

GENTLEMEN,

You May Smoke

By Mart McCann
Photography by Frank Barnett





The “Bar and Grille” theme of this feature has led photographer Frank Barnett and me to explore, among other things, the subcultures surrounding wine, coffee, and craft-brewed beer. Guess what? Cigar makers and retailers are just as quirky, passionate, diverse, and customer-focused as their brethren in those other endeavors.

Like wine tasting, cigar smoking is a social activity; witness all the cigars that are consumed during male-bonding rituals such as football games, outdoor barbecues, and yes, fishing trips.

Tower Pipes & Cigars has been around in my hometown of Sacramento, California, for 45 years, and even though I have never smoked a cigar except for that one time in 1968 when Mary Cecile Cunningham and I were trying to impress the wrangler at a Santa Rosa dude ranch (we were about 19 at the time), I felt right at home walking in.

Above Tower’s door are three framed covers of *Cigar Afi-*



cionado magazine featuring portraits of Jack Nicholson, George Burns, and Bill Cosby, which everyone sees upon exiting. There is a rather obvious gap where a fourth portrait has been removed. Brandon Thomason, who was manning the counter that Sunday afternoon, explained that former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger had been told to take his business elsewhere after failing to keep a campaign promise regarding tobacco taxes.

Brandon answered my rookie questions, e.g. what makes a great cigar, with patience and enthusiasm. High quality aged tobacco is essential, but so is construction. You want a cigar to draw easily, burn evenly, and produce a tight ash. I could tell that *much* more research was going to be needed, so Frank and I headed to Rich's Cigar Store upon our return to Portland. Rich's is an institution, as well known for its inventory of periodicals as its tobacco products. Over a thousand magazines from all over the world, covering everything from architecture to zoology, line the aisles of the flagship store on southwest Alder Street.

DJ Gollyhorn looks exactly like a gentleman who has just stepped out of a 19th century daguerreotype, complete with vest, pocket watch, and neatly groomed beard. Fitting, since Rich's got started in 1894. We chatted while I waited for the subject of my interview, General Manager Bill Shindler, to finish

with a customer. DJ had been working at Rich's for a month, and was beginning to learn the business first-hand, by smoking cigars. "The first one they had me smoke was an Arturo Fuente 858 Maduro, and then I kind of went all over the place. But it was, and still is, one of my favorite cigars."

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It was a Friday afternoon, and a lot of the customers who came in were shopping for cigars to enjoy at the Ducks game against Fresno State the next afternoon. I overheard Bill say, "If you don't see what you're looking for, just ask. We've got 1,500 facings here, and a humidor that reaches to the street." I tried to imagine choosing a cigar and quickly gave up. So I asked DJ another of my stand-by rookie questions, to which he replied, "This is easily my favorite cigar. La Flor Dominicana Double Ligero Digger. You can't help but feel masculine and emboldened when you smoke that cigar." Trying not to wander into double-entendre territory, I asked, "How big is it?"

"Let's see. Eight-and-a-quarter by 60, and it's fabulous!" Cigars are measured by length in inches, and diameter measured in 64ths of an inch. So DJ's favorite is 8¼" X 60/64," or 15/16" in diameter. And it is admittedly handsome.

Bill was assisting a novice smoker with his selection. "Are you a fast smoker or a slow smoker?" he asked. The customer guessed he was a "medium" smoker. Later I inquired how long it would take a fast smoker to finish a six-inch cigar. "I know of one person who would be through with that in 15 minutes. I'm glad I don't have his mouth. A six-inch cigar should last me about an hour and 30 minutes, depending on the thickness." The \$11.50 price for the La Flor Dominicana Double Ligero Digger suddenly made perfect sense to me. I might linger over a \$12 glass of pinot noir for half an hour and consider that money well spent.

I asked Bill how long he thought it would take for DJ to get good at selling cigars, and he replied that he might never get good. "I've been in this business since 1976, so almost 40 years. Right now, I don't have the time to give him what he needs. I go over his notebook, review his conclusions, so I can tailor a lesson plan to get him to where I need him to be. That's what I'm working on." DJ chimed in, "Cigar 101." Bill continued, "Anyone can sell a cigar. You learn the three parts of a cigar. One problem you run into is the customer who has just enough knowledge to make him dangerous. With the electronic media that you have today, there's more bad information out there than good."

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The subject of "The Cigar Craze" is always a good one



to generate debate. When asked his opinion of what launched the sudden interest in cigars during the 1990s, Bill said, “If you were to ask Marvin Shanken that question, he would say he was responsible, but it was really an increase in disposable income. The economy was doing well; people had a little extra to spend. Cigars have always been associated with luxury and wealth, so it’s natural that cigar sales would increase.” In case you haven’t already guessed, Marvin Shanken is the publisher of *Cigar Aficionado*.

With the demand for cigars on the rise, “...new product started coming out of otherwise overlooked areas. A Nicaraguan cigar, back in the 70s, was not so good. They didn’t want to use

Ecuadoran tobacco, but because of the craze and people needing tobacco, the demand forced them to check out different avenues. And some of this is good. Now I can take some Nicaraguan cigars and say ‘these are some of the finest cigars in the world.’ I’ve smoked Cubans, but I would not hesitate to say these are better, based on construction and blending.”

My earlier visit with Brandon Thomason left me with basic knowledge

of cigar construction: wrapper, binder, and filler. Bill Shindler could expand on any of the three in great detail. We started with the outermost part, the wrapper. “The Fuentes, for example, are known for their Cameroon wrappers. Because they are grown in the hot desert sun, the leaves seem to have more ability to hold oils and moisture, so they can survive. When you have a cigar with a Cameroon wrapper, right away you’re going to have a medium-bodied cigar because the wrapper has held onto that oil and that moisture.”

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“People don’t realize that some of the finest wrappers in the world are grown right up there in Connecticut. Right in the middle of the Connecticut Valley, there are fields and fields and fields, and they have these tarps, and the plants grow under the tarps, in the shade. Connecticut shade wrapper. They also have a Connecticut broadleaf, which they grow on the other side of the valley out in the sun, and that makes for some of the finest maduro leaves.”



Frank had started photographing humidors, and I remarked that one was as beautiful as a jewelry box. Bill smiled, “They make jewelry boxes, too. I wanted to buy one for my wife, but they are even more expensive than the humidors.” The object of my outright lust was a rich red Elie Bleu Flor de Alba model, with a capacity of about 75 cigars. Bill continued, “These are made in Paris. One inch thick. You can smell the Spanish cedar when you open the box. Dovetailed, because a lot of the humidors you get today have mitered corners. What happens with mitered corners is that, when the wood starts to swell the

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moisture goes straight out, and the wood cracks. With dovetails, it keeps the pressure from going out, and then they add end-caps so when you close this down, it's almost seamless.” As to what one should pay for a humidor, Bill suggests that a good guideline is three times the value of the cigars. So, if the capacity of the humidor is 75 cigars that cost \$10 apiece, the math works out to \$2,250 for the humidor, which is just about what that gorgeous Elie Bleu cost.

On the way out, we picked up the 20th Anniversary issue of *Cigar Aficionado*. I had seen the magazine around for years,

in high-end delis and at my local wine shop, usually featuring a celebrity cigar-smoker on the cover. I could never figure out how a publication devoted to cigars managed to stay in business. Then I opened one. Marvin Shanken, in his interview with Executive Editor Gordon Mott, said he wanted *Cigar Aficionado* to be “the ultimate men's lifestyle magazine,” and he may very well have succeeded.

As I flipped the pages, past advertisements for luxury goods, I noticed the cigar reviews, complete with scores ranging from 82 to 98. Wow, I thought—just like *The Wine Spectator*. Then I read the interview. Marvin Shanken, publisher of *The Wine Spectator*, built his first subscriber list by offering a free copy of his cigar magazine (before it had a name) to anyone who wanted one. This offer was made in the pages of *The Wine Spectator*, and generated 100,000 requests. With that kind of leg up, it's no wonder *Cigar Aficionado* turned a profit in its first year, an almost-unheard-of achievement.

In the same way that *The Wine Spectator* might steer you toward a wine you hadn't thought of trying, *Cigar Aficionado* seems to be a good source for finding high quality smokes, although I haven't given in to the temptation to fire one up yet. If you're ready to join the brotherhood of cigar smokers, reading is not going to substitute for experience. Talking with Bill Shindler convinced me of that. Find a really knowledgeable retailer, experiment with several different styles of cigars, and remember, to quote Rudyard Kipling, “A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke.” 

Famous (and Infamous) Cigar Quotes

The title of this article references a famous quote from King Edward VII who ruled the United Kingdom between 1901 and 1910. His mother, Queen Victoria, did not approve of smoking and banned it from court. Edward VII became King, and would intone after dinner, “Gentlemen, you may smoke.”

Other well-known quotes include these:

“If smoking is not allowed in heaven, I shall not go.”

—Mark Twain

“Eating and sleeping are the only activities that should be allowed to interrupt a man’s enjoyment of his cigar.”

—Mark Twain

“I never smoked a cigar in my life until I was nine.”

—W.C. Fields

“Given the choice between a woman and a cigar, I will always choose the cigar.”

—Groucho Marx

“The only way to break a bad habit was to replace it with a better habit.”

—Jack Nicholson, explaining why he switched from cigarettes to cigars.

“I drink a great deal. I sleep a little, and I smoke cigar after cigar. That is why I am in two-hundred-percent form.”

—Winston Churchill

“Happiness? A good cigar, a good meal, a good cigar and a good woman—or a bad woman; it depends on how much happiness you can handle.”

—George Burns

“There is nothing more agreeable than having a place where one can throw on the floor as many cigar butts as one pleases without the subconscious fear of a maid who is waiting like a sentinel to place an ashtray where the ashes are going to fall.”

—Fidel Castro

“I know a man who gave up smoking (cigars), drinking, sex, and rich food. He was healthy right up to the day he killed himself.”

—Johnny Carson

“Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

—Sigmund Freud

“There’s something about smoking a cigar that feels like a celebration. It’s like a fine wine. There’s a quality, a workmanship, a passion that goes into the smoking of a fine cigar.”

—Demi Moore

