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BRAND REPORT CARDS

S-Z

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.

SANCHO PANZA

[Honduras: reviewed on October 21, 2005]

Made in the Villazon factory in Cofradia, Honduras, this version of Sancho Panza debuted in 2000. It’s square-pressed with a brown band, similar to that used on the Cuban version.

It’s medium in body and exhibits a slightly spicy aroma and excellent construction. The flavor leans to sweetness at the start, with a mildly caramelized taste and an undertone of spice.

The spicy element comes through more boldly in mid-course and the taste is balanced between a spiciness felt on the tongue and a caramelized flavor in the mouth.

This is a rustic cigar with an amiable personality that's easy to smoke and a great value at suggested retail prices of between \$3.60 and \$5.10, not including any local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

SANCHO PANZA DOUBLE MADURO

[Honduras: reviewed on October 21, 2005]

The "double maduro" reference is to the use of maduro-shade leaves for both the wrapper and binder in this blend, most readily identified by its yellow band.

It's fuller-bodied than the regular line, earning a rating of medium-to-full. It's also square-pressed.

The sweetness of the maduro wrapper and binder are easily recognizable and quite pleasant, with a note of spice on the finish.

But the flavor revs hotter as you approach midway, with the spicy elements taking command. The second half is dominated by the spicy, even peppery taste, which is augmented by a slightly spicy aroma.

The Double Maduro is a bold cigar, proud and assertive, that leaves subtlety behind. Lovers of coarse flavors will enjoy this blend and appreciate its value, at \$3.10 to \$4.65 each, before local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

SANCHO PANZA EXTRA FUERTE

[Honduras: reviewed on October 21, 2005]

"Extra fuerte" means more power in this cigar and it offers a medium-to-full-bodied taste, again with a squared shape.

The flavor is completely different from the other lines, however, yielding an understated, sweet taste at the start with a slightly sweet finish. The aroma features a hint of spice.

The overall impression can be considered mellow at first, but spicy elements emerge halfway and a tangy, more powerful taste is offered in the second half. The more intense flavor profile makes this an excellent everyday cigar for those looking for more character. Again, it's a superior value at \$2.85 to \$4.25 each before applicable tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

SANTA ROSA

[Honduras: reviewed June 2004]

Underrated, this blend edges toward a medium body with Honduran-grown binder and filler, but with a pleasing smoothness and price point.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

SAVINELLI EXTREMELY LIMITED RESERVE

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 11, 2006]

The Savinelli “ELR” was an immediate hit as soon as it hit the market in 1995, thanks to its excellent construction and flavorful blend created by the Tabacalera A. Fuente.

Very well made, ELRs have a spicy aroma and a definite caramelized flavor that’s rich with a sweet, long finish. It’s relaxed but not monotonous; it smokes slowly and evenly with a pleasant, enticing, sweet charm.

Medium in body, there’s a touch of spice to flatten the sweetness of the flavor in the second half of the cigar and some we tried had a peppery note on the aroma near the end. It was a nice way to end a terrific experience.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

SAVINELLI FUERTE

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 11, 2006]

The Fuerte came out in 2004 and was the second Nicaraguan blend to be offered under the Savinelli name. It’s made at Tabacos Puros de Nicaragua, well known for the Joya de Nicaragua lines.

This blend is forthright, with a medium-to-full body and plenty of character that becomes apparent as soon as you light it. Considering its maker, that’s no surprise.

The aroma is spicy, but not overwhelming. Rather, the lasting impression is of the presence of this blend in your mouth and the way it draws your attention. The flavor has a caramelized aspect, which can seem heavy if you draw too hard, but it’s just the fullness of the cigar that convinces you to ease off.

Given its power, the faint note of spice on the back of the throat during the second half is a welcome distraction. But the finish is consistent and can be heady if smoked right to the fingertips.

At suggested retail prices of \$3.75 to \$5.00 (before local tobacco taxes), the line can only be classified as an outstanding value, as well as a top-line cigar.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

SAVINELLI LIGA ESPECIAL

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 11, 2006]

This line debuted in 2005 and is also made at Tabacos Puros de Nicaragua. It’s double banded with the words “Liga Especial” (in Spanish, “special blend”) below the same band as on the Savinelli Fuerte.

The Liga has a dark, oily wrapper and showcases both caramelized sweetness and a spicy finish right from the start. This parallel taste experience offers a complexity that’s easy to appreciate and is accented by the richness of the caramel-like flavors in mid-course.

The flavors are more muted in the second half and the spicy aspects come out more strongly toward the close. It's once again a bargain at retail prices of \$4.50-\$5.75 each (before local tobacco taxes).

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

SAVINELLI NICARAGUA RESERVE

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 11, 2006]

First offered in 2002, this is the first of the Nicaraguan-made Savinelli lines and it is still going strong.

The line is all box-pressed, with rich-looking Nicaraguan-grown wrappers. But the body is medium and it features a very sweet flavor that's almost transparent in its purity, compared with the more common caramelized nature of many blends. It's an unusual and striking contrast and one worth discovering.

There's a dash of spice that comes into play in the second half, which is well balanced and makes the cigar a little more lively. Made by the Tabacalera Esteli, it's again well priced at \$3.50-5.50 each (before taxes).

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

SAVINELLI SPECIAL SELECTION

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 11, 2006]

The "Special Selection" 2004 debuted in 2005. Also double-banded, all three sizes are torpedoes, with pointed heads.

It's medium-to-full in body with a spicy aroma and an even burn. There's a very rich caramelized presence to the flavor which continues throughout most of the cigar. Although the blend fills the mouth, it's not heavy and leaves no mark on the head as you enjoy it.

As with the other Savinelli Nicaraguan-made blends, there's a little spice on the finish beginning in mid-course, but well balanced and under control. A little more expensive at \$5.00-5.50 (before local tobacco taxes) the Special Selection is just a pleasure.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

SOSA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 4, 2006]

Completely underrated, the Sosa flagship is just terrific.

There's a deep, rich, sweet caramelized taste to this cigar that's evident from the first puff. The flavor can be so intense as to be almost fruity and despite its sweetness, it can also be heady if you draw too long. That's remarkable for a medium-bodied cigar and will make you respect the blend even more.

There's a tang of spice on the finish in the second half that leads you gently to the end of the cigar . . . waiting for tomorrow, when you can enjoy another. At suggested retail prices of \$3.50 to \$5.40 each (except for the Piramide at \$6.80), you won't have to worry about affording them,

either.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

SOSA EXCLUSIVE SERIES

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 7, 2006]

This is also a medium-bodied cigar, but of a totally different nature.

The blend offers a balance of caramelized sweetness and spice, aided by a slightly spicy aroma that underlines the spicy nature of the finish. The taste is consistent from start to finish and the elegant balance is always maintained.

But don't draw too hard or you'll spoil the mood. The Exclusive Series is good, knows it and is in no hurry to prove it. Just relax and appreciate its obvious sweetness and the subtlety of the finish. Another bargain at \$4.00-6.00 suggested retail.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

SOSA SUPER SELECTION

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 7, 2006]

The Super Selection is an all-maduro line offered in varnished, all-cedar boxes, presented without cellophane. The Mexican-grown wrapper offers the expected sweetness on the tongue to start off with and is complemented by a spicy aroma.

It hums along nicely, but with a short finish that cuts the sweetness level to a rung below that of the Sosa and Exclusive Series. A touch of spice is evident in the second half and gives depth to this medium-to-full-bodied blend. The taste flattens out a bit in the final third.

At suggested retail prices of \$5.50 to \$7.00 (and the No. II torpedo at \$8.00), the Super Selection will fully satisfy the maduro lover looking for sweetness with a little bit of spice.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

SWISHER SWEETS

[Machine-made in the U.S.: reviewed September 11, 2006]

This Jacksonville, Florida tradition from Swisher International is the nation's largest-selling cigar. It's aptly named, as its sugary sweetness dominates the taste.

Made with homogenized tobacco leaf wrapper and binder, with short-fill tobaccos inside, the Sweets smoke quickly with a mild body, a medium finish and a slightly spicy aroma. But the sugar taste is direct and constant, although there is a touch of spice on the finish in the second half.

Swisher Sweets are forthright and honest. They are stunningly sweet and proud of it. Smokers looking for complexity and a toned approach to taste should look elsewhere and should be ready to pay more for it. The cigars we tried averaged 80 cents each, including California's 46.76% tax on the wholesale price.

Overall grade: C: Satisfactory.

TAMBORIL CONNECTICUT

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 19, 2005]

This was one of the brands which led the Cigar Boom when it debuted in 1996. Brilliantly packaged and showcasing a seriousness which was surprising for a new cigar company, it was a star until manufacturing, marketing and availability problems diminished its reputation and it faded away.

Now, Abraham Shafir, who created the original blend, has reintroduced it, right down to the prized Diablo size, a 7-inch by 47-ring beauty with a round head and a perfecto tip at the foot.

The Connecticut version is medium in body and has a rich, intense taste at the start with a tang of fruit-like sweetness that's inviting and deep. Complimented by a toasty, light aroma, it has a medium finish without a hint of bite or bitterness.

The rich flavor is endearing, even while receding in the middle third and keeps you wondering what the next puff will bring . . . right to the end. It's an interesting and entertaining cigar and priced right from \$2.00-\$2.70 retail (before local tobacco taxes). The Diablo is only \$2.50!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TAMBORIL SUMATRA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 19, 2005]

Immediately recognizable by its colorful red band and dark Sumatra-grown wrapper, the quality of manufacture is quite apparent and it's easy to smoke.

There is plenty of caramelized flavor to enjoy, with a gentle undertone of pepper that isn't so much tasted as felt on the tongue. This is a dignified and reserved blend; a "gentleman" of a cigar, with a short finish that should be smoked slowly.

While the caramelized tone remains predominant throughout, the peppery accent remains present, slightly amplified in the final third, but never argumentative or unpleasant. Well made and an excellent value at \$1.85 to \$2.50 each (before local tobacco taxes).

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

TATUAJE

[United States: reviewed June 8, 2007]

Here is the cigar – with a brown band – that has made so much noise since its introduction in 2004. It has a toasty aroma and a medium-to-full body with an excellent, easy draw.

There's a rich, caramelized taste to start with a long, bright finish. You'll remember the clear, high tones of sweetness that this blend can reach, inevitably receding in intensity, but with a clean, smooth finish.

There's a hint of pepper which enters the picture toward the end, but it's only the bracer for the end of a very pleasant experience.

This is an expensive cigar, offered mostly in boxes 25 at suggested retail prices of \$8 to \$22, depending on size.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TATUAJE RESERVA

[United States: reviewed June 8, 2007]

The Reserva line was also introduced in 2004 and is marked with a black second band added below the standard Tatuaje brown band.

This line features a toasty and slightly spicy aroma and delicate, almost fragile core of sweetness complimented by a light, clean finish. This is a calming cigar that asks for your attention to appreciate the complexity of the flavor.

Well made with an even burn, a note of spice enters the mix in the second half. The depth of this blend really requires that it be smoked indoors. It's offered at retail prices of \$11-12 each.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TATUAJE HAVANA VI

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 8, 2007]

Johnson introduced this line in 2006 as a less-expensive opportunity for smokers to enjoy the Tatuaje experience. He certainly succeeded and this red-banded edition offers an outstanding cigar in construction, draw and flavor.

There's a spicy aroma to start, with a rich, caramelized taste and just a touch of spice on the finish. It's medium-to-full in body and is smooth and balanced throughout.

The tight construction is evidenced by the long ash this cigar develops and the very slow-burning nature of this blend. It's offered in boxes of 24 at suggested retail prices of \$5.50 to \$8.00, and well worth it. The Havana VI blend may cost less, but it is no less of a cigar!

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TE-AMO – Natural wrapper

[Mexico: reviewed September 7, 2007]

Here is the famous Te-Amo brand, so well known throughout the U.S. and once one of the most popular brands in the country.

The tobaccos are all from Mexico and with a natural wrapper, the blend offers a medium body and a spicy aroma. The flavor is creamy with a note of sweetness and a medium finish, creating an enticing balance between the flavor in your mouth and the spicy scent on the nose.

Well made with an even burn and a nice draw, this is an easy cigar to smoke, but the flavors are not as stout as you might expect. But it's also a bargain at suggested retail prices of \$2.65 to \$4.85 each in sizes from the No. 4, a petit corona of 5 inches and 42 ring gauge, up to the massive C.E.O. at 8 1/2 inches and 52 ring.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TE-AMO – Maduro wrapper

[Mexico: reviewed September 7, 2007]

The maduro-wrapped version of Te-Amo only comes in three sizes: Churchill, Robusto and Toro, all in boxes of 25. Stock up now.

Mexican-grown maduro wrappers are among the world's most sought-after and for good reason. As demonstrated on the Te-Amo maduro line, it brings a direct and clear sweetness to a cigar and an enviable consistency in taste.

The Te-Amo maduro has a full body, but offers a perfect balance between a toasty and just slightly spicy aroma and a sweet taste with a note of caramelized flavor. It's smooth and consistent and offers just a tinge of spice near the end.

At retail prices of \$3.50 to \$4.00 each, it won't be hard to make this one of your regular cigars and you'll understand clearly why Altadis U.S.A. created Team Te-Amo from among some of the top U.S. Senior Tour golfers.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

TE-AMO ANIVERSARIO

[Mexico: reviewed September 7, 2007]

The Aniversario blend was introduced in 2000 and was one of the first Mexican-made cigars to include non-Mexican leaf, with Dominican and Nicaraguan filler leaves.

It's a bit stronger than the standard line, with a medium-to-full body and a dark Habana-2000 wrapper. The flavor has a tinge of sweetness which continues through the finish.

Well controlled, the flavor stays consistent throughout and ends when a peppery signals the end is near. This is a pleasant cigar that's easy to smoke, but is also modest and reserved. Careful smokers will enjoy it, along with the very reasonable retail pricing of \$4.20 to \$5.50 per cigar.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TE-AMO WORLD SELECTION – DOMINICANA BLEND

[Mexico: reviewed September 7, 2007]

The newest project from Te-Amo is the brand new World Selection, offering unique, themed blends on three different styles: Dominicana, Honduras and Nicaragua. They will debut in stores in October 2007.

The Dominicana Blend has a Connecticut Shade wrapper and is full-bodied with a Mexican maduro binder (!) and Dominican and Mexican filler tobaccos. There's a creamy and slightly caramelized taste that stays consistent to the end. There's just a pinch of spice that pops up in the second half that's actually quite entertaining.

The Dominicana selection has the quietest taste of the three World Selection blends, but for those who enjoy a lighter cigar, this could be a fine choice.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

TE-AMO WORLD SELECTION – HONDURAS BLEND

[Mexico: reviewed September 7, 2007]

The Honduras blend incorporates Honduran-grown leaf in the filler but features a Mexican-grown Corojo wrapper. There's a light, toasty aroma to this blend and a medium-to-full body.

There's a tingle of spice to this cigar with an undertone of light caramel in the background. It doesn't shout, however, but remains controlled, comfortable and even throughout. There's more balance between the caramelized and spicy elements in the second half.

The Honduras Blend is the most robust of the three World Selection styles, with plenty of character and appeal right to the end. Like all three styles, it's very reasonably priced at \$3.50 to \$4.00 per cigar.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

TE-AMO WORLD SELECTION – NICARAGUA BLEND

[Mexico: reviewed September 7, 2007]

The Nicaragua Blend has, of course, Nicaraguan-grown leaf in the filler, but has a Mexican-grown Criollo wrapper and Mexican maduro binder.

It offers a medium-to-full body and a notably spicy aroma. There's a fairly rich caramelized taste and an entertaining balance that comes from the spicy scent.

A note of spice enters on the finish in the second half, but this cigar is pleasant, well made and just tastes good.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TEMPLE HALL

[Dominican Republic: reviewed June 2004]

Its high quality is to surprise to those who know this great, mild-bodied brand. Wonderful to hold, easy to smoke, thoroughly enjoyable with an enviable smoothness.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

TOPPER DANLI

[Honduras: reviewed July 14, 2006]

Connecticut-based Topper Cigar Company has been making cigars since 1896! Long famous for its machine-made Topper and Rosedale lines, it has recently returned to handmade cigars, with its Danli line made in Honduras.

The ones we tried used medium filler, but burned well and were well constructed. Medium-to-full in body, the taste featured a hint of caramel and sweetness, but was too demure. There were highlights, but the cigars we tried lacked a consistent brightness of flavor that would grab our attention.

However, it's well made, well priced and easy to smoke: a good cigar. With a little reworking of the blend to offer a sharper flavor profile, it could be a winner.

Overall grade: B: Good.

TRINIDAD – Natural Wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 26, 2005]

The quality of the construction of this cigar comes across immediately. Perfect draw, even burn and a bright white ash are all evidence. There is a toasty aroma with a spicy element to it.

The blend is medium-to-full in body and features a caramelized flavor which can be quite tangy depending on the size. Its sweetness is most evident in the long finish. There isn't a trace of bitterness.

The flavor is mellower in mid-course and a bit of spice emerges around the halfway point. Connoisseurs will take their time with this cigar; puff too hard and it will tire you out. It's quite self-assured and the flavor doesn't have to shout to be appreciated.

Overall grade: A-:Excellent.

TRINIDAD – Maduro Wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 26, 2005]

This is also a very well made cigar, with a slow burn and a slightly spiced aroma. All of the maduro-wrapped shapes are box-pressed.

The influence of the maduro wrapper is apparent, as the caramelized flavor is a bit more intense than in the natural-wrapped version. The Trinidad Maduro blend is dignified, sometimes tangy, but never assertive.

Just a dash of spice is evident in the second half, but a nice balance is maintained. This is a robust cigar, full in body, but never aggressive. It will surprise you with its quality if you smoke it with patience.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TROYA – Cameroon wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 25, 2006]

The Troya line that was re-blended in 2004 is offered in both a Cameroon and Connecticut wrapper. All of the sizes are numbered and the Cameroon group includes three shaped cigars, nos. 36 (perfecto), 72 and 81 (both torpedoes).

The impact of the Cameroon wrapper is clear on these cigars, which offer a medium-bodied taste and a toasty, inviting aroma. The flavor offers a core of caramel, but is deeper and more subtle in the Cameroon version than in the Connecticut edition and is more present in the mouth.

There's a spicy element that develops on the finish in the second half that flattens out the taste a bit and ends the cigar on a more nuanced note.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

TROYA – Connecticut wrapper

[Dominican Republic: reviewed August 25, 2006]

Also introduced in its current blend in 2004, all of the Connecticut-wrapped Troyas are straight-sided cigars, from a 5 1/2-inch Corona to a full-sized, 7-inch double corona labeled as a Churchill.

The ones we tried were medium in body and burned beautifully, with a light, toasty aroma. The flavor was rich and well caramelized, with a long finish that carried the sweetness through to the next puff. It was easy to enjoy.

A spicy element developed as the cigar went along, starting on the finish, but eventually sharing the stage with the caramelized taste in the second half. Very well balanced, the addition of the spiced note gave an enjoyable crispness of flavor that continued through the end.

Best of all, the Connecticut line is very reasonably priced at a suggested retail of \$4.92 to \$5.58 each, before local tobacco taxes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

TROYA X-TRA

[Nicaragua: reviewed August 25, 2006]

Marked by a second half marked “X-Tra,” this blend debuted in 2004, giving extra heft to Troya smokers looking for a more powerful taste. Thanks in part to its Corajo ‘99 wrapper, mission accomplished!

The X-Tra is medium-to-full in body, but has a mild, toasty aroma. There’s a note of caramel once again in the taste, sweet with a medium finish. But there’s also an element of spice that broadens the flavor and expands past midway.

Bolder in the second half with spicy and peppery notes, the blend is well controlled, tingling the mouth with flavor and avoiding even a suggestion of bitterness. This is a very pleasant, well-made cigar that will be enjoyed best after evening meals when you can appreciate the progressive nature of the blend.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

VEGAS DE NICARAGUA

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 22, 2007]

The Vegas de Nicaragua was introduced in 2006 featuring an Ecuadorian-grown wrapper. The blend is medium-to-full in body and has a spicy aroma.

The flavor is quite unique, with a spicy taste on the tongue, balanced by a light, caramelized flavor on the medium finish. This balance is attractively maintained well into the second half, when a peppery element enters. However, the cigar is never harsh or aggressive and the balance of tastes is easy to appreciate. Suggested retail prices are quite reasonable and range from \$4.40 to \$4.80 each for a very nice cigar.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

VIBE

[Honduras: reviewed May 4, 2007]

Vibe is made under the supervision of Rocky Patel for United Tobacco and features a Nicaraguan-grown Corojo wrapper.

This blend has a slight sweetness in the flavor and a fairly bright taste that's pleasant and easy to enjoy. There's a creamy core that eases into a slightly spicy finish.

"Vibe" is a good name for this cigar as it's lively and fun with an even burn. It's also well-priced, at \$4.40 to \$5.70 each before local taxes.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

VIRTUOSO TORAÑO

[Nicaragua: reviewed June 23, 2006]

This brand debuted during the Cigar Boom, but was discontinued in 2000. Revived in 2005 with musically-themed shape names like Crescendo and Encore, it's medium in body but lacks the brightness of flavor of the other lines.

Well made, the Virtuoso features a toasty aroma and a light, slightly caramelized flavor with a spicy finish. It tastes good, but it's mellow and relaxed. This is a solid, quality performer, but on a team of superstars, it doesn't stand out.

Overall grade: B+: Very Good.

VISTA DE CUBA

[Dominican Republic: reviewed July 13, 2007]

The Vista de Cuba line was introduced in 2005 and is a unique brand in that it is co-owned by Oliveros and the independent sales representatives who sell it to smokeshops across the nation. We found it to be a surprising delight.

The taste features a light creamy tone with a medium finish that's enviably smooth and is accented by a slightly spicy aroma. Despite being of medium body, this is a mild and composed cigar, easy to enjoy with an excellent draw and an even burn.

There's a modest note of pepper that comes in during the second half, but the blend never moves toward spiciness or anything harsh. Even the price is smooth, with suggested retail pricing of \$5.50 for the 42-ring Corona up to \$6.50 for the 56-ring Belicoso.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

WHITE OWL

[Machine-made in the U.S.: reviewed September 11, 2006]

Made by Swedish Match in Dothan, Alabama, White Owls date back to 1887. Of the three market-leading machine-made brands we sampled, this brand was a bit more complex and offered a mild-to-medium-bodied smoke.

Like the Phillies and the Swisher Sweets, White Owl uses a homogenized tobacco leaf wrapper and binder and short filler. The top is pierced and there is a toasty aroma to go along with a slightly sweet taste.

You really don't notice this cigar much as you smoke it and the flavor is without complexity and rather one-dimensional. That doesn't make it a bad cigar, just an ordinary one that can be smoked easily to pass the time of day.

Overall grade: C: Satisfactory.

ZINO CLASSIC

[Dominican Republic: reviewed September 28, 2007]

The Zino Classic is the newest of the Dominican blends, introduced in 2006 with a nod to the history of the brand, featuring an Ecuadorian-grown wrapper and binder and filler leaves from Honduras, site of the previous Zino production.

We found the new Zino Classics a delight, with a medium body and a toasty and spicy aroma. There's a rich, caramelized style to this blend that continues through a fairly long finish.

As you would expect from a Davidoff-made cigar, the Zino Classic exhibits a perfect draw and even burn, making it a pleasure to smoke. The flavor remains lively, with its rich, sweet taste continuing right through to the end. There's only a pinch of spice noted in the second half, just accenting the finish.

The Classic comes in six shapes, four of which are available in elegant, all-black aluminum tubes. The best way to try the brand might be the new Tubos Assortment: one each of all four tubes for a suggested retail price of \$27.40 plus local tobacco taxes. Or try the individual cigars; at suggested retail prices of \$5.00 to \$8.70 each, they're well priced for what you get.

Overall grade: A+: Outstanding.

ZINO CONNOISSEUR • *Discontinued*

[Honduras: reviewed September 28, 2007]

Just for comparison's sake, we had to try one of the Honduran-made Zinos. We chose the gold-banded Connoisseur line, which ended production in 2005.

It's medium in body with a toasty and just slightly spicy aroma and a bright, buttery taste. There's only a hint of spice on the finish and even then you have to look for it.

Like today's Zinos, it burns perfectly and maintains its rich flavor to the end, fading just a bit in the second half. Both the Connoisseur and Mouton-Cadet styles were well made and much admired and we miss them both; don't hesitate to pick some up if you find them on a store shelf somewhere!

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

ZINO PLATINUM CROWN

[Dominican Republic: reviewed September 28, 2007]

This brand shocked the cigar world when it was introduced in 2003. Not only was the

manufacture of Zinos in the Dominican Republic a surprise, but so were the suggested retail prices of the Platinum Crown series: from \$27.00 to \$39.00 per cigar! That's higher than any of the celebrated Davidoff (White Label) lines!

These had better be stupendous cigars.

The small shape range and attention to detail of this line is remarkable. The packaging is spectacular and the shapes are totally modern: the 8 1/4-inch by 50-ring Stretch (\$39 each); the 7 1/2-inch by 50-ring Double Grande (\$30), the fat 6-inch by 60-ring Barrel (\$27), and the star of the line, the sensational, bulbous 5 7/8-inch by 61-ring Chubby Especial perfecto (\$35).

Once lit, there's a slight spicy aroma and a medium-to-full body that demands your attention. The flavor is rich and caramelized off the start with a splash of spice on the finish. It's very well balanced, especially considering the depth of flavor and stays consistent well into the second half.

Of course, the draw is easy and the burn is even, especially on the Chubby. There's just a hint of pepper that creeps in during the second half as an accent and signals the hidden power of this blend. Don't oversmoke a Platinum Crown, or your head will feel it later.

These are gorgeous cigars designed to the highest standards; whether they are worth the price is an individual decision. But they are, without doubt, of the very finest quality.

Overall grade: A: Exceptional.

ZINO PLATINUM SCEPTER

[Dominican Republic: reviewed July 2004]

Enjoy a solid core of medium-bodied flavor with a chaser of spice on the finish. The spicy undertone accelerates throughout the cigar, but is never out of control or harsh. Great balance.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.

ZINO PLATINUM SCEPTER II

[Dominican Republic: reviewed September 28, 2007]

The Platinum Scepter line was introduced just after the Platinum Crown series in 2003 and is more accessible in price at \$7.50 to \$15.00 each.

It's medium-to-full in body and has a spicy aroma. There's a fresh, clean taste to this blend, with an Ecuadorian wrapper and Connecticut binder, and a short finish. The flavor has a caramelized tilt with a dash of spice on the finish that you'll feel on your tongue.

The balance of sweetness and spice is quite impressive and is easy to appreciate thanks to the flawless draw and even burn. The spicy elements move forward in the second half, but are never aggressive and always well moderated. This is an elegant cigar and one which should be smoked patiently to enjoy all of its attributes.

Overall grade: A-: Excellent.