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THE CIGAR PRIMER

CIGAR INGREDIENTS

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Before getting into how to smoke a cigar, what goes into cigars? The answer to this question is the key to assessing the quality of a specific cigar. All but the thinnest cigars include three elements: (1) the filler tobacco at the center, (2) a binder leaf which holds the filler together and (3) the outer wrapper, which is rolled around the binder.

For beginning cigar smokers, it's critical to identify the difference between handmade and machine-made cigars. Cigars which are made by hand generally use "long filler" tobacco: leaves which run the length of a cigar. In a handmade, the filler, binder and wrapper are combined manually to create a cigar.

Machine-made cigars utilize high-speed machinery to combine "short filler" tobacco - usually scraps or pieces of tobacco - with a binder and wrapper. Because of the tension placed on the tobacco by the machines, the binders and wrappers are often made of a homogenized tobacco product which is stronger than natural leaves and can be produced in a variety of flavors, strengths and textures.

A few brands combine machine-bunching (using long-filler tobacco) with hand-rolled wrappers; this practice has been very properly dubbed "hand-rolled" as opposed to handmade by cigar expert Rick Hacker in *The Ultimate Cigar Book*. And some larger cigars use "mixed" or "combination" filler of long-filler and short-filler tobaccos.

The quality of the tobaccos and more importantly, how they are blended, determines the quality of the smoking experience. In the filler, "ligero" leaves which provide power are blended with "seco" leaves with a milder flavor and "volado" which helps to ensure an even burn. These are combined with a binder and wrapper to provide a balanced flavor.

Is there anything other than tobacco in a premium, handmade cigar? Yes. A tiny bit of gum, often gum tragacanth (sap from a gum tree) is applied to seal the wrapper. It's a tasteless and safe form of dietary fiber keeps the cigar together until you can enjoy it!

TYPES OF TOBACCO

Cigars seem to incorporate a dizzying array of tobaccos, but in fact, the range – from a scientific standpoint – is quite small. Steve Saka's brilliant article, "Black Tobacco" in the Spring 2006 issue of *Cigar Magazine* notes the origins and history of what is now cigar tobacco:

- ▶ Tobacco originated in South America in the mountainous Andes region of what is now Ecuador and Peru. Part of the Solanaceae family, which also includes eggplant, petunias,

potatoes and tomatoes, scientists have specified 66 types of tobacco, only two of which are smokable. These types of tobacco have been cultivated since perhaps 5000 B.C.E.

- ▶ The two smokable types of tobacco were named by Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus in 1753 as *Nicotiana rustica Linnaeus* and *Nicotiana tabacum Linnaeus*. The *Nicotiana tabacum* type is the one we know today that is used for almost all smoking tobacco.
- ▶ Within the *Nicotiana tabacum* family, there are multiple sub-species, including blonde, burley and Oriental that are fire-cured or flue-cured and used for cigarettes and black, which is air-cured and used for cigars.

And Saka notes that “While black tobaccos can be grown almost anywhere, they typically thrive in a sandy loam of volcanic soil in a hot, humid climate. Their leaves’ robust flavors, aromas and nicotine content make them suitable for smoking without inhalation; their smoke is to be enjoyed for its taste and aroma alone.”

What about the different kinds of tobacco grown for cigars today? Saka lists five basic types from five different regions, noting that the wide experimentation with tobacco has led to literally thousands of individual strains of black tobacco:

- ▶ *Bahia*: this is grown in Brazil and is one of the oldest native-seed tobaccos.
- ▶ *Broadleaf*: widely grown, especially in the U.S., this style resulted from the migration of natives from the Andes area into North America.
- ▶ *Habanesis Hybrids*: these styles developed from seeds brought to Cuba from Mexico in 1534 and form the base of the “Cuban seed” tobacco family.
- ▶ *San Andres Negro*: planted in Mexico and was cultivated by the Aztecs.
- ▶ *Sumatran*: originally planted on the Indonesian island of Sumatra from seeds brought by Dutch explorer and traders of the 1500s.

Within these varieties, there has been endless experimentation and development of the types of tobacco (some of which have the same names as those listed above) we know today:

- ▶ Arapiraca, grown in Brazil from the Bahia type.
- ▶ Besuki, grown in the Jember region of Java in Indonesia. Saka notes that there are two types of Besuki: “Vroege oogst” (VO) which is Dutch for “early harvest” and “No oogst” (NO) or “late harvest.”
- ▶ Broadleaf, grown in the Windsor, Connecticut area since being brought to the area by B.P. Barbour in 1833. It’s sun-grown and stalk-cut and is one of the most popular leaves used for maduro wrappers.

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- ▶ Cameroon, planted in that West African country beginning in the 1950s by Jean Masseran of France's SEITA and revived in the 1990s by the late Rick Meerapfel of CETAC. Saka reports that in 2003, Cameroon tobacco was planted outside the country for the first time, in Ecuador.
- ▶ Connecticut Shade, grown in the Connecticut River Valley for wrapper, mostly under shade (hence the term, "Connecticut Shade") since its development in 1906. Seeds of this style have been widely planted and cultivated elsewhere, especially in Ecuador and Honduras.
- ▶ Connecticut Sun-Grown is, in fact, grown in Connecticut and traces its lineage back to Cuba of the 1870s. Saka writes that this style is also called "Havana Seed" and "Medio Tiempo."
- ▶ Corojo, a style of tobacco created by the Cubans in the 1940s from breeding of Criollo plants at the El Corojo Vega and grown in Cuba for wrapper until 1997. It was replaced by more disease-resistant types in Cuba, but is widely planted in Honduras, Nicaragua and elsewhere.
- ▶ Corojo 99, developed in Cuba for wrapper leaf in 1999, but also widely planted in Ecuador and elsewhere.
- ▶ Criollo, referring to "native-seed" tobaccos in any location; the Cubans referred to the tobacco grown on their island as "Criollo" and the specific strain we know as Criollo today was developed there in 1941. It's also grown in other countries such as Honduras and Nicaragua.
- ▶ Criollo 98/Criollo 99, both developed in Cuba as more disease-resistant version of the standard Cuban Criollo plant. The C98 is also planted in Honduras and Nicaragua today.
- ▶ Habana 2000, developed in Cuba in 1992 to be more resistant to disease than the Corojo it was designed to replace, this style found favor when planted by Nestor Plasencia, Sr. in Nicaragua in 1996. It's widely used for wrapper today. It is also planted in Honduras and Mexico.
- ▶ Isabela, grown in the Philippines and quite mild.
- ▶ Mata Fina/Mata Norte/Mata Sul, all grown in Brazil from the Bahia type.
- ▶ Olor, native to the Dominican Republic and quite mild.
- ▶ Piloto Cubano, grown in the Dominican Republic in many varieties. Saka reports that Carlos Torano, Sr. is widely credited with being the first to plant tobacco in the Cibao Valley of the Dominican Republic with seeds brought from Cuba after he left in 1960.
- ▶ San Andres, grown in Mexico from ancient seeds in the San Andres Valley. This type of tobacco is also grown in Costa Rica.
- ▶ San Vicente, grown in the Dominican Republic, reportedly from seeds from the San Vicente farm in Cuba and less powerful in flavor and aroma than Piloto Cubano.

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- ▶ Sumatra, originally from Indonesia but now widely planted elsewhere, notably in Ecuador and Mexico.
- ▶ Tembakau Bawah Naungan or TBN, developed in the 1980s and grown under shade in Indonesia for wrappers. It's a crossbreed of the Besuki and Connecticut styles.
- ▶ Vorstenlanden, grown in Indonesia on the island of Java. Wrapper leaf shade-grown from this seed is also known as VBN.

Experimentation continues worldwide with tobacco. A lively leaf developed in Peru by Altadis U.S.A. is becoming popular for filler and a project in Costa Rica at the Tabacos de la Cordillera complex is planting tobaccos from ancestral seeds from Cuba from the 1940s and 1950s!

However, as Saka writes, “While uniformity is the norm in other tobacco varieties, uniqueness is the trademark of black tobaccos. The same exact black tobacco seed grown in two different locales results in plants that, while similar, are oftentimes drastically different in flavor, body and aroma. The difference between a seed grown in the sun-bright tropics of Indonesia versus the same seed grown in the cloud-covered valleys of Ecuador is vast. For all practical purposes, they are two entirely different black tobaccos, to the point that it is hard to believe they come from the same seed strain. These wide-ranging differences do not require the separation of continents to be apparent; vegueros will often remark how the exact same tobacco grown on one side of the road is different than the leaf grown on the other.”