

Cigar Making

One of the author's on-and-off hobbies other than windsurfing is growing heirloom Havana leaf tobacco and processing the leaf into cigars. It is a very time-consuming and labor-intensive endeavor but the final product is exceptional. This subject could easily take dozens of pages to cover but this article will provide just a brief summary of what is entailed.

The first thing is to procure some heirloom tobacco seed. "Heirloom" refers to the older strains of Havana cigar tobaccos used from the late 1800's to about the 1960's, those that historically made Cuban cigars famous. More modern strains were genetically selected to be more disease and drought-resistant and to allow more product per acre, taste being a secondary consideration. Cigars made with heirloom Havana-seed leaf have distinct flavor profiles and nuances not experienced in even the most expensive modern-made cigars. The process of going from seeds to two-inch-tall sprouts is involved and would require its own separate article.

Cigar tobaccos are generally categorized as wrapper, binder, and filler. Wrapper leaf should be very large, without any holes or tears, and have some stretch to it when fully cured. Binder should also be large, and filler can be of most any size. When setting about to grow a crop to make cigars, at least three to five different strains should be grown. A cigar made with several different blends of tobacco strains, each with its own profile and nuance, makes for a much better smoke, with the final flavor profile exceeding the sum of the component strains' individual profiles.

Once a young tobacco sprout is planted in good well-drained soil and kept watered it grows extremely fast. In about two months it will be about five feet tall and the first lower leaves will be huge and ready for harvest. Knowing when a leaf is truly ready for picking, or *priming*, is an art. In a week or two leaves above those will be ready, and so on upwards on the plant. The lower leaves are mildest while the upper smaller leaves being the strongest flavored.

Throughout the entire time the plants are alive and growing, constant vigilance against pests is required. Dozens of types of bugs, aphids, caterpillars and leaf-mites seem bent on constantly assault these plants. An entire article concerning pests could be written.

Once picked, each group of primed leaf is strung up on a wire pushed through the base of the stems and hung up in rows to dry somewhere out of the sun and rain but where there is still 65-75% humidity, such as a covered patio. This first drying process is called "color curing," a weeks-long process where the leaf slowly changes from green to yellow and then brown. Once completely brown, about twenty-five leaves are bunched together with a zip-tie on the stems. Each bunch is called a "hand." The hands must then undergo heat curing, where the temperature must be maintained between 110 to 120F for about a month for enzymatic activity to change the leaf into what we know as smokable cigar tobacco. An old large chest freezer with a light bulb inside works for

this. The hands should be briefly shaken out in fresh air every week or so during this process.

Once the heat curing process is complete the leaves are unbunched and the main center veins stripped out leaving two crescent-shaped halves. These are then placed in large plastic bags and stored away to “rest” for a few months where final curing takes place. Throughout this process humidity must be carefully maintained. Too much humidity and mold will ruin the leaf, too little and it will crack or crumble. Constant vigilance at every step is required throughout the entire process.

Once all of the leaf is fully cured and taken to about 75% humidity so it is workable and won't crack, a small “puro” of each batch should be rolled and tested. A puro is a cigar made from a single strain and batch of tobacco. Notes should be made with each puro regarding flavor, whether it stays lit well, produces a lot of smoke, or has any other notable qualities. Such tests are important with regard to blending different strains and batches to put together the final product. After all, a cigar is not simply some cheap nicotine delivery system, something to be merely “smoked.” It is to be engaged, to be experienced and savored. It is said that a woman needs to have a really good cry every so often, and in that same sense a man sometimes needs to have a really good cigar. Making a really good cigar, like distilling a fine bourbon, is important.

Of note, the curing process cigar tobacco undergoes greatly reduces both nicotine content and VOC's (volatile organic compounds) compared to cigarette tobaccos, which are derived from Virginia strains rather than the broader leafed tropical Havana leaf strains.

Different strains, and there are dozens of them, each have distinct characteristics. Some notable ones in the author's experience include *Florida Sumatra*, which has a smooth chocolatey-leathery-nutty profile but is difficult to get many large leaves from. *Glessnor* has a distinctly sweet, almost candy-like taste profile and makes an excellent wrapper for that reason. *Wisconsin Seed Leaf* is a “work horse” strain in that it grows prolifically and produces many good large leaves per plant, burns well, and has a mild crème-soda like flavor, and thus makes an excellent binder or filler to mix other stronger strains into. *Pennsylvania Red Leaf* has a strong traditional cigar tobacco profile and is included in most of the author's eleven different standard cigar “recipes” or blends. Finally, *Little Dutch* is a dark, strong leaf with a classic rich coffee/leather/chocolate/nuts profile that really enhances a blend with even a sliver or two in the core of each cigar.

Once all of the strains are tested and separated into bags and piles of leaves set out on a table with a good thick wooden cutting board and a razor-sharp *chaveta*, or traditional crescent-shaped cigar cutting tool, the final assembly is at hand. It would take a separate long article just to go into this process alone. Suffice to say there's a good bit of art involved in rolling, pressing, wrapping, and cutting a cigar.

The end product of all of this work is a truly unique cigar that probably tastes like the

ones Hemingway enjoyed on hot Havana nights in the 1940's and JFK smoked in the Oval Office; cigars made with the original unadulterated Cuban seed heirloom tobaccos that first made Cuban cigars famous. No preservatives, no treatments, no additives like there likely are in modern mass-produced cigars. Full flavored yet light, satisfying and relaxing, and to the author, fully worth the effort in making them yourself.

- Ted Avellone