

BUSINESS INSIDER

SMOKE SIGNALS

by Philippe Dova / Photo: Parker Zheng

Through 20 years of experience, Eric Piras has become an expert in every facet of the tobacco industry – from growing and production to marketing and sales. Today, he's a key player in the global cigar segment with his distribution company, Cigraal



Tell us briefly about the market for handmade cigars.

Premium handmade cigars represent only 5% of total cigar production worldwide, meaning that they accounted for 500 million of the 25 billion cigars produced in 2015. From the tobacco seed to the finished cigar in its wood humidor, there are nearly 400 processes. It's a true craft. Although there was a time when cigars were reserved for a certain elite, they have been democratized so that it's now possible to buy an excellent quality handmade cigar for HK\$60.

Do cigars have specific designated origins, the way wines do? And does the place where the tobacco is grown affect the taste?

Only Cuban cigars have a designated origin and are made from 100% Cuban tobacco. The main growing areas after that are Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic, followed by Indonesia and the Philippines.

Why did your company, Cigraal, ultimately decide to specialise in the distribution of non-Cuban cigars?

We distribute handmade cigar brands from Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic because, while 20 years ago cigar lovers only smoked well-known brands, today they are much more attentive to price and taste. It's the same as with wine – people don't just smoke a label anymore and the lesser-known, more affordable non-Cuban cigars offer excellent quality for these consumers.

Many people still consider cigars to be a guy thing...

More and more women are smoking cigars. The best example is Maya Selva, the owner and creator of the Honduran Flor de Selva brand.

How should you properly smoke a cigar?

First, you need to cut it with a cigar cutter. Then, take the time to light it with a butane lighter or good matches. A few other tips: Never inhale the smoke.

Let the cigar go out by itself – never stub it out. And choose a cigar size that goes with your personality, just like you choose the right size for clothes.

What sort of flavours do you get from smoking a cigar?

First, a cigar consists of three parts: the wrapper, the binder and the filler, which is a blend of tobacco leaves from these various countries. Each brand has its own signature cocktail and its own taste. This taste varies depending on the size, but Nicaraguan cigars generally have a stronger flavour, whereas those from Honduras are much more delicate.

There are three stages. With the opening taste, you get the wood, coffee and chocolate. In the second stage, the flavours can be more powerful. The third stage is when you finish smoking the cigar – normally, when you reach the band. There are handmade cigars for all tastes: light, medium and very powerful. The cigar you smoke depends on your state of mind, your surroundings and the weather.

What foods and drinks pair well with cigars?

Chocolate, coffee and spirits such as rum that come from the same countries where cigars are made. Malt whiskies, ports and sweet Bordeaux wines go very well with cigars. And a fine, robust Pu-erh tea with a medium-strong cigar is an absolutely magnificent pairing.

Are there a lot of cigar collectors?

Yes, especially in Asia. Every year, limited editions sell for sky-high prices. Collectors' humidors [a cabinet containing 300 cigars] have gone for a million euros at auction. Around the world, they fight over pre-Castro brands like Davidoff that used to be manufactured in Cuba. As with wines, there's a growing collectors' market. For some people, it's an investment. Personally, I'd rather smoke them and enjoy them. Sharing a cigar with a friend is a very special moment that you can't put a price on. 