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THE CIGAR PRIMER STORAGE

LONG-TERM STORAGE: GET A HUMIDOR!

Cigars are like any other plant product and deteriorate over time if not cared for. That's where a humidior for cigar storage comes in. To store your cigars for use over time, a humidior is essential.

As a product of the Caribbean, cigars do best in a tropical climate similar to the conditions under which they were created. The consensus is that storage is best achieved at a temperature of 70 degrees (F) and at 70 percent relative humidity.

The risks of having conditions which vary wildly from this norm can be substantial. At extremely cold temperatures or with too little humidity, cigars will dry out and be unsmokable (a.k.a. DEAD). At high temperatures - above 80 degrees F - or at high humidity levels, the dreaded tobacco beetle can hatch and begin boring its way through the cigar. The microscopic larvae are embedded in the leaf and high temps or humidity allow them to hatch and destroy any cigar they are in. Whole boxes of cigars have been turned to dust by these vermin. The only defense is to ensure that your cigars are kept at correct temperatures and at humidity levels of less than 80 percent.

(If you get beetle infestations, you'll see the holes and every cigar which has these problems must be discarded. Check all other cigars in the same box or pack carefully and make sure they are stored in a new or different container before returning them to your humidior. This is why many enthusiasts keep their cigars in their cellophane wrappers to protect against the spread of beetles, even though this slows the aging process. More on this below)

So what kind of humidior works best?

Any container which has a good seal and can incorporate a sponge or other humidification device can be used, even Tupperware. During the Cigar Boom of the 1990s, there was even a plastic box marketed as the "TupperDor"! But beyond that, you're buying a piece of furniture.

All humidors should close tightly and if lined with wood, must use Spanish Cedar. Other woods such as plywood or American Cedar can have strong smells which can interfere with the taste of your cigars. Take your pick of exterior decorations to match your home or office decor. One

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suggestion: keep your humidor away from direct sunlight to keep temperatures down.

Not all humidors come with humidifiers, so you need to check before buying. If you need to buy a humidifier separately, there are plenty to choose from, but check to see which require a special propylene glycol solution and which use simple distilled water.

SHORT-TERM STORAGE: GET A CASE!

Just going out for a few hours and need to take your cigars along? Opt for a quality cigar case, made from odorless leather in endless styles and price points. You can choose from ultra-protective hard cases with individual slots or softer cases which have open interiors to allow you to carry different sizes as desired. Don't worry too much about humidification when carrying your cigars for a few hours on the road, unless you're going to the desert.

There are cases, essentially small humidors, which include a humidification device inside and there are ideal for taking cigars on a multi-day trip. Be careful, however, on how you fill the humidifier. Losing cigars to overhumidification, or worse, to an exploding or leaky humidifier inside a case is all too common.

STORAGE: THE GREAT CELLOPHANE DEBATE

Here's the question: when storing cigars in a humidor, should they be removed from their cellophane wrappers, or not?

This is almost like asking who is the greatest baseball player of all time . . . no two people you ask will have the same answer. For example:

- Many connoisseurs, including the noted experts at the Gerard Pere et Fils store in Geneva, Switzerland, campaign vigorously against keeping cigars in cellophane on the grounds that without it, cigars will "breathe" better and reach their peak of flavor.
- Others, especially Hong Kong collector Min Ron Nee, whose *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Post-Revolution Havana Cigars* is one of the wonderworks ever written on the subject, are just as strident in their belief that cigars can age perfectly in cellophane – especially over longer periods – and that there is no reason to remove it.
- A third view is tempered by an aversion to risk in storing cigars. In specific, the danger of tobacco beetles.

These pests are latent in tobacco leaves, right through the cigar-making process. However, they are most often (but not always) prone to hatch when temperatures reach about 80 degrees (F) or more. If they do, they are liable not only to bore through the cigar they are in, but to jump to adjoining cigars if they are able.

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Nothing will break the heart of a smoker more than to open a box of beautiful cigars and see them reduced to dust by beetles which have run wild through an entire box. To prevent this:

- (1) Ensure, as much as possible, that your cigars are stored in conditions which are both humidity-controlled *and* temperature-controlled. One way to do this, especially for large cigar collections, is to convert freestanding wine cellars – always temperature controlled – for use as cigar humidors. Many models now incorporate humidity control in order to keep corks moist so that they do not disintegrate and pollute the wine upon opening.
- (2) If your humidor is not temperature controlled, at least keep it away from direct sunlight, which will heat your cigars.
- (3) Keep the cellophane on your cigars in order to ensure that if a beetle does hatch, it has an added barrier – the cellophane wrapping – in moving from cigar to cigar. This is especially important in humidors in which multiple brands are stored together.

One more reason to consider keeping your cigars in the cellophane in which they were packed is if you remove cigars from your humidor and place them in a case for travel. In some cases, cigars can be squeezed together and the jostling inside a suit pocket or in your briefcase can cause wrappers to rub against each other and possibly end up chipped or broken. This will not happen to cigars which are placed in a case with their cellophane wrappers intact.

So, our advice is: safety first, and keep your cellophane on. It's not a perfect defense against beetles and bad baggage handlers, but it's an easy one to implement.

STORAGE: WHAT ABOUT AGING?

“Cigars should not be consumed during the sick period.”

That's the clear and unambiguous advice from Nee in *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Post-Revolution Havana Cigars*.

It's worth noting, because the taste of a cigar changes over time. Nee defines four different stages of aging:

- Sick period;
- First Maturation;
- Second Maturation;
- Third Maturation.

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The “sick period” is marked by the unpleasant smell of ammonia when smelling the cigars. Nee notes that this is due to the continuing fermentation of the leaves once rolled into cigars and will go away as the cigars are ventilated. He believes that for most cigars, “the ammoniac smell will be over 90% gone in a few months, 95% to 99% gone by the end of the first year and practically all gone by the end of the second year.”

This instruction is carried by only one cigar we know of: Rafael Gonzalez. Originated in Cuba in 1928, it has long carried the following notice on the box:

“In order that the Connoisseur may fully appreciate the perfect fragrance they should be smoked either within one month of the date of shipment from Havana or should be carefully matured for about one year.”

Nee is concerned exclusively with Cuban-made cigars and does not comment on any differences in manufacture between Cuba and other cigar-producing countries. But among manufacturers for the U.S. market, in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua and other countries, the length of time between when leaves are harvested and when they are rolled into cigars is longer, sometimes much longer (like in years). This helps reduce the ammoniac element. And there are manufacturers who hold their made and boxed cigars for weeks up to months to provide some in-the-box aging that will further eliminate the ammonia problem. Thus, most – but not all – cigars on U.S. smokeshop shelves have already passed through the problem stage.

The question is then, how will aging improve cigars. The answer can be quite a bit, if you’re willing to be patient.

The legendary cigar merchant and brand icon Zino Davidoff always maintained that cigars should be stored in their original boxes because they “keep working” over time. Nee agrees and he’s willing to be patient:

“Cigars continue to generate pleasant aromas and flavours as a result of the continuous fermentation. These flavours thus increase in intensity with time. And bitterness, believed to be the taste of nicotine, becomes less and less as fermentation causes nicotine to be broken down into simpler molecules.”

While noting that Nee does not claim to be a chemist by profession, he offers the following guidelines for aging cigars into the first maturation period:

- For mild cigars, about 2-3 years in standard boxes and 4-5 years in cabinets!
- For medium-bodied cigars, five years in regular boxes and 6-8 years in cabinets.
- For full-bodied cigars, 7-8 years in standard boxes and 10-15 years in cabinets.

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Who can wait that long?

But Nee continues, describing the second fermentation as the time when the tannins in the leaves have been broken down. This aspect is well known in wines. For cigars, Nee suggests this period comes between 15 and 25 years, noting that “[t]he cigar tastes quite different to what it was when at first maturity. It is interesting that part of this kind of ‘taste’ is strikingly similar to a 20 year or 25 year old Scotch whiskey.”

Third maturation? Nee notes only that this is when the aroma reaches an indescribable state of finesse “and no words can describe how *great* these bouquets smell because of the paucity of the primitive Human vocabulary.” It takes at least 20 years to reach this state and maybe quite a bit longer.

Writing in 2003, Nee notes that this is one reason why pre-Castro Havanas from the 1950s are often described as so exquisite today, as they have had enough time to – in some brands – to reach their highest level of maturity.

For those of us without the patience of the Hong Kong collector, we can learn some lessons about aging and taste:

- Give cigars with the smell of ammonia either a long time to age in a large humidor or lots of ventilation to eliminate the odor.
- If possible, try to age mild cigars for about a year and give stronger cigars perhaps a couple of years to get past the sick period and enjoy some additional fermentation in the box.
- By all means keep a card file or diary and compare the taste and temperament of specific cigars tasted at different times over a 2-3 year period. You can only appreciate the difference in aging by tasting a few cigars from a box at yearly intervals and, you will be looked upon by your cigar-smoking friends as a true connoisseur.

Never mind that your non-smoking friends will think you’re a nut!