

Perelman's Pocket Cyclopedia of Havana Cigars: 3rd edition

FROM FARM TO FACTORY

§ 2.05-2.06: AT THE FACTORY

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2.05 THE MAGIC OF THE FACTORY

Once leaves have arrived at the factory, the initial effort is to unbundle them, check each for quality and refresh the dried plants with a water shower. After draining the excess water, the leaves are placed in a high (about 90 percent) humidity room for 4-6 hours.

Then the leaves are de-veined by workers, usually women, who remove the center stem with a quick, decisive motion and separate the whole leaves into halves. These half-leaves, the raw material now ready to be made into cigars, are further sorted into 18-20 classifications by experts, also mostly women, who separate the leaves into piles over a half-barrel covered with ox skins, or on their thighs. The latter practice has given rise to the exotic, but wholly incorrect notion of Havana cigars being rolled on the thighs of young women in the cigar factories.

Once sorted, however, the rolling process begins as the now-selected leaves are bunched and delivered to the roller's gallery (*galera*).

The gallery is a noisy place, with many people at work and a reader or a radio dispensing literature, news and/or music. This practice apparently began in 1865 at the El Figaro factory with the Partagas factory following quickly in January 1866. The practice reportedly began when rollers hired one of their compatriots to read books or newspapers aloud and paid him out of their own pockets the wages that had been lost while reading. The practice spread and the resulting cultural and political sophistication of the rollers alarmed the Spanish government to the point where the practice was prohibited from 1868-78 and from 1895-98. Use of radio broadcasts crept into factory life about 1923, apparently at the Cabañas y Carbajal factory.

The leaves are sorted into the mixtures that will be used for the type of cigar that the roller will make each day and then delivered to the specific roller's table. There, the roller will combine the formula of ligero, seco and volado leaves into the specific factory shape and brand he or she will make. Some rollers put together a complete cigar one at a time by hand, while other use wooden molds to hold the filler and binder, then press them into shape in a giant vise for 30-40 minutes and finally apply the wrapper.

Whatever the technique, all rollers place the *ligero* (the most powerful) leaves at the center, then *seco* (aromatic and flavorful leaves) and finally *volado* (for aroma and burning qualities). This ensures a slower burn in the center and faster combustion at the outer edges of the bunch. Then the binder (most often *volado*) is applied, and finally the wrapper. The cap is fashioned from a piece of the same wrapper, held in place by a tasteless drop of gum from the *Dagame* tree. Cuban experts confirm that 93 percent of the flavor and combustion come from the filler and binder and only *seven percent* from the wrapper.

Rollers are assigned their daily workload depending on their specific level of skill. Standard-grade rollers are considered to be on the fourth level, while experienced rollers graduate to the fifth level. Specialists in rolling a particularly difficult size - especially the shaped cigars known as *figurados* - are on the sixth level and the true masters, who can make any size of cigar, are at the top, or seventh level.

An average roller making handmade cigars in the smaller sizes will produce from 150-200 cigars a day, while rollers of the larger sizes will complete from 100 to 150 cigars daily. The finished products will sit on the top of the roller's table and be bound up in bundles of 50 (literally, "half-wheels" or *medias ruedas*) and then delivered to the quality control department. Student cigar rollers will take up to nine months to complete a comprehensive training program before being allowed to begin making cigars for export.

Samples are taken from each bunch and tested for weight, ring gauge and appearance. Discarded cigars are ground up and shipped out with scrap tobacco for use in cigarettes.

Tasters also test some cigars, as well as new blends. The tasting process involves taking up to six puffs — not more — and evaluating cigars on eight separate points, each on a five-level scale from "Excellent" to "Poor":

- ▶ Appearance of the wrapper
- ▶ Aroma
- ▶ Burn
- ▶ Consistency
- ▶ Draw
- ▶ Strength
- ▶ Taste
- ▶ Overall quality

Once cleared for quality, the bundles are packed in cedar, fumigated for insects and stored for two to three weeks to release excess humidity. Finally, the cigars are sorted by color (more than 70 shades of brown have been identified!) and when a full box of a specific brand and size have been matched, they are sent for packaging.

The process is similar for machine-made cigars. More modest in price and reputation than their handmade cousins, excellent Vuelta Abajo tobaccos are very much in evidence in many of the machine-made brands and shapes. Originally introduced in the Por Larrañaga factory in about 1925, the machines threatened to put Cuba's cigar rollers out of business and led to a national boycott of machine-made cigars, ending the machine-made experiment in 1937.

Re-introduced in 1950, when demand rose and the galleries could not keep up, a new group of cigar-making machines was set up in the La Corona, Partagas and Por Larrañaga factories - this time without incident. These same machines are in operation today.

Two types of machine-produced cigars were available for many years: all machine-made (*mechanizado*) and machine-bunched with hand-rolled wrappers (*mano*). The all-machine products of use short filler (*tripa corta*), while the machine-bunched cigars used long-filler leaves (*tripa larga*) and cigar molds, with a standard wrapper rolled by hand to finish the cigar. Priority in machine-made cigars is given to volado, which burns quickly, to balance what are usually thicker wrappers, which will burn more slowly than those used in handmade cigars.

The machine-bunched with hand-finishing process essentially disappeared in 2000, leaving only all-machine and all-handmade styles for virtually all Cuban-made cigars.

The final packing process includes application of the band, if necessary and packing in a properly dressed box. The credit for the development of the cigar band is given to the Dutch cigar maker Gustave Bock at the El Agulia de Oro factory, who apparently introduced the practice in about 1850 as a way to differentiate his brand from others. In 2002, it was decided that all Havana cigars would be banded to cut down on counterfeiting.

The use of color lithography on cigar boxes is credited to Spanish cigar maker Ramon Allones, also in the 1850s.

The final process involves the sealing of the box and application of the guarantee seals and other indicia of authenticity, beginning with the seal of the Cuban government, symbolizing its warranty – in four languages – of the quality of cigars exported from Havana and applied to all cigars manufactured for export after July 16, 1912. The current seal design dates from 1931.

Please note the different inscriptions applied to the bottom of each box, depending on the style of manufacture:

- ▶ Hand-made cigars inscribed “*Totalmente a mano*” meaning “totally by hand.”
- ▶ Machine-bunched and hand-finished cigars, which were inscribed “*Hecho a mano*” meaning “made by hand.”
- ▶ All-machine-made cigars are inscribed “*Hecho in Cuba*” meaning only “made in Cuba.”

While there are small variations in the overall manufacturing process from brand to brand – a third fermentation of leaves for Cohiba, the use of aluminum tubes or cellophane for other brands, for example – the basic process remains the same. This ensures not only quality, but the tradition which is taken so seriously by the Cuban cigar industry and which links it to the centuries of cigar-making which have transpired on the island since the time of Columbus.

2.06 MYTHS, HISTORY AND FACTORY CODES

The history and romance of Havana cigars are very much tied up in the factories which produce them. For this reason, we offer here some basic information about these facilities, but with some caveats noted below.

Contrary to some reports, factories do not produce the same brands year after year. Although some factories have “home” brands which they will always produce — Cohiba at the El Laguito factory, Partagas at the Partagas factory and so on — the actual determination of which brands and sizes will be produced each year is made only after annual meetings of Habanos, S.A. and its distributors around the world. Once the production promises have been made, the factories are then assigned their quotas for brands and sizes.

The history of each factory is quite interesting, although details are often sketchy. One odd item is the relationship between the “Romeo y Julieta” factory (now called “Briones Montoto”) and the “El Rey del Mundo” factory (now called “Carlos Baliño”). After some research, it became clear that the old headquarters of the El Rey del Mundo Cigar Co. at 852 Padre Varela is now, in fact, the “Romeo y Julieta/Briones Montoto” factory. The actual former headquarters of the

Romeo y Julieta brand at 152 Padre Varela burned many years ago. Now, the two plants are located only one block apart from each other, with the El Rey del Mundo factory denoted by not so much as a sign for many years. The only word on the front of the building was “Polak,” undoubtedly after the name of the previous owner.

Visitors to Cuba can strike out on their own “historic factory tour” if desired by consulting the addresses of manufacturers from the official list of Cuban makers in 1940 in section 4.

An enormous interest in which cigars were produced in which factories sprang up when Cubatabaco began applying coded stamps to the bottom of boxes produced in 1985. Two stamps were used: one designating the factory of origin and one designating date. This led to code revisions in 1998, even more interest and finally a decision in 2000 to adopt new factory codes but present an easily-understandable date code, showing the month the cigars were boxed. A fourth set of factory codes was adopted in 2003, which have not been disclosed, although some educated guesses have been made.

The date codes are simple enough to understand as shown in table form:

<i>1985-98: “NIVELACUSO”</i>	<i>1998-99: “CODIGUNETA”</i>	<i>2000-present: MONTH CODES</i>
N = 1	C = 9	ENE = January
I = 2	O = 8	FEB = February
V = 3	D = 7	MAR = March
E = 4	I = 6	ABR = April
L = 5	G = 5	MAY = May
A = 6	U = 0	JUN = June
C = 7	N = 1	JUL = July
U = 8	E = 2	AGO = August
S = 9	T = 3	SEP = September
O = 0	A = 4	OCT = October
Three or four-digit codes with the month first and year following. Example: NOSU = 10/98 or October 1998	Four-digit code with the year first and month following. So, CCNE = 99/12 or December 1998.	NOV = November
		DIC = December
		Years are indicated by two-digit abbreviations

Factory codes are another matter. Devotees of specific brands have tried to identify factory origins to find cigars which they feel may be better made at their favorite factory, a situation which has not pleased either Habanos S.A. or the national distributors. Thus, a considerable effort has been made to keep factory codes secret, albeit with mixed results, as shown below. This table presents all 60 cigar factories known to have recent production, with pre-nationalization names and historic codes *where available*, compiled from a variety of sources.

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The 2003 codes are, at best, a guess.

<i>Factory</i>	<i>Codes ▶</i>	<i>1985-98</i>	<i>1998-99</i>	<i>2000-03</i>	<i>2003-</i>
<i>City of Havana:</i>					
Briones Montoto ("Romeo y Julieta")		BM	EDC	PEL	KMM
Carlos Baliño ("El Rey del Mundo")		CB	EGD	LOC	
El Laguito		EL	EUN	CLE	MKO
Francisco Perez German ("Partagas")		FPG	EAT	OSU	GKI
Heroes del Moncada		HM	ENI	RPO	
Jose Marti ("H. Upmann")		JM	ECA	ECA	LLN
Nueva Jose Marti ("Nueva H. Upmann")		---	—	—	LLN
Miguel Fernandez Roig ("La Corona")		FR	EOG	EAR	FRH
Juan Caño Sainz ("Por Larrañaga")		FL	EEO	ARA	
<i>Cienfuegos Province:</i>					
Cienfuegos I ("Quintero y Hno.")		CFGS	OTC	Group Codes: EOP LAC SEL PUV	
Cienfuegos II		—	OAI		
Cruces		—	OOG		
Cumanayagua		—	OET		
Lajas		—	OIN		
<i>Granma Province:</i>					
Bayamo		TTB	NAT	ACS	
Jiguani		—	NOC	PLO	
<i>Holguin Province:</i>					

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<i>Factory</i>	<i>Codes ▶</i>	<i>1985-98</i>	<i>1998-99</i>	<i>2000-03</i>	<i>2003-</i>
Antillas		—	UNG	Group codes: IESC PUL UPA URE	
Gibara		—	UDI		
Holgiun I		TTH	UAN		
Holguin II		—	UCE		
San Andres		—	UET		
<i>La Habana Province:</i>					
Artemisa I	Group of factories using the code TLP		TEN	Group codes: ALV CAV LPE PAR SCO SOL SSU VEL	
Artemisa II			TEC		
Bejuoal			TND		
Guines			TOU		
Guira I			TAE		
Guira II			TDC		
Quivican			TIO		
San Antonio I			TCI		
San Antonio II			TNG		
San Antonio de las Vegas			TGT		
San Nicolas de Bari			TUD		
Santa Cruz del Norte			TTA		
<i>Pinar del Rio Province:</i>					
Candelaria		—	GDI	Group codes: LRL SLA	
Consolacion del Sur		—	GAD		
Piloto		—	GCN		
Pinar del Rio ("Francisco Donatien")		PR	GNU		
San Juan (Rio Seco)		—	GOC		
<i>Sancti Spiritus Province:</i>					

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<i>Factory</i>	<i>Codes ▶</i>	<i>1985-98</i>	<i>1998-99</i>	<i>2000-03</i>	<i>2003-</i>
Arroyo Blanco		Group of factories using the code SS	CEG	Group codes: APE CLO DUO LUL OVU PAS REC SRA USP VCR	
Cabaiguan			COT		
Fomento			CGI		
Guayos			CNE		
Jatibonico			CTO		
Perea			CUN		
Sancti Spiritus			CID		
Taguasco			CDU		
Trinidad			CAC		
Zaza del Medio			CCA		
<i>Santiago de Cuba:</i>					
Santiago de Cuba		—	AGE	OLA	
<i>Villa Clara Province:</i>					
Baez		Group of factories using the codes VC or VSC	DNU	Group codes: CPV LES PUC RSE SUA URL	
Camajuani			DDE		
Esperanza			DIT		
Manicaragua			DEG		
Placetas			DGC		
Quemade de Guines		Group of factories using the codes VC or VSC	DAI		
Ranchuelo			DOD		
Remedios			DCO		
Santa Clara I			DTA		
Santa Clara II			DAT		
Santo Domingo			DNC		
Vueltas			DUN		

The explosion of popularity of cigars around the world re-opened the doors of several old factories in 1997, including the Por Larrañaga site, the old Quintero y Hno. factory in Cienfuegos and production sites in the eastern half of Cuba in Bayamo and Holguin.