

Cubanos, Habanos, Havanas, ISOMs – whatever you call ‘em, one thing is for sure: The forbidden fruit of Cuba is considered a holy smoke by lovers of the leaf throughout the US. What *is* it that draws so many Americans to the contraband Cuban cigar?

THE CUBAN MYSTIQUE

by Tom Zarzecki

My friend Eddie’s annual backyard pig roast is always the event of the summer but this year’s was extra special. Through a contact at a local airport, Ed’s boss made a *mucho grande* score: two pristine boxes of real-deal Cohiba Esplendidos.

Well, it was a magnificent day in August and all the cronies were there; I find a pig roast to be such a primal sort of gathering. Like some ritual from the Cro-Magnon era, the males of the species hovered over the kill. As we noshed on charred flesh from the rotating carcass and guzzled our favorite swill, I couldn’t stop thinking about the contraband that was due at any moment. Then, like a sentinel from the *isla de Cuba*, the boss man

appeared with a package tucked neatly under each arm. I started bopping around like a kid on Christmas morning while babbling like an incoherent fool. Okay, it’s true... my wife thinks I’m an ass, but let’s gets something straight: I love cigars. I love Cuban cigars... especially illegally smuggled Cohiba Esplendido Cuban cigars.

“Open ‘em, Eddie! Open ‘em!” the brazen mob demanded.

So, without haste, Eddie did just that. As he pried open the cedar lid, I envisioned scenes from *Pulp Fiction* – you know, when each time they opened Marsellus Wallace’s briefcase, a golden ethereal light glazed their faces. But when Eddie



pulled back the box top the only thing that glazed my face was the look of a kid who just found coal in his stocking. The so-called Cohibas were about as “real deal” last year’s price on Enron stock.

First off I’ve smoked enough Cohibas to know that the wrapper is *not* basement-door gray; I had never seen a goddamned gray cigar before! And secondly the bands looked as if some third grader cranked them out on his iMac. I fully expected the crowd to turn ugly. But much to my astonishment the Cro-Mags devoured the “faux-hibas” while praising Ed’s boss for his cunning cross-border maneuver. I was in total shock. Didn’t these oafs know they were hoodwinked? Couldn’t they tell this was bogus? *Did they even care?*



JFK puffs on what could be one of the US’s last legally obtained Cuban cigars.
Photo © Bettmann/CORBIS

Now it’s common knowledge that Cubano cigars are the best, right? And if Eddie’s boss knows a guy at the airport they’ve got to be the real deal... right? This whole situation really had me questioning my own love for Habana puros. Are they really the finest cigars in the world? Or is it just because tradition and lore say so that we believe it is so? The pig-roast primates acted as if they were smoking gold dust. If Eddie had told them the cigars had been rolled in Poland there wouldn’t have been a single taker in the bunch.

There’s no question that handmade Cuban cigars have an incredible mystique behind them, especially here in the United States. When I travel to Toronto, Canada on business the first item on my agenda is always to pick up some Habanas. They’ve actually got supermarkets with beautiful walk-in

humidors filled to the rafters with Fidel’s finest: Monte No. 2s to the left, Hoyo Double Coronas to the right, Partagás Serie D above and Vegas Robaina below. Who the hell needs Viagra?! A shopkeeper once said to me: “I can always tell who the Americans are. You people go crazy when you come in here.” Maybe it’s just that innate human urge: We greatly

Are they really the finest cigars in the world? Or is it just because tradition and lore say so that we believe it is so?

desire what we’re not allowed to have – a kind of forbidden fruit mentality.

The reason that Cuban cigars are *prohibido* in the US is of course a decision made by our thirty-fifth president Mr. John Fitzgerald Kennedy. There’s a terrific story behind the entire ordeal and no one could ever tell it better than JFK’s very own press secretary, the late Pierre Salinger. In published accounts and interviews, Salinger himself tells the story of the somewhat comical adventure that changed the lives of Cuban citizens right to this very day.

Not too long after the Bay of Pigs disaster President Kennedy called Salinger into his office, asking the young press secretary to go on a secret mission:

“I need a lot of cigars,” Kennedy stated.
“How many, Mr. President?”

“About one thousand Petite Upmanns.”
(The Cuban Petite H. Upmann was the president’s smoke of choice.)

When Salinger inquired about the time frame of this bizarre task, Kennedy simply replied: “Tomorrow morning.”

Salinger himself a lover of the Cuban leaf knew all the shops in the Washington, DC area. At eight o’clock the following morning the president asked to see him. Quite pleased with his score, Salinger proudly told his boss that he had managed to round up twelve hundred Havana beauties. Then, with a big smile, the commander in chief drew a long sheet of paper from his desk, which he signed immediately. That paper was none other than the decree that banned all Cuban goods from entering the United States. The embargo had officially begun.

The president’s new mandate caused incredible problems for American cigar factories, as well as for citizens whose palates



A factory worker stamps a finished box with those three mystical words: *Hecho en Cuba*.
Photo © Patrick Roberts/Sygma/CORBIS

demand the flavorful zest of fine Cuban smokes. Story has it that actor Milton Berle (a ten to fifteen a day Havana junkie) caught wind of the forthcoming declaration a few weeks before it came to be. Reportedly horrified by the news, he went on a wild buying spree throughout New York City, stockpiling as many Cuban cigars as he possibly could.

Of course, the embargo directly necessitated the growing and production of handmade cigars in new destinations like the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Mexico. But even though some of today’s finest cigars come from the aforementioned growing regions, we Americans still lust for the commodity we’re not allowed to have.

Speaking from personal experience, the Cuban cigar is an acquired taste. Much like gaining appreciation for fine wines, most people start out nice and light – perhaps a Connecticut shade wrapper – then slowly graduate to fuller-bodied brands. To the untrained palate, Cubanos are, for the most part, incredibly strong and harsh. I distinctly remember my very first Habana – it was about ten years back at a trendy little bar in downtown Houston. After a hearty steak dinner, my client handed me a Bolivar Corona Gigante. Although I was a *virgin de la Cuba*, that damned billy club was so dark and oily, it literally seduced me into smoking it. But after no more than ten minutes, the room actually started moving on its own while the young barkeep inquired if all residents of New Jersey had putrid green complexions like mine. Feeling certain that someone had slipped me a Mickey, I proceeded to hurl my Ruth’s Chris rib eye. I vividly remember swearing up and down that I would never again smoke a Cuban cigar – never, ever, I lied.

Can someone please explain to me what in God’s name makes a man have irrepressible cravings for the very thing

that made him toss his cookies a decade earlier? What is it that brings about this almost carnal desire for tobacco that’s produced just ninety miles south of Key West? I’ve heard many people, including golfing buddies of mine who enjoy a Cohiba every once in a while, say that they catch a pretty hefty, yet relaxing, buzz from the occasional Cuban treat. Well, a few years ago, a surgeon friend actually corroborated what I thought was a myth. A big cigar smoker himself (aren’t all doctors?), he told me that the mineral lithium had a large presence in Cuban soil, and that each cigar carries approximately .275 megagrams of the metallic substance. He said that this is

a main cause for some of the intriguing reactions people may occasionally have when they spark up a Cubano. After doing a little internet research, I found out from several agricultural sites that there is indeed a high presence of lithium in the island’s soil. So I went even further. After surfing several pharmaceutical sites, I found that lithium is used to treat people suffering from the turbulent mood swings of manic depression. Its purpose is to bring a calming effect to those suffering from hyperactivity, but it can also elevate one’s depressive mood. This lends credence to a couple of interesting points: There’s a relaxing quality a Havana can bring about, as well as one that can just plain lift your spirits. Oh, and it also noted that it can cause adverse effects such as dizziness, nausea, and vomiting (no kidding!).

For hundreds of years, entertainers, athletes, and politicians

I vividly remember swearing up and down that I would never again smoke a Cuban cigar – never, ever. I lied.

alike have publicly declared their unbridled passion for Cuba’s greatest gift. Acclaim, popularity, and even dignity have been bestowed upon the island treasure. I’ve heard radio icon Rush Limbaugh refer to it as “the best tobacco in the world – no comparison.” On movie sets, Arnold Schwarzenegger has hooked many nonsmoking actor buddies on his favorites, Monte No. 2 and Punch Punch. Business tycoon J.P. Morgan literally smoked dozens of his favorite Habanas a day. A bit later in life, the savior of Wall Street had a terrible cold and

THE CUBAN MYSTIQUE

his doctor insisted he cut down severely on his tobacco intake. Morgan took his physician's advice and reduced his pleasure down to a mere twenty sticks per day. Rudyard Kipling was so enamored with Havanas that he penned the famed poem "The Betrothed," a story that poses a quandary, as the author must choose between his dear wife Maggie and his sacred Cubanos:

*And I have been servant of love for
barely a twelvemonth clear*

*But I have been Priest of Cabañas a
matter of seven year*

A man after my own heart! The author especially took a lot of heat for the famed line: "And a woman is only a woman, but a good Cigar is a Smoke." Once, when asked what he would do if his wife objected to his Cuban habit, Kipling simply replied: "Get a new wife."

I'd have to say the world's most exalted devotee of Cuban cigars would be none other than Sir Winston Churchill; old Winnie was an absolute zealot about his stogies. Rarely seen without a mammoth club protruding from his jaw, it was estimated that the prime minister consumed more than three thousand cigars per year! That's a quarter of a million over the span of his lifetime (a life

that he enjoyed for ninety years, thank you). The guy burnt so many holes in his silk pajamas that his wife actually made him a cigar bib to wear in bed. He even had the Royal Air Force create an oxygen mask that would accommodate his addiction during high-altitude flights. After the Nazi blitz on London in 1941, enemy bombs all but blew the famed Dunhill cigar shop to pieces. At two in the morning, Alfred Dunhill himself telephoned Sir Winston, informing him, "Your cigars are safe, sir." (Talk about your preferred-client status!) His favorite size was seven by forty-eight, which the Romeo y Julieta factory in Havana aptly named the "Churchill" in his honor.

So what is it that really makes Cuban cigars different than, better than, or superior to those of other nations? If you talk with any well-versed cigar enthusiast he'll tell you, it's the sheer complexity of the Cuban cigar. A perfectly aged Havana is medium, to fuller-bodied, possessing a certain depth and

balance that ignites the senses. Appreciation of a well-made Cuban cigar has many similarities to that of experiencing a fine wine. Much like a bottle of rich cabernet, a freshly lit Cubano often starts out zesty on the palate, then suddenly opens up with an explosive powerhouse of flavors. More than halfway through, it begins to round out, culminating in a smooth, enjoyable finish.

Obviously there are terrific cigars, full of character and flavor, from Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. But as flavorful and aromatic as these smokes are, I still feel they don't have the depth of a Cuban Hoyo Double Corona, Partagás Serie D Robusto, Trinidad Fundadore, or the new Montecristo Edmundo. So, I ask once more: What is it that makes them different, better, superior? Seeking some tangible evidence, I took a trip to the Habanos S.A. website to see if it could shed some light on the subject. Here's a direct quote from the site, explaining their position on Cuban tobacco's alleged supremacy:



Rarely seen without a mammoth club protruding from his jaw, it was estimated that the prime minister consumed more than 3,000 cigars per year.

Photo © Bettmann/CORBIS.

"Numerous attempts to achieve the standards of an authentic Cuban cigar in other areas of the world with seeds of Cuban origin have failed to attain its unequalled quality. These same elements:

the harmonious combination of the sun, the average temperature, atmospheric humidity, soil and subsoil composition are those which make the quality of the Cuban cigar both in terms of agriculture and manufacturing, unique to Cuba."

So, much like regions in France that grow the very finest grapes, Cuba enjoys the world's consummate tobacco-growing ecosystem.

All right, students – we've all passed our science exams, but what about the origin of the Cuban cigar as we know it today? How did this fascinating mystique come about and when did it actually begin? Well, if you look beneath the fiery-colored Habanos S.A. logo, you'll find a tag line, which in essence is a history lesson unto itself: "Unicos desde 1492," ("Unique since 1492") refers to the genesis of Cuban cigars, for it was Christopher Columbus who visited the island that very same year. Upon his return to Europe, he told of Cuban

natives who inhaled the smoke of a burning plant they called “cohiba.” In the early 1500s, several renowned explorers sought to find tobacco and deliver it to their European homelands. By the end of the sixteenth century, countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, and England were completely infatuated by its intoxicating qualities. But it wasn't until the early eighteenth century that cigars were produced in Spain in the manner we know today.

Cigars finally reached North America around 1762. Revolutionary War hero Israel Putnam returned to Connecticut after his tour of Cuba with the British army, toting a hefty batch of fine Habanas along with an abundance of Cuban seed. At the end of the war and with newfound independence, Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut became home to the very first American cigar factories.

Around the time of the Civil War, the tax on cigars was quite high, and good stogies were mostly enjoyed by only the wealthy and refined. But after the war, the government cut back on the tariffs, making it affordable for the average person to enjoy a smoke. Cuban tobacco was plentiful and cigarmakers cropped up in record numbers. In Joe Davidson's book *The Art of the Cigar Label* the author states that by 1905, there were over seventy thousand cigar factories registered with the US federal government, and an estimated thirty thousand more who didn't even bother to register. In 1906, cigar sales were at seven billion units sold in the US to a population of only eighty-five million! Those numbers may seem staggering, but you have to remember that almost every man of that day enjoyed many a cigar (back then, the makers of Altoids and Febreze would have had a field day).

Before the turn of the century, cigar companies boasted their sumptuous Havana long filler. But they soon realized there was a great need to differentiate themselves from the onslaught of competition. Scores of brands carrying unique monikers and in boxes displaying a wide variety of artistic subject matter were introduced to consumers. The once-drab wooden cigar box was transformed into a brilliantly colored piece of display advertising. Manufacturers appointed the world's finest printers and lithographers to create ornate images, luring would-be customers into procuring their smokes. They even went as far as embossing their artwork with actual gold-leaf foil, projecting a feeling of superior quality.

In 1920, the cigar industry in the US reached its pinnacle with 8.2 billion units sold. Subsequently, the sale of cigarettes surpassed cigars that very same year. It has been said that cigar sales began to decline during World War I, when General Pershing claimed that cigarettes “made for better soldiers”; henceforth, every fighting man had sinner sticks issued as part

of his daily rations. Our boys got hooked and, as a result, so did most of post-war America.

As cigar sales declined over the years, many Americans still continued their love affair with fine Havana puros. But something happened in September of 1960 that changed the industry forever: A defiant, bushy-faced rebel named Fidel Castro ordered his khaki-clad henchmen to seize control of all family-owned cigar factories in the name of the revolution. The great cigarmakers of the day – Cifuentes, Toraño, Menendez, Palicio – were forced into exile, leaving their beloved homeland with nothing more than the shirts on their backs. As they settled in places like the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Tampa, Miami, Honduras, and the Canary Islands, the new Cuban government was now in control of all cigarmaking operations. The Cubatabaco firm was created and the nationalization of the Cuban cigar industry had begun.

Over the last four decades, even the harshest critics of the Castro regime claim that the cigar is one of the only things the communist government has ever done right (guess we may as well touch on political science while we're at it...). There are



A Pinar del Rio farmer hangs his harvest of lush Cuban leaf
Photo © Peter M. Wilson/CORBIS

those here in the US who are quite vocal about their hopes of having the long-running embargo finally lifted. During the Clinton administration, there were constant rumors that JFK's mandate would finally come to an end. That never happened. George W. Bush, however, tightened the reins on the island nation even further. The theory is that the Cuban people themselves will finally revolt against their longtime dictator – something the last nine US presidents had hoped for. Under the prior regulations, US citizens with family in Cuba could obtain a specific license, enabling them to make multiple visits to the island. They were also allowed to bring back up to one



Cuba's bushy-faced dictator enjoys a real deal Cohiba, 1977.
Photo © Wally McNamee/CORBIS

hundred dollars' worth of merchandise (generally, two boxes of cigars) for their own personal consumption.

New rulings issued by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) basically say that Cuban-Americans traveling to the island require a specific license that will only authorize highly restricted travel. Visits can only be made to members of the traveler's immediate family just one time during a three-year period, measured from the last departure from Cuba. And the longest they are permitted to stay is fourteen days. But, more importantly for you worshippers of the heavenly Havana, smoke on this: In October of 2004, the US Department of the Treasury's OFAC issued the following statement: “There is now an across-the-board ban on the importation of Cuban origin cigars.” This basically means that even those granted travel to Cuba are forbidden to bring back even one measly cigarillo. “The question is often asked whether United States citizens or permanent resident aliens of the United States may legally purchase Cuban goods, including tobacco and alcohol products, in a third country for personal use

outside the United States,” the notice said. “The answer is NO!”

Holy ligerero! Big Brother's playin' one mean game of hardball. And, just to sprinkle a little vinegar on the wounds, the department also added that breaking the rules can lead to criminal penalties, including fines of up to one million dollars for corporations and \$250,000 for individuals, and up to ten years in prison! (Uh... could somebody pass me a nice “Dominican-made” stogie, please?) So, for the record, folks, if you find yourself sitting at the blackjack table while vacationing in the Bahamas, and that cute little cigar girl shows you her tray of goodies, you simply say: “Jeez, ma'am, thanks – but no thanks! I'd be committing a felonious deed against my native land.” Insane, you say? How can they realistically enforce a measure like this, you ask? I'm not really sure myself, but there's no question that our government is doing everything it can to stick it even further up Castro's Caribbean culo.

Now, just as there are those who demand the removal of the embargo (many of whom risked their lives during the Mariel Boatlift of the early eighties), there are scores of Cuban Americans who have sought quite the opposite: I have personally spoken with several Cuban-born American citizens (those whose families left Cuba for good, prior to Castro's closing the door in the early 1970s) who actually want to see even tougher restrictions set upon their onetime home. The bottom line is that they detest Fidel Castro and everything he has ever stood for. Agreeing with the moves of President Bush, they live for the day that the dictator's reign will finally see its demise.

Yeah, I got a little heavy here with the social studies... but you've got to realize that all of this has so much impact on whether Americans will ever be able to legally enjoy a good Cuban cigar. And even with all these new rules and regulations,

The great cigarmakers of the day – Cifuentes, Toraño, Menendez, Palicio – were forced into exile, leaving their beloved homeland with nothing more than the shirts on their backs.

some things are still ambiguous. You mean to tell me if I invite a few of the boys over for a night of Texas Hold 'Em, and we indulge in some Hoyo Churchills, my pals and I are aiding and abetting the enemy? And what about *Cigar Aficionado* magazine? Their reviewers have rated Cuban cigars for years! (May I just say that I am yet to taste hints of orange zest, earth, marzipan, or notes of caramelized anything in my Esplendido? But hey, that's a whole other discussion.)

I decided to contact US Customs via the web and ask

for some *real* clarification on the rules: Is it actually illegal to smoke or even just possess a Cuban cigar? Is the law only aimed at purchasing, smuggling, and dealing? Well, here's the reply I got straight from the source's mouth (i.e. an e-mail from a rep at Customs): *"It is illegal for US persons to buy, sell, trade or otherwise engage in transactions involving illegally-imported Cuban cigars. The penalties for doing so include, in addition to confiscation of the cigars, civil fines of up to \$55,000 per violation and in appropriate cases, criminal prosecution which may result in higher fines and/or imprisonment."* The interesting thing here is that there is no mention whatsoever about simply possessing or smoking the cigars. In fact, the agent who e-mailed me neglected to answer that part of my inquiry. Obviously it's the purchasing and importing that gets 'em a little hot under those heavily starched collars. There's nothing that states it's an infraction to merely smoke them... not yet, anyway. So, while this news will make the Punch pounders and Julieta junkies breathe a tad easier, please realize this truth: Until Fidel Castro goes to that great shaded wrapper tent in the sky, it's going to get tougher and tougher to find real-deal Cuban cigars here in America.

With the intensity that Castro's cojones are being squeezed, it's my theory that counterfeit cigars in the US will become a greater problem than ever before. As we now know, the risk of smuggling real Cubanos comes with a potential hefty price tag. Plus, if one *does* manage to bring them in from places like Canada, their taxes are so damned high that the resale markups would be completely insane. So, the most affordable way for the bad guys to make money is to produce cheap imitations. Made with inferior scrap tobacco, the bogus Bolivars fetch incredibly high profit margins. Plus, if convicted, the criminals will be dealing with tax evasion as opposed to the unnerving fate of being tried for treason. Remember when I said that we greatly desire what we're not supposed to have? The hunger will become maddening for those who pine for Partagás, and counterfeiting may become more lucrative than in the past.

What's truly amazing is that the greatest number of counterfeit Cuban cigars comes from Cuba itself. The problem has escalated to the point where the government has taken special measures to hunt down the perpetrators. Even with secretive box codes and hologram labeling, Cubatabaco is fighting a tough battle. The dilemma is that massive amounts of fraudulent Habanas are making their way into Europe. With cigars being the third-highest-grossing export of the island nation, this kind of bad press could blow a monstrous hole in its already fragile economy. In late May of 2004, the Cuban

National Police and Customs authorities announced that they had carried out a series of raids around Havana, successfully shutting down over 150 underground factories. In the raids, they confiscated close to twelve thousand boxes of counterfeit cigars bearing the most popular brand names. But one of the things most troubling to officials was that the quality of the fakes was almost indistinguishable from that of the genuine product.

One has to wonder why on earth the Cuban counterfeiters would take such life-threatening risks. I asked my first-generation Cuban friend to lend a little insight. The reason is obviously financial, as the common man in Cuba lives in terrible poverty. Manufacturing counterfeit cigars pays a higher wage than any menial government job could.

But if they're so impoverished, how do they get the materials to produce such exquisite forgeries? From people who work in the government-run cigar factories, that's how. Many involved are factory employees who double as insiders for the counterfeiting rings; they steal the materials needed to produce the goods, including whatever scrap tobacco they can get their hands on. That would explain why the boxes and bands look authentic... because they are! And the rollers of the pseudo-Cohibas are highly trained, so the finished product is pretty convincing. But even though real Cuban tobacco is used, the end result is not a bona fide, box-aged Esplendido or Monte No. 2.

Habanos S.A. (formed in 1994, with the goal of aggressively increasing worldwide distribution of Cuban cigars) is taking great measures to protect its coveted brands. At the writing of this article, there are thirty-two trademarked names listed

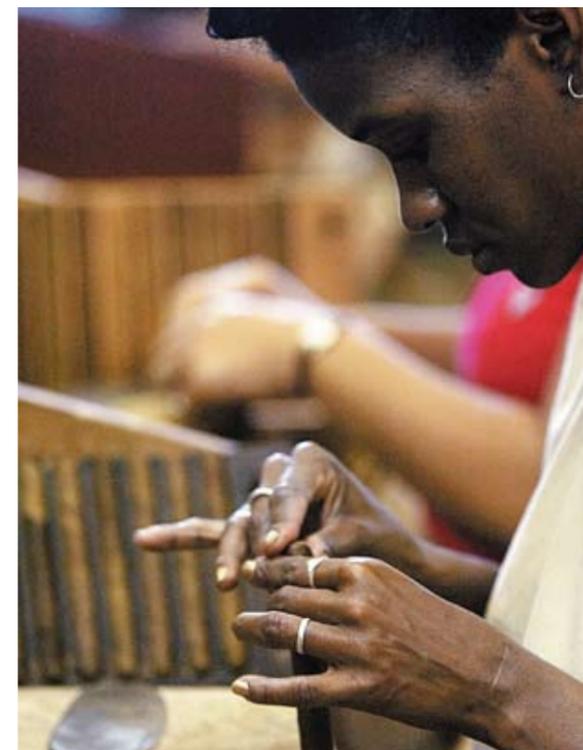
What's truly amazing is that the greatest number of counterfeit Cuban cigars comes from Cuba itself.

on their website: Montecristo, Hoyo de Monterrey, Punch, Romeo y Julieta, and Partagás are all renowned best sellers, but no cigar has ever experienced the overwhelming fanfare of the prestigious Cohiba, the flagship of Cuban cigars that was first created in 1966 for Fidel Castro himself. With assassination attempts becoming a daily threat, the commander appointed his finest and most trusted roller, Eduardo Rivera, as his personal cigarmaker. This ensured Fidel's safe enjoyment, as well as the safety of the many diplomats and foreign dignitaries to whom he presented his coveted gifts. It wasn't until 1982 that the now-hallowed puro was released to the public as a commercial brand and the very first release of the

post-revolution era. One interesting fact that separates the Cohiba (which is without a doubt the most counterfeited Cuban brand) from all its Cuban cousins is that it's the only Havana whose leaves are triple fermented, as opposed to the usual double fermentation. The distinctive school-bus yellow and black-and-white checkered band has become the industry's symbol for quality and excellence.

Although Cuba is considered the world's preeminent tobacco-producing nation, it wasn't too long ago that Habanos products started getting a pretty bad rap... and rightfully so. During the Cigar Boom of the nineties, demand was at an all-time high. Government-run factories were at full capacity, cranking out cigars in record numbers. Materials for a good cigar take a certain amount of time to grow, cure, and ferment, plus, on an island that size, there are only so many hands experienced enough to roll quality cigars – so it's no secret that they started taking short cuts. The results were all too apparent: Proper aging of the tobacco was drastically reduced and opening a fresh box was all the proof one needed. The stench of ammonia was enough to knock you senseless and the trademark cedar and coffee-bean flavors were replaced with distinctive notes of acid reflux and putting green! Rollers who once produced one hundred cigars a day were forced to substantially increase their daily workloads. I sure as hell would hate to smoke the two hundredth cigar rolled by Javier after sixteen hours of monotonous labor (and, actually, I'm pretty sure I have). I once got a box of Cohiba Lanceros that were rolled so tight that my brain imploded with every painful draw. Anyone who smokes Cubanos has certainly experienced the very same thing. Quality control was dismal; it seemed that no two Cohibas were alike.

Finally, management woke up and took the high road. Within the last few years, several beautiful new factories have been built to replace the dilapidated dumps that workers were once held hostage in. With modern amenities and clean, safe conditions, a new message was sent to the employees, which, no doubt, has had very positive effects. Habanos S.A.'s vice president Manuel Garcia has made it his personal mission to improve the products and image of the company. He placed 260 electronic devices that check for draw consistency within the factories. He also realized that cutting down a bit on production produced a much higher-grade cigar. They say the proof is in the pudding and, fortunately, I've had the opportunity to sample some of the exquisite new creations (they were given to me, honest!). The Cohiba Siglo VI, the Montecristo Edmundo, and the dark and hearty Edicion



A *torcedora* secures the head of an H. Upmann, 2004.

Photo © Claudia Dau/Reuters/CORBIS

Limitada series are proof that Habanos S.A. is serious about reclaiming the title of cigar world dominance.

Without question, the biggest news to rock the cigar world took place at the dawn of the new millennium, as European tobacco giant Altadis purchased a fifty-percent stake in Habanos Corporation for approximately \$500 million. The combined strength of these two global powerhouses has created the ultimate win/win situation: Distribution and sales of Cuban-made cigars have reached more regions than ever before – except, that is, the world's most coveted and elusive marketplace: the United States of America.

Mark my words here and now: If and when the embargo is finally lifted, a whole new boom will consume the American public. Antismoking laws and FDA regulations won't be able to stop the extraordinary demand for Havanas – *real-deal* Havanas. But the real question is, will the newfound availability diminish the lore of the Cuban cigar? Will the illicit mystique finally become unmasked, as decades of denial come to a halt with the simple click of a mouse? I really don't have an answer. But I'll tell you one thing for certain: I sure as hell can't wait to find out. **CM**