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BRAND REPORT CARDS

A-F

Here is a summary of our *CigarCyclopedia.com* cigar reviews, including our letter grades in the familiar school-style A-F format.

How do you rank one cigar above another? Character and integrity.

Most blends fall into the category of peppery or caramelized. The determination of how “full” each cigar was is based on the presence of taste in the mouth. Some are “mouth-fillers” and some are much less present. We tried several brands which were advertised as “full-bodied” but were, in fact, medium-bodied to our senses.

Once classified as a medium-to-full or full-bodied cigar, we looked for a good draw and an even burn and presentation – band, packaging and so on – had some impact. Beyond, the real test came down to taste:

- ▶ Did the blend offer a distinct character? Did it make a clear statement: “I am peppery” or “I start harsh, but get mellow” or was it confused, inconsistent or just unfriendly? Did it offer us a reason to be attracted, or to admire it? Or just shoveled its taste toward us on a “like it or lump it” basis. Those which provided a taste which showed brightness, refinement, control and subtlety impressed us; those which were just bitter, timid or unpleasant, did not.
- ▶ A further refinement of the character question was the integrity of the blend. Did it try to fool the smoker by starting off one way and then changing in mid-course? Did the blend remain consistent in burn and taste throughout the smoking experience? Those which created a headline at the start and then backed it up with a consistent taste throughout scored best.

These attributes were combined with the brand’s availability and price and then graded against the background of all of the other brands we have tried over the years.

601 CONNECTICUT

[Nicaragua: reviewed May 4, 2007]

This is the black label brand, featuring an Ecuadorian-grown, Connecticut-seed wrapper and Nicaraguan-grown binder and filler leaves. It’s very well made and easy to smoke.

It lights easily and immediately draws attention to itself with a toasty and spicy aroma and a medium-to-full body. There’s a core of caramelized flavor, but it’s critical to take your time with this blend and not rush it, lest it turn bitter.

But if you give it time, you'll be rewarded with a rich, smooth flavor that has just a tinge of spice on the short finish. It's consistent and smokes evenly to the end; it's also affordable at \$6.50 to \$7.90 each before local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

601 HABANO

[Nicaragua: reviewed May 4, 2007]

Here is a darkly-dressed cigar that might appear overpowering, but offers rich, sweet flavors instead.

This red-label blend is medium-to-full in body with a Nicaraguan-grown, oscuro-shade wrapper. There's a spicy aroma to start and a rich flavor with an undertone of dark caramel with a note of sweetness on the finish. It's well priced at \$6.50 to \$8.95 each.

The caramelized flavor and a hint of spice on the finish are marvelous, but hide the overall power of this blend. The taste remains rich and satisfying to the end, but this blend can also be heady and is not recommended on an empty stomach! Then again, there are those who look forward to a challenge of a cigar which may be stronger than they are!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

601 MADURO

[Nicaragua: reviewed May 4, 2007]

Here's the star of the class. The maduro line is marked by a blue label and is reported to be the first box-pressed cigar coming from the Tabacalera Cubana. It probably won't be the last.

The blend offers a medium-to-full body with perfect draw and construction. There's a toasty and peppery scent to this cigar, with a rich taste of dark caramel and a sweet finish thanks to the Nicaraguan-grown maduro wrapper.

It's quite satisfying, but never heavy. Elements of spice and pepper are a little more evident in the second half, but it's well worth the suggested retail prices of \$9.15 to \$10.45 each before local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

A. TURRENT

[Mexico: reviewed September 7, 2007]

This blend debuted in 2005 to salute the 125th anniversary of the Turrent family's involvement with tobacco, which started with a move from Spain to Mexico in 1880.

Unlike many Mexican cigars that are made only from Mexican-grown tobaccos, the A. Turrent blend includes a Nicaraguan wrapper along with a San Andres Criollo wrapper and Mexican-grown filler leaves. The result is a medium-bodied smoke with a slightly spicy, slightly peppery aroma.

The flavor features a creamy core, with a subtle, spicy finish. Very well made, it has a perfect draw and an even burn. There's just a note of pepper at the very end, but it's well balanced and

signals the end of an enjoyable cigar. At suggested retail prices of \$3.50 to \$5.00 each, your wallet will also enjoy it!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

A R CRIOLLO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed May 18, 2007]

This blend from Augusto Reyes is distinguished by its red band. It has a toasty aroma and a medium-to-full body.

It begins with a creamy, toasty flavor with a short finish with just a touch of spice. The blend has plenty of hidden power, however, and the spicy finishing element grows in importance as you move through the cigar.

If you enjoy a spicy tone, this cigar will agree with you. But while its Criollo filler is the key to its taste, the blend can also leave a mark on your head. Smoke carefully!

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

A R EPICUR

[Dominican Republic: reviewed May 18, 2007]

This medium-bodied blend sports a bright blue and is a true joy. There's an easy, light and slightly spicy aroma and the cigar offers a medium-bodied experience.

There's a clean, clear caramelized flavor, with an endearing delicacy and balance, with just the slightest hint of spice on the finish. This is a subtle cigar with a relaxed taste that demands contemplation and attention.

The Epicur line is made even more interesting by being made up of torpedoes and perfectos. The Perfecto Grande, at 6 1/4 inches and 54 ring gauge is a special delight.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

A R NATIVO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed May 18, 2007]

The Nativo is identified by its black band and showcases a medium-to-full body with a toasty and spicy aroma and an even burn.

The taste is slight creamy and sweet with a tingle of spice on the finish. It's nicely balanced and the delicate flavor is clean and refreshing.

In the second half, the blend introduces an undertow of pepper on the finish, but it's not aggressive and the balance and smoothness of the experience are maintained. If there was any doubt that a cigar made of all Dominican-grown tobaccos could be complex and layered in its flavor profile, this cigar ends the debate.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

A/R EPICURE

[Ecuador: reviewed June 1, 2007]

Most of the Puros Armando Ramos line is made up of Ecuadorian puros: wrapper, binder and filler all grown in Ecuador and this blend is a good example.

It offers a slightly spicy aroma with a medium-to-full body. There's a creamy, somewhat sweet core to the taste that's very pleasant and very smooth. But there's no mistaking the spicy elements on the medium finish to the draw.

The flavor profile remains consistent throughout the cigar, although we saw some problems in draw in one of the samples. The A/R Epicure is a top seller in Spain, especially in tubes and it was easy to see why. At \$3.00 to \$3.60 for most of the shapes before local tobacco taxes, it's also a bargain.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

ACID

[Nicaragua: reviewed May 25, 2007]

This is Jonathan Drew's breakout line, introduced in 1999. Today, there are five different series within this line: Acid, Holistics, Remi, Juggernaut and a group of specialty items. We selected the Remi series for a trial as it has the largest number of shapes, six.

It's full-bodied with a slightly peppery aroma and a sweet taste to start, followed by a long finish with just a slight tingle of spice.

The scented aspect of this blend is apparent, but not overwhelming as with some other brands of this style. The Remi, like all of the Acid group, is well made and draws very easily. It's consistent with its sweetness and spice tones and easy to enjoy. Towards the end, the spiced finish tends toward a more peppery tone, but it's never aggressive or off-putting. But the blend will leave its mark on you; it's best to sip this cigar lest it take control!

The Acid Remi speaks for the entire line: this is not a brand to be afraid of or to keep from trying. It has plenty of devotees and there is every reason to think it will continue to add to that total in the future.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

ADAN Y EVA SELECCION ESPECIAL XO EDICION LIMITADA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed July 14, 2006]

In addition to having one of the longest names among cigars sold today, this is the highest-quality branch of the Adan y Eva line. Offered in beautifully-decorated twist-lock aluminum tubes, the Seleccion Especial XO series is easy to enjoy and is very well made.

The wrapper is dark and oily and the cigar has a spicy aroma. The flavor is medium in body and well balanced between a lightly-peppered taste and a tang of sweetness that continues through the finish.

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It's a relaxing smoke and never gets aggressive or tiring. Its consistency in taste and burn throughout underlines its status as a very high-quality cigar, whether enjoyed in the Garden of Eden, or at home!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

AMERICAN BORN CUBANS

[United States: reviewed August 3, 2007]

This line – ABC for short – was introduced in 2005 as a salute to the 10th anniversary of La Tradicion Cubana and to honor the contribution of the new generation of Americans born to Cubans who left their homeland after the Communist takeover of 1959.

The cigar itself has a toasty aroma and a rich, light, caramelized taste with short, sweet finish. The blend is consistent throughout, but each of the samples we tried exhibited an uneven burn and therefore suffered a lower grade.

Overall Grade: B+: Very Good.

AMERICAN STOGIES

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 14, 2006]

The American Stogies series offers three choices: the standard line with eight sizes, the Corajo lines with seven and the Small Cigar series with two. We sampled the Corajo group and were pleasantly surprised.

For a cigar designed to sell for \$2.20-3.00 each before local tobacco taxes, the samples we tried burned well, had a spicy taste and a note of sweetness that helped to create a balance of flavor.

Medium-to-full in body, we noticed a large volume of smoke from this brand during our tests. The side-by-side tastes of spice and sweetness were entertaining and even a peppery tone that came in during the second half of the cigar was gentle and agreeable. An excellent cigar given its price and perfect, in its longer sizes, for the golf course.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

AQUARIUS

[Brazil: reviewed October 6, 2006]

Imported by Brazil Cigars & Tobacco of Miami, Florida, Aquarius debuted in the U.S. in 2005.

It's medium in body and has a light, toasty aroma. The blend is marked by a defined taste of caramel that's quite rich with a medium-length finish. A spicy note edges in on the finish as the cigar reaches halfway and eventually reaches a balance with the sweeter elements in the second half.

Aquarius is nicely balanced and leads the smoker through an evolution of flavor as it reaches the end. Well constructed, it would be an excellent companion during any late afternoon, especially accompanied by any full-bodied beverage.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

ARGANESE – Ambassador blend

[Dominican Republic: reviewed February 15, 2008]

The Arganese lines are anything but straightforward. There are three different base blends: Ambassador, the mildest; Chairman, in the middle and Presidente, full-bodied. Then each blend is available in a choice of wrappers!

The Ambassador is offered with either a Connecticut or Nicaraguan-grown wrapper. The Chairman is available in Connecticut, Cameroon or a Brazilian maduro. The Presidente is offered in Connecticut, Nicaraguan or maduro. And there are six sizes in each for a total of 48 combinations, plus a barber-pole-wrapped “Churchill” in the Chairman style. Happily, the cigars are double-banded so you’ll know what you’re smoking!

For our tasting, we started with the lightest, the Connecticut-wrapped Ambassador. It’s a robust and well-made cigar that we found to be medium-to-full in body rather than mild and very well made.

The Ambassador blend has a toasty, light, spicy aroma. There’s a rich taste to it with buttery notes and a hint of pepper on the medium finish. The balance of flavor between the sweetness and the peppery notes is quite impressive. There’s a bit more pepper in the second half, but always in control and easy to enjoy.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good

ARGANESE – Chairman blend

[Dominican Republic: reviewed February 15, 2008]

The Chairman blend is noteworthy as being the only style which is offered with a Cameroon wrapper. It burns very well with an even, easy draw with a slightly spicy aroma.

The taste is wonderfully deep and rich, with a semi-sweet flavor and a medium finish that keeps you interested. There’s only the barest undertone of spice and the taste can even remind you of roasted almonds.

The flavor and balance remain consistent throughout and combined with a full-bodied presence in the mouth make the Chairman a cigar to enjoy when you really have time to concentrate on its subtleties and quality. The suggested retail prices of \$5.56 to \$7.00 make this blend accessible to just about everyone.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional

ARGANESE – Presidente blend

[Dominican Republic: reviewed February 15, 2008]

The Presidente line starts out medium-to-full in body and has a spicy and peppery scent which draws your attention immediately.

With a Brazilian maduro wrapper, it offers a welcome taste of dark caramel that quite rich, with a pleasant medium finish that retains the sweetness of this leaf. It’s smooth and mellow, even understated with an even burn and an excellent draw.

There's a note of pepper which enters the finish in the second half that's an interesting contrast to the maduro wrapper. Retail pricing for all sizes is also between \$5.56 each and \$7.00.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

ARTURO FUENTE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 2004]

All the yelling is about Opus X, but the original Gran Reserva series is Fuente's best. This lineup of 19 shapes is beautifully made, draws perfectly and offers a balanced, accessible – even mellow – taste of light caramel with a clean finish.

More medium-to-full than full-bodied, its character and class are evident in every puff, as is the care in the blend as the intensity of flavor continues without interruption all the way to the end, a hallmark of ultimate quality. There is a reason why this blend is the bedrock of the Fuente's great reputation as master cigar makers.

Of the many sizes in the line, the Flor Fina 8-5-8 might be the best as it is consistently great, but with an impossibly reasonable street price of less than \$100 per box of 25 in many states with moderate tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

ARTURO FUENTE DON CARLOS

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 2004]

This outstanding line offers pleasure from the first puff, with a slow, even burn and a toasty aroma. The flavor is sumptuous, emphasizing a mellow, caramelized flavor that makes you want more. The sweet finish accentuates its obvious class and elegance and makes this brand an icon for quality and satisfaction despite its limited availability and high price.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

ARTURO FUENTE HEMINGWAY SERIES

[Dominican Republic: reviewed July 2004]

Mellow, soft, fruity flavor earns your admiration immediately. Light, toasty aroma in a medium-bodied cigar. Smoke this one slowly to appreciate the balance and refinement of this blend.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

ASHTON AGED MADURO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 2004]

Not always available and expensive when it is, the smoking experience engendered by this blend can only be called rhapsodic. It is elegantly balanced and offers a perfect draw, even burn and a completely unique taste of cocoa and caramel that is impossible to put down.

The Connecticut Broadleaf maduro wrapper is as sweet and delicious as it looks and the finish is buttery smooth, without a trace of spice or bitterness. It delivers its gifts continuously to the end, making you think only of the next time you can be left alone long enough to enjoy another.

This cigar ages well, but with such an inviting taste, who can put off the pleasure long enough to let them sit? A triumph for Robert Levin and his Ashton Distributors group, as well as for the Tabacalera A. Fuente which produces this brand.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

ASHTON VIRGIN SUN GROWN

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 2004]

Introduced with great fanfare in 1999, these are outstanding cigars which offer a primary focus on pepper with a soothing undertone of a caramelized sweetness. Even the aroma is balanced, with a spicy and slightly peppery scent that accentuates its lively nature. There is no let-up in taste until the last third, when the flavor becomes even a bit more powerful, but always well-controlled and never overpowering.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

AVO 787

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 12, 2007]

In response to requests for a medium-bodied blend, Uvezian and Kelner created the Avo 787 that was released this past summer (2007) at the Retail Tobacco Dealers of American convention and trade show.

It features an Ecuadorian-grown wrapper and Dominican-grown binder and filler leaves and offers a completely unique taste, not just in comparison to its siblings in the Avo brand, but to almost any cigar we have tasted.

There's a spicy aroma and a medium-bodied presence to the 787, but the flavor is stimulating and different. The core taste in this blend is a powerful, fruit-ish and tart-like flavor that could remind one of plums, but in a way which is much more savory than sweet. It's a deep flavor that's accented by a lightly-spiced, fairly long finish.

This remarkable taste experience continues with consistency throughout the cigar and it's never sour or grassy. It's much more powerful than any of the other regular-production Avo lines and offers a taste which will not appeal to everyone, but which will develop a fanatical following that craves this completely original approach to taste and balance in a cigar.

The price is a bit higher than the others in the Avo brand, at \$11.00 to \$13.00 each, not including tobacco taxes. This is a cigar you must try because of its unique approach; it will broaden your idea of what tastes are possible in tobacco.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

AVO CLASSIC

[Dominican Republic: reviewed July 2004]

Truly a classic: medium in body with a glorious combination of flavor and spice. At its best, almost a candy stick featuring sweetness and spice, especially in the larger sizes.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

AVO CLASSIC II

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 12, 2007]

This is the original blend introduced by Uvezian and Kelner in 1986 that created the brand's impressive reputation for taste and quality. It will impress you again today.

Promoted as a mild cigar with rich taste, we found the blend to actually be medium-to-full in body, meaning it filled the mouth with flavor. It has a toasty, slightly spicy aroma featuring a Connecticut Shade wrapper and a marvelously caramelized taste with a medium-to-long finish.

One of the things that becomes obvious in smoking a number of these cigars is the quality of construction and dependability of the draw. It's almost perfect, with a consistently even burn and a solid ash that makes smoking these cigars a pleasure.

The blend stays consistent right to the end, smooth and delicious. The original is still the best and at retail prices of \$7.00 to \$9.40 each, is at least occasionally accessible to all smokers.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

AVO LIMITED EDITION 2008: TESORO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 22, 2008]

"Tesoro" means "treasure" and the limited-edition Avo for 2008 is called by that name. It's a 5 3/4-inch by 50-ring toro, uniquely packed upright, but upside down in a box of 20 with bands on the foot!

The cigars themselves are of medium body, with an Ecuadorian sun-grown wrapper and a toasty and spicy aroma.

This is a spicy cigar, have no doubt about it. While there is a note of sweetness in the first third, the blend of San Vicente and Piloto Cubano tobaccos (with a little Olor to ensure an even burn) creates a tingly taste on the tongue on the finish.

The spiced flavor continues throughout and increases in intensity in the second half, with a peppery note detected towards the end of the cigar. But it's never harsh and the balance of this blend is apparent as it maintains a certain decorum at all times. After all, it's an Avo.

The Tesoro is offered at \$12.00 per cigar and if you like it spicy, it's a treat.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

AVO MADURO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 12, 2007]

Once the Avo line became a success, naturally there was a call for maduro-wrapped shapes.

The call was answered in 2000 and today there is a six-shape Avo Maduro group. This is a medium-bodied cigar, a little thinner in the mouth than the Classic version. There's a toasty, slightly sweet aroma to this cigar and a rich, deep, sweet flavor. There's just a note of spice on the medium finish.

While there's plenty of flavor, the line doesn't show much finesse, but more of a constant power throughout. There's a just a touch of pepper that comes in during the second half that underscores the brawn of this line, but it will be a favorite of smokers who appreciate rich flavors and like the sweetness of maduro.

The pricing is very similar to the Classic line at \$7.40 to \$9.40 each; all sizes are sold in boxes of 25.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

AVO SIGNATURE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 12, 2007]

The Avo Signature line is a direct descendant of the first of the Avo Limited Editions, introduced in 2001 as the "Avo 75" anniversary cigar. That blend – offered in only one size (7 x 50) in boxes of 10 – was so widely popular that it had to be part of the regular-production line.

%%pagebreak%% By the end of 2001, the Avo Signature line was a reality, sporting a reddish band and offered in five sizes, but like the Avo 75, only in boxes of 10.

The samples we tried exhibited a slight spicy aroma and a medium body. The taste has a clean sweetness to it with just the barest pinch of spice that comes in on the medium finish. It's a balanced smoke with a consistent taste throughout that's easy to enjoy and like all Avos, burns perfectly.

The Signature's medium body makes it accessible to all smokers, but it's priced a little higher than the other lines, at \$8.10 for the Small Corona (4 1/2 x 43) to \$13.80 for the Double Corona (7 x 50) without including local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

AVO XO

[Dominican Republic: available in 5 sizes]

The XO pays tribute to Uvezian's musical background with shape names taken from musical notations such as "Intermezzo," "Notturmo" and "Preludio." And this blend plays very, very well.

Introduced as the second Avo series, in the early 1990s, we found it medium-to-full in body, with a toasty aroma and a note of spice. The flavor is rich and caramelized, with a modest, neutral finish that's devoid of spice.

That makes the XO a gentle, relaxed cigar through the first half and while a precisely-measured dash of spice enters on the finish in the second half, it serves to add depth and subtlety to the blend so that it does not become boring or monotonous.

Best of all, the XO line is well priced, ranging from \$5.50 for the small Allegro (4 1/2 x 34) to \$10.90 for the tubed Maestoso, the largest cigar in the line at seven inches and 48 ring, not including local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

BACCARAT "THE GAME" HAVANA SELECTION

[Honduras: reviewed June 2004]

A quality, mild cigar from Honduras? Is this a game? Yes, and you win with a gentle, mild-bodied blend of flavors and a sweetened finish at a value price.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BACCARAT "THE GAME" HAVANA SELECTION II

[Honduras: reviewed February 8, 2008]

Not familiar with this brand? You should be; it has been one of the nation's best-selling premium cigars for many years and is made by the Eiroa family in Honduras, where they also make the hot-selling and full-bodied Camacho Corojo line!

It's hard to believe that the same folks who grow the tobacco and blend Camacho can produce a mild-bodied cigar, but the Baccarat blend is not to be underestimated. It's certainly mild, with an easy light and a light and slightly spicy aroma.

Made from all Honduran-grown tobaccos, the key to Baccarat's success is the sweetness of its taste. It's got a little sweetness added to the cap, so you'll start with a happy taste every time you light one up.

Very well made, the Baccarats we tried burned evenly and slowly, showing off near-perfect construction and draw. The sweetness isn't overpowering and there's a bit more depth to the flavor in the second half.

Easy to smoke and easy to like, Baccarats come in a blizzard of shapes to fit anyone's interest. It's also easy on the pocketbook, with retail prices ranging from just \$1.95 each for the small Bonitas (4 1/2 inches by 32 ring) up to a modest \$4.55 for the 8 1/2-inch by 52-ring King. The popular Rothschild (5 x 50) is priced at just \$3.45 each.

Two sizes are offered in a candela (green) wrapper and five are offered in maduro, but all are fun to smoke and the Baccarat is an excellent "beginner's" cigar thanks to its straightforward approach to flavor and price.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional

BAHIA DESEO

[Nicaragua: reviewed October 6, 2006]

This is one of the newer blends in the Bahia line and one of the most interesting. The original blend debuted in 2003, but Deseo was re-blended in 2005 and now offers a medium-to-full-bodied cigar with a toasty, spicy aroma.

Deseo has a richer taste than the Gold or Trinidad series, themed with caramel but still airy and light. There's just a suggestion of spice on the fairly short finish and like all Bahia blends, it smokes very slowly.

There's more spice in the second half and there's a balance toward the end of the cigar between the sweet and spicy elements.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BAHIA GOLD

[Nicaragua: reviewed October 6, 2006]

The Bahia Gold line is a veteran of the Tony Borhani stable, introduced way back in 1997!

It's very well made and square-pressed with a beautiful large band. It has a medium-to-full body, with a very light caramel note that is totally unique to Bahia. The flavor almost floats in the mouth, finishing with a creamy, slightly sweet taste.

The Gold line smokes very slowly and drawing harder to bring out more flavor only sharpens the taste. This is a cigar to give time to and enjoy its subtleties, even in the shorter formats such as the Robusto. It's consistent and easy to appreciate if you're a patient smoker.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

BAHIA INSIGNIA

[Nicaragua: reviewed October 6, 2006]

Insignia was introduced at the 2006 Retail Tobacco Dealers of America show in Las Vegas and celebrates the 10th anniversary of the Bahia line. It's the best of the blends we tried!

It's medium-to-full in body, with solid construction and a spicy aroma. The taste is the deepest we found among the Bahia blends, with a light caramelized theme and a pinch of spice on the tail of the rich, medium finish.

There's a little more spice on the finish during the second half, but the brightness of the very nice flavor in this cigar sets it apart from its siblings.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BAHIA TRINIDAD

[Nicaragua: reviewed October 6, 2006]

Trinidad debuted in 1997, but was re-blended for 2002. It's also square-pressed and offers a slightly spicy aroma.

This is not a cigar for the novice, as the Trinidad can be heavy with a medium-to-full body. Always under control, the blend has power, but the flavor is marked by a lightly-spiced, caramelized taste with a short finish.

If you take the time to appreciate its complexities, this can be a charming cigar, but many smokers will simply try to extract more flavor from it too quickly. That will turn it grassy, but more patience will be rewarded with a delicate taste set on a powerful base. A pinch of spice is evident toward the end, signaling that the voyage is coming to a close.

Overall grade: B: Good.

BALMORAL ROYAL SELECTION

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 5, 2005]

In the 1994 film classic "Forrest Gump," Marlena Small as Gump's mother utters the famous

line, “Life’s a box of chocolates, Forrest. You never know what you’re gonna get.” To say we were surprised by the Dominican-made Balmoral Royal Selection cigars we tried is an understatement. Stunned is more like it.

While the natural-wrapped version is good, the Balmoral Royal Selection maduro line is just marvelous. Rich and sweet, it offers a long finish of bright, light caramel flavors with perfect balance and an easy draw. It’s a happy cigar, consistent and even, relaxed and smooth and a joy to smoke.

It’s medium in body with a toasty, never harsh aroma. There’s no reason to pull on it; it gives its gifts readily and is fully satisfying, even more so with a few months of aging. In packs of five or boxes of 25, the suggested retail prices of \$3.00 to \$6.70 each (before local tobacco taxes) make this blend an excellent value . . . almost as good as the cigar itself.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

BEETHOVEN

[Ecuador: reviewed June 1, 2007]

Fans of the great German composer will obviously be intrigued by this cigar, with has a medium-bodied heft and a toasty aroma with a tinge of spice.

There’s a certain calm to this cigar and the flavors are discreet with a caramelized tone. Solidly made, there’s just a tinge of spice on the finish. It’s pleasant, easy to smoke and easy to enjoy, but does not exert its character on the smoker. But it’s a solid value with retail prices of just \$4.40 to \$5.40 for the single-wrapped edition with a rosado-shade leaf.

The Beethoven line also has a fancy side, with both rosado and maduro wrappers in a barber-pole configuration, which cost somewhat more and a wonderful box presentation in the shape of a piano! Although this line has musically-inspired shape names like Concerto, Sonata, Symfonia and so on, wouldn’t it be better to celebrate the composer with shapes named after his greatest compositions: Fifth (for the famous Fifth Symphony), Sixth (Pastoral), Ninth and for the double corona, “Ode to Joy”?

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

BLACK PEARL – Cobre Series

[Nicaragua: reviewed September 8, 2006]

“There is La Perla Habana and there is Black Pearl,” notes Doug Wood of the Burlwood Group, creator of both blends. “They are different.”

So here we have the Black Pearl Cobre (“Copper”) Series, with a band that says “Black Pearl” and a copper-color back. The blend debuted in 2003 and impresses you with a toasty aroma that has a peppery note at the start.

The flavor is lightly caramelized and very mellow and relaxed, with a medium finish. It’s tempting to “oversmoke” the cigar and try to accelerate the taste, but it’s better to refrain.

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This is a medium-to-full cigar in body and there's an undertone of spice in the taste in the first half that becomes primary in the second half as the sweet elements fade. This is a nice cigar and very well priced at \$3.95 to \$4.60 each before local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

BLACK PEARL – Rojo Series

[Nicaragua: reviewed September 8, 2006]

The most celebrated Black Pearl line is the Rojo "(Red)" which is identified by the red back of its band. It's full-bodied with a Habano Criollo wrapper and offers an intriguing flavor that has an understated riff of caramel that becomes more apparent as the cigar moves along.

There's a toasty aroma with a spicy kick and the balance of the caramelized and spicy elements in the second half is well done. It's an excellent candidate for a year or two of aging, especially in the cabinet-style boxes in which the line is offered.

This is a relaxed blend that doesn't tire you as you smoke it. It deserves its pedigree, especially at very reasonable prices of \$3.95 to \$4.75 before tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BOLIVAR

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 21 October 2005]

General brought together the combined knowledge of its blendmasters Daniel Nunez, Benji Menendez, Ernesto Perez-Carrillo and Estelo Padron to create a memorable cigar in its new Bolivar and they succeeded.

The oily and dark San Agustin wrapper from Honduras is your first indication of the quality of this cigar and it's brilliantly constructed, solid to the touch and easy to light.

The complex blend offers an immediate reward, filling the mouth with caramelized flavors while tickling the tongue with a spicy element. The balance is perfect as the sweetness is emphasized in the first half and the notes of spice accent this flavor, but refrain from creating any sharpness so often seen in other cigars.

The Bolivars we tried smoked easily, but the flavor kept us interested in every puff. The depth and richness of the caramelized highlights deepened in mid-course and then gave way to a spicier tone in the second half, retaining a welcome sweetness on the finish.

Here is a cigar with character and class that will satisfy those looking for a blend which clearly ranks with the top-tier brands on the market.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

BUCANERO CLASICO

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

The Clasico goes all the way back to 1996 and is the flagship for the many maduro-wrapped blends in this line. It starts with a spicy and slightly sweet aroma and showcases a medium-to-full-bodied taste.

The flavor is sweet but a little shy, with a sweet medium finish. There is a relaxed, subtle quality to this cigar, so don't be fooled with expectations of overpowering flavor despite the extra-dark Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper.

The taste recedes a bit towards the end and becomes a little less sweet, but remains well balanced.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

BUCANERO CREW

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

The Crew has a light Connecticut wrapper and a nice, mild-to-medium body. It features a light, slightly caramelized taste with a toasty, slightly spicy aroma and a medium finish.

Introduced in 2003, this is a pleasant, mild cigar that's easy on the palate and easy to smoke with an even burn. The flavor flattens out a bit in the second half, with just a hint of pepper near the end.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

BUCANERO EL CAPITAN

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 2004]

Real flavor from the start without a trace of bitterness or spice. Medium in body, it has a slightly spicy aroma and a smooth finish. Light on the palate, it's a good choice before meals.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUCANERO EL CAPITAN II

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

"The Captain" is a box-pressed beauty that debuted in 2001, featuring a Costa Rican-grown maduro wrapper. It offers a medium body and has a spicy aroma.

The treat is in the taste, which has a creamy core to it and a touch of sweetness on the finish. It's well balanced and consistent with an easy draw and a pleasure to smoke.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUCANERO FULL SAIL

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

The Full Sail has been around since 2002 and features a Costa Rican maduro wrapper with a medium-to-full body. It has a light, spicy aroma and a very nice, light caramelized taste from the start. There's just a suggestion of spice on the medium finish.

This blend is consistent and interesting with subtleties in the intensity of the flavor as you move through the cigar. In a word, a winner.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUCANERO SALSA

[Nicaragua: reviewed October 2004]

This is the best of the emerging Bucanero line. It lives up to its name with a consistent, bright flavor which emphasizes notes of dark fruit with a lighter, caramelized taste. It's a seductive blend which invites you to take the next puff, without any hint of spice to distract you from the richness at hand. These are darkly-dressed cigars whose oily wrappers foreshadow the depth of the flavor to be enjoyed.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUCANERO SALSA II

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

As you might expect from a cigar with this name, the Salsa offers a spicy aroma to accompany its medium-to-full body. Introduced in 2003, this is another maduro-wrapped shape, this time with a Nicaraguan-grown Criollo wrapper.

The flavor has a sweetness to it, aided by a medium finish, but it's not overpowering. It's actually rather demure, with a tinge of spice on the finish. It maintains a consistent quality right through to the end and offers surprising delicacy in flavor.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUCANERO WINDJAMMER

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

The Windjammer is the original Bucanero blend, first offered in 1995. It has a medium body with a slightly sweet, toasty aroma.

The flavor leans toward caramel with a nice sweetness and a medium finish. It's understated and smokes well thanks to excellent construction and has a nice, clean draw.

Don't oversmoke the Windjammer, looking for more intense flavors, lest it turn grassy. Relax with it and you will enjoy the lightly balanced taste and even burn.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

BUCANERO Z

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

The Z is full-bodied, with yet another style of maduro wrapper, this time from Indonesia. The body is square-pressed and there's a toasty, slightly spicy aroma at the start.

This blend has a unique taste that's quite heavy in the mouth, but not overpowering. There's a slight caramelized note and a short finish that exhibits some sweetness. Inexperienced smokers may have some trouble with this combination, as it's unusual, but quite satisfying. There's a modest, peppery accent at the end of the cigar, but it's only a signal that this singular smoking experience has come to a close.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUNDELO BY BUCANERO CAMEROON

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

The “Bundelo” selection debuted in 2006 and offers excellent value as well as quality in taste and construction.

The Cameroon-wrapped edition is box-pressed and has a medium body to go along with a toasty aroma. There’s a rich, caramelized taste and a short finish, but you will be sure to notice the solid feel and heft of this cigar.

It’s easy to smoke and consistent right to the end. At suggested retail prices of about \$2.90 before local tobacco taxes – in any of the three sizes – it’s not only a terrific cigar, but a real value as well!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUNDELO BY BUCANERO HAVANA ROSE

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 6, 2007]

This blend isn’t heavy, but fills the mouth more completely, with a medium-to-full body and a spicy aroma, offered in three larger sizes of 6 inches by 60 ring (Canon), 7 inches by 48 ring (Gigante) and 8 inches by 50 ring (Presidente).

All feature an elegant Nicaraguan-grown Rosado-shade wrapper that helps to provide a nice caramelized taste with a note of spice on the short finish. This is a gentle cigar, airy and easy to enjoy.

The flavor flattens a bit in the second half, but the Havana Rose is a good candidate for golf or enjoying a cigar after a light lunch outdoors. At suggested retail prices of around \$2.80 each, it’s also easy on the pocketbook.

Overall grade: B: Good.

BUTERA “LA PENNA”

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 3, 2007]

The exquisitely dark Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper is your first clue that this is a full-bodied cigar, beautifully made at the world’s largest cigar factory, Altadis U.S.A.’s Tabacalera de Garcia in La Romana in the Dominican Republic.

Re-introduced in its current blend in 2004, the La Penna line has a spicy aroma and solid construction with a perfect draw. The taste features a rich caramelized flavor with a spicy finish of medium length.

It’s quite satisfying, but smokes very slowly. The flavor calms in the second half, but remains consistent throughout. Very, very nice.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

BUTERA ROYAL VINTAGE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 3, 2007]

Mike Butera was better known in the pipe trade than for cigars when he introduced the Butera Royal Vintage in 1993.

He told anyone who would listen about the quality of the blend and the rich flavor of this cigar, and he knew exactly what he was talking about. The Royal Vintage has a spicy aroma and a creamy taste with a slight caramelized flavor. It's mellow and the happy taste continues through a medium-to-long finish.

The smoothness of the draw and of the flavor are impressive, as is the construction and even burn. A really, really wonderful cigar which, if you haven't tried it, deserves to be discovered.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

BUTERA VINTAGE SELECT

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 3, 2007]

This edition of the Butera line debuted in 2005 and has a green band. It has a toasty, slightly spicy aroma with a full body and a slight sweetness to the extra-dark Brazilian wrapper.

The flavor runs toward the creamy side, with a very light note of caramel and a medium finish. It's very relaxed and mellow in approach with an even burn and easy draw.

There's a pinch of extra spiciness and a gentle peppery note near the end, but it's never harsh or aggressive. This is a fine cigar for a more experienced smoker who can appreciate the subtleties of this blend.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

C.A.O. BRAZILIA

[Honduras: reviewed September 22, 2006]

Introduced to considerable fanfare in 2001, the Brazilia is marked by a bold band in the national colors of Brazil. It's well made and lights easily – even the 60-ring Amazon! – and offers a full body and spicy aroma.

The taste is entertaining, with a sweet, caramelized tone off the start and a medium finish. It's gentle and happy and not at all aggressive.

There's a balance between sweetness and spice in the second half that's easy to appreciate. This blend is never heavy and like so many Brazilians, is quite agreeable.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

C.A.O. CRIOLLO

[Nicaragua: reviewed September 22, 2006]

Here is a cigar that smokers seem to disagree on: either they love it or are indifferent. Its medium-to-full-body and flashes of power appeal to those looking for bolder tastes.

The Criollo, which debuted in 2002, is very well made and begins with a light, clean sweetness in the taste, accompanied by a spicy aroma. But there are bolts of lightning to come, from dashes of spice in mid-course all the way to jabs of pepper in the second half. It's a good cigar for those who appreciate a full range of flavors and are not put off by its brawn, or subtlety!

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

C.A.O. Cx2

[Nicaragua: reviewed September 22, 2006]

The Cx2 is a unique approach using two Cameroon leaves for the wrapper and binder, introduced in 2005.

Fans of the earthy quality of Cameroon tobacco will not be disappointed in the Cx2 as it showcases both a modest sweetness and a matted, spicy finish. The flavor has depth and develops an almost refreshing tone in the second half that leaves a clean, light spiciness on the tongue.

This is a subtle, medium-bodied blend that can be mistaken for a lightweight by an inexperienced smoker unwilling to draw out its mysteries. For true Cameroon fanatics, this will be a cigar they cannot do without.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

C.A.O. GOLD

[Nicaragua: reviewed September 22, 2006]

Here is the second C.A.O. blend, originally introduced in 1996 and still going strong today.

It smokes perfectly, with an even burn and a toasty, slightly sweet aroma. There's a demure sweetness to the taste, with a rich and smooth finish. Puff gently on the Gold Label, as it can become tart if overdrawn.

The flavor profile lessens in the second half, but remains mellow and easy with a medium body and an easy finish. The Gold Label was one of the keys to C.A.O. becoming a major player in the cigar industry in the 1990s and although not as high-profile today, is still one of its best.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

C.A.O. ITALIA

[Honduras: reviewed September 22, 2006]

Incorporating rarely-seen Italian leaf into the filler blend, the Italia hugs you right away with a thick, sweet taste and a long finish. It's steady and smokes slowly.

There's a spicy element that becomes evident about halfway and livens the taste right through to the end. Medium-to-full in body but never overpowering, the stout nature of Italia is what makes it interesting and enjoyable.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

C.A.O. Lx2

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 1, 2008]

This is the third of the "x2" series from C.A.O. and possibly the best. The 2003 Mx2 line

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

emphasized the use of two maduro leaves for the wrapper and binder. The Cx2 line debuted in 2005 and although it wasn't the first to use Cameroon leaves for both wrapper and binder, it was certainly the highest-profile brand to do so.

The Lx2 is named for its use of two types of ligero tobaccos – those leaves picked for power and flavor – in the filler, from the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. The leaves from a farm near Condega, Nicaragua called Pueblo Nuevo were the inspiration for the brand; the harvest from this farm is reserved exclusively for use in C.A.O. and Torano Cigars blends.

The double-banded Lx2 itself is full-bodied, but never overpowering and has a pleasant, lightly-spiced aroma. The flavor is light and sweet with a demure note of caramel, quite sophisticated and deft in its own way, with a hint of spice on the finish.

Well made, it burns evenly and smokes very slowly thanks to its dense construction. The taste is rich, but becomes a little flatter in the second half. Despite its name, this is not a fearsome cigar, but one which has excellent balance and plenty of taste.

It's offered in three primary shapes – Rob (5 inches by 48 ring), Toro (6 x 50) and Beli (6 1/2 x 52 torpedo) – but there is also a limited-edition Lancero (7 1/2 x 38) that might be the best of all. But all shapes are accessibly priced at \$6.20 to \$6.90 each, not including local sales or tobacco taxes.

One more nod to the quality of C.A.O.'s thought process and manufacturing follow-up: both bands came off quite easily, ensuring that the underlying, Nicaraguan-grown wrapper suffered no injury! Well done.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

C.A.O. Mx2:

[Honduras: reviewed September 22, 2006]

Another of the C.A.O. "double plays," the Mx2 features two maduro leaves used for wrapper and binder. The result is medium in body and there's a spicy aroma to it.

Naturally, there's plenty of sweetness here as would be expected with a maduro-wrapped blend. But it's not overpowering and the relaxed tone is quite satisfying. There's a note of spice that shows up in the second half, but it's a complement to the sweetness and not a distraction.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

C.A.O. SIXTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

[Nicaragua: reviewed September 22, 2006]

The C.A.O. 65th was created to celebrate Cano Ozgener's 65th birthday (the band is shown above) and his triumph over cancer. This is a square-pressed, full-bodied cigar that offers multiple elements: a bright caramelized taste off the start, accompanied by a spicy aroma.

There's also a nip of spice on the finish that provides a balanced, refined flavor. Connoisseurs will find subtleties in this blend, including spicy and peppery notes in the second half that make the finish quite entertaining.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

C.A.O. "THE SOPRANOS" EDITION

[Nicaragua: reviewed September 22, 2006]

Welcome to The Family! Created under license from HBO, home of "The Sopranos," this cigar was introduced in 2005. There's a toasty, spicy aroma and a medium-to-full body, making the blend already more measured than the characters in the series!

The flavor features a gentle, sweet, caramelized taste with a big, heavy finish. It doesn't smother you, though and has a relaxed, friendly tone that continues in a surprising manner. There's a bit of spice on the finish in the second half, but it's easy to see why bosses and soldiers alike would enjoy this brand.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

C.A.O. VISION

[Dominican Republic: reviewed September 22, 2006]

The first Dominican-made cigar from C.A.O., the Vision was introduced at the 2006 Retail Tobacco Dealers of America trade show in Las Vegas.

It's a winner. Medium-to-full in body, it offers a light, caramelized taste that deepens in richness during the first half. Not syrupy sweet, this blend is clean and smooth with only the barest hint of spice on the finish.

There's a toasty aroma with this cigar and a bit more spice in the second half, supporting the rumbling sweetness which is the signature of this blend. If this is C.A.O.'s Vision of the future, it's a bright one indeed.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

C.E. BECK Y CIA.

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 15, 2007]

This is a cigar to surprise you. It has a pigtail head and a mild-to-medium-bodied taste with a spicy aroma. But it's hardly dull.

The blend showcases a light, caramelized blend with a medium-length, very smooth finish. The balance is almost perfect and the cigar sails along with an even burn. There's just a hint of spice on the finish in the second half, but that's only signals the end of a very nice, elegant smoke.

Not heavily publicized, this is a very nice cigar and a nice value at direct-order pricing of \$4.00-5.20 each.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CABAIGUAN

[United States: reviewed at June 8, 2007]

The Cabaiguan brand, saluting a Cuban tobacco town of the same name, greets you with a spicy aroma and a medium-to-full body.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

Pete Johnson of Havana Cellars introduced this brand in 2005, a year after Tatuaje. There's a creamy core to the taste, with a light, spicy finish. The spice becomes more prominent as you reach halfway.

Well made with an easy draw, the creamy aspect of the flavor recedes a bit and there's a tinge of both spice and pepper on the finish. This is an interesting cigar, offered mostly in boxes of 24 at suggested retail prices of \$8.75 to \$10.00. But its power in the second half points out that it is not for the novice.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

CABALLEROS

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 6, 2008]

Introduced in 1993, the Caballeros line features a Connecticut-grown wrapper and Dominican-grown binder and filler leaves and has remained steady since the earliest days of the Cigar Boom of the 1990s.

It's medium in body and has a spicy aroma at the start and offers the light, slightly caramelized taste that marked so many Dominican-made cigars of the 1990s. There's a spicy note on the finish and while the flavor calms in the second half, a pleasant balance is maintained throughout and the approach is consistent.

Caballeros is a nice cigar, well made and is reasonably priced from \$3.60 up to \$5.00; all six sizes are offered in boxes of 25.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good

CABALLEROS VINTAGE

[Honduras: reviewed June 6, 2008]

This second version of the Caballeros line debuted in 2004 and was originally called Caballeros Aniversario, but the name was changed later to Caballeros Vintage.

Like the standard Caballeros line, this blend has a Connecticut-grown wrapper, but both sizes in the brand are box-pressed. The blend is medium in body and there's a toasty aroma.

The flavor is rich and caramelized and there's a spicy finish, too. The intensity of this taste recedes in the second half and the spiced elements come to the fore. This is a well-made cigar with an even burn and easy draw.

The Vintage will be more in line with the tastes of today's smoker as the depth of flavor is stronger than that in the original Caballeros. Offered in boxes of 20, the Rothchild (5 x 50) has a suggested retail price of \$4.75 and the Toro (6 x 54) is priced at \$5.50 each.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

CAMACHO COROJO

[Honduras: reviewed October 2004]

Remember the chorus from Jim Croce's timeless hit, "Bad Bad Leroy Brown"?

And it's bad, bad Leroy Brown / Baddest man in the whole damn town / Badder than old King Kong / Meaner than a junkyard dog!

That's the story of Camacho Corojo. Christian Eiroa's concoction using all Corojo leaves achieved a near-impossible feat: redefining the full-bodied category after the end of the Cigar Boom. Despite the hundreds of brands which surfaced and sank in the Boom, this is the brand which became the standard against which all other heavy-bodied brands were compared against, almost immediately upon its introduction in 2000.

It's powerful and peppery and brawls with your senses almost continuously upon lighting. Very well made with an even burn, it maintains its presence, tang and reach continuously, letting up only slightly after halfway. Yet the taste is controlled and although spritely, is more bright than bitter and never bitter for the sake of oppressing the smoker.

This is not a cigar to take lightly and although some cigar hounds light one up after breakfast (no doubt to cover the taste of the motor oil they drank instead of morning coffee), it should not be tried on an empty stomach and may still be too heady for those for whom it is not the right cigar.

Best of all, the pricing of this brand is very fair at \$4-7 (street prices) for most sizes, in line with the value-based history of its distributor, Camacho Cigars of Miami. A remarkable cigar which changed the landscape of its category.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

CAMACHO COROJO II

[Honduras: reviewed October 27, 2006]

Here is the famed all-Corojo blend which stunned so many smokers with its power and sophistication in 2000. It did not disappoint us.

If you expect an all-powerful cigar that turns your mouth into a heap of dead nerves, think again. This is a densely-packed, expertly-made cigar that offers a marvelous balance of power and flavor that has to be enjoyed slowly to be fully appreciated.

The brown-banded Camacho Corojo showcases a toasty, somewhat spicy aroma and offers a pleasant, refined taste of caramel washed down with a deceptively powerful finish that you will feel keenly on the throat. It's a peppery wash to follow the sweetness on the tongue and the delicacy of this balance is wondrous.

Equally stunning is the consistency of this taste throughout the cigar. It's subtle and unique, self-assured and special. It finishes perfectly, still on balance. Unless you're desperate to be awash in pepper, don't oversmoke this cigar and make it burn hot. Sip it and enjoy, but have a drink nearby. Your throat – and your head – will thank you.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

CAMACHO COROJO – Candela wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed October 27, 2006]

The Honduran-grown candela version of the Camacho Corojo is produced only in the Monarca size (5 inches by 50 ring) and has a bright green band to along with the bright green wrapper.

The binder and filler are the same as in the Camacho Corojo blend (and are brown).

There's a spicy and peppery aroma to this edition and it's full-bodied like its siblings. But the flavor is milder, with only a touch of sweetness on the tongue and a lighter shade of pepper on the finish.

It's well balanced, but more easygoing than the standard Camacho Corojo blend and delivers more or less what you would expect from a candela-wrapped version. No surprises, but nothing to be ashamed of, either. Although something of a novelty, it's still quite a fine cigar.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CAMACHO COYOLAR PURO

[Honduras: reviewed September 22, 2005]

It's full-bodied, with all-Honduran-grown tobacco and designed to be strong enough to make you "say Uncle." The dark wrapper prepares you for an overpowering taste, but the blend is much more subtle.

It offers a pleasant peppery scent and while the flavor is, of course, pepper-based, it's never harsh. In fact, the taste is muted at the start and leaves no mark on your throat like other full-bodied cigars.

But this black-bander is deceptive, even tricky. While the taste is stately, there's a hidden power in the blend and it gets heady as you reach the mid-point, reminiscent of the famed Partagas (Havana) 8-9-8 Cabinet Selection Varnished.

There's a note of sweetness in the second half, but that's a decoy, as the blend works on your head, delivering a sophisticated, nuanced flavor with perfect consistency, construction, burn and power! But when you've finished, you know you have smoked a powerful cigar.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CAMACHO COYOLAR PURO II

[Honduras: reviewed October 27, 2006]

The Coyolar Puro line was released in 2005 and was originally named the "Say Uncle" cigar for its power. It was named in a consumer contest; the winning entry focused on the fact that the tobacco for this blend comes from the Coyolar farm, thus the "Coyolar Puro."

Easy to recognize with its black-and-white band, the Coyolar Puro has a toasty aroma and a well-controlled balance in the taste. There's a touch of sweetness to start, but backed up with an unmistakable dash of pepper on the finish. You'll feel it on the throat very quickly.

Like the Corojo, the consistency of flavor in this blend is impressive all the way to the end. So is the balance, as the flavor never becomes bitter or aggressive. Full-bodied, it's a bit more one-dimensional than the Corojo, but as charming and polite as a bully can get.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CAMACHO HAVANA

[Honduras: reviewed October 27, 2006]

This is the original Camacho blend from Honduras and it's still popular today. You'll recognize it by the two-tone yellow and red label.

The Camacho Havana is a medium-bodied blend and the lightest of the Camacho line. It features a spicy aroma, but the taste is light and easy. The flavor is caramelize, but light and sweet with a smooth, medium finish.

Like all of the Camachos, the blend is steady and consistent right to the end. There's just a touch of spice towards the end, but it's only a signal that a very pleasant smoke is coming to an end. Because of the success of the Camacho Corojo, the Havana line has a fairly low profile and that's a pity. It's a marvelous cigar in its own right and grossly underrated.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CAMACHO SELECT

[Honduras: reviewed October 27, 2006]

Julio Eiroa introduced this blend as a 2005 holiday "thank you" to the many Camacho retailers across the country. The response was so good that the Select (red band with gold lettering) was introduced into the regular production line.

Unlike many of the other Camacho blends, the Select does not use all-Honduran-grown tobaccos. Instead, a Cameroon wrapper is blended with Jamastran-grown leaves to offer a medium-to-full-bodied taste, with a toasty aroma.

Camacho Corojo fans will not be surprised by the light caramelized flavor, but will be impressed with the silky smoothness of the finish of the Select. There's only a hint of spice at the very end and the blend is mellow, classy and refined. It leaves no mark on the head, except the recognition that this is one of the smoothest, easiest-to-appreciate Honduran-made blends on the market today.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CAMACHO SPECIAL LIMITED RESERVE

[Honduras: reviewed May 5, 2005]

The natural-wrapped editions were smooth with a rich and toasty flavor and a medium-to-full body that tantalized the smoker with just a hint of spice on the finish. A complete contrast to its brother, the powerhouse Camacho Corojo, the SLR is smooth and delicious. It burns slowly with marvelous balance and has none of the aggressive nature of some of its siblings. A very good cigar and a nice value.

Overall grade: A-Excellent.

CAMACHO SPECIAL LIMITED RESERVE II – Natural wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed October 27, 2006]

Here is another full-bodied Camacho, this time the Special Limited Reserve – SLR – with a red band and white lettering. It offers a full-bodied experience with a spicy, powerful aroma.

Introduced in 2003, the SLR offers a smooth, mellow taste of caramel with a short, lightly-spiced finish that you'll find it easiest to appreciate in the longer sizes. Well made, it burns evenly and won't tire a patient smoker. The spicy elements are a little more forward towards the end of the cigar, but never aggressive or annoying.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CAMACHO SPECIAL LIMITED RESERVE II – Maduro wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed October 27, 2006]

There were maduro shapes in the SLR line at its inception, but a full line of maduro-wrapped shapes was only introduced in 2005. Also full-bodied, this line has a double band that clearly indicates it's an SLR maduro.

There's a spicy aroma at the start and the editions we tried used a Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper which is being phased out as a new, Honduran-grown maduro is being introduced. Nevertheless, we found the trademark sweetness that maduros are known for right from the start, with just a little bit of spice on the finish.

The flavor was not as clear or smooth as on the SLR and we'll be anxious to try the new maduros after they've had some time to age a bit. Even so, this was an enjoyable blend of high quality – just not as high as the others!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CARLOS TORAÑO CAMEROON 1916

[Nicaragua: reviewed 23 June 2006]

The second-most popular blend among all Toraño lines, the 1916 offers an easy draw and a medium-to-full taste that features a marvelous, caramelized flavor. Sip it slowly and draw easy; too much smoke will unnecessarily concentrate the taste, hiding its subtlety.

The quality of the Cameroon wrapper is apparent and there's a lightly toasted aroma which compliments the smooth, sweet profile of this cigar.

A hint of spice appears in mid-course, just enough to make you appreciate how smooth the blend remains through the end. Despite the intense taste, this cigar isn't heady and will not overpower you. It's a wonder, especially at retail prices of \$4.16 to \$5.62.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

CARLOS TORAÑO EXODUS 1959

[Honduras: reviewed 23 June 2006]

This is the most popular Toraño blend and remembers the Toraño family's forced exile from their Cuban homeland courtesy of Fidel Castro.

This is a dark cigar with a Honduran-grown Habano wrapper and square-pressed in the old Cuban style. It's medium-to-full in body and has a spicy aroma and an easy draw.

The most recent editions we tried featured notes of caramel and pepper in the taste and while sweetness prevails, the peppery element is clearly present. It may not be going too far to

compare the competing flavors to the dual emotions of the sorrow of exile from one's homeland and the joy of heading to freedom. These were more complex than the Exodus '59s we tested in 2004.

Very well made, the cigar burns easily but vacillates between a sweet taste and a peppery one. That's music to lovers of complex, heavier cigars, but may be off-putting to those looking for a simpler, more straightforward taste.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

CARLOS TORAÑO EXODUS 1959 SILVER SERIES

[Honduras: reviewed 23 June 2006]

The Silver Series is fuller than the Exodus, with a medium to full body. There's a spicy aroma and the taste features a peppery bent.

It's not the aggressive tone of, say, a Camacho Corojo, but rather a gentle tingle on the tongue, with a slight sweetness on the finish. The balance becomes equalized in mid-course, but the peppery element remains dominant.

This is another very well made cigar and despite its elegant band, its taste makes it seem almost rustic.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CARLOS TORAÑO NICARAGUAN SELECTION

[Nicaragua: reviewed 23 June 2006]

The Nicaraguan Selection is perhaps not as high in profile as some of the other lines, but it should be.

This is a delicious cigar which fills the mouth with a medium-to-full body and plenty of smoke. It's nicely balanced with an even burn, an easy draw and a sweet, caramelized taste. Sure, there's just a hint of a peppery finish on the back of the throat, but it's so slight that it actually underscores the quality of the blend.

It's not quite as bright in flavor in mid-course, but it continues sweet and flavorful to the end. After you've finished, the quality of the Nicaraguan Selection becomes even more apparent as it leaves almost no trace of headiness despite its depth of flavor.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CARLOS TORANO NOVENTA

[Nicaragua: reviewed May 23, 2008]

Here is the anniversary cigar that salutes Santiago Torano's move to Cuba in 1916 and the beginning of the Torano tobacco empire. Introduced with great pride, it's a puro – as it would have been in Cuba – made from all Nicaraguan-grown leaves.

We found the blend to be medium-to-full in body, but with a very pleasant toasty and spicy aroma. Perfectly constructed, it draws easily and offers a very light, caramelized flavor with just a slightly spicy, but very clean, medium finish.

This blend smokes quite slowly and has a mellow, contemplative character to it. It burns fairly evenly and is consistent in its approach, with a bit more spiciness toward the end. The Noventa successfully demonstrates the quality of the Torano brand, but in a quieter and gentler way than some of the full-bodied screamers on the market today.

All three shapes are quite large, with ring gauges of 50-54 and are presented in boxes of 25. Retail prices range from \$10-12 per cigar, not including local tobacco or sales taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

CARLOS TORANO RESERVA DECADENCIA

Nicaragua: reviewed May 23, 2008]

The story goes that Carlos Torano was enjoying his dinner one evening and finished it off with a wonderful glass of Decadencia Chocolate Port from the Wilson Creek Winery in Temecula, California. He was so impressed, he created the first flavored-infused cigar in the Torano line, the Reserva Decadencia which debuted in 2007.

Understanding the nature of flavored cigars and their impact on any cigar near them, the Reserva Decadencia line is strictly packaged in sealed glass tubes that eliminate any odor issues. But don't think that you won't immediately know that this is a flavored cigar! The aroma of the wine hits you as soon as the seal is broken.

There's a toasty aroma to this cigar which complements the strong scent of the Port from the Connecticut Shade wrapper. But lighting the cigar calms down the process and you are met with a very clean taste that's just lightly caramelized with a very light finish that has just a hint of the Port to it. Very subtle.

The quality of the blend comes through at mid-way and into the second half. This is a flavored cigar, but not one which yells; it whispers. There's more of a toasty taste in the second half and while the Port taste is there, it's there as an accent and is never out of balance with the tobacco.

A spicy element emerges at the end and while the cigar is medium in body, it can also leave a mark on your head if you smoke it too hard. This is a cigar to relax with, but the intensity of the Port's sweetness on the aroma and the subtlety of the blend will tempt you to try to force more flavor from it.

Both shapes – Churchill and Robusto – are offered in boxes of 20 and retail for \$10-12 each before tobacco and sales taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

CARLOS TORAÑO RESERVA SELECTA

[Honduras: reviewed 23 June 2006]

Here is a beautiful cigar, offered in glass tubes and double banded. Carlos Toraño has called this blend his favorite and there is plenty for the connoisseur to enjoy.

This is a more subtle cigar than some of the others. There are deep and rich flavors, but they speak softly here. An almost fruit-ish tone is evident, but also a slight tingle of spice that grows as you reach the midway point.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

There is a pleasing, sweet finish and the Reserva Selecta is always light on the palate. The flavor will be best appreciated with shorter draws and by an experienced smoker.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CARLOS TORAÑO SIGNATURE COLLECTION

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 23 June 2006]

Another double-banded cigar, this time featuring Carlos's signature on the second band.

It's beautifully made and a solid smoke, with all of the pleasure one anticipates from a deep brown maduro wrapper, grown in Brazil. The smack-your-lips sweetness of the blend is obvious from the first puff and is accentuated by a spicy aroma and a tingle of spice on the finish.

The Signature blend is a joy to smoke right to the end and offers subtleties in taste if you are willing to go slow. The short Perfecto shape (5 inches by 51 ring) is a particular delight, especially in an after-lunch selection if you have time to devote to it.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CARLOS TORANO TRIBUTE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 2004]

"Tribute" is the right word for Carlos Torano, who not only offers his own lines of outstanding cigars, but makes many other excellent brands for sale by others. But the new Tribute line is one of his best. It welcomes you with a toasty flavor on top and a smooth, woody tone underneath. A cigar that comforts you, it is friendly and best enjoyed slowly.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CASA BLANCA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 2004]

Underrated, but mild and well made at a great price in every shape imaginable. The mild-bodied flavor can be a little weak, especially in the smaller sizes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CASA BLANCA II

[Dominican Republic: reviewed February 8, 2008]

The box for this brand pictures the White House in Washington, D.C. and, of course, the brand's name means "White House." It was supposedly developed in the 1980s for use at the Presidential mansion, but that's long over now.

The cigars, however, are terrific and have been a favorite for smokers of mild-bodied cigars into their third decade. The size range is enormous and includes two cigars of 66 ring gauge – the 10-inch Jeroboam and five-inch Half Jeroboam – two of the largest available on the U.S. market.

These are indeed, mild-bodied cigars, made at the MATASA factory in the Dominican Republic. The standard version sports a U.S.-grown Connecticut wrapper and it's the mildest of the Casa Blanca styles.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

It has a slightly spicy aroma upon lighting, but develops a marvelous, caramelized taste that can be quite rich, but is never spicy or too rich. There's an easy draw and a medium finish that is nice and satisfying, not always the case with a mild-bodied blend.

The flavor recedes in intensity in the second half, but it remains tasty to the end with a nice balance between the taste and the spices in the aroma.

It's also a bargain, at retail prices from \$1.25 for the 4-inch by 36-ring Bonita, up to \$7.25 for the massive Jeroboam (10 x 66). A Robusto (5 x 50) retails for only \$3.00 each and the President size (7 1/2 x 50) is just \$3.50. The most interesting and fun shape may be the Obsequio (6 x 49), a perfecto-style cigar with a rounded head and a bulbous foot, which retails for \$3.50 each.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CASA MAGNA

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 29, 2008]

This cigar, introduced at the 2008 IPCPR show, is a collaboration between Manuel Quesada and Nestor Plasencia. It's made with all Nicaraguan tobacco and features a medium-to-full body and a toasty aroma.

The surprising aspect of this cigar is its taste, which has a unique, clean sweetness. There's a hint of caramelization, but the sweet and tangy flavor is paramount. The Casa Magna burns well and won't tire you and is easy to enjoy.

There's a touch of pepper at the very end, but this is a terrific cigar that will be even better and smoother with six months of age in a humidor. There are five sizes, uniquely offered in boxes of 27 with three layers of nine cigars each. They are also priced right, ranging from \$4.75 to just \$6.00 each, even for the 6-inch by 56-ring Gran Toro.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CASA TORAÑO

[Honduras: reviewed June 23, 2006]

One of the newest of the Toraño brands, this was the family's private house blend until 2004, when it was finally offered for retail sale. It was worth the wait.

This is a smooth, brightly-flavored cigar with an almost buttery taste and just a hint of spice on the finish. With an even burn and a slightly spiced aroma, the elegance and balance of the blend are instantly apparent . . . and appreciated.

It's perfectly constructed and has a light, even, sweet taste that's fully satisfying and as calm as the pastoral scene depicted on the band (above). There's a little more spice in the mid-course, all well-controlled and easy to enjoy.

The biggest surprise? This mild-to-medium-bodied beauty has preposterous suggested retail prices ranging from just \$4.50 to \$5.20. Load up now!

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

CASA TORANO – Natural wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed May 23, 2008]

Here is the Torano family’s “home blend,” enjoyed by the Torano family at home and in the factory, but thought to be too mild for commercial success. Instead, it’s become a hit since being introduced in 2004.

Characterized as a mild-to-medium-bodied cigar, we found it to be medium in body and very well made. There’s a spicy and toasty aroma and a rich caramelized flavor with just a tingle of spice on the finish.

While not overpowering in the mouth, this is quite a lively blend that maintains its richness into the second half. The spicy elements come forward, especially on the finish and a peppery note will tell you that you have finished this cigar.

The Casa Torano is also a fabulous value! All of the five shapes retail for \$5.84 or less, not including local tobacco or sales taxes.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional

CASA TORANO – Maduro wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed May 23, 2008]

If the natural-wrapped edition is so good, why not add a maduro version? Casa Toranos in maduro finally became available in 2007, with only with a Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper instead of the Ecuadorian-grown leaf on the natural-wrapped style, but an entirely different blend. That’s important to remember.

The maduro has a slightly spicy aroma at the start and a medium-bodied presence in the mouth. There is a note of sweetness as you would expect with a maduro, but the flavor is demure and calm, unusual in most maduro-wrapped blends.

An undertone of spice is present in this cigar into the second half and while it burns evenly with an easy draw, the flavor is not as intense as in the natural-wrapped Casa Torano. The Casa Torano maduro is quiet and subtle, but quite entertaining if you give it full attention.

This is an excellent cigar for warm summer evenings, but a lousy companion for golf. It’s also a terrific value, with retail pricing ranging from \$5.56 to \$6.34 each, not including tobacco and sales taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

CHATEAU REAL

[Nicaragua: reviewed May 25, 2007]

“Everything thinks I only made flavored or scented cigars, so I wanted to make just a straight, traditional cigar.” That’s the sentiment behind Jonathan Drew’s Chateau Real line, introduced last year at the midsummer Retail Tobacco Dealers of America convention and trade show.

Let’s say this: Drew knows what he’s talking about. The Chateau Real was a revelation . . . and a pleasant one at that.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

Those we tried showed a medium-to-full body with a toasty and spicy aroma. The core taste was rich and bright in caramelized tones, with a medium finish.

The smoothness of the taste and the even delivery, uninterrupted by even a pinch of spice, was relaxing and much to be admired. A hint of spice finally showed itself on the finish in the second half of the cigar but only added to its subtlety. At prices of \$4.50 to \$7.90 per cigar before local tobacco taxes, those who enjoy sweeter, smooth and easy-to-smoke cigars must place the Chateau Real on their must-try list.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

COHIBA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed September 1, 2006]

So what about General Cigar's Cohiba? A weak sister to its Cuban namesake? Hardly!

This line was introduced with great fanfare in 1997 and lives up to its pedigree in every way. Medium-to-full in body, you are greeted with a luscious, finger-lickin'-good waterfall of sweet, caramelized flavors, with a long finish.

Like the Cuban Linea Classica, it is easy to "oversmoke" this blend and be overpowered by the intensity of the flavor. Smoke it slowly to best appreciate the delicacy and smoothness of the line, accompanied by a perfect draw.

The flavor becomes quieter, even demure, in the second half, but there's never a deviation from the even burn and sweet tone of the cigar. Just wonderful, and at suggested retail prices of \$7.35 to \$20.00 each (before local tobacco taxes), well worth it.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

COHIBA BLACK

[Dominican Republic: reviewed September 1, 2006]

This is the new kid on the block, introduced at the 2006 Retail Tobacco Dealers of America show in Las Vegas, Nevada. There are four shapes, all clothed in a jet-black Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper that gives the lines its name.

Characterized as an "espresso" of a cigar, it's an apt description with a sweet taste that is clearly influenced by the maduro wrapper. There's a spicy aroma and a bright white ash that highlights the perfect construction of this new line.

Despite its full-bodied presence, it does not become heady and has a thin finish that sharpens your concentration on the flavors from each draw. This is a marvelous, sweet cigar that makes you look forward to the next puff.

The flavor is dampened in the second half and you can taste a tiny bite of spice on the finish that waves goodbye as you near the end. This is a fine addition to General's Cohiba line and these cigars should age beautifully; they will be better with a year's sleep and could be spectacular after a hibernation of 5-7 years. They are priced from \$10.50 to \$16.55 each before local tobacco taxes, but maduro smokers (especially those willing to be patient) will find them a bargain.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

COHIBA PURO DOMINICANO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed July 25, 2008]

General Cigar president Daniel Nunez had been promising a Dominican puro and he delivered with the Cohiba Puro Dominicano, the fourth blend in the Cohiba “Red Dot” line.

Made with leaves grown on General’s own farms, or farms from which the company takes the entire harvest, the Puro Dominicano is medium-to-full in body and has a toasty aroma.

Nunez said of this blend that it “showcases the extraordinary range of flavor and richness from the soil” of Dominican tobaccos. He’s right about that as the taste is caramelized, tangy and sweet, with a medium finish. Very well constructed, the draw was perfect and the burn was even throughout.

A pleasant, spicy element comes into play in the second half and the taste is clean and well balanced. It’s expensive at \$13.50 to \$20.50 each before local taxes and while excellent in all aspects, a bit more brightness and depth in the flavor would have been welcome. This is a cigar to keep an eye on into the future; Nunez clearly knows what he’s talking about when he says that “there are infinite possibilities for Dominican tobacco.”

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

COHIBA XV

[Dominican Republic: reviewed September 1, 2006]

The “Extra Virgoso” line was introduced in 2001 as a very-full-bodied version of the Cohiba line and it delivers as advertised. But this cigar is not a fighter, it’s a lover.

There is a calm to this blend, which is very full in the mouth and features a very forthright, caramelized taste. It’s not as bright in hue as General’s regular Cohiba line, but mellow and refined with a medium finish.

This is a cigar that asks for contemplation, focus and attention to appreciate the depth and fullness of its flavor. Its quality of manufacture and balance in blend are so obvious that they must be acknowledged, quietly. This is not a party cigar, but one to finish the evening with.

There is a little drop-off in the depth of flavor in the second half, but the impression has been made. At suggested retail prices of \$8.40 to \$12.60 each, the XV is the best value of the Cohiba trio, especially the marvelous 652 (6 x 52) at \$9.45 a copy.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

COSMO

[Honduras: reviewed October 24, 2008]

The Cosmo line is the most recent of the handmade lines introduced by Topper, debuting in 2004. It’s made by Camacho Cigars and offers a medium-to-full flavor featuring an extra-dark Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper combined with Honduran-grown binder and filler leaves.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

This blend has a tasty aroma and a light, creamy flavor that's demure rather than bold, with a short finish. It has more depth that might be expected at the start and is easy to smoke. The construction is excellent with a steady draw and an even burn.

There's a peppery note which enters in the second half that can be quite strong, but isn't overpowering. The shapes are fun, with three perfectos in the line, including the 6 1/2-inch by 48-ring Fancy Tales; the perfectos are all made using molds that are more than a half-century old.

Retail pricing of the Cosmo is also reasonable, at \$4.00-5.50 each and all sizes are offered in elegant wooden boxes of 25.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good

CREDO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 5, 2005]

Introduced in 1993, Credo became a well-known and much-respected brand which was later overpowered by the Cigar Boom of the late 1990s. Distinctive in its powder-blue box, it has not yet regained its place among the elite, but that does mean it is not deserving.

Made in the Dominican Republic under the supervision of France's Belaubre family, the taste is complex. There is sweetness and spice and a hint of caramelization on the finish. There's a lot going on, but like a three-ring circus, it is well choreographed. Its mystery is its strength!

The mild-to-medium-bodied blend is not heavily present in the mouth, but the interest comes from its long, subtle finish. A Credo must be savored slowly to be fully appreciated; it's not for everyone, but will entertain the connoisseur if he (or she) has the patience.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

CREDO LIGAS

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 5, 2005]

This version of Credo debuted in 1997 and is made in Honduras with the aim of being more forthright than its older sibling.

It has a medium body and has rich moments, but is also thin in the mouth. Its attraction is in the steady finish that entertains you with a modest caramelized flavor on the tongue, but a nip of pepper in the throat! Maybe this is the meaning behind the band, which features the two faces of the theater: comedy and tragedy, looking toward each other.

The quality of the leaves and the workmanship on this cigar are clear; it only lacks depth in flavor to keep it from more serious attention.

Overall grade: B: Good.

CUBA ALIADOS

[Honduras: reviewed July 28, 2006]

Rolando Reyes originally made this blend in Cuba in the 1940s, and started manufacturing it in

Honduras in 1989. It drew national attention when it was featured in a cover story in a J-R Cigars catalog in 1993. Reyes regained distribution rights in 2004 and revised the blend in 2005. It's a winner.

There's a sweet tang of caramel in this cigar, with just a wisp of spice on the finish. It's medium to full in body and there are powerful flavors in this cigar.

But the overall impression is one of sweetness and even as the spicy elements assert themselves in the last half, it's easy to like. There's a toasty, slightly sweet aroma and an even burn. Near the end, the spiciness is most apparent, but never aggressive or off-putting. A well-made, highly enjoyable cigar for those who have both a sweet tooth and enjoy a level of complexity in their cigars.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUBA ALIADOS DOBLE FUERTE

[Honduras: reviewed 28 July 2006]

This is a new blend for the Cuba Aliados brand, introduced in 2006. Also medium-to-full in body, it's more present in the mouth than the standard Aliados blend.

There's a noticeable peppery tinge in the aroma and while there are caramelized features to the taste, the peppered elements are first on the tongue. The flavor is consistent and while some will find this blend has too much bite, remember that this is the "Double Fuerte." It's not nasty or aggressive, but powerful and self-assured, knowing that it delivers the pop that some smokers look for in cigars. Well done, but not for everyone.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUBAN CRAFTERS – Cameroon wrapper

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 15, 2007]

There are two versions of the Cuban Crafters blend, with Cameroon or Nicaraguan-grown wrappers. The Cameroon-wrapped version offers a medium body with surprising smoothness and a slightly spicy aroma.

It offers a delicate, caramelized taste that creates a consistent, pleasant chord of flavor that continues through the first half of the blend. There's a solid white ash and even a monster like the 60-ring Chairman or Campana is easy to enjoy . . . if a bit big in the mouth.

The Cuban Crafters line dates from 2003, but is under-appreciated in this version. At buy-direct prices of \$3.60 to \$4.80, it's a winner.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUBAN CRAFTERS – Nicaragua wrapper

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 15, 2007]

This edition of the Cuban Crafters brand is square-pressed with a pigtail head. There's a toasty aroma to this cigar to complement its full-bodied taste.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

There's a rich taste of dark caramel that marks this blend at the start, with a short finish. It smokes fairly evenly, but a peppery note predominates in the second half and can surprise you. There's quite a bit of strength here and inexperienced smokers will find the change in taste unsettling if they're not ready for it.

Overall grade: B: Good.

CUBITA SPANISH MARKET SELECTION

[Dominican Republic: available in 8 sizes]

The "SMS" stands for Spanish Market Selection, indicating a dark brown wrapper and this bold version of Cubita does not disappoint. This blend offers a medium-to-full body and a spicy aroma that smokes very slowly with an even burn that requires your patience.

Tobaccos from three nations are in this cigar: the wrapper is from Honduras, the binder is Dominican Olor and the filler is Dominican and Nicaraguan grown. That's a good recipe for a flavorful and smooth cigar and the Cubita SMS delivers with a sweet, slightly caramelized taste and a medium finish.

The flavor remains smooth and clean with more sweetness than caramel and a lightness that can be misconstrued. You won't get more flavor by puffing harder, but by relaxing with this blend, you'll fully enjoy its subtleties.

The cigar becomes tangy towards the end and that's the signal to put it down. The SMS is enormously under-appreciated, especially with a retail price range (before local taxes) of just \$4.90 to \$5.25 for the larger sizes! The Toro (6 x 50) at just \$5.05 is very nicely priced indeed. All but the Minis are offered in boxes of 20.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUESTA-REY CABINET SELECTION

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 29 July 2005]

This is the original Cuesta-Rey line, which still includes the No. 95. It's made at the Tabacalera A. Fuente in Santiago, Dominican Republic and like all Fuente-made cigars, it draws perfectly and is beautifully constructed.

The blend offers a rounded, gently caramelized taste that can sometimes turn tart, but is most often smooth, mellow and relaxed, with a mild-to-medium body. With a toasty, lightly-spiced aroma, it's not aggressive.

It smokes slowly and in the larger sizes, such as the No. 898 (7 inches by 49 ring) or the No. 1 (8 1/2 x 52), it's a great value and can be a great companion on the golf course.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

CUESTA-REY CENTENARIO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 29 July 2005]

This is a bolder version of the original blend, introduced in 2000. Also very well made, it has a light, slightly sweet aroma, but a fuller body in the medium-to-full range. The flavor is not

overpowering, however and features a light, peppery taste and a short finish.

Polite and engaging, it may be too bland for those looking for striking flavors, but this is a very nice cigar that will go well with most meals, or as a companion to a late-evening cocktail.

Overall grade: B: Good.

CUESTA-REY CENTRO FINO SUNGROWN

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 29 July 2005]

This is the best of the Cuesta-Rey group and although medium in body, has the most distinctive taste and has met with near-universal acclaim since its debut in mid-2003.

Utterly refined, it provides a very fine, light, almost buttery flavor with just a suggestion of sweetness and spice. It is best appreciated when smoked slowly and is a stunning value at suggested retail prices of between \$4.85 and \$6.95 before any local tobacco taxes.

It is, undoubtedly, one of the finest medium-bodied cigars you can get anywhere.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

CUMBRES DE PURISCAL GOLD

[Costa Rica: reviewed 9 June 2006]

This is a medium-bodied cigar, but its refinement and balance impress you immediately.

The cigars we tried were very well made, drew easily and burned evenly throughout. There's a gently caramelized aroma that's inviting and it enhances the lightly caramelized flavor profile.

There's never even a hint of bitterness and the delicate taste slows you down so that you can appreciate it more. In its flavor and depth, it reminds one of the Cuban Juan Lopez brand, which we have found is among the very best medium-bodied cigars on the planet.

Best of all, the taste and strength remain consistent throughout the cigar, relaxing the smoker. The finish is fairly short, but is not a drawback; you simply wait for the next puff.

The taste settles down a bit in mid-course and there is just a hint of spice – only a tingle! – towards the end

As good as advertised, the CdP Gold is wonderfully made and very well priced at \$3.25 to \$5.90 retail. Its only drawback is that it is only available online and not at retail stores. It's the only thing wrong with this brand.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

CUPIDO • *Discontinued*

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 2004]

Medium in body, there is a deep flavor of fruit from the very first puff to the last, especially in the Churchill size. Although expensive, it's a cigar to be sought and savored.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

CUPIDO CRIOLLO

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 25, 2008]

The Cupido brand caused a sensation when it appeared during the Cigar Boom as one of the first cigars out of Nicaragua – other than Joya de Nicaragua, of course – to draw rave reviews.

That version of Cupido is gone forever and the brand seemed to be sleeping, if not dead, but it's been revived by Cuban Crafters in two styles, the Cupido Criollo and the Cupido Tuxedo.

The Criollo is sharply box-pressed to an almost wafer-thick shape, but the dark Criollo-seed wrapper is inviting. It's medium-to-full in body and has a toasty, inviting aroma.

The taste is reminiscent of the original, with a tang of sweetness. In this blend, however, the flavor is lighter and not as intense, with a short finish. Well made, it has an even burn and smokes easily so that you're not tired by it.

The blend does not give as many highlights in the second half, with a note of spice introduced toward the end. However, the consistency of this cigar is very nice and at retail prices of \$3.09 to \$3.60 each before local taxes, it's a bargain! All five sizes are offered in boxes of 25.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUPIDO TUXEDO

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 1, 2008]

There was a Cupido Tuxedo brand during the Cigar Boom, but this blend is new. It features all Nicaraguan-grown tobaccos in five larger sizes from 48 to 52 ring. It welcomes you with a medium body and a spicy and peppery aroma.

If you like your cigars spicy, you'll enjoy the Tuxedo. It has a spicy taste with just a hint of sweetness and a spicy and sometimes peppery finish. However, it's certainly not a bruiser and although a heavy cigar at times, it's never aggressive or bitter.

The interplay of spice, a little sweetness and a note of pepper on the finish continues right through the end. All five sizes are offered in boxes of 25, with pricing to be announced.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUSANO 10

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 September 2005]

This is a tenth anniversary cigar for Cusano, introduced in 2004 and using tobacco harvested in 1998 and featuring an Ecuadorian-grown, Cuban-seed wrapper.

It's quite good, with an easy draw, medium body and a friendly, toasty aroma. The taste is not pronounced, but it's interesting, with a sweet, fruit-like flavor and a pinch of spice that you'll feel on the throat during the finish. An element of matted spice balances the flavor in the second half.

The 10 is best appreciated if you can give it some attention and appreciate the subtlety of the flavor. It's only made in Robusto (5 inches by 50 ring) and Crown Corona (5 x 42) sizes; this

blend begs for a Toro or Churchill size so you can enjoy the flavor longer.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUSANO 18

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 September 2005]

Excellent construction in a medium-bodied blend, and an aroma with a hint of pepper to it are your first impressions of this cigar.

It has a balanced taste between elements of spice and pepper with a hint of caramel as an undertone, with a nice, short finish. The latter keeps the flavor from becoming aggressive or harsh and makes the 18 quite seductive during the first half.

It's a good cigar to keep you warm and comfortable and its easy-to-like, mellow approach to the use of spice makes it a great companion after dinner or with a late-evening cocktail.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

CUSANO 59 RARE CAMEROON

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 13, 2008]

Cameroon-wrapped cigars are certainly not hard to find today, but this unique leaf always brings something special to a cigar. That's certainly the case with the 59 Rare Cameroon, which combines aged wrapper leaves with Dominican-grown binder and fillers.

It's medium in body and there's a spicy aroma, but the smoothness of the lightly caramelized taste is impressive. If a cigar can have a "clean" or "fresh" taste, this one has it, very gently balanced with a hint of spice on the finish.

The blend isn't bold, but elegantly light and delicious with a creamy flavor and a deeper taste of spice toward the end. It's an interesting smoke, with more character than the Habano LXI, especially in the spectacular perfectly-proportioned Preferido size, a perfecto of 5 3/4 inches by 57 ring. The latter is easily the best size of the four in this line and one that will be hard to find once enough smokers know about it.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional

CUSANO CC

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 September 2005]

Yowsah! This is the fullest-bodied of all the Cusano bundled blends, and it immediately offers up a delightful caramelized taste which fills the mouth and continues through a long finish.

The CC has a nice, toasty aroma that has a hint of spice and the same tone is played underneath the caramelized taste so that just a reminder is left on your throat as you reach halfway.

Very well made with a solid ash and an easy draw, there's an increase in the spiciness of the cigar in the second half, giving the flavor more balance, but taking nothing away from the pleasure it provides.

Best of all is the price. The five shapes are priced at retail (before local tobacco taxes) from about \$1.50 to a top of \$3.10 with the 7 1/2-inch by 50-ring Churchill a value not to be missed at

\$2.70!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUSANO COROJO '97

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 September 2005]

More medium-to-full in body, the Corojo '97 features a toasty, slightly spicy flavor that has a hint of caramel on the finish.

It's never harsh, but rather modest in offering spice and a little more caramel in the taste in mid-course to go along with a woody aroma. A touch of pepper comes up in the second half to complete a very nice smoking experience.

Overall grade: B: Good.

CUSANO HABANO LXI

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 13, 2008]

Introduced early in 2008, the Habano LXI is an all-Dominican cigar made at the famous Tabadom facility in Santiago, Dominican Republic. It's another successful chapter in the long development history of the Dominican puro.

The blend offers a light and spicy aroma at the start and it's medium-to-full in body. It has a caramelized, somewhat creamy element to the flavor, but there's plenty of spice on the tongue and on the finish.

The LXI is crafty; if you're looking for a bold statement of flavor, you'll be disappointed . . . until you recognize the blend for its exquisite finesse. The taste becomes more creamy as the cigar hits midway and the spicy notes are more discreet. Combined with the perfect draw and even burn you expect from Tabadom, this cigar is a winner . . . but only in the right setting where you can appreciate its subtleties. It's perfect for an evening where you have time to appreciate it, perhaps combined with Cognac or bourbon.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional

CUSANO M1

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 September 2005]

This blend has the lightest body of the entire line at mild-to-medium, leaving only a small impression in the mouth.

It features a nice, caramelized taste and a toasty aroma, with a note of spiciness coming forward in mid-course. It's balanced, but the modest flavor profile makes you learn for a blend with more character.

Overall grade: B-: Fairly Good.

CUSANO MC

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 September 2005]

Veteran smokers will recognize the Connecticut-grown wrapper on this cigar immediately, and won't be surprised by the slightly spicy aroma.

It's medium in body and has a fairly mild, woody taste with a hint of caramel on the tongue and on the clean finish. There's more spiciness in the second half and it's an easy cigar to like on a warm, sunny day. Don't expect too much, however, as the P1 and CC blends have more highlights.

Overall grade: B: Good.

CUSANO P1

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 September 2005]

The Connecticut-grown maduro wrapper promises lots of flavor and its sweetness is apparent right away.

The flavor shows a balance of spice and sweetness with a bit more spice added on the finish. A nice, peppery aroma adds to the mix and gives this blend more personality than the MC or M1, although not the bright flavor of the CC line.

It's not heavy and it's easy to smoke, with a medium body despite the maduro wrapper.

Overall grade: B: Good.

CUVEE BLANC

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 13, 2008]

The Cuvee group was introduced in 2006 and the Blanc – blue band – has quickly become its most celebrated blend. It's easy to see why.

Medium in body, it sports a light-brown, Connecticut Shade wrapper and has a sweet and spicy aroma. There's a bright, caramelized taste to this cigar, with a spicy theme that continues through the finish.

Veteran smokers who remember the heyday of Dunhill's much-respected Dominican-blend cigar from the early 1990s will appreciate the similarities in taste, excellent construction and even burn in the Cuvee Blanc.

The spicy elements are predominant in the second half, but overall the Blanc is a pleasure. Offered in four sizes, including a mammoth perfecto (7 1/4 x 57) called the Salomon, it's available in boxes of 24 except for the Salomon, which is presented upright in boxes of 50! Pricing is reasonable, at \$6.95-7.95 for the Robusto, Toro Gordo and Churchill, with the Salomons at \$12.00 each, before local tobacco and sales taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

CUVEE ROUGE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 13, 2008]

The 2006-introduced Rouge line (red band) uses a dark, Dominican-grown wrapper that distinguishes it from its brother, the Blanc line.

It has a spicy aroma and the taste centers around a spicy core with a backdrop of dark caramel that serves to balance the flavor. It's medium-to-full in body and has a much stronger presence in the mouth than the Blanc.

There's a peppery element in the second half and the balance is intriguing as these flavors have some bite, but never become harsh or aggressive.

The Rouge is offered in the same four sizes as the Blanc and at the same price points, making it accessible to almost all smokers.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good

CUVEE NO. 151

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 13, 2008]

Introduced in 2007, the No. 151 moves Cusano's line in a new direction: it's their first cigar made in Nicaragua. It has a Costa-Rican-grown maduro wrapper and Nicaraguan-grown binder and filler leaves.

Medium-to-full in body, the 151 has a toasty and spicy aroma and a nice, caramelized flavor with a touch of spice on the tongue and on the finish. The sweetness you expect from maduro-wrapped cigars is present, but there's also a balance that makes this much more than simply another sweet cigar.

The richness of flavor recedes a bit in the second half and the approach remains consistent throughout. Well made, it's currently offered in three sizes – Robusto, Toro Gordo and Churchill – in boxes of 24 at \$6.95-7.95 each before local sales and tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

DAVIDOFF ANIVERSARIO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 2004]

Elegant, delicate, creamy flavors regardless of shape. Mild body, Perfect draw, perfectly presented. A triumph despite the high cost.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

DAVIDOFF LIMITED EDITION 2008: RESERVA 12

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 22, 2008]

When Zino Davidoff introduced his Dominican-made cigars in 1990, he created a sensation with a series of mild to medium-bodied blends that were a delight to smoke and offered a clean, creamy flavor that is still easy to appreciate.

That is not what the Reserva 12 is about.

This medium-bodied blend features 12-year-aged filler tobaccos from the Dominican Republic and a sun-grown wrapper from Ecuador that's probably the strongest cigar ever made for this famous brand.

Upon being lit, a slightly spicy aroma is evident and there's a touch of caramelized sweetness with a spicy twist on the finish. But as the cigar blooms, its full range of spicy and peppery flavors become apparent.

If master blender Hendrik Kelner was trying to show people that he can blend cigars that can compete with brands like the Fuente Fuente Opus X, he can show this cigar as Exhibit A. The spicy and peppery nature of this cigar continues steady and consistent, but it's never aggressive or off-putting.

The Reserva 12 is made only in a 5 1/2-inch by 52-ring robusto size and is presented in boxes of 10 at \$18.50 per cigar.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

DAVIDOFF MADURO ROBUSTO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 22, 2008]

The drumbeat of "when will Davidoff introduce a maduro" finally wore everyone down. The Maduro Robusto (five inches by 52 ring) is the first of what may be as many as seven shapes in the Davidoff maduro line.

The maduro wrapper is from Nicaragua and when combined with four different filler tobaccos from the Dominican Republic, offers a toasty aroma and a rich, deep caramelized flavor.

Full-bodied, the Maduro Robusto is very well made and shows an even burn. But the taste isn't sharp, but rather relaxed and mellow, becoming more creamy toward the end without even a hint of spice on the finish.

The samples we tried were fresh and the overall impact may be better once the actual production cigars show up in stores. But for now, this is a cigar to watch as it could be the start of something quite special.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

DAVIDOFF MILLENNIUM BLEND

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 2004]

Davidoff's marvelous reputation was built on lighter cigars, so what are they doing here?

The Davidoff Millennium Blend earned this high placing with its trademark perfect construction, an easy draw and a sensuous flavor of dark caramel throughout, with just a hint of sweetness on the finish. There is no nagging spiciness to detract from the richness of the flavor and it makes each puff a joy. All of the Millennium Blends we smoked lightened slightly in mid-course, but this is actually helpful to keep us from tiring towards the end.

Despite today's preference for larger ring gauges, we actually found the Lonsdale (6 inches by 43 ring) size to be the most consistently flavorful.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

DAVIDOFF SPECIAL SERIES

[Dominican Republic: reviewed July 2004]

Amazing balance of flavor and spice in the same blend, notably in the Special R, maybe the best balanced robusto of all. Medium in body and delicious!

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

DIAMOND CROWN

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 29 July 2005]

Despite being offered in ring gauges of 54 and up, this is a mild-bodied cigar. It's beautifully constructed and features a quiet, toasty, lightly-spiced aroma. The taste is demure, almost shy, with elements of spice, caramel and a touch of pepper on the tongue with a short finish.

It is even-tempered, but not light, despite its mild presence. This is an interesting cigar, but its large girth fools you into expecting more and not appreciating its calm reserve.

Overall grade: B: Good.

DIAMOND CROWN MAXIMUS

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 29 July 2005]

The magnificently-detailed, extra-large gold band is only slightly more electric than the bright white ash produced by the Maximus. It's heavier than the regular Diamond Crown line, more medium-to-full in body.

It offers both peppery and caramelized tones and the flavor is nuanced and subtle, drawing your attention to its complexity. A bit warmer in mid-course, the peppery finish is always present and keeps you balanced. This is a cigar to pay attention to.

Overall grade: B: Good.

DIANA SILVIUS – Natural wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 30 June 2006]

This Arturo Fuente-made cigar for UpDown Tobacco in Chicago, Illinois is, of course, very well made and easy to smoke. The natural-wrapped version features a Connecticut wrapper and has a pleasant, spicy aroma.

The blend is medium in body and offers a neat, caramelized flavor with a touch of spice on the finish. There are some rich flavors to savor in this brand, but it requires that you take your time and not draw too hard or too quickly.

There is some more spice and a more balanced taste at mid-way, but it is well controlled. This is a very good cigar in any shape, but especially in the Churchill (7 inches by 50 ring) if you will give it the time it deserves.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

DIANA SILVIUS – Maduro wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 30 June 2006]

Only the Robusto (4 7/8 inches by 52 ring) is offered in a maduro-wrapped version, introduced in 2003.

The use of a Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper changes the composition and balance of this cigar, making it a sweeter, less spicy smoke. The finish offers a sweet note, while the spicy tone to the aroma remains.

It's consistent to the end and is the perfect finish to treats from The Fudge Pot, located next door to UpDown on Chicago's North Wells Street!

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

DON DIEGO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 2004]

There's a good reason for the popularity of this mild blend, thanks to the hint of spice on the finish, the wide range of sizes and fair price.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

DON KIKI LIMITED RESERVE – BROWN LABEL

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 15, 2007]

There are three blends in the Don Kiki Limited Reserve line: Brown Label, Green Label and Red Label. We tried the first two.

The Brown Label is a full-bodied cigar with a spicy aroma. There's a fairly rich, caramelized taste to begin with, with a medium finish. The flavor stays consistent, showing a little note of spice at the end.

The flavor isn't bright, but the blend maintains a round and pleasant tone throughout. And at buy-direct pricing of \$1.50 to \$2.60 per cigar in boxes of 25, it's an excellent value and a good candidate for an everyday cigar to enjoy in the daytime.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

DON KIKI LIMITED RESERVE – GREEN LABEL

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 15, 2007]

The Green Label edition of the Don Kiki Limited Reserve is designated as a mild cigar and it features a light, almost buttery taste with a medium finish. It's got more body than advertised, though, as it fills most of the mouth with a medium-to-full body that's easy to enjoy and not at all off-putting.

The taste profile has an element of sweetness, but wanders a little. There's a little pinch of spice on the finish in the second half of the cigar and like the Brown Label, is easy to enjoy but does not leave a distinctive, high-line impression. At buy-direct prices of \$1.32 to \$2.28 each in bundles of 25, however, it fills the bill for a cigar to enjoy when you're not concentrating on it. Golf, anyone?

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

DON KIKI VINTAGE RESERVE

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 15, 2007]

This is the White Label edition of the Don Kiki line, offered in special cabinets of 25. We tried the Harvest of 1999 cigars and found them to be a treat.

The White Label is a medium-bodied cigar with a sweet and slightly spicy aroma. It offers a bright, caramelized taste at the start that's extremely smooth, with a medium finish and an even burn.

It's quite consistent, with a creamy tone that's accessible and easy to enjoy. This is a fun cigar to smoke and won't tire you out. And at buy-direct prices of \$2.80 to \$3.20, it's a bargain.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

DON LINO 1989 – Connecticut Wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed February 22, 2008]

Thanks to the popularity of the Aurora Preferidos and La Aurora lines, the Don Lino brand travels a little under the radar of many smokers. That's a shame and could change with the 2007 re-introduction of the Don Lino 1989 line.

This brand comes with a choice of wrappers: Connecticut or in maduro with leaves grown in Nicaragua. The natural-wrapped edition shows off a spicy aroma and offers a rich, caramelized flavor that easy to appreciate and has a long finish.

Even with that richness in taste, this blend has an attractive lightness to it and the medium-to-full-bodied heft of the cigar at the start lessens a bit at halfway. Very well made, it burns evenly and smokes slowly.

Consistent throughout, it becomes quite mellow in the second half and glides easily to the finish. It retails, depending on size, from \$6.40 to \$7.22 each.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

DON LINO 1989 – Maduro Wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed February 22, 2008]

You would expect more depth in a maduro-wrapped cigar and the Don Lino 1989 delivers. Also medium-to-full in body, it maintains that profile throughout, but has plenty of other features to interest the smoker.

Starting with a spicy aroma, this is an unusual maduro in that the blend does not over-emphasize the sweetness of the leaf. Instead, the sweetness plays against a spicy and peppery background that you'll feel on the tongue and through the medium finish. There's bite, but also balance, a unique combination in a maduro-wrapped blend.

The taste stays consistent, but becomes mellower in the second half. The burn is even and at retail prices of \$6.40 to \$7.22, this could be a favorite of those who prefer zesty cigars that have a clear and distinct character.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

DON LINO AFRICA

[Nicaragua: reviewed February 22, 2008]

This isn't a new blend, but one which is gaining converts every day. Introduced in 2003 after two years of development, this is a medium-bodied cigar with a very rich flavor. It is not made at

the La Aurora factory, but was created for La Aurora's U.S. distributor, Miami Cigar & Company.

The artwork and shape names are tributes to the indigenous people of the African savannah, the Maasi: Punda Milla (zebra), Duma (cheetah), Kifaro (rhinoceros), Tembo (elephant), Kuro (water buck) and Kiboko (hippopotamus).

The cigar itself has a spicy aroma, with a dark, caramelized flavor and a sweetness that's generated by the Nicaraguan-grown, extra-dark wrapper. The rich and sweet taste is accented by the rise of a spicy note on the tongue in the second half. This is a marvelous cigar for its dense construction, dense flavors and consistency in burn and taste. At retail prices of \$4.68 to \$7.66 per cigar, depending on size, it is accessible to all smokers and highly recommended.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional

DON PEPIN GARCIA SERIES JJ

[United States: reviewed June 8, 2007]

In addition to the Cabaiguan and Tatuaje lines, Pepin Garcia makes cigars that he distributes from his own El Rey de Los Habanos headquarters in Miami under the Don Pepin Garcia label and others.

We tried the Don Pepin Garcia Series JJ (white band), a delightful blend introduced to national distribution in 2005. There's a light and spicy aroma to this blend and a medium-to-full body.

The taste features a rich, sweet and bright caramelized taste with a medium finish that retains its sweetness. It's consistent in draw and temperament and while the taste flattens out in the second half, it remains pleasant and easy to enjoy.

A slightly spicy note enters in the second half, but only signals the end of an excellent cigar that available at retail prices from \$8.40 to \$18.00 for the giant Salomon (7 1/4 x 57).

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

DON TOMAS CLASICO – Natural wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed July 11, 2008]

When General Cigar took over the Don Tomas brand, blender extraordinaire Daniel Nunez put together a team to redefine this cigar. They settled on a Honduran wrapper and binder and a combination of Honduran and Nicaraguan-grown filler leaves that has a medium-to-full body and a spicy aroma.

Not an instant hit when introduced in 2005, but now growing in popularity, the Don Tomas Clasico has several things going for it. One is that it's no shrinking violet on the flavor front. The Honduran-wrapped Clasico has a perky taste, with a light and sweet touch of a near-citrus-like flavor that's tangy and lively.

There's a touch of caramel in there to provide a calming tone and some spice on the finish to keep the mood bright. Very well made, it burns evenly and shows a pleasant consistency.

It's another cigar that's best sipped as puffing too hard can turn the flavor grassy. But it's offered in a wide variety of shapes (two of which are in tubes) and at retail prices of just \$2.95 to \$4.75 each before local tobacco and sales taxes, it's easy to see why it's been a winner at retail.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

DON TOMAS CLASICO – Maduro wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed July 11, 2008]

The maduro version of the Don Tomas Classico again used paired wrapper and binder leaves, combined with Honduran and Nicaraguan fillers. This time, however, the wrapper and binder came from Connecticut with a dark Broadleaf wrapper.

There's a toasty aroma at the start and we found this blend to be of medium body. It's sweet as you might have guessed with a lightly caramelized taste. The finish is short with just a suggestion of spice. This isn't a heavy cigar at all, but rather light, relaxed and sweet, with good construction and an even burn.

You'll feel a little more of the spice in the second half on the back of your throat, but the balance never falls toward anything harsh. Perhaps a little more depth would be helpful, but there's no reason to complain, with, once again, retail prices of just \$2.95 to \$4.10. All sizes except the tubed Allegro (20s) are offered in boxes of 25.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

DON TOMAS CAMEROON COLLECTION

[Honduras: reviewed July 11, 2008]

The Cameroon Collection is a holdover from the U.S. Tobacco days, having been introduced in 2000. There was no reason to change it because it's terrific.

The blend is medium-to-full in body with a toasty and spicy aroma. The taste is clean and slightly sweet, but with a wonderful mellow balance of caramel and just a pinch of spice on the finish.

One enchanting aspect of this line is that it includes four marvelous perfectos, numbered 1 through 4, all of 48 ring gauge: 4 inches by 48 for the No. 1, 5 x 48 for the No. 2, 6 x 48 for the No. 3 and 7 x 48 for the largest size. They burn evenly and effortlessly, making the Cameroon Collection an inspired choice for an afternoon cigar following a light lunch.

There's a little more spice on the finish in the second half, but it hardly spoils the mood. The Cameroon Collection is also well-priced at \$3.65 to \$5.75 each with all sizes except the glass-tubed Crystals (boxes of 8) in boxes of 25.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

DON TOMAS SUN GROWN

[Honduras: available in 5 sizes]

The Sun Grown is the latest in the Don Tomas line, having been introduced last year (2007).

The name will warn you that this can be a stiff cigar, so be ready. It offers a medium body and a mild, spicy aroma, but the spiciness of the blend becomes obvious fairly quickly.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

There's a modest core of caramelized taste in the flavor, but the spicy elements are the stars, especially on the short finish. It's fairly consistent, so if you prefer a zesty, spicy blend, this could be your ticket.

Once again it's well priced, at just \$2.95 to \$5.00 each in boxes of 25.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

DONA FLOR

[Brazil: reviewed October 6, 2006]

This is probably the most popular premium cigar in Brazil, although the Suerdieck brand is possibly better known. Introduced in 1977, Brazil Cigars & Tobacco brought it to the U.S. market in 2005.

It's a medium-to-full-bodied cigar to our taste and greeted us with a lightly spiced aroma from its all-Brazilian-grown blend. The taste is marked by a light note of caramel followed by a spicy and even peppery finish. It's an adult smoke to be sure; heavy, but with a sophisticated layering of flavors.

Very well made, the blend burns evenly to the end, with a peppery element more present in the final third.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

DYNAMITE

[Nicaragua: reviewed July 14, 2006]

Cheered by the success of the American Stogies line, Bill Bock of Indianhead introduced Dynamite in 2005. Made in Honduras, it's a five-nation blend offered unbanded in just three sizes in a choice of a Corojo or Maduro wrapper.

We opted for the Corojo again and although it was enjoyable, it did not have quite as much interest for us as the American Stogies line. The blend is medium-to-full in body and offers a toasty aroma.

The flavor favors pepper, but it's not bitter or aggressive, rather measured and even subtle with an underscore of a toasty, nut-like taste on the finish.

Well made, it's almost perky rather than explosive as the name might imply. It's a lively cigar and at Indianhead's value pricing of \$3.20-3.50 (before local tobacco taxes), it's certainly worth a try. It won't blow your budget!

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

EL GRAN REY

[Nicaragua: reviewed December 21, 2008]

Curivari Cigars introduced this blend in 2008 with the goal of delivering a complex, layered taste for the advance smoker. In this it succeeded quite admirably.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

This is a medium-to-full-bodied cigar with a spicy aroma. The taste offers a balance of a lightly caramelized core, accented by well-defined notes of coffee and sweetness, with a very slightly caramelized finish.

Very well made with an even burn, El Gran Rey has considerable depth of flavor, but the multi-layered flavor makes this a blend best enjoyed by experienced smokers. There is an added note of light pepper in the second half that livens up the taste near the end.

The most expensive of the Curivari line, the three shapes are presented in elegant boxes of 25 cigars each and are priced from \$8.00 to \$9.50 each at retail, not including local sales or tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EL LAGUITO

[Ecuador: reviewed June 1, 2007]

Named for the famous Cuban factory which has been the home of both the Davidoff and Cohiba brands in Havana, the El Laguito line was introduced in 2006.

It's only available in two shapes, but the long, sleek Lancero (7 1/2 inches by 41 ring) is a special joy. The mild-to-medium-bodied blend offers a toasty aroma and smokes evenly and effortlessly with excellent construction and draw.

There's a bright, caramelized taste to the El Laguito, with a long, clean finish and an enviable smoothness. There's a little pop of spice well into the second half, but it does nothing to detract from the overall impression of quality and elegance in this brand.

It's a little more expensive than the other brands at suggested retail prices of \$6.00 to \$6.40, but well worth it.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EL LEGEND-ARIO BY CAMACHO

[Honduras: reviewed August 15, 2005]

Very well made, it smokes easily and has a beautiful dark Honduran-grown wrapper. It has a pleasant, toasty aroma with just a hint of pepper. The taste features a caramelized flavor to start and an undertone of pepper that tickles your throat.

In mid-course, the caramel and pepper flavors mix evenly and then the pepper becomes predominant in the final third. None of this is off-putting and the balance keeps you interested.

This is a cigar to be sipped rather than smoked aggressively. You'll enjoy its journey of tastes much more that way. At a suggested retail price of \$5 each (before local tobacco taxes), it's accessible and a nice value in any of its three 6-inch sizes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

EL REY DEL MUNDO

[Honduras: reviewed October 2004]

Made side-by-side with Excalibur, Hoyo de Monterrey and Punch in the Villazon factory in Cofradia, Honduras, “The King of the World” displays a balanced, fruit-like flavor at the start with a long finish that offers a note of sweetness. It’s more tempered in mid-course and has an enjoyable, toasty aroma. Very well made, an excellent value; a perfect afternoon cigar to enjoy while watching the world go by.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EL REY DEL MUNDO II

[Honduras: reviewed December 26, 2008]

This edition of the ancient brand, created in 1848, debuted in 1994. It’s full-bodied with a natural-shade, Ecuadorian-grown wrapper and even richer in a maduro-shade version.

The natural-wrapped edition offers a toasty and spicy aroma at the start and has a dramatic light and clean taste, more on the creamy side than caramelized, but with a slight sweetness and a light finish.

There’s a subtlety and layering to the taste of this cigar, regardless of the size, but the engaging flavor sometimes tempts you to draw too hard. Have patience with The King and you will be rewarded! The draw is excellent, with an even burn and the flavor maintains a welcome consistency.

There are lots of shapes in this line, but the stars are the 54-ring Robusto shapes, ranging from five inches up to 7 1/4. Most sizes are offered in boxes of 20, with street prices of \$2.60 to \$4.20 per cigar before adding local cigar and sales taxes, making this new style of an old Havana favorite an excellent value as well as a world-class cigar.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

EL REY DEL MUNDO OLIVADOS

[Honduras: reviewed August 17, 2007]

This version of “The King of the World” was introduced by Cuban Imports in late July, just ahead of the recent Retail Tobacco Dealers of America (RTDA) convention and trade show in Houston, Texas.

Like its siblings, the standard El Rey del Mundo line produced for J-R Cigars and the El Rey del Mundo Real extension, the Olivados is produced in Honduras by General Cigar. You can tell by the quality.

It’s full-bodied and has a slightly sweet, slightly spicy aroma. It starts up with a smooth, nicely caramelized taste that has a zing of spice on the medium finish. Very well made, the draw is perfect and the burn is even.

It develops a peppery bent in the second half, still with the spicy finish and finishes nicely, always under control . . . as a King should be. The Chateaux R – the robusto – is reasonably priced at a suggested retail of \$7.99 each, with the giant Chateaux D (a double corona) topping the price scale at \$11.99.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EL RICO HABANO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 13, 2006]

Also an old Cuban brand, El Rico Habano is part of the El Credito empire, along with Los Statos DeLuxe, the latter still made (by machine only) in Cuba, but not currently produced by El Credito.

It's played second fiddle to La Gloria Cubana, but is quite interesting in its own right. The current blend (Ecuadorian wrapper) dates from 2001, with maduro-wrapped versions (Connecticut Broadleaf) debuting in 2003. It's medium in body with a natural wrapper and medium-to-full in maduro.

Square-pressed, the blend offers a toasty aroma and a rich, caramelized taste at the start. It's densely packed and smokes very slowly with a medium finish.

The flavor settles down to a pleasant, mellow sweetness, somewhat more reserved than its La Gloria Cubana sibling. But it can be quite deceiving as there is considerable power in this cigar, especially in the maduro-wrapped editions. Consistent in its flavor and burn to the end, you may find that it's a little more heady than the gentle taste suggests.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EL TIANTE 23 SERIES – Natural wrapper

[Nicaragua: reviewed April 11, 2008]

This line was introduced in 2006 and features three shapes, a 6-inch by 54-ring Belicoso, a 5-inch by 50-ring Robusto and a 7-inch by 50-ring Churchill. All are well made with a good draw.

The El Tiante 23 has a colorful band which features a picture of Luis Tiant himself, wearing his famed no. 23 Red Sox uniform and into his unique wind-up in which he usually turned his back completely on home plate. Tiant was born in Cuba in 1940 and was no stranger to cigars throughout his career, although he never took up a bet from some teammates to actually smoke a cigar while on the mound.

The cigar itself features a Nicaraguan-grown wrapper that's quite smooth in the natural-shade version and although designed to be mild in taste, has a medium-to-full body to it that's quite present in the mouth. There's a spicy aroma to the blend and a clean, sweet taste that offers a light tang and just a hint of spice on the finish.

These cigars are made in Nicaragua and burn quite evenly and are easy to enjoy. The spicy elements become a little more present in the second half and a peppery note says that the game is over.

The natural-wrapped line comes in boxes of 23 — just like Tiant's number — and retails for between \$5.50 (robusto) up to \$7.00 for the Belicoso. It is certainly not a novelty cigar, and will be much enjoyed on a sunny summer afternoon . . . watching a baseball game, of course.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good

EL TIANTE 23 SERIES – Maduro wrapper

[Nicaragua: reviewed April 11, 2008]

The maduro-wrapped version of the El Tiante 23 also uses a Nicaraguan-grown wrapper that resembles Connecticut Broadleaf in its appearance, with a sandy feel and muscular veins.

Made in the same three shapes as the natural-wrapped edition, the maduros are firmly constructed with a Mexican binder and Mexican and Nicaraguan-grown fillers. This is a medium-bodied cigar that's less present than the natural-wrapped version, but with a stouter taste.

There's a toasty aroma to this cigar and a sweet and creamy taste that's easy to spot and easy to appreciate. The flavor can be slightly caramelized, but the sweetness of the maduro wrapper is plainly evident in this blend. There's a short finish, but the overall impression is relaxed and mellow.

A modest note of spice is introduced in the second half and the balance between the sweet and caramelized elements and the spicy notes leans more toward the latter as the cigar burns to the end. The maduro-wrapped blend has more character than the natural-wrapped version and will stand up better to other tastes. Perhaps this cigar is best served after a hearty barbeque?

Like the natural-wrapped sizes, the maduros are offered in boxes of 23 at retail prices ranging from \$5.75 to \$7.50 before local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

ESTEBAN CARRERAS CONNECTICUT

[Dominican Republic: reviewed May 18, 2007]

The basic Esteban Carrera line is offered with Connecticut and maduro wrappers. The Connecticut-wrapped blend has an Ecuadorian-grown, Connecticut-seed wrapper and is mild in body.

That doesn't mean it lacks taste or character, just that it leaves a small flavor footprint in the mouth. There's a spicy aroma and a rich, smooth caramelized taste to this cigar.

There's a suggestion of spice on the finish and while the taste isn't bright, the overall effect is very smooth and easy to enjoy. The spicy finish becomes more prevalent in the second half and adds a coda to an enjoyable and relaxing smoke, priced at \$6.40 to \$8.00 each depending on size and before any local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

ESTEBAN CARRERAS MADURO

[Honduras: reviewed May 18, 2007]

Made in Danli, Honduras, this version of the Esteban Carrera line sports a dark, Nicaraguan-grown maduro wrapper and a medium-to-full-bodied taste.

The aroma is slightly sweet and has just a hint of spice. There's a sweet, caramelized flavor that reflects the influence of the maduro wrapper and has a medium finish. Well made with an even burn, the blend stays consistent right through the end and even with plenty of character, is never overpowering or aggressive. A very enjoyable cigar, also retailing for \$6.40 to \$8.00 each (before any taxes).

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

ESTEBAN CARRERAS LIMITADA 1961 RESERVE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed May 18, 2007]

In 2006, Craig Cunningham decided to add to the Esteban Carreras line with a new blend, made at the La Aurora factory. We found the "Limitada 1961 Reserve" to be medium-to-full in body with a sweet and spicy aroma.

The blend is built around the aged Cameroon wrapper, which offers plenty of character to the flavor. There's a sweet and creamy, caramelized core to the taste, with a medium finish.

The 1961 burns evenly and just a bit of spice develops about the mid-way point. It's a little shy sometimes, so don't oversmoke and try shorter puffs to let the flavors reveal themselves. At \$6.40 to \$8.80 before local tobacco taxes, it's a well-made respite from louder cigars and helps one to appreciate the artisanal quality of the blender's art.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCALIBUR – English Claro wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed 22 July 2005]

This is the original blend and like all products from the HATSA factory in Cofradia, Honduras, it's very well constructed and has an easy draw.

The flavor exhibits a confident but unaggressive sweetness with a caramelized tone, enhanced by a bit of spice on the finish. The ample aroma is toasty with a more pronounced, even honeyed, sweetness.

Past the halfway mark, the taste turns more toward spice than caramel, but in a pleasant and measured way. This is an unassuming cigar that does not impose itself on the smoker, but offers enjoyment from its obviously high quality.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCALIBUR – English Claro wrapper II

[Honduras: reviewed July 27, 2007]

Created around 1977 with the help of Lew Rothman of J-R Cigars, the Excalibur line is popular in Europe in its own right, but is sold in the U.S. as "Hoyo de Monterrey Excalibur" with a band that combines the two names.

The standard Excalibur line has a tan-colored Connecticut Shade wrapper called "English Claro" by General Cigar. The blend offers a toasty aroma and features a fresh, spicy taste with a fairly long finish.

The spicy and sometimes peppery flavor is consistent from the start, but is never aggressive. It burns perfectly and will be a comfort for the smoker who enjoys spicier blends. Suggested retail prices are modest, too: from \$4.30 to \$7.25 for the giant Emperor shape.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCALIBUR – Maduro wrapper

[Honduras: reviewed 22 July 2005]

Here the standard blend of a Connecticut-grown binder and Dominican, Honduran and Nicaraguan-grown filler leaves are perfectly matched with a delicious Connecticut Broadleaf maduro wrapper. The result is pure pleasure.

Here is a rich, luscious cigar with deep, caramelized flavors which continue throughout a long finish to every puff. Deeply satisfying in the way it fills with sweetness, the flavor is perfectly matched with the bright aroma that offers a gentle, peppery accent.

Packed in all-cedar boxes of 20, the Excalibur maduros are also a stunning bargain on the price/value scale, with suggested retail pricing from about \$4.50 to \$8 depending on size (and before local tobacco taxes). My personal favorite is the No. II, a 6 3/4-inch by 47-ring beauty, but you can't go wrong in this line.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

EXCALIBUR – Maduro wrapper II

[Honduras: reviewed July 27, 2007]

The maduro-wrapped version of the standard Excalibur line uses a marvelous Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper that's sweet and rich to the taste right from the first light.

The dark wrapper creates a lighter aroma and offers a deep, full-bodied and slightly sweet taste of dark caramel, with a medium finish. This is a mellow and relaxing cigar with just a tickle of spice on the finish. Don't try to oversmoke this blend; its subtlety is worth discovering with a patient approach.

There's a bit more spice in the second half and the flavor is quieter, bringing a very nice cigar to a gentle ending.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCALIBUR 1066

[Honduras: reviewed 22 July 2005]

Introduced in 2000, this blend was chosen in a retail-store promotion when consumers picked the winner between two competing test cigars. It was the first new blend for Excalibur since its debut 31 years earlier.

This is a good cigar, with excellent construction and a toasty aroma that also features a hint of matted spice. The taste offers notes of sweetness, alternating with a more matted flavor and even an occasional tartness. This inconsistency keeps it from grading higher, but its medium-to-full body is pleasant and its easy to smoke.

Overall grade: B: Good.

EXCALIBUR 1066 II

[Honduras: reviewed July 27, 2007]

The 1066 line debuted in 2000 and has shapes named after the King Arthur legends, even though 1066 was the year of the Norman Conquest of England. Someone missed a few days in their English History class, but the cigar makes up for it.

This is a full-bodied blend, with a nice, spicy aroma and a thick, creamy flavor accompanied by a bite of spice on the finish. It's easy on the palate, but the flavor runs deep instead of bright, so it's easy to try and smoke this cigar too quickly, looking for more highlights. Be gentle and you will be rewarded.

This cigar is again a terrific value: from \$4.70 to a high of \$5.95. How do they do it?

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCALIBUR 1066 DARK KNIGHT

[Honduras: reviewed 22 July 2005]

Although part of the Excalibur 1066 line, this version has a dark, Connecticut-grown wrapper instead of the 1066's normal Cameroon outer leaf. Introduced in late 2003, this one-shape novelty in the line was expanded earlier in 2005 to three sizes for a sampling pack, and all three sizes (I, II and III) are available in full boxes.

It's no surprise that the dark Connecticut wrapper imparts more sweetness and body to the taste, layered on top of a base flavor of light, matted pepper. It's a nice cigar to smoke and the sweetness of the wrapper makes it more accessible; it is only the underlying flatness of the pepperish base which keeps it from grading higher.

Overall grade: B: Good.

EXCALIBUR LEGEND

[Honduras: reviewed 25 July 2008]

This blend is immediately recognizable by its red band, with the word "Excalibur" emblazoned in gold across the bottom. It isn't a legend yet, but the brand was only a week old when we tasted it!

It's a full-bodied cigar with a spicy aroma that's a real mouth-filler at the start. The blend takes off where the surprisingly-popular Excalibur 1066 Dark Knight series ends, using the same Connecticut-grown wrapper. The binder is also a Connecticut-grown, Havana-seed leaf and the filler includes Dominican-grown ligero and two types of Nicaraguan tobacco, including leaf that General farms on the volcanic island of Ometepe off the Nicaraguan coast.

The taste is rich and bright with a caramelized tilt with a spiced finish, offering all of the flavor that one would expect from the famous Hoyo brand. But it's never, ever harsh and has a deep, medium-length finish with a light spice element.

This balance is maintained throughout, although the intensity of the caramelized flavor recedes in the second half and the balance with the spicy notes is more evident. This is a very nice cigar and one that will be popular not only because of its quality, but also its accessible price range of \$6.75 to \$7.50 each, before local sales and tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCALIBUR ROYAL STERLING • *Discontinued*

[Honduras: reviewed 22 July 2005]

"We had this light, shade-grown Honduran wrapper lying around and we didn't know what to do with it."

So said one General Cigar executive at last year's Retail Tobacco Dealers of America Convention and International Trade Show, in introducing the new Excalibur Royal Sterling. They certainly knew what to do when this new blend started selling: make more!

Introduced in three sizes, there are now four and this new blend continues to please those who try it. The flavor is rich and complex, with a spicy aroma. It's a little spicy . . . then a little bit caramelized . . . sometimes even buttery in an occasional bright moment. It's a mouth-filler with a medium-to-full body, but it's gentle, even sedate, but clearly self-assured. Growing up in the shade will do that to you. A surprise, and a welcome one.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCALIBUR ROYAL STERLING II • *Discontinued*

[Honduras: reviewed July 27, 2007]

Here's a unique blend occasioned by what one General executive noted as a discussion about what to do with some elegant, sand-colored, shade-grown wrapper from Honduras.

The result is the Royal Sterling, introduced in 2004 and a surprising success. It's also medium-to-full in body like most of the other Excalibur blends, but with a toasty aroma and a chewy, creamy flavor that's lighter than the 1066.

The flavor is very well balanced and skips along lightly in a calm style that makes this a relaxing cigar in all sizes. It has an even burn and a solid ash. There's a spicier finish to the cigar in the second half, but it's only a change of pace that signals the end of a very nice, pleasant cigar that's also an excellent value with suggested retail prices from \$5.35 to \$6.35.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

EXCELLENCE by Felipe Gregorio

[Dominican Republic: reviewed April 20, 2007]

Philip Wynne introduced this line, made in only one size – the 6-inch by 42-ring Boulevardier – in 2004 as a statement of how refined a cigar can be. He succeeded.

Easy to light thanks to its moderate ring gauge, Excellence burns easily with a slightly spicy aroma. It sports an even burn and is elegant and understated while presenting a medium-bodied fullness in the mouth.

The taste is light and fresh and a slight tartness if you draw too hard. At its best – and if you give it a chance – you'll enjoy a lightly toasted, just slightly caramelized taste with a medium finish. There's a hint of a citrus-like tang on the finish.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

This is a gentle cigar and is consistent in taste and burn right to the end. We only wish it was a bit bolder in its flavor presentation, but its construction and quality are obvious. It retails for \$8.00 each and is packed in boxes of 48.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

EXILE

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 17, 2007]

You know this cigar is different when you unravel its tissue wrapping to reveal a stylized copy of a front page of the *New York Daily Mirror* from 1962 with the headline "President orders a total embargo on Cuban imports."

Exile itself is offered with a choice of wrappers, including an Ecuadorian-grown Rosado-shade wrapper or a Connecticut Broadleaf maduro. We tried the maduro and found it medium-to-full in body with a powerful, spicy and peppery aroma.

In fact, this is simply a powerful cigar. There's a modest caramelized note in the flavor, but the Exile excels in bringing a spicy, peppery taste and finish to bear without being bitter or biting. That's impressive, but this is a cigar for experienced smokers who can appreciate and respect its strength.

It's heady and for many, is a cigar that has the strength that Cuban cigars are "supposed to have." But it's well-blended and burns evenly. Lovers of peppery cigars will find it enticing and even dramatic, not to mention well-priced from \$5.50 to \$8.50 each.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

FALTO LEGADO

[Dominican Republic: reviewed April 18, 2008]

The Legado blend was created in 2005 to mark the 10th anniversary of La Garita and is available only in a Corona Gorda size of 5 3/4 inches by 47 ring gauge. It's well made, featuring a Nicaraguan-grown wrapper and draws easily with a spicy aroma.

This is a pleasant cigar, nicely balanced with a creamy and sweet flavor and a dash of spice on the medium finish. With an even burn and a medium-to-full body, the Legado blend relaxes you and is never overpowering. It's easy to enjoy and offered in boxes of 25.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

FELIPE FELIPE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed April 20, 2007]

This is a darkly-dressed cigar with a Brazilian Arapiraca maduro wrapper. Introduced in 2005, it's full-bodied for sure with a rich aroma that reminds you of a strong coffee.

There is complexity in the taste, with a slight tang of sweetness and even a hint of spice on the finish to accompany a gentle mocha-like core, with a medium finish. The layering of these flavors is remarkable and additional spiciness come through in the second half of the cigar.

This is not a cigar that everyone will appreciate. But if you enjoy a complex arrangement of flavors in a heavier-bodied format, you won't be disappointed. Even the pricing is agreeable, between \$4.75 and \$5.50 each before any local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

FELIPE GREGORIO

[Nicaragua: reviewed October 2004]

This is a cigar to which the connoisseur will gravitate. Especially in the square-pressed Mystic Knights size, Philip Wynne has produced a blend which pops with pepper, yet is not bitter or explosive, thanks to an undertone of dark caramel. The middle third offers a complex, spicy taste with a sweet undertone, leading to a final third which can be heady. This is a hard cigar to rank because of its multi-layered nature that requires your full attention and is a symbol of how outstanding the full-bodied category is today.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

FELIPE POWER

[Dominican Republic: reviewed April 20, 2007]

The name of this 2006-introduced line is a little misleading.

If you're expecting an overpowering smoke that sets your palette on fire, forget it! The Felipe Power is full-bodied and comes in a series of large ring gauges, the smallest of which is 50. But it offers a light, even flavor with a slight lean toward caramel that provides an intriguing contrast with its presence in the mouth.

There's an unusual sweetness to this blend that's unusual and satisfying, due directly to the unique Pelo de Oro – "Golden Hair" – wrapper of ancestral Cuban seeds grown at the Tabacos de Cordillera in San Jose, Costa Rica. Wynne is the first manufacturer to create new blends with this leaf, but he won't be the last.

The smoothness of the flavor and consistency of the smoking experience are also remarkable. This is a mellow cigar that will be much better enjoyed indoors than outside so that the delicacy of the taste can be appreciated. There are plenty of sizes in the line, ranging from \$10 to \$15 before local tobacco taxes and packed in boxes of 26.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FLOR DE CANARIAS

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 29 June 2006]

This line is made by Altadis U.S.A. exclusively for the famed Iwan Ries & Co. of Chicago, Illinois. Well made, this is a mild-to-medium-bodied cigar with an easy draw and a toasty aroma featuring a Habana 2000-seed wrapper grown in Nicaragua.

The taste is marked with a lightly-caramelized flavor with a light finish. There's a pinch of spiciness as well, which can be off-putting if you draw too quickly or too hard. Take your time!

At \$1.10 to \$3.75 each depending on size, it's an excellent value and a fine daytime cigar, offered in both natural and maduro wrapper shades.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

FLOR DE GONZALEZ BLACK LABEL RESERVA SELECTA

[United States: reviewed June 22, 2007]

This is a maduro-wrapped blend using Connecticut Broadleaf for a medium-to-full body with a toasty, slightly spicy aroma.

There's a creamy taste at the core of this cigar, accented by just a hint of spice on the medium finish. Well made, this cigar burns very slowly and the longer sizes can tire you if you're looking for bright flavors or spicy highlights.

With an even burn and its creamy character, this is a gentle cigar despite its dark wrapper. There's a little more spice on the finish of the second half, but it's never aggressive. If you enjoy a cigar that lasts, with demure flavors, this is a good choice.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

FLOR DE GONZALEZ GREEN & WHITE LABEL

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 22, 2007]

The Green & White is a mild-bodied cigar that immediately impresses you with its spicy aroma and easy draw.

The blend features a clear, clean, caramelized flavor that's quite light, with a medium finish. It's well made, with a solid ash and an easy draw. It's consistent right to the end, with an even burn, offering a flavor that perhaps better characterized as creamy than caramel.

In any case, it's a delight and at suggested retail prices of \$3.00 to \$3.40 before local tobacco taxes, a fine cigar for a relaxing afternoon.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FLOR DE GONZALEZ GOLD LABEL

[United States: reviewed June 22, 2007]

This is the original blend conceived by Gonzalez when he opened his shop in Hialeah in 1993. It's medium-to-full in body and has a toasty, slightly spicy aroma to it.

The flavor is creamy and slightly sweet, but did not offer the highlights we enjoyed in the Green & White Label. This is a very well made cigar, with an easy draw and a fairly long finish.

But its light and reserved nature gives way to more spice and a peppery note in the second half. This is a sophisticated cigar that more experienced smokers may find rewarding and is reasonably priced at a suggested retail of \$4.40 to \$6.00 (before any tobacco taxes) except for the nine-inch Gigante (\$6.80).

Overall grade: B: Good.

FLOR DE GONZALEZ HABANIQUE RESERVA SELECTA

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 15, 2007]

This is a medium-bodied blend with a slightly spicy aroma and an easy draw.

The Habanique offers a creamy, slightly sweet taste that remains consistent throughout the cigar. There's a medium finish and a distinctive character to the taste. It's very well made and burns easily so that even the larger sizes won't tire you as you enjoy it.

There's just a tingle of spice near the end to signal it's time for another, or that your table should be ready . . .

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

FLOR DE GONZALEZ SANDWICH

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 22, 2007]

The Sandwich is a mixed-filler cigar which burns like a long-fill. There's a sweet aroma to this cigar and a medium body. This is a wonderful cigar and a fabulous find at a bargain price.

The flavor is sweet and caramelized right from the start. Well made, it burns easily and maintains a solid ash with rich and bright flavors. There's a note of spice well into the second half that signals the end of this cigar is near. But at \$1.00 to \$1.32 each in bundles of 25, who cares? Light up another; add this cigar to your list of remarkable values and with all of the sizes measuring from 7 to 7 1/2 inches in length, it's a perfect golf cigar.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FLOR DE JARDIN

[Honduras: reviewed July 14, 2006]

Created by cigar lover Michael Makens of Bedford, Texas in 2005, this is a mild-to-medium-bodied blend that has nothing special to recommend it. Until you smoke it.

Obviously well made, it's easy to light and burns perfectly. There's a light, easy taste of caramel from the start and a slightly spicy aroma that is an excellent complement.

Consistent in burn and taste, it rides along nicely. Its easy grace and steady flavor don't tire you out and even a hint of pepper that enters in the latter half is just a tickle that invites you back for another. Well conceived, well executed and a must-try for those who enjoy a lighter blend, or are big fans of Texas.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FONSECA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 June 2006]

Among today's relatively small circle of true mild-bodied cigars, Fonseca is one of the standard bearers. This is a smooth, easy-to-smoke cigar that offers relaxation, enjoyment and does not demand too much attention. Beautifully constructed, the ones we tried burn easily and will not tire you out.

The flavor is mild in body as expected, but with a pleasant, lightly caramelized taste. Don't puff too hard; the sweetest draws are often the shortest, especially on the spectacular Triangular, a 5 1/2-inch by 56-ring pyramid that can be scary to look at, but a joy to smoke.

There's a little hint of spice on the finish in mid-course, but nothing to worry about. Sit back and savor the gentility and class of this blend right to the end. Best of all, it leaves no heavy after-effects on the mouth or the head, so it's perfect when this cigar is only the start of the evening, not the end.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

FONSECA CUBANO VISO FUERTE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 29, 2008]

This is the second blend in MATASA's "Fonseca Cubano" series, aimed at the cigar enthusiast who looks for more flavor and more complexity. The Fonseca Cubano Limitado has been a hit since its debut in 2008 and the Viso Fuerte includes a unique combination of a Honduran-grown Criollo Viso wrapper with a filler blend that includes U.S.-grown Connecticut Broadleaf!

It's a medium-to-full-bodied blend with a nicely spiced aroma. The flavor includes a rich, caramelized note with a short finish. The clear and clean taste is inviting and there is a tangy finish as the cigar moves into the second half.

Very well made, with an even burn, the Viso Fuerte continues smoothly into the second half and develops a peppery element at the very end that signals that this show is over.

This is a very nice cigar that's also accessibly priced at \$5.25 to \$7.50 each, not including local sales or tobacco taxes, offered in all four sizes in boxes of 21.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

FONSECA SUN GROWN CEDAR

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 June 2006]

You would expect more power in a "sun grown" cigar and Quesada delivers. The Sun Grown Cedar line – with each cigar beautifully presented in a cedar sleeve – is medium-to-full in body and shows off a slow burn to make you pay attention.

It's worth it, though, as there's a rich, bright caramelized taste at the start, with just a slight undertow of spice to let you know it's there. It's as if the cigar is asking you to slow down so that it can be enjoyed completely.

There's a light, toasty aroma and the spicy elements are confined to the back of the tongue.

Naturally, the flavor flattens out a bit in mid-course, but it's still a rich smoke that's relaxing and stable to the end. Remarkably, for a fairly rich cigar, it also leaves very little impact on the smoker upon completion.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FONSECA VINTAGE COLLECTION

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 June 2006]

Using the same blend style as the standard Fonseca line, the Vintage Collection is aged for five years.

One would anticipate a even smoother smoke than the regular line with all that extra aging, but the depth of flavor is the noteworthy feature of our sampling. There is a gentle, caramelized taste

at the start, but it's easy to be overpowered by the taste if you take a heavy draw!

There's a long finish to each puff that underlines the sweetness of the blend and even the aroma has a slight sweetness to it that adds to the happy effect.

There's less sweetness in mid-course and even a hint of pepper, but very well controlled and easy to manage. With its added character (compared to the standard line) and characteristic absence of any lingering buzz, this would be an excellent after-lunch cigar in the Robusto (5 x 50) or Cetro (6 x 43) size.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FONSECA/MATASA 30TH ANNIVERSARY

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 June 2005]

To mark the 30th anniversary of the MATASA plant, a full-bodied version of the Fonseca line was designed and introduced in 2005.

It's a totally different kind of cigar from the red-label FONSECAS. This is a heavy-bodied, rock-hard billy club with a perfect draw and an incredibly slow burn.

The taste is powerful, with a slight sweetness and a peppery backdrop, plus a slightly peppery scent. It's interesting and draws you into the mystery of what's coming next.

But the tug of war between the sweet and peppery elements is never settled and continues right to the end of the smoke. This is not a cigar for the beginner and its subtlety – combined with its heft in construction and flavor – make it a late-evening pleasure for the experienced smoker.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

VEGAS DE FONSECA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed 16 June 2006]

The "Farms of Fonseca" was the first of the full-bodied Fonseca lines, originally released in 2000. It features a Cameroon wrapper, a bold Connecticut Broadleaf wrapper and both Dominican and Nicaraguan-grown ligero leaves in the filler . . . and you can taste it.

The power of this blend hits you right away and a peppery element is your introduction. This is a strongly-flavored cigar, but there is also a slight sweetness on the finish. The lightly-spiced aroma is pleasant and helps to keep the cigar from becoming overpowering.

Despite the peppery taste, the flavor is not aggressive and does not burn your tongue or throat like some other full-powered blends. That makes it "refined" in its own way, a considerable achievement on its own.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FUENTE FUENTE OPUS X

[Dominican Republic: reviewed October 2004]

The Tabacalera A. Fuente produced cigars that were ranked six times in our 2004 listing of the top full-bodied cigars and earned two of the top five places, but the hysterically-sought Opus X

was not among its best. It's a cigar for adults, for sure, showcasing a woody body accented with strong flavors of spice and pepper. The balance is complex and refined, showing its class, but its mood is more somber than celebratory. Well made, it's appropriately priced at its suggested retail prices of up to \$14.50, but not at the wildly-inflated prices it usually draws.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

FUNDACION ANCESTRAL – Vuelta Abajo 1940

[Costa Rica: reviewed February 15, 2008]

The different cigars developed by John Vogel at the Tabacos de la Cordillera in Costa Rica are named for specific seeds, matched to their location and year of debut in Cuba. The Vuelta Abajo 1940 model was delightful with a spicy and peppery aroma and a perfect draw and burn.

The taste was demure, with a toasty flavor that was astonishingly smooth and quite unique, with a slightly sweet, medium finish that offered just a hint of sweetness. Perfectly balanced, this is a full-bodied cigar that has perfect balance.

There is a peppery tone that enters the picture towards the end, but is never bitter or overpowering. This is an excellent daytime cigar as its flavors aren't so intense, but are always interesting.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent

FUNDACION ANCESTRAL – Pinar del Rio 1941

[Costa Rica: reviewed February 15, 2008]

The Pinar del Rio 1941 blend is medium-to-full in body and has a spicy aroma and showcases a spicy taste right from the beginning.

There's an element of sweetness as well and the spiciness never becomes irritating or tiring. These elements settle down in the second half into more of a balance that's quite nice and even mellow. It's impressive and different and shows a consistency in approach that's different and subtle.

Like all of the Fundacion Ancestral lines, distributed by Arango Cigar Co. of Northbrook, Illinois, these cigars aren't cheap with suggested retail prices of \$11.40 to \$11.85 each. But this is a unique blend that not quite like anything else you've tried..

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

FUNDACION ANCESTRAL – Artesima 1944

[Costa Rica: reviewed February 15, 2008]

There's no doubt that this is the lightest of the three Fundacion Ancestral blends and is medium in body. It has a spicy and an engaging flavor that shows a spark of fruit-like tang with a moderately spicy finish.

It's very well constructed and burns very well. The flavor moves toward the peppery side in the second half, but is never bitter and stays lights and easy to smoke.

BRAND REPORT CARDS: A-F

The tart flavor contrasts perfectly with the spicy aroma for a really interesting experience.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

FUNDADORES JAMAICA

[Jamaica: reviewed July 7, 2006]

This is the top-selling brand for Barrington House Int'l, and it's easy to see why. It's easy to smoke and, like Jamaica, is nice and relaxed.

The flagship Gold Label style offers a lightly caramelized flavor and has a spicy and sometimes pungent aroma. It's mild in body and is a nice, easygoing smoke.

If you have the opportunity, this is an excellent cigar to age for a year or so. The aged editions we tried offered a silky smooth finish over more recently-made cigars that exhibited some tartness. The aged cigars stayed consistent in taste and burn through the end. Either way, this is a very nice, very friendly cigar and well priced at \$4-6 each before local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.
