare these "outlaw cigars," as do our cigar smoking brethren in other parts of the world, most notably Canada, England, and Europe. (Of course, all of this is changing even as these words are written, with the pending legalization of Cuban cigars in the US.) But even in those countries, the opportunity to compare all thirty of the exported Cuban brands is not possible, as no single country has all thirty brands exported to it. Which is one of the reasons that I put as many as possible of Cuba's finest in Chapter 8, so that at least we could know what we have or have not.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that even in the US, where Havanas have been forbidden, it is estimated that a surprisingly large number of illegal boxes of Cuban cigars, as many as 10 million "sticks" a year—or approximately a sixth of Cuba's annual production—are being smuggled into and smoked within our borders (although if any customs agents are reading this, I'm only kidding!). The penalties for an American citizen buying and possessing post-embargo Havana cigars in the US is $250,000 per offense and up to ten years in the slammer—which some may feel is a little stiff for a forty-five-minute smoke. For those who do not wish to run afoul of the law, foreign travel provides an excellent opportunity for Americans to taste the forbidden leaf. After all, the more we know about something, the less mysterious it becomes. Besides, there is an understandable tendency for American cigar smokers, when given the opportunity to procure a Havana, to grab whatever is being offered, in the blind belief that if it is Havana, it has to be good. Unfortunately, such is not always the case. A familiarity with the product can at least provide the cigar aficionado with a basis upon which to make a selection. That way, a cigar smoker with a sensitive palate might wisely choose to pass over a Bolivar Coronas Gigante, knowing it possesses a strength that is not for the uninitiated, and instead might wisely opt for a less potent but equally satisfying Rafael Gonzales.

Which brings us to two myths that must be cleared up. The first is that all Cuban cigars are strong. Anyone who has ever smoked a Juan López or a La Flor de Cano knows the fallacy of that statement. The second belief is that Cuban cigars are better than cigars made in other countries. "Better" is a subjective word; a more appropriate choice would be "different." Different in the way a Beef Wellington is different from a Châteaubriand. They are both gourmet

delicacies, but each has its own character and taste. It is the same when trying to compare Havanas with Dominican or Honduran cigars. You can't, as each has a very distinct identity. But of the three, Dominican and Honduran cigars are fairly comparable in price, while Havanas are decidedly more expensive.

Up until recently there were five major cigar-making factories in Cuba: La Corona, Partagás, H. Upmann, Romeo y Julieta, and El Laguito (which used to make the Davidoff and Cohiba brands, but today makes only Cohibas). But the Partagás factory has closed, and once renovated will no longer be making cigars; its operations have been moved to the renovated El Rey del Mundo factory. And most of Cuba's cigars use shade-grown wrappers, which is a fairly notable change, as in pre-embargo days all of their wrappers were sungrown. Inasmuch as shade-grown tobacco burns slower than sungrown, a Havana cigar is relatively slow burning and their HPH ratings run the gamut of 2 to 3. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of variation in the quality of today's Cuban cigar. My experience in Chapter 2 is one example. Yet, when I smoked a Punch Monarcas later on that same trip, I was amazed at the velvety smoothness of the flavor. And the Monarcas is a big cigar. But unfortunately, the Monarcas incident was not an indication that the situation was getting better. While rewriting this very Chapter for the second edition, I was examining the dark and oily wrapper of an extremely well-made Partagás Lusitania, and, succumbing to temptation, decided to smoke it. Upon lighting the cigar, I found it to possess that rich, creamy flavor such as only the famed Saint Luis fields of Cuba's Vuelta Abajo could produce.

This was indeed the savory excellence for which Havana cigars have long been famous. Perhaps, I thought, things were changing in Cuba. But then, later on in the week, I smoked a Cuban Partagás 8-9-8 and instantly felt betrayed. It emitted a harsh bite and, although properly humidified, developed an ugly, out-of-control burn running down one side of the wrapper (a "canoeing" effect; see Chapter 4), unusual in an easy-to-light cigar such as an 8-9-8 with its Perfecto tip; it was indicative of a poorly fermented wrapper. So here were two Cuban cigars of the same brand, both presumably made of the same leaf and rolled in the same factory, perhaps even by the same roller. Yet, their smoking qualities were on opposite ends of the pleasure spectrum. But there's more.

On another occasion, while visiting a friend in Europe, I was shown a newly opened box of Havanas he had bought in which some of the wrapper colors were mismatched. Yet in the Havana cigar factories, I saw skilled workers meticulously sorting cigars by color, just as they do in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Honduras. I also made it a point to personally inspect randomly

selected boxes of cigars in two retail stores in Havana (one was at the old Casa de Partagás, located in the Partagás factory and the other is at La Casa del Habano, in the Havana suburb of Miramar) and in both cases found every box to be beautifully color matched. The conclusion one must draw is obvious: there is a sporadic quality-control situation in Cuba that has to be more closely monitored if they are to regain their reputation of consistency. Which, as we know, is the hallmark of a good cigar.

Unlike their exported brands, the cigars smoked by Cubans themselves are of a much lower quality. They are made in factories separate from those that make Havanas for export. Two of these factories, located outside the city of Havana, are Villa Santa Clara and Sancti Spiritus. (Their boxes are stamped VSC and SS respectively. Stay away from them.) These local brands, with names like Casadores and Cinco Vegas, are relatively small in size. You won't see any Lonsdales or Churchills being smoked in Cuba, other than by *turistas* and a visiting cigar book author. Which is why some of the locals I befriended referred to me as "el hombre con el puro grande" (the man with the big cigar).

You won't know how well the tobacco has been treated in a Havana cigar until you light it up, but you can give it the same physical examination as discussed earlier in this chapter. I find in that respect, a Havana is no different from any other cigar. But there is a serious problem unique to Havanas. And that is the specter of counterfeit Cuban cigars, which I brought to public attention in the first edition of this book. Since that publication, and the resultant increased consumption of cigar smoking, counterfeiting Cuban cigars has become a multi-million dollar business. Americans are especially susceptible to this ruse, as we are not as familiar with the look and taste of genuine Havana leaf as our non-embargoed brethren. Even so, foreign fakes abound.

Often made in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and even Cuba, these bogus stogies were initially encountered in Europe, particularly Germany and Switzerland. In the recent past they were not so much in evidence in the U.K., but now that situation has changed (in London I helped dissect a counterfeit short-filler Cohiba) and I know of instances in Canada as well. The main brands that were faked used to be Davidoff and Cohiba, but now that Davidoff is no longer importing Havanas, most of the attention seems to be focused on Cohiba and Montecristo. But to confuse the issue (and the detection), some of these counterfeit cigars are actually made with Cuban tobacco, scrap leaf smuggled out of the factories by workers seeking to augment their meager wages. Likewise, genuine Cuban bands are winding up on non-genuine "Cuban" cigars. So while

the tobacco may be Cuban, it is not top quality leaf, it is not correctly blended, and it is usually rolled by an unskilled person in a cramped apartment, far from the *galeras* of Havana.

Montecristo is the best selling Havana cigar in the world, and accounts for approximately half of Cuba's total production. The No. 2 (fourth from left) is the most popular shape. The Petit Tubois is only available in the UK. The 9 1/4x48 Monte A (top) is the world's most expensive cigar.

Photo: Hunters & Frankau

Sometimes a simple cigar band can tell you a lot about a cigar: (L. to R.) Havana Punch, Honduran Punch, and Honduran Punch double-banded Grand Cru.

But sometimes you have to study each band very carefully to discern the difference. (L. to R.) Dominican Romeo y Julieta; gold accented Dominican Romeo y Julieta Vintage; Cuban Romeo y Julieta.

In addition, there are now factories that have been established for the sole purpose of manufacturing phony Cuban cigars made for sale to the American market, using poor quality non-Havana scrap leaf but very often affixing genuine Cuban cigar bands smuggled out of Havana.

That's how profitable the American black market has become, thanks to the embargo that created an artificially inflated demand, coupled with our natural inclination to think, "If I can't get it, I gotta have it, at any price!"

How can you tell a counterfeit Cuban cigar? One way is to check the bottom of the box. Prior to 1961, all Havana cigar boxes were stamped "Made in Havana–Cuba," surrounded by a double oval line. By the way, these pre-embargo cigars are the only ones that can be legally brought into the United States, as long as they are accompanied by proof that the cigars were made before the revolution. (You might consider carrying a copy of this book with you when you travel overseas in order to help document your purchases.) In 1961 Castro ordered that all boxes be stamped in Spanish and from that year on, only *Hecho en Cuba* —"Made in Cuba"—has been used. The skeletonized Cubatabaco leaf logo first appeared in 1985 in conjunction with a lettered factory code.

In keeping with the usage of only Spanish on all boxes, in 1989 "*Totalamente a Mano*," which means, "(Made) Totally by Hand," was added to the bottom of all boxes of handmade Havana cigars. Some counterfeits are stamped *Hecho a Mano*, which means, "Made by Hand," or "*Envuelta a Mano*," which means "Packed by Hand," in an attempt to trap the unwary who think all Spanish words look alike. Finally, in 1994 the Cubatabaco box stamp was changed to Habanos S.

A. and a Habanos strip was taped across the corner of each box. Currently, the real product will usually be stamped *La Habana, Cuba*, although not all boxes have this stamping. In fact, a bogus box making the rounds is stamped *La Habana Club*.

Cuban or Dominican — can you tell without reading this caption? (Top tubed cigars): Havana's Montecristo and Dominican's Montecruz (the colors are identical). Boxes: the top is from Havana, the bottom box, using the same artwork, is from the Dominican Republic.

The stamp and seal on a box of authentic Havana cigars from Cubatabaco. Pre-embargo Havana boxes were stamped with a number and letter classification of the cigar (i.e., 10G) and the words, "Made in Havana, Cuba" inside an oval. But today stampings are constantly changing to thwart counterfeiters. Cuba is even using hologram stickers on some of their cigars, but these, too, have been counterfeited (although not very well).

There has been much discussion about the letter code started by Cubatabaco in 1985 and what it means. Quite simply, it initially gave the month and year a specific box of cigars was made. But the Cubans, who have usually been very open and honest with me, balked at revealing the letter-number translation. The main reason for their hesitancy was that they felt once a consumer knew that a box of, say, Bolivar Gigantes, was made in October 1995, that potential purchaser might pass up the cigars and say, "I'd rather have an older box that was made in 1990." But the facts are, given the rarity and desirability of anything Havana, most lovers of the leaf will readily take any bona fide box they can get.

These cigars are counterfeit! Although this looks like a rare glass-topped collector's case of Cohiba Espléndidos, Habanos never made a glass-topped box such as this. Instead, it was manufactured by counterfeiters in Canada. In addition, the cigars (which are not real Cohibas) have not been color sorted, another give-away. However, a correct Habanos sticker is affixed across the upper right hand corner of the case. One must be careful when buying "Havanas" from an unknown source.

Up until fairly recently, there were two sets of capital letters stamped within a square on each box of Cuban cigars. The top set, consisting of two letters, denotes the factory in which the cigars were made. Each factory has two names, a pre-revolutionary name and a post-revolutionary name. For example, the H. Upmann factory is also called José Martí, and uses the initials JM on the box. Here is the complete list, including the box letter code, what the initials stand for, and the actual factory in which those cigars were made:

From the Partagás storage vaults in Havana come these rarities from the pre-Castro past: A 1947 box of Don Joaquin cigars, which included 13 different shapes. On the right is a two-foot long "triple-plus Churchill" that was custom rolled for the late King Farouk of Egypt, who used to place them straight up in a hookah for smoking with royal guests.

Box Code	Factory Name	Pre-Revolutionary Factory Name
JM	José Martí	H. Upmann
FPG	Francisco Perez German	Partagás
BM	Briones Montoto	Romeo y Julieta
FR	Fernando Roig	La Corona
HM	Heroes del Moncada	El Rey del Mundo
EL	El Laguito	(none)

The bottom set of four capital letters represent numbers, which translate into the month and the year that particular box was made. Each letter equals a specific number, but there is a code that you must know. To crack this code, think of the

word Nivelacuso (or the phrase, "Nothing In View Equals Length And Can Use Some Objectivity," if that makes it easier). There are ten letters in this word. Going from left to right, each letter in the word Nivelacuso goes up the numerical scale and equals a number going from 1 to 9, but then, the last letter in Nivelacuso, an "o," equals zero, instead of the number ten. Thus, "N" equals 1, "I" equals 2, "V" equals 3, and so on. So, a legitimate Cuban box of Juan López cigars that is stamped FR over the letters NISL means that box was made in the La Corona factory (FR=Fernando Rey=La Corona) in the twelfth month (NI = 12, or December) of 1995 (SL = 95).

Of course, since this book was originally published, Habanos revised the code, just as many of the counterfeiters revised their techniques when we first exposed bogus Cuban cigars in the first edition. But that just leaves another mystery to be solved. After all, trying to head 'em off at the pass is half the fun. To get a current listing of the box codes and what they mean, go to www.cubancigarwebsite.com.

Keeping that in mind, be aware that counterfeit stamps have already been forged, although they often are not used correctly, mismatching the cigars with improper factories or years. For example, if you know how to read the code and translate a box of Cohiba Siglo IVs as having been made *prior* to 1992 (the year they were introduced), you know you don't want to buy that box, no matter what the price. And because the Cuban guarantee label has not changed since 1912, it therefore is no longer a guarantee, since there has been plenty of time to make counterfeit printing plates, although computer technology has made the process easier and more sophisticated now.

By putting this information about the growing cancer of counterfeit Havanas in this book to warn you of deception, I also warn the counterfeiters of what we know. There is no way around it. Consequently, none of this is failsafe protection against being stuck with illicit cigars, as almost anything—boxes, bands, labels, and stamps—can be copied. I say "almost anything," because the one thing that cannot be duplicated is the physical look and feel and the actual taste of real, properly fermented Havana leaf. Thus, the only foolproof way to detect a fake Havana is to smoke it. Of course, you have to know what a real Havana cigar tastes like in order to be proficient at this method.

I was victim of this mixed blessing a few years ago during a trip to Mexico, when I picked up a box of Monte Cristo [sic] Canalejas. Thinking this was a new size that had somehow escaped me, and completely overlooking the fact that Montecristo was erroneously printed as two words instead of one, I got taken. The first puff told me it wasn't a Havana, but by then it was too late. Besides

Mexico, Brazil, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic, other non-Cuban *faux*-Havanas are reputedly coming in from Nicaragua and are being stamped "Mexico." Your only defense against the growing number of counterfeits is to buy directly from the duty-free shops when traveling outside of the US, or from a reputable dealer when in Europe or England. Another safe bet is to buy Cuban cigars directly from La Casa del Habano outlets, of which there are many throughout the world. And because even legitimate Havanas are not all created equal, it is helpful to know the best quality smokes will be found in England, Switzerland, and Spain.

Contrary to popular belief, European citizens traveling to the United States may not legally transport Havana cigars, even for their own use, as unbelievable as that may seem. Likewise, the old rule that Americans traveling to Cuba with government approval could bring up to $100 worth of Cuban goods into the US had been rescinded until recently. No Cuban goods of any kind were allowed. Of course, all this may be changing under the revised rules set up by the Obama administration. And although counterfeit Cuban cigars are primarily a problem for the unwary in America, by contrast, European cigar smokers should be aware that many Honduran and Dominican cigars share the same brand name as their Cuban counterparts. For example, Punch and Hoyo de Monterrey are made in both Honduras and Cuba. And Romeo y Julieta, Cohiba, and Montecristo are made in both the Dominican Republic and Havana. Consequently, there has been more than one European tourist visiting the US who was pleasantly surprised to find his favorite "Havana" cigar for sale in American tobacco shops, only to discover that it wasn't a Havana cigar at all. The reason for this sometimes-confusing double identity of some cigars is that when Castro nationalized the factories during the revolution, many of the cigar-making families fled Cuba, taking their brand names with them. As recounted in Chapter 1, they eventually began manufacturing their family brand name cigars in other countries, thus creating a dual nationality for many cigars that were formerly only Havanas. Fortunately, there is a trade agreement that forbids Havana and non-Havana cigars of the same name from being sold together. Thus, you will never see a Cuban Hoyo de Monterrey for sale next to a Honduran Hoyo de Monterrey. Instead, the Honduran Hoyo de Monterrey (which is now being imported into Germany, for example) is renamed for the European market and is known as Excalibur.

The Fuente Fuente OpusX, a Dominican Republic puro, is one of the most sought after cigars in the world, even rivaling some from Cuba. Introduced in 1995 in seven different shapes, it is now available in a number of vitolas—when you can find them.

At the Robert Lewis shop at 19 St James's Street in London, a wide variety of Havana cigars are carried that are made exclusively for the United Kingdom.

Whether Cuban, Dominican, Nicaraguan, or Honduran, there is an all-encompassing, elite category of cigar that I refer to as The Power Smoke. These are cigars that tell the non-smoking world you've made it, or are about to make it. It has absolutely nothing to do with flavor, tobacco, value or the attributes of any brand. It is strictly an image that is presented to the casual, uninformed observer, although every cigar in this classification is definitely high grade. Power Smoke cigars include virtually all of the vintage cigars. In addition, the Ashton VSG and the limited edition Dominican Cohiba Luxury Selection are Power

Smokes, as is the entire Davidoff line. Any Havana smoked in America is a Power Smoke. A Havana smoked in Europe is not, although all of the Cohibas and any of the larger sizes, such as the Partagás Lusitania and especially the Montecristo A, can certainly qualify for this category. Within the Power Smoke league there is also an upper echelon group of cigars that may not necessarily mean anything to the non-smoker, but which definitely will catch the attention of the knowledgeable cigar connoisseur. Cigars in this rarified inner circle include the OpusX, Partagas 150th Anniversary, Cohiba Behike, and any cigar that is so new nobody has heard of it yet. But of this latter category, only large sizes qualify. So take a Power Smoke to your next business seminar or dinner. Offer one to your boss. If an associate offers you a Power Smoke, clasp his hand heartily and return the favor. You've got a valuable ally.

Another category of cigar, one that is not too widely seen in the US but is immensely popular in Europe, is that of the dry cigar. Commonly referred to as "Dutch-type," these small smokes offer a number of benefits: 1) they require no humidification, because they smoke their best at only 10 to 12 percent humidity; 2) most of them come already clipped or pierced, so it is relatively effortless to get one going; 3) they are extremely easy to carry, usually coming in small packs of five, ten, or twenty cigars; 4) they can be conveniently stored in an attaché case, desk drawer or coat pocket for weeks. I once squirreled away a pack of Dunhill Señoritas in the glove compartment of my car for over a year before I accidentally stumbled upon them one day while looking for my registration. They were a little dry, but they smoked without incident. The highway patrol officer enjoyed them, too. A humidified cigar would have gone to dust.

Dry cigars come in a variety of blends, and can be as mild or as strong as you wish. Basically, there are two types of wrappers: Sumatra, which is light and mild tasting; and Brazil, which is dark and spicy. Tobaccos used within the cigars come from Mexico, Colombia, Java, Cameroon, Italy, Florida, Connecticut, and Cuba. Most people select Sumatra over Brazil, simply because it is not so overbearing.

But both light and dark wrappers are equally as popular in Germany and Switzerland, with Sumatra being smoked on a regular basis and the darker Brazil often being saved for dinners and special occasions. France remains the largest dry cigar market in the world. As we noted in Chapter 2, some Dutch-type cigars are made with homogenized leaf. In England they do not mind this in a binder, but prefer an all-tobacco wrapper. An all-tobacco dry cigar is still the most popular choice in Germany, France, Belgium, and The Netherlands. The reason

these European cigars have not caught on more than they have in the US is that their costs are often compared to a full-sized Dominican, Nicaraguan, or Honduran cigar, which is bigger and has more tobacco. And yet, there are times when you don't want a cigar with a lot of tobacco. Like in between the acts of a play. Or while waiting for a drink to be served. Or the check. Some of the dry cigars, like Agio Mehari's, Nobel Panetela, or Villiger Braniff are ideal for those moments. Your smoking time and enjoyment can be extended with some of the larger sizes of Corps Diplomatique, Dannemann, or Panter.

A Christian of Denmark Corona lasts a full fifty minutes, and I have enjoyed Schimmelpenninck Duets while barbecuing and their VSOP Corona de Luxe with a pre-or post-dinner cocktail. These are easy cigars to get used to, are ideal for travel, and provide an enjoyable change of pace smoke that doesn't require a humidor.

Buying a cigar for ourselves can be rewarding, but equally gratifying, I think, is buying a cigar for someone else as a gift. After all, one of the old adages is, "The best cigar is the one you get for free." It can also be rewarding—literally—to buy cigars for investment, if you do your homework carefully. In this context, with the increased emphasis on new shapes (or rather, old shapes that have been introduced to new smokers) and vintage or limited edition cigars, a new category of cigar has emerged for the first time. It is the rarified realm of the collectable cigar.

Special editions, such as this 2004 Cohiba Edición Limitada, have become a very successful marketing strategy for Habanos, with new variations of blends and extended aging resulting in premium prices for premium cigars.

Special humidor 134 out of 350 limited editions, each holding fifty Montecristo double coronas.

A small portion of the rare cigars found at the lengthy humidor of No. Ten Manchester Street cigar lounge in London. Notice the bloom on the Cohibas.

Davidoff has some of the strictest quality controls in the industry, as evidenced by these flawless wrappers.

Consecutively numbered Padrón Millennium cigars (the 1964 Series) came out in 2000 and were only available in a limited edition of one thousand individually numbered humidors.

These nineteenth century Cuban Romeo y Julieta culebras, are on display at the J.J. Fox museum in London. The culebra, originally devised to keep factory workers from taking more than three cigars home with them after work, were most recently offered by Partagás in Cuba, and Davidoff in the Dominican Republic, but are rarely seen today.

Just as *The Ultimate Cigar Book* was the first to point out counterfeit Havanas in the very first edition, so do we now focus the spotlight on this latest sub-trend of the cigar-smoking hobby. To be sure, connoisseurs have been collecting cigars for decades, otherwise, how do you think all those pre-Castro Havanas got squirreled away? (Under the embargo, pre-1959 Havanas, by the way, were the only Cuban cigars that could still legally be brought into the United States, in case you needed a rationale for purchasing a box.) But consciously producing and seeking out special limited-edition cigars is a relatively new phenomena, and one that has gained increased credibility by auction houses such as Christie's and upscale restaurants like Chef Thomas Keller's French Laundry in Yountville, California, which has five separate humidors stocked with such rarities as West End cheroots, a US "clear Havana" cigar rolled in 1868 and one of the oldest smokable cigars in existence, documented La Corona perfectos from 1931, and Romeo y Julieta Belvederes from 1961, a year before the embargo took hold.

By nature, many cigar smokers are collectors, even though they may not readily know it. A simple glance at all the cutters, lighters, cases, and humidors that litter my office and den will prove the point. And many of us also like to hoard special cigars. For example, I still have an unopened box of Vencedors, an

excellent Canary Islands cigar made by Eufemiando Fuentes in the late 1970s and early ’80s that was sold exclusively by the Tinder Box chain. They are well aged by now and probably past their prime, but I don’t care; I like having them around. Likewise, I have put away a few of the individually cedar-boxed H. Upmann cigars that were specially stamped and handed out at some of the first Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel smokers starting in 1985, and which, sadly, are no longer being held. I also keep a few of the specially banded cigars from the premiere party of *Smoke* magazine, even though I know the cigars are really Padróns. And on special occasions I will dip into my ever-dwindling supply of 1982–vintage Cohibas that were presented to me by a friend in a high place. But these are just vignettes. The collectable cigar category is much more widespread and intense.

It first came to my attention when readers began telling me they were actively hording the first vintage offerings (1986) of the Dunhill Aged cigar. Then, in 1992, Cubatabaco brought out a limited-edition of five hundred handcrafted cherrywood humidors filled with Cohibas. Not only the box, but each individual cigar band was numbered. This spectacular offering was obviously to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of cigars. At the time of issuance, the price per box was well into the four-digit range. A few years later, at a Dinner of the Century in Paris, a specially rolled box of fifty Cohiba and Trinidad Torpedoes (shapes that were not normally made for these brands at the time, and signed by Castro) went for $19,500 apiece. That’s $390 a cigar!

During the cigar boom of the 1990s, at the Fourth Friar’s Club of California Celebrity Smoker, a box of Dominican-made Hamilton cigars signed by sun-tanned George Hamilton fetched $800. Also, in 1996 a farmer in Ireland was offered a million dollars for a cache of 1860 vintage stogies he found hidden in his barn. And contrary to some reports, they weren’t even Havanas. Clearly, as Sherlock Holmes once remarked, “The game is afoot!”

Today, limited-edition collectables are becoming the new wave of cigar merchandising. For example, in 1995, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Partagas brand, General Cigar brought out a supposedly one-time run of superlative cigars that were made with eighteen-year-old Cameroon wrappers. This rarified leaf was actually discovered by accident, stored and forgotten, in a warehouse in Spain. But the timing of its discovery was perfect, right on the eve of the Partagas anniversary. What a great tribute to a great cigar, one of the very last to still be made with older Cameroon wrappers.

Called the Partagas 150 Signature Series, each cigar was specially banded, tied

in canvas bundles of twenty-five and tagged with the name of the roller, just as they do at the factory, then aged four months and placed in commemorative boxes of twenty-five, fifty, and 100 cigars. Eight shapes were available and there was even a limited edition within this limited edition. It was the 7x52 Don Ramon, which came in a book-shaped humidor that lifted each cigar up as the lid was opened. A copy of a rare original box, only one thousand units were produced. Needless to say, practically every available Partagas 150 Signature Series was immediately snapped up, although I used to see a few of the smaller-ringed 5x38 Ds languishing around on dealer's shelves. But not anymore. The 4½x49 Robustos and the 7½x49 AAs were among the first to go, although if you can, try to make friends with someone who still has some in his humidor. And yet, in 2014, a last group of 170 of these cigars was discovered by General Cigar, which reconditioned them, packaged them in ten-count cedar book-humidors, and offered them at $1,500 a book, with only a few held back for charity auctions, which no doubt will end up bringing premium prices for these two decade-old stogies.

Over in Cuba, the Partagás 150th was celebrated with a special party, speeches, lots of free commemoratively-banded cigars, and the unveiling of the first of 150 specially built three-drawer humidors, each with a numbered brass plaque, and containing 150 Partagás cigars.

One drawer housed fifty Partagás Series Ds, another contained fifty 8-9-8s, and the third drawer was filled with fifty Lusitanias featuring the older-styled *figurado* head rather than the current marble head. This humidor brought $45,000 at auction. Later on, a San Francisco collector paid $85,000 for serial number 150. Other numbers have sold for slightly less.

Collectable cigars always carry a premium price, but many of them, such as the OpusX in all its configurations and the Padrón 50th Anniversary 6½ x52 Toro are well within reach of the aficionado's wallet. A lot depends on where you find them. And when. For example, I uncovered a cache of Havana Dunhills in, of all places, the old Dunhill store on Duke Street in London. I had stopped in for a visit on one of my trips and as a joke (I thought), asked to see the latest Cuban Dunhills, knowing that none had been made since 1989. With a wink their cigar specialist led me to a cabinet full of individually cedar boxed Havana Club cigars, (a 9¼ x49, the same size as the Montecristo A), and some graceful Atados (a slender 67/8x28). It seems that, just after Dunhill's pullout from Cuba, they had been stored in a warehouse on the banks of the Thames and forgotten until April 1995. Fortunately for London and the cigars, during those ensuing years the

cigars survived and aged wonderfully. In fact, the unusually warm summer of '95 helped them age even further. "Nobody knows about these, yet," the humidor manager smiled. Now you do.

But you don't have to travel far to find collectable cigars. Many of them are right in your local tobacconist's humidor or by mail order over the Internet. You just have to know what to look for. For example, the Macanudo Vintage Cabinet Selection can still be found in some of the earliest 1979, '84, and '88 years. The reason is that in 1996 General Cigar released all the remaining inventory they had been holding to make room for the new 1993 vintages. And Dunhill Aged cigars are now coming out with shorter runs of each new vintage, which means you will be seeing new years more often, but they won't last as long on dealer's shelves, so if you have a favorite year (such as when your first child was born or when you have completed reading every page in this book), best buy a box of those cigars before they are gone. They will not taste any different, because consistency is why different vintage tobaccos are stored in the first place, but there is always a special aura connected to certain years.

Yes, this really is a golden cigar—a DM Golden Torpedo hand-wrapped by Daniel Marshall in multiple layers of 24 kt. gold leaf, as first reported by the author in the March 2012 issue of Robb Report. Underneath all that glitter is a DM Red Label Nicaraguan puro, but due to the higher flash point of gold (1064.18 degrees Centigrade) a butane torch is recommended.

Special shapes, certain brands that are no longer made and hard to find, or limited production cigars like OpusX are all collectable cigars. For example, whenever I find a box of Ashton Cabinet #2s I grab it because I know they just cannot produce enough of the aged leaf to lay in a large stock. Same with the Hemingway Classic and any really good Maduro. (Should I be telling you all this? What if you buy up all my boxes?) The Fuente OpusX is a good case in

point. Actually, the official name is Fuente Fuente OpusX, with the two Fuente names representing Don Carlos and Carlos Jr., while Opus is a notable piece of music and Opus One is the name of a spectacular limited edition wine created by Robert Mondavi Winery (see Chapter 7). The "X" stands for "Project X," because the growing of the Dominican wrapper used to make this cigar the first commercially available DR *puro* was kept a secret for so long, it was dubbed ProjectX in 1994.

I know this because in 1992 I was there with Carlos Fuente Jr., standing in the rain-soaked fields as the first seeds of what was to become OpusX were planted. "Don't write about this," he implored, "because we don't know how it's going to turn out."

OpusX is still so well-guarded a cigar that the Fuente factory has a special aging room just for its limited supply, and of the 2,500 employees, only thirty-two are considered qualified enough to make this very special *puro*. Once while visiting a tobacconist in Georgia, and noticing that he still had a box of OpusX cigars for sale, I was asked about the brand. As usually happens, a small crowd had gathered, drinks were eventually brought out, and this gradually turned into a mini-smoker. By the time I had finished my story, the box was empty.

One of the problems with cigars that doesn't occur with other collectables is that you can't have your collectable cigar and smoke it too. More than one aficionado who has somehow managed to latch onto a box full of rare stogies has then had to decide what to do with them now that he's gotten them. Fire 'em up and enjoy them as they were originally intended? Put them away as an investment? Or resell them to your best buddy for a profit? Personally, I collect every cigar with the thought that eventually I will smoke it. It may only be on a special occasion, but it will someday cease to exist. Another worthwhile use for collectable cigars is giving or trading them to someone else who might not have one. For me, this is one of the most enjoyable benefits of the cigar hobby. I will never forget being in a private cigar club one evening and swapping cigars with the member who had his locker next to mine.

Which brings up another point: one of the prerequisites for collecting cigars is that you must have a humidor in which to store them. For some of the high-end rarities, you might even want to think about insurance. If you start to amass a sizeable enough collection, putting them on computer files and cross-indexing them as to country, year acquired, and price paid might not be a bad idea. To be sure, there are some cigar collectors who have acquired such a valuable inventory of combustible rarities they must now grapple with the problem of whether to

smoke these collectables or simply keep them in a humidified vault.

All of which brings us to the subject of cost. Just how much should one pay for a really good cigar, collectable or not? There are no retail prices in this book for a reason, local and federal taxes notwithstanding: ever since the 1970s, cigar prices have been escalating at an unpredictable rate. They also fluctuate dramatically across the country, as each city or state has its own "pleasure tax" that they insist on burdening cigar smokers with. Of course, this is a self-defeating punishment, as the added-on taxes for cigars have forced many to take their purchases out-of-state, either by direct mail, Internet, or while traveling. Therefore, the municipalities that sought to pick our pockets now find that there are fewer pockets to pick. A far more equitable solution would be to lower the taxes on cigars, thereby increasing volume and hence, revenue. But this probably makes too much sense for many of our elected officials to grasp.

It is difficult to judge a cigar by its price. For example, in India you can pick up a Rajah, RAF John Hunter, or Picollo for substantially less money than it would take to buy a street lunch of Chicken Vindaloo, but is it worth it? Only you, standing there as the cigar unravels in your mouth, can answer that question. And in England, a ten-count box of the coveted Cuban Cohiba Behike 56 could possibly be substituted for a weekend at Leeds. Which one would be more enjoyable might simply depend on the weather. Price is relevant, but one would assume that a higher price reflected a better grade of tobacco and more care taken with its construction. This is often—but not always—true, and the appearance of super premium and vintage cigars has made more than a few individuals do a double take when they see some cigars costing more than a bottle of vintage Bordeaux. In many cases, these higher prices simply reflect longer aging times for the tobacco, larger leaves that must be used, extra skill required for making a special shape, or a better grade of packaging to uphold an image.

More recently, cigar prices have been escalating because of the demand (you'd think they would be lowering, but that's not how it works). And the price of tobacco is increasing simply because there is not enough of the best leaves to go around. Moreover, the insatiable demand of the cigar boom rebirth has caused a shortage of skilled rollers. As a result, a number of new companies are coming into the cigar industry waving huge amounts of cash at some of the best torcedores, who are leaving their long-term employers and going where the money is. Who can blame them? The end result of all these factors is higher prices for cigars, and not all of them are worth it, simply because the

manufacturer may have the best rollers but not the best tobacco. It is a successful company that has both and they will invariably have the best cigars.

But with all that said, relatively speaking, most premium cigars are underpriced for the pleasure they give. Therefore, the first criteria should be to find a number of cigars that you like. This in itself can turn into a never-ending search and is part of the fun of cigar smoking. Shop around for the best selection. And the best price. Although sometimes paying a few pennies more might be worth it for the feeling of camaraderie you get when visiting a particular tobacco shop. Or for the thrill of acquisition. Other times you may just want the best cigars at the lowest cost. Then, when all is done and you have a coterie of cigars whose shape and taste meet your criteria, decide if the price is worth it to you. If it is, you've found your perfect cigar.

CHAPTER 4

THE RITUAL OF LIGHTING, THE ETIQUETTE OF SMOKING

Anticipation provides more than half the pleasure of fulfillment. And so it is with cigar smoking. Even before I finish a meal, I am thinking about the after-dinner cigar, and this makes the food even more tantalizing on my palate. In many cases, I am never quite sure what that cigar will be. When out with friends, I have already tried to second-guess events by preselecting the cigars I might want, and my cigar case, which holds three, is never filled with the same three. After all, who knows exactly how I will feel or what the evening will bring? If we decide to go for a walk afterwards, perhaps I will want an Hoyo de Monterrey Excalibur No. 1. Or, if coffee is served, I may decide upon a Partagas No. 2. But what if cognac is brought out, and an Avo No. 9 seems more in order? No, one can't be too well prepared when dining away from our supplies in the stockade. On the other hand, when at home, my cigar selection is sometimes much more complicated, as I am faced with a far greater choice to make from my multiple humidors (I have long since discovered that one is not enough). Very often a likely candidate is selected and is poised for the clipping when some inner sense tells me to hold! This is not the perfect subject for tonight's smoke. And back it goes, only to be replaced by Cigar No. 2, which may have been what I subconsciously wanted all along. But whatever the final selection turns out to be, once the chosen cigar is lit, it serves me well and I have never had any regrets. After all, no matter what the cigar or size or country of origin, when picked from my own reserves, they all have one thing in common: I originally thought them worthy enough to bring into the sanctity of my humidor.

There is a certain degree of mental preparedness involved in selecting and smoking a cigar, and much of the enjoyment is simply a matter of perception on the part of the smoker. There is even something about an unopened box of cigars: holding the solid squareness in your hands, tearing off the crisp cellophane, cutting the seal, and unlatching the brass hinge with your thumbnail. And then, opening the lid and unleashing the fresh, pungent aroma of cedar and

tobacco for the first time. Finally, lifting out the first cigar and knowing that there are still more pleasures to be had.

In the Comfortable Outdoor Smoking Area (or COSAs, as they are quaintly labeled in the United Kingdom) of The Churchill Bar & Terrace in London's Hyatt Regency Hotel in Portman Square, the author prepares to offer a cigar to the life-sized Lawrence Holofcener bronze entitled, "In Conversation," which has a young Winston Churchill perpetually seated in the warmth of the heaters overhead. Unfortunately, on November 21, 2014, a basement gas explosion resulted in this luxury hotel temporarily closing down, much to the chagrin of London cigar smokers.

One of the cardinal rules of cigar smoking is to always allow enough time to fully enjoy your cigar of choice. When picking out a Corona, for example, you will need at least thirty minutes. A Rothschild may take more time if you are a slow puffer. And any of the Churchill sizes will require forty-five minutes to an hour. That is why many of the smaller cigars are so popular today, because we don't always have sufficient time to enjoy the bigger ring sizes and longer lengths. Smoking a cigar during the day can be quite a different experience than smoking a cigar in the less demanding wee small hours of the morning.

Just when you smoke a cigar is up to you. Your body will usually tell you when it is time to start and when it is time to stop. Or how many you should consume within a given day. One famous French actor segues from one cigar to another by lighting up a new Punch Double Corona with the one he is about to finish.

And many enthusiasts glowingly speak of the morning cigar, the before lunch cigar, the after lunch cigar, the mid-afternoon cigar, the before dinner cigar, the after dinner cigar and sometimes even the after-cigar cigar. Frankly, those are too many cigars for me. As with everything worth doing, I hold with the philosophy that moderation is the secret to optimum enjoyment. Smoking a megadose of cigars can overload the palate and dull it, which is a bit like chugging an entire decanter of fifty-year-old cognac rather than savoring a snifter-full. It is far more rewarding to smoke fewer cigars but to be able to indulge in each one more intensely. I often ask people if they are cigar smokers and occasionally they will reply, "No, not really; I only smoke one or two a month." Then, in fact, they are cigar smokers. After all, there is no rule on quantities in this pastime.

Conversely, I am frequently asked how many cigars I smoke and people are often surprised at my answer. I rarely smoke more than one cigar a day, unless I am on vacation or it is a special event. Sometimes, I will take a "cigar break" in the middle of the afternoon, just to clear my brain and to take stock of what I have accomplished so far and what else has to be done. But usually when I open my humidor, it will be to bask in the luxury of a well-earned evening cigar, after dinner and often deep into the night, when all is still and I can slip my mind into neutral and with the help of my cigar, coast through any obstacle course that life has put in my path. After hours is the perfect environment to smoke a cigar, for it is a time when all your senses are freed, and one can concentrate on the sensual feel and taste of handrolled smoke from a distant land.

On the other hand, when at a Gentleman's Smoker, I will enthusiastically and unapologetically succumb to the multiple lures of a Petite Corona with champagne, a Panetela with hors d'oeuvres, a Rothschild after dessert and then a conversational Double Churchill with a snifter of malt whiskey or cognac. After all, a Smoker is a cigar *event*! But then, I may not smoke another cigar for one or two days afterward to allow sufficient time for my taste buds to regroup. While on vacation or during the weekend, I will occasionally fire up a Dutch-type mild cigar at midday, or later on, select something a little more robust to help me watch the sun go down over a shimmering glass of spirits.

But no matter when you smoke, or how often, there is a definite ceremony involved with bringing a cigar to life, so that it may unleash all of the pleasure that it holds. I have a definite pre-lighting ritual that I go through with every cigar that I smoke. First, I take an exorbitant amount of time to savor the sweet bouquet that emanates from the wrapper. Sometimes my wife shares in this sensual enjoyment, although, as much as she appreciates a good cigar, she is only

good for about one or two sniffs. Next, I roll the cigar over in my hand, visually caressing its form, examining the wrapper, and reaffirming my commitment that this is indeed the perfect cigar to smoke at this particular moment in my life. Then, and only then, does the lighting ceremony begin.

The first thing to consider is whether or not to remove the band. In Europe there is no question about the matter, for it is considered good form to defrock a cigar of its band, although I find it somewhat ironic that often these bands are then placed prominently in an ashtray or on the table for all to see. If you don't wish to hide the band, why take it off? I will never forget my shock the very first time I saw anyone tear the band from a cigar. On this particular occasion, it was a rather prominent public official and I have never forgiven him. Why anyone would want to remove the band escapes me, unless, of course, they are ashamed of the cigar they are smoking. In that case, it is best to choose a different cigar. After all, the band is a sign of your good taste. It tells others that this is the brand you have chosen, and you are proud of it. Unlike the Empress of Russia and gentlemen smokers of the Victorian era, we no longer have to worry about soiling our gloved hands with tobacco stains, but the band still serves as a proud reminder of our cigar's identity.

Pride and romanticism aside, there is also a practical reason for not removing the band. Because a portion of the cigar band is often inadvertently glued to the wrapper, you can seriously damage your cigar by trying to peel off the band. Besides, why would you want to undo the handcrafted accomplishment of a skilled worker? But if, for some self-and-cigar defiling reason you still feel a compulsion to remove the band, at least wait until the body of your cigar has had a chance to warm up as it is being smoked. The heat will soften the glue and the band may be easier to slip off without invoking The Curse of the Ripped Wrapper. If you want to avoid the band controversy altogether, you might consider smoking only Punch and Hoyo de Monterrey Rothschilds and Ramón Allones Trumps. These cigars are boxed without bands. The perfect compromise, of course, can be found in cigars with bands that cover the foot of the cigar. In this case, the decision has already been made for you, because the band must be removed if the cigar is to be smoked. In all other instances, I recommend leaving this bit of historical decoration alone.

With the band controversy firmly affixed, we should now expose another arcane practice, that of licking a cigar before lighting it. This unsavory and vile act had its origins in the days of non-humidors, but even then it was a senseless endeavor. To truly re-moisten the cigar you would have to unroll it and lick the

filler and binder as well. I will never forget giving an acquaintance an after-dinner cigar at one of the few Beverly Hills restaurants that, at the time, still allowed smoking such things on the patio. To my horror and disgust, he immediately started rolling the unlit cigar around in his mouth like an all-day sucker. Before I could grab his throat, the maître d' rushed over and said, "What's the matter, sir, didn't you enjoy the food?" A properly humidified cigar does not have to be licked.

We now turn our attention to clipping the cigar. There are four distinct types of cuts that you can make: 1) the Guillotine cut, in which a straight-across slice is taken off of the head; 2) the Punch cut, in which a round sharpened metal tube is rotated into the head and a plug of tobacco is plucked out; 3) the "V" cut, wherein a "V"-shaped wedge is cut into the head, and 4) the pierce, where a hole is punched through the center of the head.

The pierce is one of the older styles of "cuts," although it really isn't a cut at all. The pierce can be affected on any ring-sized cigar, but there are some drawbacks to it. The most noticeable is the fact that the single hole very often acts as a collection point for all the rancid acids and tobacco juices. Inasmuch as the smoke (and your tongue) passes over this hole, the taste of the cigar is often adversely affected. Another problem with the pierce is that by boring a hole into the cigar head, there is a risk of crunching the tobacco against the sides and bottom of the hole, which could interfere with the draw, although the machine-made pierce, which is found on many Dutch-type cigars, has eliminated this problem completely. In my collection of tobacciana, I have an elegant gold-and-alligator skin covered retractable cigar piercer that dates from the 1890s, which shows how well esteemed this type of cut once was. However, for today's knowledgeable cigar smoker, it is impractical.

For many years, the V cut was considered best, as it creates an ample, two-sided surface to provide an adequate draw, and the exposed tobacco—a potential gathering spot for bitter tars—is kept at an angle, away from the tongue.

The three different types of cuts (L to R): Guillotine; "V"; and Pierce (in this case all three cuts have been machine made on Dutch-type cigars).

However, there are some drawbacks to the V cut. For one thing, there are very few pocket clippers capable of making a clean V-type slice without ragging up the edges (the Colibri V-Cut being one of the few exceptions). Another problem has to do with the larger ring gauges that are finding favor with many of today's cigar smokers. A standard V-cutter is simply not big enough to accommodate some of the more massive cigars, and anything larger than a 52 ring may only produce a shallow slice instead of a deep cut. The punch cut is the most recent innovation and works quite well on most cigars (perfecto tips excepted), but unless you use a tool like the Crestmark (see Chapter 6) with a built in plunger, the cutting tool often gets clogged with tobacco. And unless you use a tool like the Davidoff Round Cutter (see Chapter 6 and 7), the hole you make may not be the right size for the ring gauge of your cigar. But the Davidoff doesn't have a plunger and the Crestmark only has one size hole. Besides, the punch cut doesn't do very well on certain *figurado* cigars like the Belicoso or Pyramid.

Much more practical for virtually all of today's cigars is the guillotine cut, which, like the V, exposes an ample surface for easy draw and full flavor. It is also a much easier cut to execute, assuming the blade is sharp. The only caveat is that some of the pocket-sized guillotine cutters do not provide a large enough guide hole for cigars with big ring sizes. We will cover this topic more thoroughly in Chapter 6.

Still, for overall practicality, my recommendation is to go with the guillotine. After all, what was good enough for Marie Antoinette should be good enough for our cigars.

When making a guillotine cut, do not cut too much off the top of the head or you could risk turning your Churchill into a Rothschild. The best guideline is to make the cut slightly above the horizontal line where the cap connects with the

wrapper, which should put the cut above the curvature of the shoulder of the cigar. That way, enough of the cap is left on the cigar to keep it from unraveling. Make the cut quick and definite, unless you are using one of the scissors cutters, in which case you may want to rotate the blades around the wrapper to create an encircling slice that marks the start of a clean cut. Of course, this only works when your cutter is sharp. A dull blade will tear the wrapper and you'll run the risk of walking around with a cigar that looks like a pom-pom.

At Edward Sahakian's Cigar Lounge at the Bulgari Hotel and Residences in London, Manager Mike Choi, winner of the Hunters & Frankau 2013 UK Habanosommelier Competition and 2014 Habanosommelier World Championships Runner Up, presents a properly prepared display of a cigar and lighting implements to a customer.

With our cigar properly clipped, we are ready for the baptism of fire. For this exalted task, only a wooden match or a butane lighter will do. A cardboard match is impregnated with chemicals, and the flame from a lighter fluid-soaked wick leaves a residue; both of these devices will taint the taste of tobacco. Butane, on the other hand, burns clean and odorless, and this, or some of the extra-long cedar smoker's matches or a cedar spill are definitely the flames of choice.

The Ritual of Lighting …

After striking a match, be sure to wait until the flare has died down, or your first

puff will be a sulphurous one. The flame of a butane lighter is easier to control, although it does burn hotter. But whatever method of fire you select, don't plunge your cigar directly into the flame as if it were a branding iron. This cloddish practice will soot up your wrapper—and you might notice the more erudite cigar smokers around you turning their backs, leaving you out of their conversations, and gradually filtering out of the room. Soon you will be left alone, an outcast, without friends, family, or hope for the future, all because of this one thoughtless act.

To properly light a cigar, the foot should never be allowed to touch the flame. Instead, the cigar should be held at a forty-five-degree angle directly over the tip of the flame, which is the hottest part. Then, slowly rotate the cigar, gently toasting the tuck and drying out the filler so it will be more receptive to the flame. Some people enjoy maintaining this procedure until the end of the cigar is completely charred and bursts into flame of its own accord, with no puffing required. However, this technique, spectacular as it is, also produces a much stronger first few puffs. Rotating and toasting the foot of a cigar is especially practical with big ring gauges, as it enables you to visually ensure that the entire circumference of the cigar is being warmed and charred. Some smokers toast their cigars until a thin ring of fire appears around the foot. Then, to help the glow spread, they take the smoldering cigar away from the flame and gently wave it around in the air. This drives the anti-smokers in the room absolutely crazy! A noble gesture, but I prefer to simply toast the cigar and inhale the delicate bouquet that is released from the tobacco, an aroma that we will not be able to smell once we start smoking.

At the outdoor cigar terrace at Dukes in St. James, London, bar manager Alessandro Palazzi demonstrates the proper way to light a cigar with a long cedar match, toasting the "foot" and keeping the flame from charring the wrapper.

Bar Supervisor Luca Tramontana at The Wellesley Hotel in Knightsbridge, London "toasts" one of the hotel's exclusive Havana cigars with a butane torch lighter for a customer. Note that the flame does not touch the tobacco.

Next, with the foot of the cigar warm and perhaps just starting to give forth

with a few wisps of smoke, place the cigar to your lips and hold it directly above the tip of the flame. As you gently puff, rotate the cigar, gradually lighting the entire circumference of the foot. All too often a smoker fails to rotate his cigar while puffing, thus lighting only half the cigar and consequently, providing only half the enjoyment. He then smokes away in pathetic oblivion, like a man who has forgotten to zip up his fly and is wondering what everyone is staring at.

Now sit back and sip the full, rich flavor of the savory smoke, much as you would a fine wine. Cigar smokers never inhale, as the taste of the pure tobacco is sensed only by the taste buds in your mouth, much like a gourmet meal. The tongue is the main gathering spot for all the different flavors of tobacco. Sweetness is sensed on the tip, saltiness on the sides, and bitterness near the back. Exhale the smoke, letting the bellowing clouds drift upward, for smoke is an integral part of the enjoyment of a cigar. (During an experiment in the 1890s, it was conclusively proved that cigar smokers who lit up in a darkened room, and consequently could not see any smoke, did not enjoy their cigars as much as those who smoked in a room in which there was light.) A cigar's taste and aroma are transported by the smoke it creates. Thus, the more smoke, the fuller the taste and the more aroma. Because a bigger ring gauge produces more smoke, it also produces more flavor.

But just as a cigar's shape is the embodiment of pleasure, you may not always want a full sized cigar. Sometimes I enjoy smoking two smaller cigars rather than one large one. This, of course, doubles the enjoyment of the lighting ritual. Also, when testing cigars, I often will smoke two similar shapes at once, such as a Dunhill Aged Samanas and a Don Diego Grecos, or will pair up a Henry Clay Breva with an Hoyo de Monterrey Super Hoyo, alternating my puffs and cleansing my palate at intervals with mineral water (carbonated or plain, it doesn't matter) and dry bread, just as you would in a wine tasting. I admit it looks a little strange to the uninitiated to have two cigars going at once, but this is a great way to determine which particular blends you prefer and to compare the tastes of sometimes extremely divergent tobaccos. If you only smoked one cigar at a time, your sense of taste might not be as acute when you finally got to the second cigar. Much better to start out with equal taste perception for both cigars by alternating between the two. Don't forget to jot down your observations as with the multitude of brands that we have today, it will be impossible to recall your reactions to them all.

A properly constructed cigar will develop a long ash, but be prepared to tap it on an ashtray just before you think it might unexpectedly fall off due to hidden air pockets. And that thin charred line between wrapper and ash indicates a well-aged cigar.

A good cigar can be smoked all the way to the band – and sometimes, beyond.

As you smoke any cigar through the course of its existence, you may find that its flavor will change with its length. (Do not confuse this with the oft-cited phenomenon of a cigar not "kicking in" until ten minutes into the smoke; this is sometimes the mark of a poorly fermented cigar.) This is definitely true of torpedoes, where the ring gauge changes as the cigar is being smoked, but also is evident with other shapes as well, as the smoke continues to filter through the tobacco and intensifies as the cigar grows shorter. What started out as an HPH 2 could easily end up an HPH 2.5 when you place your cigar in the ashtray for the

final time. Because the head of a cigar acts like a filter during the entire length of the smoke, most cigars, no matter what their brand or size, will smoke at their optimum for the first two-thirds of their length and then tend to become harsh, and many connoisseurs prefer to let them go out once they have crossed that threshold. Others will smoke their cigars right on down to their lips, relishing the hotter, stronger taste as their facial hair bursts into flames.

With decreasing length comes increasing ash. A long ash on a premium cigar is indicative of a healthy outer wrapper and a well-formed long leaf filler bunch. This ash acts as an insulator, and can help cool the foot of the cigar as it is being smoked. However, a soft spot in the bunch of even the best super premium cigar will cause the ash to weaken when it reaches that point and fall off unexpectedly. To avoid this potential problem, I rarely let my cigar ash get more than an inch in length. When it comes time to detach itself from the Mother Ship, I gently touch the tip of the ash to the bottom of an ashtray and let it gracefully depart. But don't attempt to produce a long ash on even the best of the short filler cigars, as their short leaf tobacco physically prevents it from forming.

Perhaps this is a good time to talk about The Fallacy of the White Ash. For years there has been a great misconception of trying to link ash color to cigar quality. About the only thing a white ash signifies is that you're smoking a cigar with a white ash. Ash color has nothing to do with how well a cigar may smoke, although the implied purity of white has undoubtedly caused many cigar makers in the past to unjustifiably strive for this color, thereby perpetuating the myth.

All the color of a cigar ash can tell us is the approximate mineral content of the soil in which the tobacco was grown. Obviously, different soils from different areas have different mineral contents and consequently, they produce different ash colors. For example, if there is too little magnesium, the ash is dark. The more magnesium in the soil, the lighter the ash. But too much magnesium will cause the ash of even a long filler cigar to flake off before its time. Normally, the lighter the ash color, the sweeter the tobacco will taste. Consequently, a cigar with a dark grey ash will be more pronounced in taste than one with a light gray ash. Nor does ash color have anything to do with the combustion rate of the tobacco. That is determined by the soil's PH (which is why tobacco buyers often test the burn rate of a leaf at the warehouses in the fields before purchasing a bale for cigar making in the factories). Now you probably know more than anyone else in your neighborhood about cigar ash.

Maybe it's the color of the ash, or the patterns it makes, or the natural texture of the wrapper, but I often find myself studying my cigar while I smoke it.

Although it is silent, a smoking cigar can tell you many things. For example, that thin, shiny black ring that acts as a fence around the ash and separates it from the unburned wrapper shows that your cigar is well made and the tobacco has been properly cured. On the other hand, if this ring is more like a wide blackened band that is blistered, it is a sign of poor leaf combustion and means that the tobacco wasn't fermented properly. But then, your taste buds probably already told you something was amiss. Which brings up another point.

Occasionally while smoking, you will get a very uncomfortable hollow, almost gaseous feeling in your chest. This is an indication that the tobacco was not properly fermented or aged, and you are getting too much nitrogen and nicotine into your system. The best cure for this malady is to get rid of that cigar and try a different brand. Another disconcerting occurrence is a cigar that starts burning unevenly down one side of the wrapper, a situation sometimes described as a "runner" or "canoeing." Normally, there is nothing you can do to stop this runaway brush fire. I have tried reclipping the cigar and even building a backfire. It never gets better and I am usually left with a smoldering brand that is more dangerous than enjoyable to smoke. Assuming you have lit the cigar properly, this unsettling phenomenon can be caused by one of four things: the cigar maker's "booking" of the filler, improper humidification of your cigar, a poorly burning tobacco, or a problem with the actual construction of the leaf that has somehow escaped the watchful eyes of the inspectors at the factory. Normally, the two most frequently encountered culprits are poor humidification and poor leaf construction. Unfortunately, at this juncture we cannot do anything about poor leaf construction other than to toss the cigar and take notice of the brand, hoping it doesn't happen again. But there is something we can do about ensuring that our cigars are properly humidified, and that "something" will be discussed in the next chapter.

But, sometimes, no matter how well we've cared for them, we still come across a cigar that just won't draw. These frustrating encounters are usually more prominent with smaller ring gauges, where the bunching is tight. But no cigar is immune, and I have found a hard draw in some well-known premium cigars that were in the 48 and 54 ring categories. No amount of red-faced puffing and reclipping is going to help. Besides, why ruin your evening by trying to undo what is most assuredly the faulty construction of the cigar itself? The only solution is to take the cigar back to the tobacconist where you got it (assuming it is still relatively unsmoked). Expect a replacement cigar or a credit on your next purchase. Tobacconists are an honorable breed and have, at one time or another,

experienced the same thing themselves. They will understand. Or they should.

Assuming everything goes right, as it most often does, there is no peace like the serene smoke from a good cigar. But occasionally, because there are no artificial ingredients or chemicals in a cigar to make it burn, it will go out before its time. This is especially true if we should be engaged in conversation so stimulating it makes us forget to take the obligatory occasional puff to keep the embers of pleasure lit within the hearth underneath the ash. If that should happen to you, simply warm the end of your cigar over a flame before relighting it. This will release the carbon monoxide and ammonia that has been trapped inside the ash and lessen the shock to your palate when the cigar is reborn, as a relit cigar almost always smokes stronger. There are also times when a cigar that has seemingly died prematurely can be brought back to life simply by exhaling through it very gently. A curl of smoke tells you that there is hope.

A counterfeit Cohiba. The short filler does not hold an ash. Note the coarse veins of the wrapper. The uneven burn, the thick black "bubble-like" ring, and the rancid taste are all evidence that the wrapper has not been properly cured.

Eventually, however, all good things must come to an end and our cigar must be allowed to go out. To try and keep it alive beyond its prime can only taint the otherwise fine memory of that once vibrant smoke, for then it becomes disagreeable and bitter, much like a love affair gone bad. When this moment occurs, gently lay the cigar in an ashtray and let it succumb to natural causes. This releases the least amount of odor. Do not crush your cigar as you would a cigarette, as that only spreads the burning ash and increases the total area of noxious fumes. When I smoke my cigars at home, I always dispose of them grandly in the fireplace, or let them quietly go out in a distant ashtray outside, lest anyone complain. It is simply a case of "what they can't smell can't hurt you." And thus, the sanctity of my cigar-smoking enclave is preserved.

Which brings up a new home-improvement innovation spawned by the cigar renaissance, the "cigarden." This is simply a peaceful retreat in the backyard that has been specially landscaped to make cigar smoking more enjoyable. It can be as simple as a shaded lounge chair and an ashtray within easy reach, or as elaborate as a sylvan enclave featuring the gurgling sound of a waterfall and the melodic strains of music through hidden speakers. Of course, other items, such as a barbeque, badminton net, or a small gardening plot may also be included as part of the cigarden. In fact, their inclusion may be crucial to the acceptance of the cigarden by others in the household. The main prerequisite, however, is that somewhere in the backyard there be a private sanctuary where one can enjoy a cigar.

But even this precious utopia—one of the few islands of solace left to the modern-day cigar smoker—quickly fades once outside the protective environs of our home, the tobacco shop, and the Smoker. Sympathetic understanding ceases to exist on the mean streets of a rabidly fanatical world of anti-smokers. Just as during the Victorian era, cigar smoking is again being frowned upon in public. Yes, history does have a way of repeating itself, and today, with roving gangs of militant anti-smokers waiting in ambush around every street corner and lurking in every building, the world we live in is no longer considered safe for the likes of us. Our only defense is to band together. We have the clout, if only we would use it. Although there are very few places left where one may smoke a cigar in peace, they must be preserved, either through legislation or by outright acquisition.

Which explains the rebirth of a number of cigar-friendly private clubs that are springing up across America. I have christened these bastions of freedom "smokeasies," a grammatical takeoff of the speakeasy of Prohibition infamy.

A smokeasy is simply a club where cigar smokers can relax in comfortable surroundings and light up in peace. Sometimes there are membership fees, sometimes not. Most smokeasies offer private cigar lockers (or "keeps" as the British call them), as well as deep-cushioned chairs, wide-screen televisions, refreshments, and other amenities as dictated by the members' wishes and the locale. The Grand Havana Room in Beverly Hills and New York City serves gourmet cuisine, features a fully stocked bar, and has become the hot spot for Hollywood's elite, all of whom need a special key to gain access via private elevator. By contrast, Club Macanudo in New York is open to anyone who buys a cigar there (and it doesn't only have to be a Macanudo). In Chicago an upscale men's clothiers has added a cigar lounge so customers may relax while they shop. Other smokeasies across America may simply be smoke-friendly lounges in cigar

stores.

The Davidoff Lounge at The Tobacco Shop of Ridgewood, New Jersey, is a classic example of luxury cigar lounges that are enjoying a renaissance, and which blends tradition and modern design. Among its amenities, the lounge features 100 private lockers for members to store their cigars, and a private boardroom for meetings and dinners.

In Havana (which ironically has "No Smoking" signs posted in most areas), Cuba's modern Meliá Cohiba hotel has a smoking lounge, El Relicario, stocked with an impressive La Casa del Habano selection. On the other side of the globe, The Pacific Cigar Company, the official Havana importer for Asia Pacific, operates numerous upscale cigar lounges, including Cohiba Cigar Divan in Hong Kong and the P&L Cigar Club in Taipei. And in London, which has had smokeasies since Queen Victoria's reign, England's notorious Health Act 2006 could not snuff out the cigar and has given rise to a number of "Comfortable Outdoor Smoking Areas," or COSA's, as they are quaintly called. These areas are actually outdoor cigar lounges with foliage-thick walls, soft leather chairs, fireplaces, and heated ceilings and floors, which give them the ambiance and comfort of an exclusive gentleman's club. Some of the most notable are the Cigar Room atop the May Fair, The Garden Room at The Lanesborough, No. Ten Manchester Street's stylish cigar terrace, and The Churchill Bar & Terrace at the Hyatt Regency London, which features a life-sized sculpture of Sir Winston seated at one of the tables. More dramatic yet is the cigar-centric creation of the Wellesley Hotel in Knightsbridge, which not only features two luxurious outdoor

cigar smoking area and some of the rarest cigars in the City, but also boasts a private humidor in their penthouse suite.

But these growing numbers of smoking enclaves aside, there are also subtle ways to win an anti-cigar war fueled by ignorance and prejudice—the two things that cannot be swayed. Rather than pointlessly argue with militant anti-smokers, we must try to win the *non*smokers over to our side. These are the people who are neither anti-nor pro-cigars. They are the middle ground and comprise the largest percentage of the American populace. If we can show them that we are more civilized than the radical anti-cigar thugs, we will have made our point. We must convince them with kindness. And courtesy. It does no good to force ourselves upon others, for we only aggravate the situation.

The Cigar Room at the five star May Fair Hotel in London's West End effectively transformed an unused rooftop into a sophisticated ultra-modern cigar smoking environment, with steel mesh "ceilings" to comply with England's open air requirement, and gas fireplaces and overhead heaters for warmth.

"Smokeasies," civilized havens where people can relax with good friends, good spirits, and good cigars, have enjoyed a rebirth in modern times. In New York City and in Beverly Hills, California (pictured), the Grand Havana Room is one of the country's most exclusive private clubs, where access is for members and their guests only, and entrance is by private, key-operated elevator.

As an example, even if I am in a restaurant or bar where cigar smoking is allowed (a rarity, I admit, but they do exist in various parts of the world), I will still ask the table next to me if they mind if I smoke, making sure they see my cigar case and know exactly what it is I am referring to. If they don't mind, then all is well. But if they take offense, then I politely thank them for not letting me ruin their evening, and make a big show of putting all of my paraphernalia away. Sometimes the offending party ends up feeling guilty and recants. Or at least apologizes. Usually not. But at least I have shown them that I am a considerate individual and perhaps the next time they read about "rude smokers," they may recall the incident and begin to rethink all this mass media hysteria. In this situation, I have nothing to lose. If I had gone ahead and smoked my cigar, they would have complained, thereby ruining the moment for everyone. So I simply wait for a more hospitable environment (often retiring to the welcoming sanctuary of a nearby smokeasy, or back in the sanctity of my own home), where I can enjoy my cigar with a peace and solitude that they will never know.

Additionally, whenever I encounter a restaurateur who is friendly or at least sympathetic to the cigar smoker's plight, I always make it a point to tell him how much I appreciate his attitude. You can be sure he gets the opposite side of the argument from anti-smokers who are convinced they are being politically correct by dictating other people's lifestyles. And if the maître d' of a restaurant is a cigar smoker (How do you find out? You ask.), it can be mutually beneficial to offer him a cigar *before* he seats you. On occasion I have also sent a cigar to the chef after an especially enjoyable and well-presented meal. It is always reassuring to discover that many of these professional gourmets are cigar smokers.

Although the airlines have their anti-cigar statement irrevocably in place, I have extended my "cigar sensitivity training" when making reservations at hotels and resorts, asking if cigar smoking is permitted. Very often I am pleasantly surprised, such as discovering that the Montage Laguna Beach has ocean-view fire pits for cigar smokers, or that Graycliff Boutique & Smoking Divans has two cigar smoking lounges at, of all places, the Nashville International Airport. And not surprisingly, it is usually the cigar-friendly hotels and resorts that have the better amenities and a friendlier staff. The same applies to cruise lines, although there are very few cruise lines left that acknowledge the fact that the cigar smoker is a consumer who does more than his share to keep the wheels of commerce

turning. But perhaps because of their British registry, the Cunard Lines' Queen Elizabeth has always permitted cigar smoking on board and even stocks a fairly-priced selection of Havanas in their Churchill's Cigar Lounge. Unfortunately, on all too many other cruise lines, the attitude toward cigar smoking ranges from "not allowed" to "only on the upper decks during a hurricane." So if planning to enjoy a leisurely Lonsdale off the coast of Tortola or a Robusto amidst the red rocks of Sedona, be sure to check out whether or not your intended cruise line, resort, or hotel is cigar friendly. Even among the chains, some individual properties may be.

Indeed, cigar-smoking victories are where you find them. On one of my daily power walks I routinely encounter a young father puffing on a cigar as he rapidly pushes his newborn son in a baby stroller. With the wheels rumbling and all that smoke, he looks like a freight train but there is always a contented expression on his face. "It's great to get out with your kid and enjoy a good cigar," he once told me. Another dad wrote to me and related how, every Saturday night when the weather is right, he and his boy go out in the back yard. The father has his cigar and a snifter of cognac; his son has a snifter of apple juice and a bubble gum cigar. There is family unity and character-building bonding here that the anti-cigar people simply do not have the capacity to understand.

Whether smoking cigars with others or in the sanctity of our homes, it remains a pleasure that belongs uniquely to us. And by joining together to spread this camaraderie, we are ensuring that it remains an ongoing and viable part of everyday life. Gradually, others are starting to accept that fact. Unfortunately, not everyone. But that is a battle we must eventually win. For then and only then, will cigar smoking assume its rightful place as a publicly acknowledged entity of civilized society, and an integral ingredient for quality of life.

CHAPTER 5

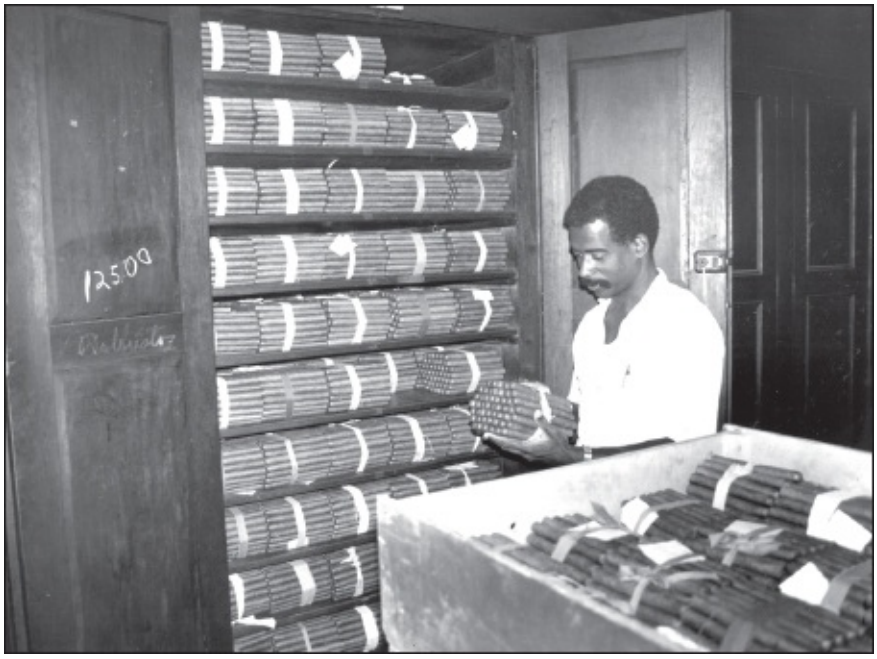
THE SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL CIGAR STORAGE

They say that good things can't last forever, but humidification is one method of extending your cigar-smoking pleasures indefinitely. It also enables you to save money by purchasing cigars by the box or by stocking up on your favorite brands when they go on sale. Cigars should be stored at 65 percent to 70 percent humidity and at a temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit. If you have trouble remembering numbers, you can probably get away with a 77–70 mix. A cigar that is too dry will smoke hot, fast, and unevenly; too moist and it will be hard to light and even harder to puff. Either way, you will be deprived of the pleasure you are entitled to.

The best way to store cigars is in a humidor, and we will be discussing the various types available in the next chapter. The most important advice I can give you now is to always use distilled water in your humidifying agent. Tap water tends to cause mold and has additives that can destroy the effectiveness of some humidifiers over a period of time and can even alter the flavor of your cigars. The purpose of a humidor is to recreate the mild humid climate of the Caribbean, where the cigars were made. Which means you wouldn't want to be a humidor salesman in the Dominican Republic. I always take extra care to check my humidors once a week for moisture level. We all tend to get a bit paranoid about dry cigars, and one of the biggest problems today is overhumidification by aficionados who are just as paranoid as I am. If your cigars start to crinkle up or feel soggy, leave the humidor lid open for a few days or take the humidifying agent out until things settle back down to normal (usually about three days to a week, depending on how waterlogged your stogies have become and in what part of the country you live—they'll dry out quicker in Arizona than in Florida). Feeling your cigar is the best way to tell if it is properly humidified; those built in hygrometers are usually far from accurate, as we shall discuss in the next chapter.

When checking your cigars, make sure that no greenish-blue patches of mold have started to form on them. If this mini-calamity occurs, remove the offending

cigars immediately and air out the humidor after cleaning it thoroughly with a dry cloth. A light grayish-white dusting of bloom on the wrapper is permissible, however, and shows that the cigars are aging. You can wipe this bloom off with a soft cloth if you like, or leave it on the wrapper, as one would leave dust on an old bottle of wine. It won't hurt anything and may even enhance the taste.



The "ultimate" cigar storage area: the late nineteenth century cedar-lined cabinets in Havana's Partagás factory.

In many European countries where Dutch-type cigars are all the rage, most notably in Switzerland, France, and Germany, humidors are not perceived as being necessary, and it has only been since the 1980s that French tobacconists have begun installing humidors in their shops to house the better grades of "wet" cigars.

During a publicity tour to promote the German edition of my book, most of the walk-in humidors I saw in tobacco shops were large, modern, and very well stocked.

If you don't have a humidor, one of the best places to store cigars is in the closet, as this is normally the one room in your house that is dark and has the least amount of temperature fluctuation. If possible, keep your cigars in a cedar box, as cedar enhances the flavor of tobacco over a period of time, much like adding spice to food. If you don't buy your cigars by the box, you can put loose ones in an airtight plastic container. You may want to line the bottom with a few

strips of cedar gleaned from an obliging tobacconist to offset any lingering non-tobacco odors. I even know a fellow who stores his bundle cigars in a well-scrubbed coffee can with a plastic lid. Of course, your cigars will dry out if you don't have some sort of humidifying agent in there with them. It can be as simple as a moist paper towel or a small sponge placed with your cigars inside a sealed plastic bag. A commercially made humidifying agent, such as Bóveda Humidipak, EverMoist, or Credo, as discussed in the next chapter, is even better as the humidification will be more controlled. Just don't let any water come in direct contact with the wrappers or it will ruin them. Should your cigars dry out completely, they can be rehumidified with no loss of quality as long as the natural oils in the tobaccos haven't evaporated.

Overhumidification of a cigar can literally make the wrapper explode, a common phenomenon in tropical climates as well as in humidors.

The place *not* to store your cigars is in the refrigerator. I speak from personal experience. Most frost-free refrigerators have a tendency to suck the moisture right out of things, including your cigars. And because tobacco is highly absorbent, it will tend to take on the flavor of whatever food is nearby. I will never forget those pizza-flavored Perfectos. By the same token, do not store flavored cigars, like the vanilla-scented Arango's Sportsman, in with your non-flavored cigars, or everything you light up will taste like a cookie.

Storing dry cigars presents no special problems, as they remain self-sufficient at relatively low humidity. Ideally, all they need is 12 percent but I've even kept some in the glove compartment of my car with no ill effects on me or the cigars. Even if you live in a temperate clime, such as in the Southeastern United States, simply keeping these cigars inside, away from the hanging moss, should easily maintain their long-term taste and burning qualities. Just remember to stay away from extremes, such as putting your box of Schimmelpennincks on top of the

radiator or on that frosty six-pack.

When storing cigars in a humidor, many aficionados recommend rotating your cigars at least monthly so they will all receive the same degree of humidification (cigars on the bottom of a humidor are definitely not as moist as those inhabiting the upper berths) but this strikes me as being a lot of time-consuming work. As most humidors have a moisturizing agent in the top of the lid, my theory has always been that as you smoke the top layer of cigars, the next layer will be humidified in turn. I have yet to have any problems with this practice, although if I were a more responsible person with time on my hands I would probably opt for the rotation procedure. But frankly, I would rather be smoking my cigars than rotating them.

A humidor also comes in handy if you want to age your cigars, as many serious cigar smokers are starting to do. Actually, cigar aging is not a new trend, as it was very much in vogue with Edwardian smokers early in this century, and every once in a while a forgotten box of pre-Castro (and often pre-Batista) Havanas keep popping up, usually going for unconscionable prices at auction. In 1996 a sheep farmer in Ballymore, Ireland discovered 600 cigars that had been hidden deep in the recesses of his country manor ever since 1860. Thanks to the natural humidity in that area, the cigars were perfectly preserved. It didn't take long for an unidentified American investor to offer a million dollars for the cache. As reporter Kyle Pope of *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out, based on 500 of the cigars still being smokable, that's about $2,000 per cigar, or $22 a puff!

Aging cigars is very similar to aging wines or gourmet cheeses. Some cigars can be aged for as long as ten to twenty years, although two to five years is the norm nowadays, as most of us do not wish to tie up our tobacco for too long a period of time without enjoying it. Besides, many of today's cigars will peak at one or two years and then will actually start to deteriorate in quality. And just like wines, some tobaccos will not age at all, while others can have their flavors enhanced immeasurably. The best way to determine which cigars will take to this process is to test smoke an aging cigar every six months. Here is the procedure I use:

In addition to the humidors for storing the cigars I am currently smoking, I have separate humidors in which I keep the cigars that I am aging. I am also fortunate enough to live near a tobacconist who rents out cigar lockers in his walk-in humidor, which increases my aging potential considerably. Firms like Dunhill and Davidoff and a number of other tobacconists—where space permits—also offer this storage service to customers. And most cigar clubs, such as the

one at the Ritz-Carlton St. Louis, provide private humidors for their members as part of an inducement for joining. But even at home, it is an easy process to tuck a box of cigars away in a special humidor purchased just for aging, or to seal them in an inexpensive and efficient plastic food container with a moisturizer in it. In addition to a 70–70 mix of temperature and humidity, cigars will age best in a cedar box. But remember to remove the cellophane from each cigar as well as the interior tissue from the cedar box, or all your efforts will be for naught. Cellophane inhibits the aging process and the interior paper is a barrier between your cigars and the cedar.

I mark each box I am aging with the day, month, and year that I first put it down. Before closing the box, I smoke one of the cigars, and note my impression of the aroma of the wrapper and the taste of the tobacco. Approximately six months later I smoke another cigar from the box and refer to my original notes to see if there has been any change in the flavor and wrapper aroma. If there has, then I know I am on a roll. But if there is no noticeable difference, then that box gets "decanted" and smoked immediately. It doesn't mean the cigars are bad; it just means that there is no benefit to keeping them sequestered any longer.

And there is nothing to say that you cannot age a number of different cigars in one box, keeping in mind that, being of different tobaccos, if they age, they will most likely age at different rates. And for long-term aging, you should have a cedar divider between different brands, so that dissimilar types of tobacco do not come in contact with each other. Putting maduros next to Connecticut shade wrappers will affect the lighter-tasting cigars.

You should be warned that there is a specter that can arise as a result of either short-term cigar humidification or long-term aging, and that is the evil form of *Lacioderma*, the dreaded tobacco worm. The first edition of *The Ultimate Cigar Book* was the first book to bring this plight to the universal attention of consumers. Even though many cigar makers are now fumigating their warehouses every thirty days, these prolific little creatures sometimes still manage to survive. They do it by laying their eggs deep inside the tobacco leaf. There they go dormant, and that leaf eventually gets made into a cigar. And sometimes a dark humidor that has gotten a little too warm or a little too humid is just what they need to be aroused from their slumber, like some loathsome creature in a microscopic horror movie. Within twenty-two days the larva hatches into a hungry worm that finds itself in an all-night buffet—your cigars! This vile creature, still unseen by human eyes, eats/bores its way through the tobacco leaves, creating a tiny tunnel that leads out to the surface of the cigar.

There, bloated and burping hideously after gorging itself on your Double Coronas, it metamorphoses into a pinhead-sized brown beetle and, if it doesn't fly out the next time you open your humidor, its body will usually be found in the bottom. Oddly, these tobacco beetles normally confine themselves to a single cigar, but every once in a while they get in a traveling mood. I once opened a box of what used to be twenty-five fully formed cigars and found nothing but ragged leaves and tobacco dust. A virtual invasion had taken place. Usually the worm will bore straight up and out of a cigar, leaving its telltale hole (which completely ruins the cigar, by the way), but occasionally they will eat a deep trough along the length of the wrapper.

A freshly bored hole of the dreaded Lacioderma (tobacco worm). Notice the tobacco dust left around the opening.

When you discover the deadly *Lacioderma* in your humidor, the first thing to do is take a stiff drink of any of the substances discussed in Chapter 7. Then, return to the scene of the crime and remove the dead cigar. In fact, you must remove all the cigars if you are to stop the beast in its tracks, and to prevent others of his pack—who may still be lurking in your cigars—from eventually hatching. Actually, only one cigar may have been harboring the larvae, but you can never be sure. There may be others from the same box. For all intents and purposes, all the cigars must be given The Cure: Place them on a light-colored paper towel (easier to spot any bugs that way) and scrutinize each cigar for wormholes. If any more are found, throw them out. Then carefully examine your now empty humidor for signs of the beetle's body. Chances are you will find it. What you do with it is up to you. A friend of mine was so enraged at finding the bug still alive he actually drove a letter opener right through its heart—well actually, its whole body—and through the bottom of his humidor as well. A bit

rash, but effective. It killed the beetle.

Next, put all of the apparently healthy cigars in a plastic Ziploc bag, gently force the air out of it, seal it, and place it in the freezer. Leave it there for two days. Three is even better. Then, take the bag from the freezer to the refrigerator so the cigars will thaw out slowly and will not go into shock and split. This is the only time I can recommend putting cigars in the refrigerator. Once the cigars have thawed, remove them from the refrigerator, take them out of the bag and let them slowly return to room temperature. Do not put them in the sunlight to speed up the process or they will split their wrappers. Once again I tell you this from personal experience. In the meantime, completely clean and aerate your humidor. Use warm water and a paper towel. And wipe the interior completely dry. DO NOT use soap, or your cigars will taste and smell like your laundry. Now you can put your cigars back. The bug is dead. The cigars can be smoked. You have made the world safe. For now.

But the Night of the Living *Lacioderma* may return. It shouldn't, because tobacco crops are sprayed and warehouses are fumigated, but this is one creature that just isn't on the endangered species list. Even dry cigars are not immune from its attack, and the freezing technique—on a much larger scale, of course—is used by many European manufacturers to keep their Dutch-type cigars "clean" when shipping to tropical or subtropical countries. In addition, a great many cigar manufacturers in the Dominican Republic and Honduras are now freezing their cigars before shipping, but it is a costly and time-consuming process, and not everyone practices it. Thus, a shipment that hasn't been frozen is delayed in customs or sits on a nice warm, humid loading dock in Miami. The bug hatches and the eventual recipient of the infested box of cigars finds he has also inherited some new "pets." But at least you now know The Cure and how to get rid of this beast and save your cigars. Like anything, constant surveillance is the best defense. Check the cigars in your humidor regularly. Not just the top row, but right down to the bottom. Keep your humidor away from heating vents. Given a choice, it is better to keep cigars cool with less humidity rather than overly humid and warm. With these precautions, perhaps someday cigars of all nations will be able to live safely in their humidors and know a life without fear from the wrath of *Lacioderma*—the dreaded tobacco worm.

One final note about cigar storage. Sometimes a tabletop humidor isn't enough. That's why there are companies that specialize in making furniture humidors, end tables, and armoires that are actually humidified storage units capable of holding hundreds of cigars. But sometimes hundreds of cigars aren't

enough. That's why there is now a growing industry of individuals who are building private walk-in humidors for cigar connoisseurs in their homes and offices. It isn't as farfetched as it may seem.

All you need is a closet or extra bedroom that can be commandeered. Line it with Spanish cedar (standard American "closet cedar" is much too aromatic), weatherproof it, install a portable humidifier with a regulating agent so that it doesn't become too moist and *voila*! You've increased your cigar storage capacity by thousands of cigars. The benefits are many. Now you can take advantage of those great sale prices on boxed cigars. You can search cities and traverse the Internet stocking up on favorite brands, thereby protecting yourself from future shortages (although you will probably be creating this shortage by stocking up on these brands). You'll always have a variety of cigars to choose from, no matter what size, shape, or wrapper leaf you may desire. Many Hollywood celebrities have walk-ins to preserve their privacy when selecting their smokes. A Beverly Hills attorney has his walk-in tucked underneath a staircase in his house. By contrast, a real estate broker is incorporating a huge walk-in as an integral part of his overall house design. With a gleam in his eye, he estimates he'll be able to store more stogies than some Third World countries can make in a year.

No, you can never have too many cigars. That's what cigar storage is all about.

CHAPTER 6

CIGAR ACCESSORIES: THE AFTERMARKET OF SMOKE

Just as you might want to upgrade your mega-boosted surround-sound system with ceiling speakers, so might you add certain amenities that are designed to make your cigar smoking more enjoyable. They can be novel, luxurious, or even superfluous, but some accessories are absolutely essential. Like a good cigar cutter, for example.

In most circles, it is not considered *de rigueur* to chomp off the end of a cigar with your teeth and spit it across the table hoping to make a slam dunk in your date's martini glass. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was certainly aware of this commonsense bit of etiquette when he wrote these lines in his 1912 classic, *The Lost World*: "… We re-entered the room which we had left so tumultuously ten minutes before. The Professor closed the door carefully behind us, motioned me into an arm-chair, and pushed a cigar-box under my nose. 'Real San Juan Colorado,' he said. 'Excitable people like you are the better for narcotics. Heavens! don't bite it! Cut—and cut with reverence!'"

Nor is the sometimes-condoned technique of trimming a cigar with your thumbnail considered genteel, even though it is often done by the cigar makers themselves. But what might be customary in the tobacco fields and cigar factories is very likely to be frowned upon at a social gathering. What is needed is a civilized method of making the four basic types of cuts discussed in Chapter 3. Because the guillotine is the recommended cut of *The Ultimate Cigar Book*, we will deal with this one first.

The most easily encountered and least expensive cutter will be the pocket-size plastic devices that have a finger loop at one end and are often given away as premiums by some of the cigar companies. And if you prefer to have one that is not embossed with a logo, they are one of the most inexpensive items you can buy in a tobacco shop. The blade is basically a razor, and as such, it is not good for a great many close shaves with your cigars, as it will get dull quickly. If you use this type of cutter regularly, the average lifespan will be about six months, but

most people will lose theirs before they wear them out. Slightly more practical is the Klipit 2000. Not the prettiest cigar cutter in the world (it looks like a cockroach), it nonetheless features a stainless steel blade, a positive safety lock, a large enough hole to accommodate a 54-ring cigar, and is very inexpensive. Even better is the Pocket Scissors Cutter by Credo, which will cut up to a 70-ring cigar and comes in a variety of colors. Slightly upscale in design and price is the twin-bladed cutter from Pléiades and similar models that feature a hole on either side of the blade for your thumb and index finger.

The Credo pocket scissors cutter can handle a 60-ring gauge cigar as well as a pyramid shape (note the separate "hole" cutter on top). Plus it is relatively inexpensive and comes in a variety of colors.

Big-ringed cigars demand a cutter that can handle the job, like this double-bladed Xikar guillotine. The Dunhill "Tinder Box" table lighter uses liquid fuel and dates from the 1950s.

Some popular cigar cutters (l. to r.) antique-styled cigar scissors, two-fingered Guillotine cutter, and a stag-handled V-cutter. Shown with an S.T. Dupont L2 Palladium butane lighter.

A significant step up in price and appearance is the excellent Donatus guillotine-type cutter from Germany, which sports a Solingen steel blade. It is available in a great number of case styles, including two of the most popular, brushed steel with contrasting gold and as a briar-paneled version from firms such as Savinelli. Some of the latest guillotine cutters are made by the American firm of Xikar (pronounced "Zeye-kar"), which produces a rather muscular-looking "butterfly" cutter with two metal "wings" that lock closed when not in use. The German HRC 58 stainless blades won't rust and are self sharpening. Xikar cutters come with a variety of designs on their "wings," including cigar bands, carbon fiber, and mammoth ivory. Although a bit heavy in the pocket, they will cut up to a 64-ring gauge cigar. Two of their newest innovations is a two-fingered cutter that magnetically adheres to a Xikar lighter, and their X875 double guillotine cutter that can slice a 75 ring cigar, should one ever be made (and I suspect it's only a matter of time). And for something even more dramatic, a company called Room 101 in Hollywood, California, designs sterling silver versions of the Xikar cutter affixed to a heavy silver belt chain and embellished with skulls and other motifs.

By far the most versatile pocket-sized guillotine cutter is the Zino Cigar Cutter by Davidoff. It is one of the few cutters capable of facing up to a 56 ring gauge without shirking its responsibilities. Although its modern polymer construction makes it slightly heavier than some other versions, the Zino has excellent surgically sharp twin blades, so that equal pressure from two sides is automatically applied to the cigar head; the cut is made from the outside perimeters straight through to the center, as opposed to starting from one end and slicing across. This enables the fingers to apply far greater leverage for a faster, surer cut. Because of its unique design, the polished stainless steel blades are self-sharpening like the Xikar, which means that this cutter will probably last indefinitely. I have two that I have been using alternately for over fifteen years. Available in black, brown, red, green, gray white, and the new translucent green, the Zino, while not inexpensive, is far from being the costliest cutter on the market. Considering its practicality and versatility, it is one of the best values available today.

Davidoff's classic silver two-finger cigar cutters can take up to a 56-ring gauge and are enhanced with wood inlays.

Black tie and a La Palina Black Label means you're ready for a night out, wearing your Colibri Ascari black steel chronograph with gold accents, and carrying a black and copper-trimmed Colibri Astoria triple-jet lighter with foldout cutter.

Now we start getting into the realm of luxury-class guillotine cutters, which I find to be surprisingly limited. Perhaps the best variety for a single design can be found with the stainless steel blade vest pocket versions from The White Spot (formerly Dunhill). These British-made works of art are available in a number of finishes, including polished steel, steel and gold, silver plate, sterling silver, gold plate and 18-carat gold. Elegant enough for formal wear, each cutter comes with a protective leather pouch and a "shackle" for attachment to a watch chain. This is one cutter you definitely won't want to lose!

Silver and skulls are some of the cigar cutter themes produced by Matt Booth's Room 101 studios in Hollywood, California.

From France, S. T. Dupont makes a distinctive rectangular-shaped pocket cutter in different finishes, including Chinese red-and-black lacquer, silver, and gold plate. And Cartier offers their Santos-styled cutter with multiple screws, to match their Santos watch. Definitely not a pocket cutter and more in the line of a desktop accessory is the stainless steel, hand-forged Davidoff Cigar Scissors, which is also available with gold plated handles. Employing the same principle as their Zino cutter, this double-bladed cutter is one of the easiest to use in terms of gauging the size of the cut to the ring size of the cigar. It is my at-home go-to cutter, although similar designs are marketed by other firms as well.

In the punch cut, wherein a round sharpened cylinder is rotated into the cigar head and a hole is plucked out of the cigar, you can run the price gamut from an inexpensive cutter that looks like a .44 Magnum bullet (in fact, that is what it is called) all the way up to the elegant Davidoff Round Cutter, which comes in a variety of finishes, including gold, silver and gold, and lacquered.

This is really one of the best, as it sports three different diameter-cutting cylinders so you can match the proper cut to the ring size of the cigar. Otherwise, too small a hole will have the same effect as the pierce: acidic tobacco juices will gradually condense along the cut and eventually ruin the taste of your cigar. Too large a hole is just like making too wide a guillotine cut and you run the risk of taking in too much air and hyperventilating (and you thought that dizzy feeling was from the tobacco!). And Elie Bleu makes an elegant two-piece punch cutter with a choice of ebony, rosewood, or snakewood veneers. Both a pocket model and a stand-up desk version are offered.

Almost all of the V-type cutters are made by the German firm Donatus, and are sold under a variety of brands. Their tabletop cutter has an elongated handle, usually with side panels of wood, staghorn, or precious metal, and features a small notch in the rounded end for removing the nail from the cigar box. The rounded lip of the cutter is used to pry open the lid. Although this style is called a "V" cutter, it also has two guillotine-type slicing holes on either side, with a small hole on one side for European dry cigars, and a slightly larger hole (around a 33 ring) on the opposite side. Unfortunately, while these cutters are nostalgic and attractive (I often use them in photographs) I have never found that their side blades work very well. This same style of cutter is also available in a much smaller vest pocket size, which does not have a return spring on the blade, a handy feature only found on the larger versions. By far the best of the breed of the "V" cutters are the silver-plated hallmarked versions from The White Spot. Both their tabletop and vest pocket V-cutters are attractively gift boxed.

Whether you opt for a guillotine cut or a V-cut, these Colibri models—available in a variety of colors—can handle up to a 60-ring gauge. The Rocky Patel Red Panel Burn lighter adds a colorful touch of flame.

Cigar piercers, or "drills," are no longer in vogue, although a few can still be found in shops where traditions die hard. There are only two cigar piercers that have some deviation from the norm. One is a sterling silver golf tee that twists like a mechanical pencil to produce a silver drill. It would seem to be the perfect accessory for the duffer who literally wants to make a hole in one. Substantially less expensive is The Trilogy, a small key-ringed metal rod in which the lower part unscrews to reveal a slender drill point. This is designed to be used to pierce three holes, each at a forty-five-degree angle, in the head of a cigar. Thus, the tars and juices do not condense at a single hole in the center and the smoke is

directed away from the tip of the tongue. One thing in favor of piercers: along with the punch and a few of the newer models of guillotines, they can be used to handle huge cigars like the 66 ring gauge Nub by Oliva or the massive 5¾x66 Jaime Garcia Reserva Especial Super Gordo. I will admit to occasionally carrying a piercer on my key ring in case I forget or lose my guillotine pocket cutter, and it does make a handy (but sharp!) emergency toothpick.

When selecting a cutter, I opt for the less expensive razor-blade varieties to always keep handy in my coat pocket and the glove compartment of my car. In fact, I literally have one in every coat I own, so that even if I forget my Zino or Dunhill at home, I never suffer the awkwardness (not to mention embarrassment, as a professional cigar writer) of being without a cutter. When these cheaper cutters become dull (as they most definitely will) or lost (as they most certainly do), it is a simple matter to get a new one at little or no cost. However, if you smoke quality cigars, you will eventually want a quality cutter.

For home use I keep a Zino and my Davidoff cigar scissors by my smoking table at all times, so that they are always at hand when I am near my cigars. Likewise, I keep a tabletop cutter by my chair in the den for emergency use when the Zino is not reachable. When venturing out into society, I carry a gold Dunhill cutter in its leather pouch; it is an impressive way to clip your cigar and that of a friend. Being a collector of cigar cutters, I will sometimes carry one of my antique clippers on a chain in my vest, although these are mainly for show, as they are not capable of handling the larger 50 to 54 ring gauges that I usually smoke. Likewise, Winston Churchill always made a great display of wearing a cigar cutter attached to his watch chain, but he rarely used it, preferring to pierce his cigars with a wooden match.

No matter what type of cutter you select, the most important criterion should be the blade. It must be sharp. Otherwise, you won't be slicing the cap of your cigar, you will be crushing it, thereby hampering the draw and negating all of the handiwork the cigar maker put into making the bunch. A sharp penknife is far superior to a dull cigar cutter. But in the cigar factories, you will often see a cigar maker simply using his thumbnail to make a circular cut in the cap of his cigar, rather than using a cutter. After all, a thumbnail is something you are rarely without.

Just as a cutter is the most useful accessory you can buy, acquiring a quality humidor will be the best investment you will ever make for your cigars. A good humidor doesn't have to be overly expensive. But it can be. However, as we discovered in the last chapter, it can be as unpretentious as a tightly sealed plastic

container. Or as convenient as the cigar boxes that come with their own humidifying agents. But what do you do when you and your Significant Other invite a few couples over for dinner and as it happens, cigars are offered at the end of the meal, when everyone retires to the patio or den? Bringing out your Vintage Macanudos or Cohiba Esplendidos on a cookie sheet or a dinner plate is not the best way to make a presentation. You might as well light your cigars against the hot exhaust pipe of a Harley Davidson. No, there will come a time when you and your cigars will demand something better.

Davidoff white hum & ltr–These elegant white leather-covered humidors with matching butane lighter are from Davidoff.

(photo: Davidoff of Geneva)

The Padrón 50th Anniversary Humidor is a limited numbered edition of 1,000, and filled with consecutively numbered, specially banded 61/2x52 box press Toros.

Whether or not anyone else ever sees it, a humidor reflects what you think about the cigars you smoke. It embodies pride of ownership and, in many cases, adds a distinctive touch to your home or office decor. Not only does it make a statement that a cigar smoker is there, but it can also say something very personal about what kind of a cigar smoker you are. Some humidors can even become heirlooms, passed down through the generations. This is an especially effective rationale for cigar smokers with young children or grandchildren. Or, like some of us, you might decide to take your humidor with you when you go to that Great Smoking Room In The Sky.

There are two basic requirements that any humidor has to meet: It must provide a constant and reliable source of humidity, and it must be airtight. Surprisingly enough, not all humidors have these traits, which is why many lower-end products are losing ground to some of the better grade versions that are constructed more like a fine piece of furniture with a specific purpose, rather than just a box in which to store cigars.

In addition to its functional ability, a humidor must be able to hold a realistic number of cigars for your smoking requirements. That includes accommodating the shapes you like to smoke. If you prefer 7½ inch long Churchills and a humidor has a storage area that is six inches in length, it will not be a good buy for you, no matter what the price. On the other hand, many of the 100-and 150-cigar humidors have movable dividers, which can be adjusted to accept a wide range of cigars, from the 5¼x42 Petit Coronas del Punch all the way up to the 7 5/8x49 Partagás Lusitania and beyond. But beware of some humidors that boast of being able to store fifty cigars. I succumbed to this hype with one well-respected brand, but when I got it home I discovered that they must have been referring to fifty Coronas. Try as I might, the best I could store was twenty-five of my Churchills, and that was only by laying them in horizontally. There is certainly nothing wrong with that. Just be sure you are aware of these limitations and don't take everything you read or hear for granted. It is better to have a humidor that is too big rather than too small. After all, you can always buy more cigars.

Some humidors are lined with cedar, which becomes a very complementary aromatic when used in conjunction with tobacco. That is why the aging rooms of all the major cigar factories are lined with cedar. And why cigar boxes are built of cedar. However, there is a school of thought that says because cedar is absorbent,

it can interfere with the uniformity of humidity control. Thus, you will find many humidors lined with mahogany or with a finely lacquered and sealed interior. There is no problem with this, for as long as the humidor is airtight and has a proper humidifier, your cigars will be kept fresh and will age according to the ability of their tobaccos, but without that hint of cedar spice. It is really a matter of personal preference. As for me, I have both types in my home, preferring to keep my cigars for immediate smoking in a 100-unit mahogany humidor without cedar lining, while keeping my aged cigars in a 150-unit with cedar lining. However, my personal preference is for cedar; I like that extra hint of spice in my smoke.

In a classic example of cause and effect, the US cigar boom of the 1990s created an unbelievable plethora of humidor manufacturers, both old and new. Clearly this is the one perceived accessory that everyone deemed to be in the most demand. And maybe they were right. After all, once you graduate from buying two or three cigars at a time and start acquiring boxfuls, where are you going to store all those stogies? Today, however, most of those manufacturers have gone on to craft other things, like furniture. Or clothes hangers. But a number of quality humidor manufacturers have survived, and as a result, virtually every style of humidor is available to us, from glass jars to unfinished wooden models to elegantly lacquered veneer to reconstructed humidors made from antique jewelry boxes and writing desks.

Indeed, on a recent trip to Europe, every antique dealer I spoke with bemoaned the growing scarcity of nineteenth century "laptop" writing desks due to the fact that entrepreneurs were converting them all into humidors which were eagerly purchased "by you crazy cigar smokers!" But no matter what the style, good humidors don't come cheap.

However, Ashton markets some very attractive and efficient humidors under the Savory name, which feature wood veneers such as burl, African teak, and Macassar, and come equipped with humidifiers and hygrometers. Stepping up in price, and handmade in Switzerland by the same company since 1965, are the legendary humidors of Davidoff—all cedar lined and many with lock and key for keeping out those sticky-fingered office trainees, and all with Davidoff's exclusive self regulator that maintains a constant humidity level of seventy to seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit. A wide variety of fancy grained wood and leather finishes is offered. Davidoff humidors range in sizes from forty to 200 cigars, plus a smaller series of travel humidors that can hold from six to eighteen cigars. In addition, their Zino line, which is made in France, includes a beautiful tobacco leaf model

(with an actual tobacco leaf embodied in the lid).

The elegance of custom-handcrafted humidors is the hallmark of The White Spot, which offers a number of handmade designs under The White Spot banner. These humidors utilize The White Spot's revolutionary Humidity Control System, which is a glycerin-based regulator charged with water and lasts for approximately four weeks, after which time it must be re-moisturized. But the real benefit of this system is the fact that it can be removed from the humidor and handheld to reveal a sliding scale that gives an extremely precise humidity level reading. The system itself is inexpensive, and must be replaced every eighteen months or so. Perhaps this is finally the answer to most factory-equipped hygrometers, which I find to be less than accurate. And be sure to check out their leather-covered travel humidors, which can lend a touch of luxury to even the most dismal of hotel rooms.

A Daniel Marshall travel humidor, finished in glossy walnut and featuring gold plated hinges. It holds up to eighteen cigars and comes with a protective suede pouch.

Daniel Marshall has made a limited edition of fifty humidors fashioned out of The Balvenie 21 Year Old Port Cask whisky barrel staves. To quote Marshall, "Your cigars will be gently and perfectly infused with the magnificent aroma of 21 year old Balvenie Whisky." And just to make sure, each humidor (big enough to hold 150 cigars) comes with a bottle of 12-Year-Old Balvenie DoubleWood single malt.

Daniel Marshall has also made a limited edition of humidors featuring actual old Cuban license plates. The cars, of course, are still in Cuba.

California-based Daniel Marshall is a craftsman who is very much involved with bringing elegance and luxury to his customers through his rare exotic wood humidors. For the most part, he prefers to sell direct, rather than through retail shops, although many of his humidors can be seen at some of the best tobacconists throughout the world. Made in a variety of wood finishes, and in sizes ranging from fifty to 500 cigars (and larger, on request) each D. Marshall

humidor takes approximately four months to construct, and features his "One Thousand Coat" deep glass-like exterior finish. Inside, his humidors are lined with Spanish cedar and all hinges are gold plated and mortised into the walls of the humidor. A very exacting humidification unit keeps cigars stored in his multilevel humidors in a constant state of readiness. In addition to optional lock and key, personalized nameplates are available. Although hardly inexpensive, these are some of the best humidors on the market; D. Marshall humidors are so tightly constructed that I only have to replenish the moisture in the humidifying agent once every two months.

But realizing that economy is a fact of life, Daniel Marshall also offers his Ambiente (which means "environment" in Italian) series, which features the same exacting construction of his higher priced models, but instead of a high gloss rare wood exterior, is finished in Black Matte, Rosewood, Macassar Burl, and Zebrawood, all with a 150-cigar capacity with a lift out tray. Not to be overlooked is D. Marshall's stylish leather-covered travel humidors. As an extra touch, some of D. Marshall's limited edition and bespoke humidors come with a selection of D. Marshall specially banded cigars. And one of his newest designs features authentic Cuban automobile license plates inlaid into the lid, but these, as you might image, are limited editions, as is his humidor constructed of Balvenie single malt whisky barrel staves.

Inlays as only Elie Bleu can do on a humidor, featuring tobacco leaf "stars" and cigar "bars," complete with American eagle bands. This is number 24 out of a limited edition series of 250.

Every car should come with a built-in humidor. This custom option is only available on the current Rolls Royce Phantom.

Photo: Rolls Royce Motor Cars

Indeed, exquisite humidors are more than just a place to store your cigars; they become a statement about your lifestyle. Which makes me wonder about the lock and key prevalent on so many humidors today. About the only reason I can see to have one boarded up in this fashion is to keep your manservant from pinching a smoke while you are out in the back forty shooting grouse. But then, any thief worthy of a good cigar would probably just cart off the entire humidor. Still, I suppose a lock does keep visiting family members from pawing your aged Havanas.

While on the subject of humidors, this might be a good time to discuss humidifiers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the old brass-and-clay moisturizer that Dunhill used back then was one of the best, as were some of the blotting paper devices that were sandwiched in between a perforated metal holder affixed to the inside top of the lid. It was a simple concept: soak some water into an absorbent material and let it permeate the inside of a closed box, checking it every few days to make sure it had not dried out. That same basic principle applies today, only now we use everything from organic sponges to sophisticated devices that have been patented by some of our most respected firms. The Davidoff internal self-regulator is not available separately, but The White Spot Humidity Control System is.

There is another humidifying device that I consider to be one of the best. It is the Credo Precision 70 or Onyx, so named because it maintains the moisture inside a humidor at a constant 70 percent, as long as the device is properly charged with distilled water or propylene glycol, which is sold separately. The Precision 70 can easily humidify seventy-five to 100 cigars, while the smaller Rondo can accommodate twenty-five to fifty cigars. There is even a thinner size for travel humidors but these require filling every week or so. The Credo system

is what many of the top custom humidor makers use, and it is also the system selected by many cigar makers who put humidifiers in their cigar boxes. The Credo is available in black or gold, and comes with a magnetic mount for the inside of your humidor. It only needs to be rehumidified once a month, and its modest cost is a small price to pay for keeping your cigars healthy and fresh.

There are a number of electronic humidifiers available but I much prefer to keep things simple. In this respect, I am a big fan of those tiny round beads of water-absorbing crystals found in such devices as the Humi-Brick and Humi-Disk, both of which are packed with white gel crystals that can absorb up to 100 times their weight in water. Simply pour water into the device until the crystals change from white to clear. They will slowly begin to release moisture over a period of weeks. When the crystals start turning white again, it is time to rehumidify them. Daniel Marshall uses a similar system for his humidors with his new polymer bead system that keeps humidity levels in a very precise range, as long as the beads are not allowed to dry out and "go white."

Another handy product is the Bóveda Humidipak, a sealed, two-way humidity control pouch that has been filled with a special saturated solution of water and salt. Each individual packet is actually a water-vapor permeable "reverse osmosis" membrane that releases humidity into your humidor. Simply place the correct number of packets (normally, two packets for every fifty cigars—the more packets, the more humidity, so be careful not to overdo it). Three different humidity levels are available: 65, 69, and 72 percent. Once activated by tearing open the outer cellophane envelope of each packet, the Humidipak will usually last about two months; you'll know when they have expired because become very hard. Then simply throw them out and replace with a fresh Humidipak.

But no matter what type of humidifying device you use (the ready-to-go Humidipak notwithstanding), fill it only with *distilled* water. Tap water has a tendency to cause mold. We may think tap water is okay to drink, but you certainly don't want to expose your cigars to the stuff. If your humidor is cedar lined, it is always a good idea to pre-humidify it for a couple of days before you place your cigars in it. Being absorbent, cedar will compete with your cigar for moisture unless it is already moist. In addition, moist cedar acts as a mini-humidifier itself, releasing a greater amount of its moist aroma into the air surrounding your cigars. Of course, there is no reason to pre-humidify non-cedar humidors, as the interiors are hand-lacquered to a hard, nonabsorbent finish. Speaking of finishes, make sure your humidor stays out of the sunlight, as those fancy veneers can fade. The warmth of the sun isn't exactly good for your

cigars either.

Because tobacco leaves are so highly absorbent and sensitive to moisture, the more cigars you put into your humidor, the more moisture will be required, and you will have to replenish the water in your humidifier more often. The best way to tell if your cigars are not drying out is to feel them. Unfortunately, the hygrometers that come with most humidors are rarely factory set for anything resembling accuracy. To correct this almost universal oversight, take your hygrometer out of the humidor and wrap it in a damp washcloth for an hour. Then take a look. If it is not registering 100 per cent humidity, adjust the spring-loaded needle on the back with a pencil so it is pointing at the 100 mark. The best bet, of course, is to invest in a digital hygrometer, such as the excellent model made by Western Humidor and others.

I make every effort to check my humidors once a week, but find that the D. Marshall, Davidoff, Zino, Elie Bleu (some of the most attractively inlaid humidors on the market), and Dunhill/The White Spot products need replenishing only about once every six to eight weeks. With humidors, you really do get what you pay for. On the other hand, if you should come across an antique humidor that you wish to put back into service (make sure it's not warped before you buy it), you may want to replace the older moisturizing unit with a Credo, or simply put a shot glass of distilled water in with the cigars. But be careful; if the humidity level reaches 85 percent or more, mold will start to form, especially on those cigars nearest the humidifying unit. And before putting cigars into any antique humidor, clean every inch of its interior with alcohol and let it air out for a few days. Who knows who kept what in there before you bought it. And finally, there are small pocket humidors by firms such as Csonka and Vinotemp—with many models containing their own humidifier and some even with a hygrometer—that can accommodate two to three of many of today's popular cigar sizes, thus insuring your favorite cigars will always be fresh, wherever you go.

Lighters are another viable commodity that no cigar smoker should be without. Some of the most novel lighters are those that incorporate both a cigar clipper and a butane lighter in one slim design, such as those made by Colibri with electro-quartz ignition and a stainless steel blade.

Colibri also makes a waterproof all-weather lighter that uses no flame—just an adjustable mini-blast of blue-hot heat. I have lit cigars in a rainstorm with this lighter, as well as on the bow of a ship, as wind doesn't seem to affect it either. Personally, I prefer the 90-degree pipe lighters such as the Quantum Pipe and the

Pipette, as this angle enables me to "paint" the end of my cigar with the glowing heat without burning my fingers.

The Colibri Pacific has a 90-degree flame that works equally as well. And for many years I have also been using the gas jet "torches" that look as if they could be used for cutting through a bank vault, but which really are superb for lighting the biggest ring gauges in any kind of weather. But one of the most innovative developments is the advent of the wide-flame, double-flame, and triple flame lighters, such as found on lighters by S. T. Dupont, The White Spot, and Davidoff, which utilize multiple burners for effortless firing up of the biggest ringed Robusto. In fact, The Colibri Astoria uses a triple-jet butane flame and features a foldout cutter that will handle a 59-ring cigar. And for those who enjoy the retro look, The White Spot Unique (an Alfred Dunhill design stemming from the early twentieth century and the first lighter designed to be used with one hand) and their Rollagas lighters can be ordered with a modern wide cigar flame.

The retro White Spot Turbo butane lighter, inspired by the Unique Sports lighters sold by Alfred Dunhill in the 1920s, produces an updated super-charged flame well-suited to outdoors use. It is shown in a classic silver diamond pattern.

Cigar lighters can also be fashionable accessories, as evidenced by this Davidoff double burner fan-flamed butane lighter in grey lacquer and rose gold. This limited edition comes with a protective leather case.

This custom copper cigar ashtray was conceived by Khalid Affara, owner and developer of The Wellesley, a very cigar-centric boutique hotel in the Knightsbridge area of London. It features cigar rests sturdy enough to accommodate large ring gauges and a bowl deep enough to keep a pile of ashes from blowing away. Smaller versions can be found on the heated tables of the hotel's outdoor cigar terrace.

As much a collectable as it is a cigar ashtray, this is part of the Born To Be Wild collection of detailed antiqued bronze castings by 2 Saints in Paris (www.2saints.fr). Only 88 pieces have been produced.

An early American lighter for some early American cigars: At one time this 1906 Heritage electric cigar lighter was reproduced by Pioneer Manufacturing, Inc., of Battle Lake, Minnesota. The original was made for the Klein Cigar Company in New York, when electricity was still a novelty. This replica duplicates the oak and brass original but is powered by four C-cell batteries. Like the original, the swing-out wick utilizes lighter fluid. The Judge's Cave and Muniemaker cigars by F. D. Grave and the centennial boxed Travis Club Senators by Finck Cigar Company have changed very little since they first made their appearances over 100 years ago.

S. T. Dupont is unique as being one of the few luxury producers that has concentrated most of its talents on cigar accessories, as evidenced by their Ligne 2 Elegance series of pocket lighters worthy of the finest black tie event. Also, their ongoing limited numbered editions of cast bronze ashtray, fountain pen and

lighter sets by French artist Frédéric Saint Romain and designer Philippe Tournaire are as collectable as they are functional. Of special interest is Tournaire's new Zodiac collection, with just fifty of each sign being made. Also extremely collectable is their hand engraved, rose gold-plated lighter that commemorates S. T. Dupont's 140th anniversary in 2012, with the 1872 date of the company's founding also hand-engraved into each elegantly designed Ligne 2 design; only 140 lighters are being made, with each requiring thirty-five hours for the engraving—exclusive of finishing and polishing.

Not as advanced in technology, but using the modern principle of electricity all the same, is a reproduction of a 1912 electric cigar lighter by Indianhead Company in Miami, Florida. Back around the turn of the last century, electric lighters became all the rage once people found out that Edison's invention wasn't going to make them go blind.

Of course, just as quickly as they came in these lighters went out, when the growing advantages of lighter fluid and the convenience of paper safety matches were discovered. Gone but not forgotten, the Eldred Wireless #12 Cigar Lighter, one of the most obscure and rarest of the early electric lighters, is once again being made in America of solid walnut with brass-plated antiqued parts. It is an exact duplicate of the original and even though it uses lighter fluid, it is guaranteed to be a conversation starter as well as a cigar starter at your next Smoker.

While on the hot topic of lighters, we must not forget the basic match, or more specifically, the cigar match, such as those put out by Davidoff, among others. Their extra length allows plenty of burning time and flame to properly toast even the largest ringed cigar without toasting your fingers. The cedar that is traditionally used for these specialized matches produces a faint hint of flavor during the initial few puffs, as an added bonus. Of course, if you wish to go completely "retro," try a cedar "spill," a long, thin strip of cedar (you can easily snap off a length from the cedar sheets that separate the two layers of cigars in most boxes, or they are also sold commercially by Commonwealth Cedar Spills) such as they do in the finest of private clubs. Simply light one end of the spill and use that to light your cigar for the purest essence of cedar and tobacco.

One of the biggest challenges for cigar smokers has always been finding a way to safely carry our smokes. But stuffing them in boots, belts, bullet loops, and pockets has never been able to supplant the cigar case. In the past, the most popular cases were those made of leather, metal, and wood. In fact, in my collection I have an engraved sterling silver three-cigar case that is hallmarked

1854, just to give you an idea of how long these have been popular. Just like cigar making, not much has changed through the years, because today the most popular cigar cases still are made of leather, metal, and wood, with leather being the most popular and practical.

Savinelli has a number of distinct styles of Italian-made leather cases that come in fluted and unfluted designs and are available in natural or Bordeaux, in both hard and soft leather. Dunhill—which is now known as The White Spot—has adopted a pedigree bulldog as its mascot and his handsome face is featured as an embossing on a number of their accessories, including a new series of two-, three-, and four-finger (i.e., cigar) cases in black, brown, and Royal Purple leather, all designed to hold corona or robusto shapes.

Of special note is their four-finger robusto case, which The White Spot had not previously offered before. And as an extra bit of trivia, the name of their bulldog mascot is Fab Diamond, who sadly passed away in 2011, but who lives on in this series of cigar accessories.

Not to be outdone, for the first time Davidoff has introduced full-quill Ostrich cigar cases with a matching ten-cigar travel humidor, while S. T. Dupont has introduced a limited edition Humphrey Bogart "Bogie Bag" from the 1940s that will easily transport three to four boxes of cigars. J. C. Newman, under their Craftsman brand, is one of the few companies offering leather cases that will handle larger 60-ring gauge cigars, while the St. James Collection of Andre Garcia features an elegant hard leather telescoping case with a zippered lid for easy access. And Nat Sherman and Arango in the USA both make handsome and handy leather cigar travel cases. For roughing it, there are also canvas cases with Velcro closures.

When buying a cigar case, it is always better to get one that is larger, rather than smaller. That way you are not limited by the size of the cigars you can put in it. It is a lot easier to slip a small cigar into a big case rather than the other way around. I always look for a sturdy case that will protect my cigars and will hold at least a 54-ring size. Admittedly, these are sometimes difficult to find.

By that same token, I have been fortunate in acquiring a number of vintage cigar cases, such as a 1920s alligator-skin case with an inside label from Desmond Sautter of Mount Street in Mayfair, London. It never fails to elicit comments whenever I take it from my inside coat pocket to enjoy a smoke. Very often a cigar case will cost as much or substantially more than a box of cigars, but it is an accessory that is eventually going to be seen. And more important than image or presentation, if you save one cracked wrapper a week because you carried your

cigars in a case instead of unprotected in your pocket, the expense and lack of aggravation will be worth it.

Cigar clothes are also among the trends still being inspired by the ongoing interest in cigar smoking. Smoking jackets have been around since Victorian times, thanks to firms such as the now-defunct US brand Sulka and the still thriving Turnbull & Asser in London. Also in vogue are cigar ties by companies such as Polo, plus cigar band cuff links and money clips, when you can find them. At one point I even found a pair of cigar socks! And during the cigar boom in the US during the 1990s I designed a cigar smoker's shirt, with special pockets for securely holding four Robustos. Nowadays, there is always the traditional Guayabera, a loose fitting, open collared, outside-the-pants short-sleeved shirt (long sleeve versions are for more formal occasions) that is traditionally worn by cigar makers in the Caribbean and Central America. I have purchased a number of customized versions from Berta Bravo, better known as The Guayabera Lady, in Miami, Florida.

You may find some of these accessories more applicable to your lifestyle than others, but they all have their place. Indeed, Man does not live by his cigars alone. Which, by coincidence, just happens to be the theme of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

SPIRITS & SMOKE

Although it's not often recognized, wine and cigars are remarkably similar. Both started coming into their own around the mid-nineteenth century, when the 1855 World's Fair gave France an opportunity to unveil her now-classic grapes just as Cuba was gaining enthusiastic acceptance for her Havanas. And just as Bordeaux is a blend of different grapes, so are cigars composed of different tobaccos. Moreover, cigars are fermented and aged, just like wine, and each has a point at which they will peak. Even the trend of vintage-dated cigars was inspired by the classic designations of vintage wines, right on down to putting the year on the label of the bottle, or in the case of cigars, vintage dating the band and the box.

But why stop at wines for comparisons?

When it comes to pleasures of the palate, cigars can be teamed up with any number of potables. In fact, for over 100 years this has been the basic premise for Gentlemen's Smokers in Europe, England, and the United States, a tradition that has been regaining a renewed and expanded worldwide impetus in recent years. Today, many of these gatherings are no longer just limited to men, but women as well (and some are *only* for women), and not only are cigars brought out in the company of fine wines, brandies, cognacs, and ports, but also armagnacs, bourbons, malt whiskies, rums, and even beer as viable and popular alternatives. Indeed, there is a very definite cedar aroma in a glass of six-year-old Sempé V.S.O.P. Armagnac that can be matched up with a number of cigars, and the hefty undertaste from a snifter of Heaven Hills Elijah Craig 23 Year Old Single Barrel bourbon or The Glenlivet Nàdurra Sherry Cask highland single malt whisky can be just the complement to any Dominican, Honduran or Cuban cigar that rates a 2.0 or better on the HPH. And the light, fruity sweetness of Baltika No. 8 Wheat Ale is a perfect match for some of the HPH 1.5–2 Brazilian or Philippine cigars.

Rare Pairings include the no-longer produced super-sherried Macallan Gran Reserva 18-Year-Old single malt, BV's 1997 Clone 6 (a major component of their George La Tour Cabernet Sauvignon), and Taylor Fladgate's 2003 vintage port, teamed with a turn-of-the-century commemorative Montecristo Robusto (the first time this shape was rolled for the famous Cuban brand), a Forbidden X version of the Opus X (consisting of seven tobaccos and aged in Calvados barrels), and a Casa Fuente double corona, only available at Casa Fuente, located in Caesars Palace Forum Shops, Las Vegas.

On the colorfully decorated cigar terrace at No. Ten Manchester Street in the Marylebone district of London, the author's Romeo y Julieta Short Churchill proves an apt accompaniment to a yeasty Bollinger champagne.

As with many full-course cigar night "smokers" and dinners, let's start with champagne and cigar pairings, although, just like my preferences for cigars, the examples I am about to give are favorites from my own lifelong taste tests. After reading these recommendations, you may wish to venture out on your own and

blaze a different path through the gourmet's world of spirits and smoke.

Champagne usually signals the beginning of a celebration, getting us off to an effervescent start. Piper Heidsieck Rare, which is produced in exceptional vintage years, comes in a replica of a 1785 bottle that was first presented to Marie Antoinette (although it is nothing like the bottle created in 1885 by Carl Fabergé, jeweler to the Tsar, Alexander II, to celebrate Piper Heidsieck's centennial that year). The golden filigree adorning the bottle of its Rare Millésime 2002 hints at the elegant floral tones working in harmony with touches of light tobacco, chocolate, and ginger. As such it can be paired with cigars like the Fuente Casa Cuba or the Davidoff Aniversario No. 1 and No. 2, or their Puro d'Oro.

The distinctive hand-painted bottle of Perrier-Jouët Fleur de Champagne Belle Epoque (with its re-creation of a 1911 design that was brought back in 1989), holds a taste that is medium in body, but distinctively spicy. Its 2006 Brut is slightly more pronounced than its previous 2004 vintage and thus, pairs well with a My Father Cigar Connecticut or a Dunhill Aged cigar (especially the 2009), as would some of the Corps Diplomatique, Villiger-Kiel, or similar-strength Dutch-style dry (non-humidified) cigars.

For a decidedly heftier flavor for those who prefer slightly stronger cigars, try the 2004 Bollinger Grande Année Brut, with its strong, yeast-laden fruity flavor that complements cigars like the Cuban Montecristo No. 2 or the Cohiba Esplendido, which also go well with Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin, especially the 2004 vintage, although the non-vintage is remarkably close. Likewise, the new Rockefeller 2004 Brut champagne has a firm, yeasty countenance that will work with many medium to medium-full cigars, such as the Alec Bradley Family Blend. Moving one step up in staying power, the classic Krug 1988 is mellow yet full-bodied, but its 1995, 2000, and recently-released 2003 Vivacité Solaire (which means vivacious brilliance) vintages have smoky hints that start to bring it into the realm of the spicier Cubans, like H. Upmann and Vegas Robaina, as well as a few of the Nicaraguan cigars like the Padrón 1926 and the La Aroma de Cuba Noblesse; they won't overpower the champagne, which in this case should dominate. And we should not forget another of my favorite labels, Dom Pérignon. Two of its latest releases, the fruit-driven 2003 Rosé and the crisp 2004 Brut are very cigar friendly, as is the 1996 Blanc Œnothèque, which has over fifteen years of bottle aging and as a result, has developed an underlying hint of smoke that Dom Pérignon's Chef De Caves, Richard Geoffroy—who happens to be a cigar smoker himself—feels is ideal for certain heftier Dominicans, such as the Davidoff Special "R" Robusto and the Fuente OpusX.

With some of these sparkling wines out of the way, we are now ready to enter the lair of the higher proofs. Perhaps it is because the brown color of a cigar's wrapper is akin to the brown color of spirits like scotch, bourbon, and cognac, these particular distillations seem to go much better with our smokes than white or "clear" spirits such as vodkas, gins, and tequilas. Although vodka is one of the most prolific potables, and many readers can bravely battle a frigid winter's night armed with nothing more than a chilled glass of vodka in one hand and a warm cigar in the other, the fact is that most vodkas are much too light—not only in color, but also in body and taste, to stand up to all but the mildest of cigars.

That being said, Russian Standard Imperia, the best-selling vodka in Russia and one of the first to carry a Certificate of Origin from the Russian Federation, is certainly worthy of a Cuaba or a Fonseca, and also goes well with Russian Standard Gold, which is made with Siberian Golden Roots. Likewise, Beluga Gold has enough body to stand up to a medium-strength Nicaraguan or Cuban, thanks to the fact that it is distilled with Siberian spring hyaline artesian water, rice and rhodiola rosea extracts, and malted spirits. Once all these elements are distilled, they are allowed to "marry" for ninety days before being bottled. And Chopin has taken some of the elements from their wheat, rye, and potato vodkas and separated each one—without further processing—into 375 ml bottles called Singles. Pick from 2011 Young Potato, 2012 Young Potato, 2012 Potato, 2012 Rye, and 2012 Wheat and try mixing and matching them with a variety of medium to medium full cigars.

But the loftiest vodka in the world, at least to my knowledge, comes from Stolichnaya (which, by the way, is the second best-selling imported vodka in America). But it is not just Stolichnaya that I am referring to, or even its Stoli Elit. It is the handcrafted Elit Pristine Water Series—The Himalayan Edition. Made with naturally filtered snowmelt water from the Himalayan Mountains combined with winter wheat from Russia's fertile "black earth" Tambov region, this ultra-crisp vodka is electronically filtered to bring it to the lowest levels of impurities in the world. There was just enough made to fill 300 hand-blown Bohemian glass bottles, which each come with a twenty-four-carat gold-plated decorative ice pick. Here at last is the perfect vodka to accompany that Montecristo "A" or Cohiba Behike.

As for gins, my favorites are the creamy Plymouth Gin, the peppery Bombay Sapphire East, and the new, blue-hued No. 1. For tequilas, especially on a summer night while enjoying a Cuban Romeo y Julieta or a Dominican Montecristo Nicaraguan, I'll gladly pour a Milagro Unico joven, the Bordeaux-

barrel finished Gran Patrón Burdeos, or a Casamingo añejo to enjoy with an Avo Heritage.

Tequila and cigars are a good and often overlooked combination.

Brown spirits, especially single malt whisky, cognac, and bourbon, pair well with cigars.

The old frontier western standby of rotgut and a cheroot have come a long way to today's sophisticated small batch whiskey and hand rolled cigar.

These whiskies are especially suitable for medium-full to full flavored cigars. Dalmore even makes a special single malt especially for cigar smokers.

That brings us to the world of brown spirits, which normally dwell in wood paneled rooms with deep leather chairs and softly crackling fireplaces. But here one must be careful, for very often a heavy cognac or single malt whisky can numb the palate to a point where the flavor of your cigar will be lost. Also, because of the wide divergence of spirit strengths in these after-hours drinks, you may not always want to team a strong cigar with a strong whisky, and may find it more rewarding to vary the tastes, matching a medium-tasting HPH 2 cigar with a stronger cognac, for example, or smoking a hefty HPH 2.5 cigar with a lighter libation so that the tobacco remains in control. I realize this is not the accepted practice, but I find it is sometimes better to let the cigar command the palate, especially after a medium to heavily textured dinner. On the other hand, when the night is dark and stormy and the wind blows cold, I find there is nothing better than meeting Mother Nature head-on with a potent snifter of 107-proof bourbon and a full-bodied stogie that is equal to the task.

At this point in the book you should have a firm grasp on the intricacies of the various cigars in the world. But what about their casked counterparts? It sometimes helps to review the nature of these drinks so that we may have a better understanding of why one goes so much better than another with a specific cigar.

Cognac is no doubt the first thought that comes to the minds of many when the agreeable suggestion of an after-dinner drink and a cigar is mentioned. In fact, so entrenched in tradition is this combination that in 1993 Alfred Dunhill of London created an entire campaign around this dynamic duo, with other firms such as Fuente following suit. Cognac, of course, is double distilled and aged from brandy, but it cannot be called cognac unless it is made in that specific southwestern region of France. The limestone soil and the heavily governed slow-method distillation in alembic stills (copper stills that are peaked like an onion) plus the aging in white-oak barrels that must come from the Limousin forests, all join together to produce this highly revered after-dinner drink. For our Spirits & Smoke pairings, I initially opted for the superb varieties of cognac from Rémy Martin, which has the largest reserves of vintage cognac in the world and is the only blending house to use grapes harvested from the two best growing regions of France—Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne. You might say that these two areas are the Vuelta Abajo of the cognac-producing vineyards.

There are five different classifications (and price ranges) of Rémy Martin Cognacs. They are: V.S.O.P. (which stands for Very Special Old Pale—now you know), aged for eight years; Napoleon, named after Napoleon III and aged for

fifteen years; XO Special (the XO—a designation originated by Hennessy and standing for "Extra Old"), aged for twenty-five years; Extra Perfection, aged in special barrels for thirty-five years; and finally, Louis XIII, which is an aged blend of over 1,200 different cognacs, some over 100 years old but averaging fifty-five years in age, and which comes in a registered Baccarat Crystal decanter. The greater age of each cognac also coincides with a greater percentage of Grande Champagne grapes, with the V.S.O.P. starting out with fifty-one percent and the Louis XIII ending up with 100 percent. This combination of greater aging with a higher percentage of Grande Champagne ends up creating a series of tastes that have increasingly more depth. Do not confuse "depth" with strength, because the longer a cognac ages, the less alcohol it retains. Cognac is really a blend of agings from various casks in order to create an average age of the bottling. Thus, an eight-year-old V.S.O.P. could actually be an equal blend of six-and ten-year-old cognacs; by law, all cognacs must be at least four and one half years old.

Cognac and cigars are a classic paring.

Another cognac perfect for cigar pairing is Camus (pronounced ka-MOO), the largest and one of the last remaining family-owned cognac houses in France. Founded in 1863, today, under the leadership of fifth-generation family member

Cyril Camus, the company exports a full range of cognacs around the world, but for cigars, one of the best and most complex is its Extra Elegance, which comes in an understated crystal decanter that doesn't even have a label or identifying mark other than the "Extra Cognac" lettering embossed on the matte metallic silver neck band. A blend of eaux-de-vie ranging from thirty to fifty years of age, it possesses bold flavors of cedar, violets, and tobacco, making it perfect for a Trinidad Reyes or Ashton VSG. Also not to be missed are the vintage dated cognacs from Camus, including their 1940, 1973, and 1980 bottlings.

A close cousin of cognac—but noticeably less well known—is armagnac, which comes from a distinct region in Gascony, in southwestern France, approximately 100 miles south of Cognac, and produces a product that is decidedly different. Armagnac was first distilled in 1411—two hundred years before cognac—but up until the early part of the twentieth century most armagnacs were used in the blending of cognac. But now armagnac is being discovered on its own merits, somewhat like malt whiskies have now been embraced on their own without having to blend them. I find that armagnac has a lighter taste and aroma than the thicker and heavier characteristics of cognac, and thus, it is a somewhat more delicate alternative, better suited to Dominican cigars, in some cases, than Honduran or Cuban.

Unlike cognac, which is distilled twice, armagnac is distilled only once. It, too, is aged in casks of Limousin oak, where it can mature anywhere from one to twenty years. And, like cognac, it is blended to produce a specific age and quality of taste. With armagnacs, the designations are: Trois Etoiles, which is aged in barrels for a minimum of one year; VS (for Very Special) with two years minimum aging; V.S.O.P., which must be at least four and one half years old, as does Reserve. Then there is Extra; Napoleon; and EX, all of which require at least six and one half years of aging. Hors d'Âge (which translates to "beyond age," meaning it is too old to classify any other way) is an armagnac that has been barrel aged for at least ten years, although many are much older. Some armagnacs are even vintage-dated, labeled with the year that specific armagnac was put into the cask for aging.

With a criteria toward quality and total variety of product, I have selected Sempé Armagnacs for our cigars. Sempé is family-owned, and has vintages going all the way back to the early 1900s. It also produces substantially more obtainable and affordable varieties, including: V.S.O.P., which is aged a minimum of six years (and became one of my late night libations when finishing this book, as it was not so overwhelming that it prevented me from going back to work after a

glass and an HPH 2 cigar); 15-Year-Old, which is only slightly fuller in taste; Grande Reserve, a fifty-year-old blend that is noticeably richer and smoother to the point of overpowering a cigar with a 2.0 HPH rating and easily qualifying for either a Partagás or Hoyo de Monterrey.

In addition, Sempé produces a Baccarat Crown lead crystal decanter filled with their excellent twenty-year-old blend. Plus, they offer a series of collectable Limoges porcelain crowns decorated in twenty-four-carat gold and containing a variety of their well-aged armagnacs. Two other armagnacs I can highly recommend with any HPH 2 or stronger cigars, including Punch and Montecristo, are Armagnac Castarède Hors d' Âge, a twenty-year-old armagnac being made by the sixth generation of the founding family, and the 1972 Château Du Busca Armagnac Tenareze, which is made in the oldest distillery in Gascony. Most armagnacs have a slightly fruity, almost woodsy bouquet. You'll find them mellow and easy to control. Well, at least I did, or I never would have finished writing this book.

Now we get into the headier brews, my favorites. First on our list are the single malt whiskies (whisky is spelled without the "e" for the Scottish and Canadian products). Distilled from malted barley and fermented with yeast, they are classic examples of how soil and climate can affect the taste, much like cigars. Before distillation, the malt is often dried over a peat fire, which is the smoky "peatiness" we read about and sometimes taste in Scottish malts. Irish malt whiskey (spelled with an "e," same as with American whiskey) is usually dried without peat and thus, has no smokiness.

Single malts and cigars have become increasing popular since the 1990s.

Different regions of Scotland and Ireland produce distinctly different tasting whiskies. Single malts are not blends, and are produced in their own individual distilleries, each of which is fiercely loyal and competitive, proclaiming theirs to be the best. There are only three basic Irish single malt whiskey distilleries—Bushmills, Midleton, and Cooley—of which Bushmills is the undisputed world leader, but there are slightly over 100 different Scottish malt whisky distilleries, producing hundreds of excellent spirits that, unfortunately, aren't always readily available. Some, like Cragganmore and Glenfiddich, are almost too light for Cuban cigars (although they work well with some Hondurans like the Rocky Patel Sun Grown and their Edge Lite). But my preferences lean toward heavier, peatier products, such as the Laphroaig 18-Year-Old and the wonderful full-bodied warmth of a Highland Park 18-Year-Old, both of which go well with a heady Joya de Nicaragua Maduro or a Montecristo from either of the two countries in which they are made.

One of the greatest accolades to pairing single malts and cigars is Dalmore's Cigar Malt, which is the only single malt scotch created specifically for cigars. But that is to be expected, as their master blender, Richard Paterson, is a devout

cigar smoker, with a special penchant for Cubans and Dominicans. Another cigar-worthy single malt is the Dalmore King Alexander III, one of the most intricate single malts I have ever sipped. The whiskies used have been aged for twenty to forty years in a variety of woods, including French wine barriques, Madeira drums, sherry butts, port pipes, and bourbon and Sicilian Marsala barrels. The result is a muscular dram worthy of a muscular cigar, such as a Partagas Serie D No. 4.

Two other favorite whiskies are Glenmorangie 10-year-old and the more intense 18-year-old from the Highland region of Scotland. Even more complex, although not as intense, is Glenmorangie's twelve-year-old Quinta Ruban port wood finished, non-chill-filtered single malt, aged in bespoke American bourbon oak casks for a minimum of ten years and then "finished" for the last two years in wood barrels that were formerly used for port. The result is a complex, copper-colored whisky that demands meditation with the most flavorful cigars in the HPH 2—2.5 range. Also worth uncorking is Glenmorangie's Artein, a limited edition fifteen year old single malt aged in ex-bourbon casks and finished in wine casks from Tuscany.

But perhaps one of the all-time high marks should be given to The Macallan, also from the Speyside district of the Scottish Highlands, which is available in twelve-, eighteen-, and twenty-five-year-old expressions, among their more obtainable offerings, each one having more depth in taste and increasing proportionally in price and availability. I consider the eighteen-year-old to be the best of the three, having substantially more character than the twelve-year-old, but none of the roughness of the twenty-five-year-old, which, over the years, has saved me thousands of dollars in the differences in price. The Macallan is double distilled and aged in sherry casks, and that sweet undercurrent of flavor is distinctly evident in every sip. Their Fine Oak range, which introduces ex-bourbon barrels into the mix, is slightly mellower and is admirably suited to many medium-strength Dominicans and Honduran smokes.

Another Speyside single malt definitely worth investigating is Aberlour, a surprisingly affordable ten-year-old with more depth and character than some whiskies that are much older. This is a brand that has flown slightly under the radar until recently, and it is time it got some well-deserved attention. Aberlour single malts are aged in both bourbon and sherry casks, and then blended together (although this is not a blend, it is a vatting, which uses single malts from the same distillery) for finishing, much as completed cigars are allowed to marry their tobacco flavors in the aging room. The result is a medium strength, smooth,

flowery experience. Although Aberlour, Glenmorangie and The Macallan malt whiskies are each distinctively different, they all can easily bridge the gaps between cigars that range from an HPH 2 all the way up to HPH 3. Any of these combinations would be a perfect way to celebrate the Scottish rite of Hogmanay on December 31, when a friend bearing a gift of *uisge beatha*—the water of life—is guaranteed a New Year of good fortune. And those fortunes would no doubt be realized if that person was also bearing a box of cigars.

The growing influence of Japanese single malt whiskies has opened up new pairing possibilities with cigars. For example, the Yamazaki 12 Year Old is eminently suitable to medium bodied Dominicans, while the Yamazaki 18 Year Old is perfect for medium-full bodied Nicaraguan smokes.

As for Irish whiskeys, one cannot ignore that fact that it was Tsar Peter the Great who said, "Of all the wines of the world, Irish spirit is the best." It is a strange juxtaposition of countries, to be sure, but demonstrates the universal appeal of this Irish spirit. Today, Jameson leads the pack in growth, although aside from the slightly smoky Jameson Black and the 18 Year Old, it is a bit light for most Cuban cigars. But it does pair well with many of the HPH 1.5—2 Dominicans and Nicaraguans. Bushmills 16 and 21-Year-Old single malts have more body to stand up to some of the medium strength cigars such as the Davidoff Puro d'Oro, while the 12, 15, and 21 Year Old Redbreast are ready-made for mid-to-heavy strength cigars, as is their non-chill filtered 12 Year Old 115.4 proof Single Pot Still cask strength, which can almost make it possible to light your cigar without a match.

Meaty bourbons such as these demand equally muscular cigars.

Although mainly thought of as an autumn and winter drink, I consider any season an opportune time to enjoy that distinctly American invention, bourbon. The gradual reclaiming by bourbon of its rightful crown of appreciation has been a vindication of my beliefs, for this is the one libation to which I have remained fiercely loyal through my journey thus far on this planet. I collect bourbons as one would collect cigars, although I find that, unlike cigars, I have definite loyalties to certain brands.

Bourbon is made from a corn-rye-barley mixture that must be composed of at least 51 percent corn, which is ground into a fine meal. Contrary to popular belief, bourbon can be made anywhere in America, but 90 percent of all brands are distilled in Kentucky, where the mash is cooked with crystal pure limestone water that flows from the unique underground springs of that state. The result of all this is a thick, liquid "mash." Some distillers add a small percentage of mash from prior fermentations (a few of which go back for generations) to help link flavor and aroma from batch to batch; this addition of "sour mash" adds a distinct subtlety and taste to the bourbon. All bourbons must be aged in new charred white-oak casks, and it is this char that gives bourbon its rich amber color and often a touch of smokiness. Likewise, bourbon's distinctive caramel and vanilla tastes are derived, respectively, from the char and the oak. Unlike the aging process for scotch whisky, where a damp, cold climate causes the proof to decrease over the years, the hot summer temperatures of Kentucky and Tennessee actually cause a bourbon's proof to increase. Thus, in the aging process, knowing when to quit becomes more than just a figure of speech.

Among my favorites for a late night repast with a Hoyo de Monterrey

Churchill or an Ashton Cabinet No. 2, are two of the "small batch bourbons" from Jim Beam. The first is Knob Creek, a 100-proof elixir aged for nine years in the deepest char possible. (And now there is a 120-proof Knob Creek Single Barrel Reserve, for those who want to light their cigars by simply breathing on them.) The second is the 107-proof Baker's, named after Jim Beam's grandnephew Baker Beam, the master distiller, and who uses a strain of jug yeast handed down from his granduncle's time. Both of these full power drinks are rich, heavy with flavor, yet unbelievably mellow. They are also extremely potent, and care must be exercised in their use, lest you send your senses into warp drive with multiple snifters at a single sitting. I suggest a splash of branch (distilled) water, or a single ice cube.

Also not to be missed is Wild Turkey Rare Breed, a barrel proof blending of six-, eight-, and twelve-year-old stocks. For sampling true American whiskey elegance in a glass, try the hard-to-find Pappy Van Winkle 23 Year Old, a limited edition of only 3,000 bottles that comes out of the Buffalo Trace distillery in Kentucky every autumn and almost immediately sells out to collectors as much as connoisseurs. This, and a box of Fuente Hemingway Classics got me through an especially frantic Christmas a few years back.

I am also a fan of certain single-barrel bourbons, in which all of the bottlings are taken from just one barrel. Blanton's, Rock Hill Farms, and Booker's (from the private reserve of the late Booker Noe, grandson of Jim Beam) are three favorites that offer a wide enough divergence of proofs to go with any cigar. And don't miss Wild Turkey Kentucky Spirit, a full-bodied potable that comes in a distinctive "flared feather" bottle. Slightly tamer, but no less flavorful, is the double distilled smoothness of Maker's Mark 90 proof, or, when you can find it, in the much-preferred limited edition 101 proof with its distinctive gold wax over the cork. And don't miss its newest bourbon in over fifty years, Maker's 46, which ages in barrels that have been fitted with charred French oak staves (as opposed to American oak) and allowed to mature for an extra two to three months.

Tennessee whiskey is often confused with bourbon but as anyone from Tennessee will quickly tell you, it is not bourbon at all. For one thing, it can only be made in Tennessee, whereas bourbon can be made anywhere in America. The other distinction is that the whiskey is mellowed (slowly drip-filtered) through a ten-foot tall column of maple wood charcoal before being put into barrels for aging, which gives the finished product a distinctively sweet and woodsy taste. The most popular Tennessee whiskey in the world is Jack Daniel's Black Label—I

even found a bottle of it in a bar on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula while visiting some Honduran cigar factories. Also worth settling down with is Gentleman Jack, a more refined eighty-proof cousin of the ubiquitous Jack Daniel's. Gentleman Jack is unique in that it has its own patented formula, and is actually drip filtered through charcoal a second time, immediately before aging and then again, just before it is bottled. A slow and delicate process (it takes from ten to twelve days for a single drop of this whiskey to trickle completely through the vat, and too much filtering can strip the precious liquid of both color and taste), the result is a much smoother flavor that invites a meeting with some of the richer-tasting cigars, such as a Davidoff Grand Cru or a Cohiba Siglo.

Not all spirits have to be high octane to go well with cigars. Like cognac, port is a classic after dinner drink to enjoy with a smoke, and it is only twenty percent alcohol. Ruby (dark red) ports are rich in tannin-soaked flavors of plums, cherries, and chocolate and for that reason I often enjoy a glass or two of LBV (Late Bottle Vintage) Fonseca or Graham's before a meal (and sometimes even with a meal—after all, it is a heavy red wine), as well as the more traditional practice of pairing it with a cigar later in the evening. LBVs have vintage character but without the vintage price, do not require additional aging, and they are much more stable once opened. Vintage ports, on the other hand, while representing the *ne plus ultra* of port drinking, must be consumed within twenty-four hours of uncorking—which is not a bad thing, when you think about it. Two of the best of the more recent vintage ports are the 1994 and the 2011, both of which can be consumed now or aged for fifty years and perhaps longer.

Port and cigars are one of civilization's greatest combinations.

Baijiu (pronounced "bye-joe" is China's most popular liquor and one of the best selling in the world. This bottle of Shui Jing Fang comes from the oldest distillery in China, is blended with spirits aged up to 30 years, and comes on a wooden base that is made to be used as an ashtray.

Tawny ports, by comparison, are sweeter than ruby ports, and have nutty and cinnamon overtones. The tawny designation is derived from this style of port's rust-colored "tawny" hues, which lighten with age, while the intensity of their flavors deepens. Tawnies are blends of different ports and are offered in ten, twenty, thirty, and occasionally, as rare forty year olds. These years refer to the average ages of various tawny ports that have been blended and barrel-aged together. Thus, a twenty-year-old tawny could be a blend of ten and thirty-year-old wines. However, nothing can compare with two of the most elegant tawny ports in the world, Taylor Scion, an incredibly old limited edition Tawny port made from the harvest of 1855, and Taylor Fladgate 1863 Single Harvest Tawny, which came from one of the greatest vintages of the nineteenth century and represented the last great Douro Valley harvest before the spread of Phylloxera.

Although many of our adventures with spirits and smoke will occur at dinners or cigar night "Smokers," it does not always have to be in a formal setting. Far from it. And even far from home. In Havana I found it could be as simple as enjoying a Quintero or El Rey del Mundo cigar along with a can of Bucanero or Hatuey beer. Or sipping a glass of rare twenty-five-year-old, eighty-proof Montecristo rum, which is made in Havana but bottled in Spain, while smoking a favored Montecristo No. 2 Pyramid in a back room of the Partagás factory.

And the Dominican Republic is the only setting in which one can enjoy a snifter of Bermuda Aniversario rum. Potent, pungent, with a heavy aftertaste that coats the nose, it is not exported. Fortunately, the Macanudo and Fuente cigars that I had with it are more readily available, as is that other Dominican rum, Brugal. Its Brugal 1888, double distilled and named for the year Don Andrés Brugal Montaner founded this family-owned distillery, should be sipped neat (without ice) alongside a Diplomaticos No. 2. To further complement certain drinks, try chocolate—the traditional mate to many cigars, which ties in well with the chocolaty-tasting Maduro wrapper of a Padrón 1926.

And finally, when all is done, there is the small but potent cup of *café Cubano* —Cuban coffee—strong, black like the richest Oscuro leaf, and thickly sweetened with coarse brown sugar. This is the drink they serve in the cigar-making *galeras* of Havana, Honduras, and Santiago de los Caballeros, as the dusty sunlight of late afternoon filters through the windows and basks the rich brown leaves in sultry warmth. It is a drink that is used to help cleanse the palates of the leaf buyers, who smoke the raw, green tobacco before committing to a price and a purchase. Raw tobacco can smoke sweet, but it is not often that it does. Nonetheless, it is an indication of a particularly good grade.

When it comes to cigars, dark rums work best.

And so it is with our selections of champagnes, whiskeys, bourbons, rums, ports, and beer, intertwining their meticulously produced tastes with the hand blended flavors of the world's best cigars. Whether it is a soothing influence that settles the stomach after an evening of gastronomic debauchery, or just a relaxing way to ease out of the day, this is the reward of spirits and smoke.

The bond between spirits and cigars is so strong it often inspires namesake stogies, such as this

promotional Facundo-banded cigar hand rolled by Mya Cigars of West Palm Beach, Florida. It was produced to celebrate Bacardi's launch of the Facundo Collection of four super-premium rums.