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THE CIGAR PRIMER SMOKING

BAND ON OR BAND OFF?

Every beginning cigar smoker faces this question: should I leave the band on or take it off?

How to smoke cigars – with the band on or off – has been debated without end since about 1850 when Gustave Bock introduced the first bands. Why?

Bock's Havana-made cigars – like the Fuente Fuente Opus X or Padron 1964 Anniversary Series today – were copied so widely so he put bands on to identify them as authentic. Up to that time, all cigars had been sold without bands or cellophane. In the early days, bands were placed toward the center of most cigars.

(There's also considerable speculation that bands came about because of the wide use of light-colored or white gloves in high society where cigars were fashionable and the wrappers stained the gloves, but Bock is widely credited with putting bands on his cigars first.)

For generations in England, it was considered bad practice to smoke cigars with the band on, since it would "advertise" the brand you were smoking. In the U.S., there's no rule, but many smokers keep the band on.

There are some good reasons, however, to dispense with the band as soon as possible:

Band collecting:

Many smokers enjoy collecting bands and some have sheets of bands from cigars they have enjoyed kept like stamps!

In order to get bands off of cigars in the best possible condition, make sure it's not too tightly attached to the cigar. Many bands will come off more easily after a cigar is lit and the heat inside the cigar helps to disengage the band from the body. Even so, taking it off too early can tear the wrapper and if the band is glued tightly, there's little hope of removing it without a lot of work.

The best chance of success will come with gently squeezing the band (and the cigar) at various points to loosen it. If fully separated from the wrapper, you may be able to pop it off by pulling gently at its end. But if there was too much glue applied to it originally, you might end up having to cut it with a small fingernail scissors.

If you're serious about bands, you'll want to store them in a "stock book" or binder with "stock pages" used for stamps. Any quality stamp dealer will have these, with styles ranging in price and sophistication from a few cents a page to books with leather bindings costing \$50 or more.

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There's also the popular *Cigar Diary*, available at many smokeshops, in which you can paste your bands onto a page and record your impressions of that cigar. A neat item and a great way to begin your own "ratings."

Liberating the lips:

In recent years, bands have gotten bigger and bigger, sometimes inhibiting the way a smoker enjoys that cigar! For example, you could almost fit a business card in the space taken up by a Diamond Crown Maximus band.

In order to smoke your cigar more enjoyably, you may wish to dispense with these overly large, or in some cases, double bands.

However, be sure to be extra careful when removing bands, lest you tear the wrapper! If the band does not disengage from the cigar easily, leave it on; it may loosen while the cigar is being smoked and can then be removed without damaging the wrapper.

The Yogi Berra rule:

Probably the best reason for removing your cigar band comes from the "Yogi Berra rule."

In the 1957 World Series against the Milwaukee Braves, Berra was catching for the Yankees when slugger Henry Aaron came to the plate. Berra, a ceaseless talker behind the plate, told Aaron he was holding the bat improperly, with the trademark facing toward the plate instead of the hitter. Aaron ignored the taunt, crushed the next pitch into the stands for a home run and after circling the bases, reportedly told Berra, "I came here to hit, not to read."

But read we do and there's a tendency for all smokers to hold their cigars with the band up so the smoker – and everyone else – can see the front of the band. This can turn out to be a problem if your cigar starts burning at an angle, in which case the side burning too slowly should be rotated so it's at the bottom. That way, as you puff, more air is sent through the cigar and can ignite the unburned tobacco at the end while the ash on top is cooled.

If you're stuck with the band in the wrong position, you could look stupid and smoke with the back of the band on top, rotate it and perhaps damage the wrapper, or remove it and eliminate any impediment to enjoying your cigar fully. Thanks, Yogi.

There's no right or wrong way to smoke, but band etiquette aside, consider the practical consequences of your choice on how your cigar is enjoyed . . . and get one of those stamp stock books before you waste any more bands.

CUTTING

In order to enjoy cigars, the cap must be cut off to allow air to flow through. In his 1967 masterwork, *The Connoisseur's Book of the Cigar*, Zino Davidoff noted that "There are three ways to cut a cigar: by pinching, using your teeth, or with the aid of an instrument. . . . The opening should be clean."

He also added, "American smokers generally open their cigar with a dry bite of the incisor. Some – not the most refined – then spit out the piece they have bitten off. Besides the fact that

you need sharp teeth to use this method (or else you have to try twice), it does not allow for much precision. I realize that some smokers have mastered the art of cutting a cigar with their teeth. However, I do not practice or recommend this method.”

Times have changed.

Today, “instruments” are in and biting is reserved for professional wrestling. There are five major styles of cutting:

► ***Piercing:***

This is a very old method of creating holes through which to smoke a cigar. It still has its defenders, but it is well out of date. One of the problems is that unless the openings are made perfectly, the head can be mangled.

There is also the possibility that the taste and draw of the cigar will be imperfect unless the holes are made such that each one allows a draw through to the end of the cigar. Too much trouble and too many things that could go wrong, so it’s not recommended.

► ***The V-Cut:***

This was a very popular method of cutting which is still practiced today. Take a look at the eBay auction site and search for “cigar cutter” and you’ll find several V-cutters on offer.

A V-cutter makes a V-shaped groove through the head of a cigar, opening it across its width to allow draw. It maintains the shape of the head instead of removing it like a guillotine and there are some brands of machine-made cigars which are sold already cut this way.

However, unless your touch with a V-cutter is good and the plunger is sharp, you can also ruin the cigar head. Moreover, if the cap of a cigar is not perfectly finished, the V-cut groove may not draw well and once you’ve made a V-cut, there’s little chance of trying again on the same cigar without ruining it.

► ***The Cigar Punch:***

A cigar punch has a lot in common with the V-cut in that it maintains the integrity of the head of a cigar. Punches come in varying sizes and the idea is to match the right size with the girth of the cigar so that the head is opened with a hole large enough to allow an easy draw, but which does not destabilize the wrapper.

Davidoff makes some rather unique punch cutters with three different-size punches on a single disk or “key” while most punches are of a single size. Colibri is well known for its combination lighters and punch cutters.

Punches can be quite effective and require less strength than some V-cutters and some guillotine cutters. With some practice, they can be a reliable way to enjoy your cigars and “keep your head together.”

► ***Cigar Scissors:***

Perhaps the most elegant cutter of all is the cigar scissors. Shaped with curved blades which cut

across the entire head of a cigar – similar to a guillotine cut – suitable-sharp scissors can cut a nice, clean line across a cigar and open the entire head so that the smoker can draw through the entire cigar.

Because of their size, scissors have faded from popularity, but should be considered especially for home humidors. The size of the opening must be considered as it will be difficult to open a 50-ring cigar with scissors meant only for cigars up to 42 ring gauge!

However, cigar scissors are easy to find and most top-line tobacconists carry them at prices starting at \$10 and continuing right up to \$500. An especially unique scissors was introduced in 2006 by Cuban Crafters called the *Revolucion*. It is a scissors-style cutter with a hole in the middle into which to place your cigar, which will then be cut by three blades running in a circular motion! Ask for it at your local smokeshop!

There are also hybrid scissors available that as small as guillotine cutter but feature two finger holes directly attached to the cutting blades without the use of a stem. Or, you can check out the Wenger series of “Swiss Army Knives” which includes a model which incorporates a fold-out cigar scissors.

► ***Guillotine:***

For reasons of economy, ease of use, effectiveness and portability, the guillotine cutter has become – by far – the most popular style of cutter used today.

From \$1 plastic cutters with thin blades to jewel-encrusted jobs bearing pedigrees from S.T. Dupont, Dunhill, Davidoff and others, guillotines simply remove the top eighth-of-an-inch or so of a cigar and opens it up so that a smoker may puff through its entire length and width. That makes for good air circulation and is recommended for the best draw, best taste and best burn.

There is considerable debate on what kind of guillotine cutter is best, not to mention which brand. The choice has become considerably complicated today due to the ever-expanding ring gauge of cigars. To be safe, you’ll need to have a cutter that can handle a 64-ring (one inch!) monster! Consider:

- Two-bladed cutters which meet in the middle need to be extraordinarily sharp to actually cut the head of the cigar and not simply squeeze it. The most widely-celebrated cutters of this style are made by Davidoff, available in fine metals or with a colorful plastic housing (\$45-\$165), and by Xikar, which features surgical steel blades in double-bladed models with can be operated easily with one hand (\$40 to \$80).
- Single-bladed cutters vary widely in quality and price. To be effective, these blades must be truly razor-sharp since they must either cut through the cigar or mash the head. One of the most popular and effective cutters of this style is the Paul Garmirian Cutter, which is reasonably priced at \$12.50 retail but can handle cigars only up to 48 ring gauge. Davidoff also makes a cutter of this type and there are many others. Try one out before buying it! Bring an uninteresting cigar and put a prospective cutter to the test and you’ll know quickly if it’s the one for you.

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Sadly, the best-ever single-bladed guillotine cutter is out of production. The P.G. Super Cutter by Paul Garmirian was a wonder, with a Sheffield Steel blade whose leading edge had a thickness of 1/4000th of an inch and was housed in an anodized aluminum frame. Unfortunately, the boutique British maker of these tools passed away and Garmirian has not been able to find anyone who can continue production. The Super Cutter sold at retail for \$125 when it was available, but brought \$331 at a 2006 auction on eBay!

Of course, you can also get a real (but small) guillotine (shown above) as a novelty gift for the cigar smoker who was a fan of the French Revolution!

The choice of what kind of cutter to use is a personal one. Like any knife, sharper is better (and safer). Choose one which will meet your requirements for style, but be sure it opens the cigar effectively, because the pleasure is not in the cutting, but in the smoking!

LIGHTING

In *The Connoisseur's Book of the Cigar*, Davidoff addressed the issue of “warming the cigar” before lighting it. “The practice of excessive heating, still in use in many elegant restaurants, is an anachronism. Until the end of the [19th Century], the wrappers of certain Spanish cigars made in Seville were sealed with a chicory-colored gum. It was then wise to eliminate the taste of the gum by heating the cigar a bit over a flame. Today, the vegetable gum used in Havana to seal wrapper to the ends is perfectly odorless, and I see no advantage in continuing the practice. . . . I recommend only that you warm the foot very lightly, just for a few seconds, before bringing it to your lips. This creates an entryway for the smoke. The first puff you draw will then be free of various residual tastes.”

That's clear enough.

Purists will insist on not having the flame actually touch the cigar, whether from a match or a lighter. Some require the more romantic step of using a lit cedar strip (called a “spill”) to light their cigars, but this is more prevalent in Europe than in the U.S.

Enthusiasts agree that using paper matches is a bad idea, since they won't stay lit long enough to completely light your cigar. Try wooden matches and let the sulphur burn off of the tip of the match before lighting. If you're using a lighter, butane is the best (odorless and tasteless) and apply it gently just below the end of the cigar. Although elegant lighters from legendary makers as Alfred Dunhill, Davidoff and S.T. Dupont are much prized, the newest development is the so-called “torch” which offers a very hot, windproof flame. Some torch lighters even provide two or three flames, ensuring a quick light and a quick need to re-fill the lighter.

A fast light is not always a good light, however. It is essential to ensure that the entire end of the cigar is lit. This is most effectively done by turning the cigar and puffing on it as you light, exposing all of the end to the flame. Remember, **“Turn and Burn.”**

Check your light by turning the lit end toward you, blowing gently and checking to see that the entire end is hot. Then enjoy!

SMOKING YOUR CIGAR

Some of the best advice ever given on the smoking of cigars is in Davidoff's *The Connoisseur's Book of the Cigar*:

- “A cigar should not be kept in the mouth all the time . . . A cigar is not held like a cigarette. Most often it is held between the thumb and index finger. Hold the cigar in your mouth to take a puff and leave it there only for a few seconds (three, four, five or six, according to taste). In this way, if you take fifty minutes to smoke a cigar, it will stay in your mouth, on the average, no more than three minutes.

“The rest of the time it will be kept motionless between your fingers, parallel to the ground.”

- “Cigar smoke is not inhaled. The volume of smoke in the mouth produces an intense, and sufficient, pleasure. This peculiarity of the cigar, in contrast with cigarettes, protects the cigar smoker from all sorts of inconveniences, not to mention risks.”

THAT CIGAR AFTERTASTE

Some cigars leave an aftertaste in the mouth that could last for a day or two. Our approach to this problem focuses on eliminating the aftertaste layer by layer.

No single product or procedure will completely remove the taste of a cigar. By using several steps to successively reduce the amount of cigar residue in the mouth, any remaining taste can be almost totally eliminated. Try a three-step approach:

Cut most of the taste with citric acid:

This is extremely important. There's a reason why so many mouthwashes and other products have a lemon, lime or orange taste. It's the citric acid, which overpowers everything else in the mouth.

It's hardly fashionable to follow your cigar with Listerine, but there are excellent – and tasty – alternatives. Stay away from the weaker citrus drinks such as sodas and go for more acidic tonics. Orange juice is good, but a favorite is Schweppes Bitter Lemon.

If lemon extract can cut through grease in the bathroom, imagine what it can do to your mouth! Many manufacturers make this drink, including Canada Dry, but the best – if you can find it – is Schweppes Bitter Lemon in the 10 oz. bottle, served chilled over rocks in an Old Fashioned glass. The combination of lemon juice and bitter quinine is both sour and refreshing and will cut 80-90% of the taste of anything that was in your mouth.

Give your mouth something else to chew on:

After giving your mouth some time to recover from the Bitter Lemon, give your mouth something else to worry about. A couple of options:

► *Cereal.* If you're at home, this can be a tasty follow-up to the Bitter Lemon or other citric acid drink. Try a couple of handfuls of Rice Krispies straight – no milk – and see if your mouth doesn't respond with some glee. Any of the Chex cereals – except Bran Chex – are also good and Grape Nuts is also an excellent choice.

► *Cheese.* If you are smoking on the outdoor patio of a restaurant with some friends and enjoy your cigar after the entree, follow up with a citric beverage and then enjoy dessert. A great choice to chase the cigar taste from the mouth is some sharp, hard cheese. Ordering a cheese plate for dessert is quite an impressive way to end any meal.

Give your cigar the brush-off:

Once you have been “citric acidified” and cheesed up, you can get out the toothbrush and be sure to brush that tongue. By then you should be cigar taste-free . . . or too exhausted to worry about it anymore.

Alternatively, there is a product on the U.S. market called “Close Call” which debuted at the 2005 RTDA and uses a patented process which suspends copper sulfate in liquid. It has a light citrus taste and is reported to be safe to “swish and swallow.”

A couple of final thoughts:

- Remember that eliminating the taste in your mouth does nothing about the smell on your clothes and in your hair (if you have any). You’ll need to take separate precautions for this; remember that the silk smoking jacket was invented to keep the smell of cigars off of noblemen. Silk is relatively resistant to the smell of cigars compared with most other fabrics.
- After-dinner peppermints such as Altoids, or special cigar mints (the best known brand is Henry Clay) are strong and can be helpful. Just as effective can be hard candy sour balls or hot cinnamon balls.

Good luck!