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Cigars

THE ART OF ROLLING

BY BRIAN PANOWICH
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TOP SHELF CIGAR & TOBACCO SHOPPE

When you think of a cigar, or the act of smoking a cigar, the idea is commonly linked with the wealthy, the important and the powerful. The mystique goes hand-in-hand with darkened rooms and high-priced bourbon served from crystal decanters. Over the ages, both men and women, ranging from Hollywood elite like Humphrey Bogart and Jack Nicholson to famous and infamous politicians like President Franklin D. Roosevelt or late English Prime Minister Winston Churchill have all enjoyed the smooth draw from a lit cigar. In fact, Churchill was so well known for smoking cigars that a common type is named after him, the Romeo and Julieta Churchill. He was known to smoke at least 10 a day and was rumored to favor Cuban varieties. Even female celebrities like Madonna and Penelope Cruz have well publicized photos of them enjoying a good cigar.



Traditionally, cigars have also been linked to celebrations. They get passed out when babies are born or at weddings and graduations. The celebratory act is largely based on the cigar's long history as a rare or high-priced item, which, in turn, makes them well suited as a gift for a major accomplishment. And although the popularity of smoking cigars has waxed and waned through the years, the stigma attached to them has changed dramatically. Today, cigars aren't just associated with the wealthy, and the art of rolling them at home is becoming increasingly popular.

Before starting the process of learning how to properly roll a cigar, it is important to understand the history of cigars and how they ended up so popular in the modern era.

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HISTORY AND COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Contrary to popular belief, cigars did not originate from Cuba. There is documented artwork depicting the Mayans smoking rolled tobacco dating back to the 10th century. Some even believe that the word 'cigar' is rooted in the Mayan language. It wasn't until Christopher Columbus, during his ill-conceived voyage west to find India, stumbled upon an unfamiliar crop, tobacco, in what is now known as Haiti, that the introduction of the cigar crept into other parts of the world. The Haitian people smoked rolls of dried tobacco leaves, wrapped in palm husks, as a way to relax and socialize with one another. Shortly thereafter, Europeans joined the Haitian tradition.

By the mid-16th century smoking was popular across Europe and had become a lucrative business. The Spanish created the first Cuban cigar factory initially claiming that smoking tobacco had health benefits, but there were others that considered it an act of evil. Despite the controversy, the 19th century had nobles and commoners alike smoking cigars. The intrigue surrounding the Cuban cigar stems from the United States placing a ban on Cuban goods during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960s, making them a rare commodity.

To date, the leading exporter of cigars to the rest of the world is Poland, readily debunking the myth about Cuban cigars being so uncommonly well made that they outshine cigars made in different parts of the world.



THE ART OF ROLLING

If you fancy yourself an aficionado, you'll find out quickly there are companies that factory-produce cigars, but trained artisans roll most premium cigars by hand. Russell Wilder, owner of Top Shelf Cigar in Martinez, visited one of those factories in Esteli, Nicaragua in 2010.

"I wanted to have firsthand knowledge of cigar production," Wilder explains. Through the years Wilder had "read volumes about tobacco growing, handmade cigar production and felt pretty knowledgeable about it all," he admits. "I was impressed at how much I didn't know about the process. Seeing the process from start to finish was very enlightening."

The proper rolling of a cigar ensures the flavors complement each other, that it burns evenly and that the draw is smooth. The slightest imperfections in the rolling process can compromise the integrity of a cigar, which is why professional rollers train so vigorously to hone their skills and are held in such high regard. The art of rolling a cigar is a time-honored tradition that can take years to master. And while it is much easier said than done, it can be a lot of fun to learn.

The equipment needed for cigar making is relatively inexpensive and easily available through cigar shops and tobacco retailers. The most important ingredient is the tobacco — the different types ultimately determine the taste of the cigar. Cheap tobacco will leave you with cheap cigars that taste bad regardless of how skilled the roller is.

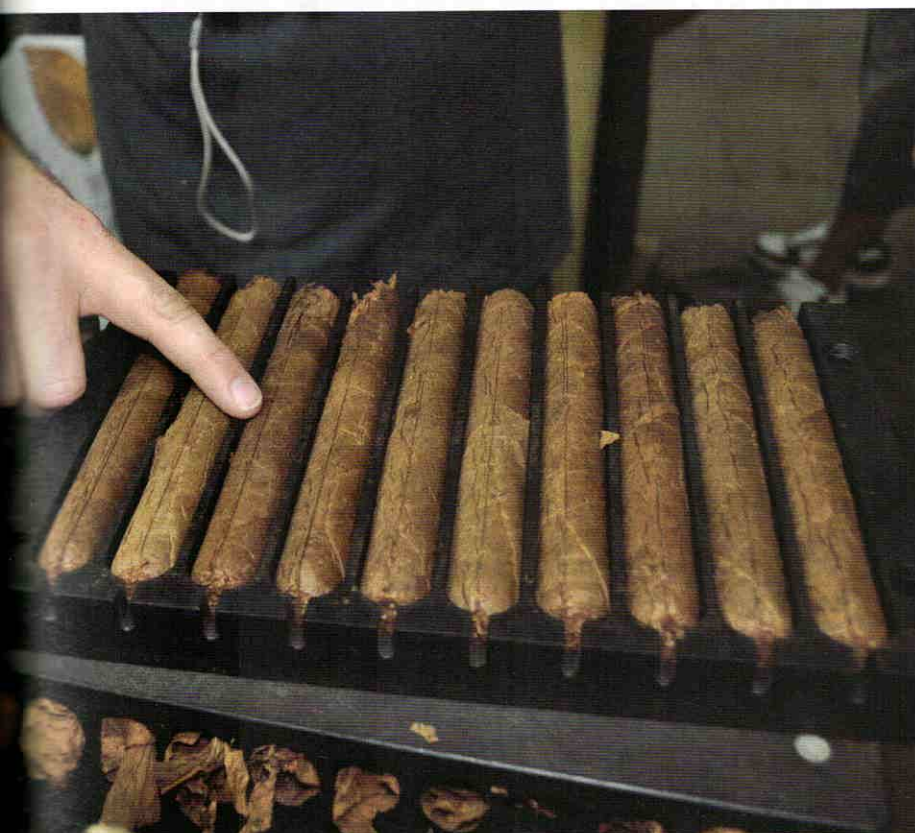
Wilder learned seedlings are chosen to go to seed (only a few plants are allowed to go to seed

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for the next year's crop.) He also learned in great detail about the fermentation process that cures the tobacco to reduce nicotine content as well as remove any harsh tastes.

There are two types of tobacco leaves needed for rolling. They are known as the filler and the binder leaves. The filler leaves make up the body of the cigar, while the binder serves as the wrap that holds the filler in place. Binder leaves are incredibly vital to the process, and they must be slightly more pliable to provide the tight hold between the filler and the final binder. The final binder is called the wrapper — the external layer of the cigar — and it's very important there aren't any tears or holes in it. Cigar wrappers provide almost as much of the flavor as the filler, so choosing a high-quality wrapper to match the filler is essential.

The tobacco leaves, particularly the wrappers, will need to be kept soft and pliable until they are ready to be used. A tube-shaped cutter provides a very quick and precise way to create the foot (or the end that you light) of the cigar. Once the desired thickness and length is determined and cut, it is important to allow for drying time to avoid any bacterial growth which could spoil the cigar. Most will need at least one week to dry.



THE SMOKING

When the cigar is rolled, dried and cut at the foot end, you can gently roll it on a flat surface and do the ceremonial inhalation of the wrapper under your nose. The cutter you used to slice the foot end, you will now apply to the curved end. This new cut becomes the draw side. Lighting the foot end with an even flame that covers the entirety of the end surface is essential to keeping a steady draw.

Cigars are meant to be savored with a slow exhale, and like all vices, moderation is key, since life is to be thoughtfully enjoyed. ■