



Most people go to the beach or Disney, maybe even camping. Not me. I'm in the cigar biz, which instantly brands me as abnormal. Cigar people do stuff that revolves around cigars and other cigar people. If we go to a tropical paradise, be assured that there will be thousands of acres of cheesecloth tents with large, leafy plants growing beneath. If we choose to hang out in, let's say... Vegas, you can bet your solid, white ash there's an industry function attracting hordes of stogie-sucking Neanderthals who might just gamble and have a drink... or six.

In late spring, I had lunch with Lew Rothman of wholesale cigar distributor Santa Clara Inc. As I wolfed down a Cuban sandwich, Lew invited me along on his yearly jaunt to the manufacturing facilities of General Cigar (makers of La Gloria Cubana, Macanudo, and Partagas, among several other popular cigar lines) in the Dominican Republic and Honduras. *Wow!* I was honored, flattered, and tickled to a pinkish hue! Not many get to take this journey of a lifetime and I had finally earned the ranks of... well, I'm not really sure how rank I was, but I was blown away.

I started thanking him and babbling like a fool when he told me to shut up—because there was more. "We're going by private jet," he said. Jesus, Mary, and Montecristo, was he kidding me?

He wasn't. I guess when you're a mogul, a titan, and the *grand fromage*, that's how you travel. I was perplexed that he'd have a pungent Polack like me along but, as they say, ya don't look a gift box of maduros in the mouth.

"You think you know about cigars, but you don't know shit until you've walked through the factories and the fields," he said with an assured tone. "I've been going for 30 years and it *still* amazes me."

Again... *wow*.

We left on a Sunday afternoon, which was kind of unusual, but what the hell; this was going to be fun, right? Our party included Lew, of course, and Ed McVey and Jane Vargas, also from Santa Clara Inc. Also aboard were our hosts from General Cigar: Keith Sparacio (Director of Sales for National Accounts) and Seanna Tobin (National Accounts Manager). Man, was this a prestigious group, and here I was—the guy who blogs about tobacco beetles, my attraction to older women, and farting in crowded elevators. Like I said, this was gonna be fun.

No sooner do I arrive at the airport does Lew give me a look that says a major-league jackass just pulled up into his presence. You see, they said they told me (but I can assure you that nobody did) to pack light. But I pack like a woman, bringing enough clothes to last in the event of another ice age. I had one of those humongous steamer trunks—you know, the kind with lots of straps and handles, complete with big stickers affixed at jaunty angles. "Jesus Christ, Zarzecki! I brought a gym bag with a few t-shirts and underwear," Lew tells me. "We're going to have to ship that home from the DR because it'll never fit on the plane to Honduras."

I felt like an excited puppy who'd never been out of his backyard before...



Never has the phrase "getting there is half the fun" been so true! This trip was *already* a cigar lover's dream—the private jet was the icing on the cake!



Again, I thought he was kidding, but I found out later that he wasn't. I will say that he was right: there is no finer way to travel than on a small private jet—cruising on a cushion of air at 43,000 feet with your keister parked in a luxurious, oversized, leather throne... sandwiches, soda, coffee, beer, and all the little bags of macadamias you can slide down your piehole. I felt like an excited puppy who'd never been out of his backyard before and, though everyone was trying to sleep, I kept yapping away. Every once in a while, Lew would shoot me a glare from underneath his Santa Clara baseball cap.

Upon landing in West Palm Beach for refueling, I called the wife and kiddies to tell 'em how exciting this was. When I hung up, Lew looked at me and said, "We all just took a vote—for you to shut the fuck up!" All righty, then! I was a good boy all the way to Santiago.

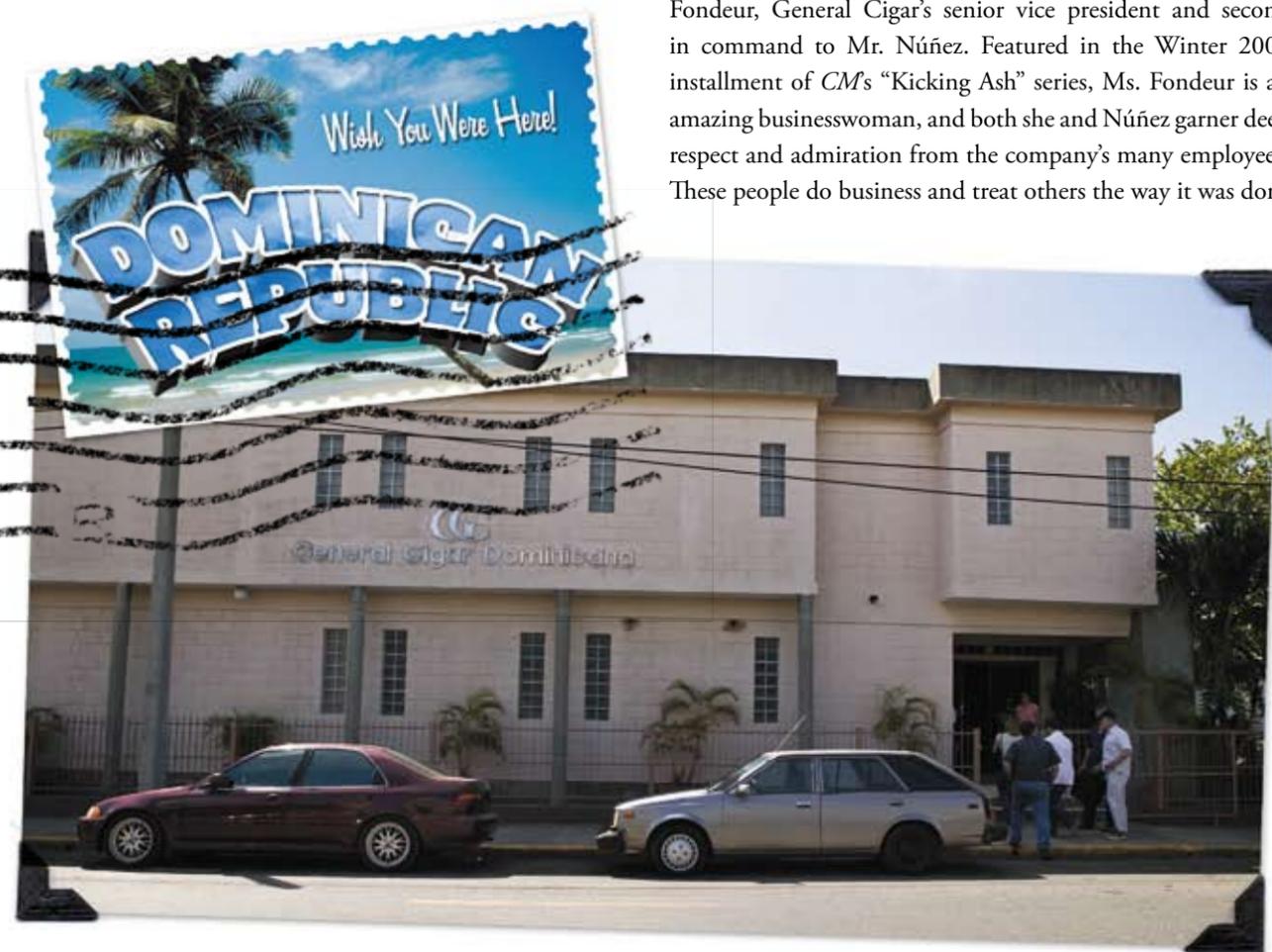
First Stop: Republica Dominicana

Santiago, home of the factory that crafts the venerated Macanudo and Partagas brands, is a busy industrial city with

more scooters racing through the streets than cars. They haul *everything* on the back of those goddamned things: bathtubs, crates of live chickens, 20-foot pieces of plywood. We happened to be there during the presidential elections, as proven by the huge posters hanging everywhere showing guys with big black mustaches and toothy grins—it looked like the US in 1958, for crissakes! I was a stranger in a strange land, but I had a job to do: observe and learn.

The following morning, I had the honor of meeting one of the true giants in the tobacco world, General Cigar's president, Mr. Daniel Núñez, truly one of the nicest, sincerest, down-to-earth gentlemen I have ever met. In a country where the national economy heavily depends on the cigar industry to survive, General's factories, farms, and warehouses employ thousands of people. (On a sidenote, they all have a very keen interest in the United States presidential elections, as the SCHIP bill threatens their very existence, as do all the new and punishing tobacco taxes.)

I also had the distinct pleasure of meeting Ms. Modesta Fondeur, General Cigar's senior vice president and second in command to Mr. Núñez. Featured in the Winter 2005 installment of *CM's* "Kicking Ash" series, Ms. Fondeur is an amazing businesswoman, and both she and Núñez garner deep respect and admiration from the company's many employees. These people do business and treat others the way it was done



Located in the city of Santiago, General Cigar's Dominican facility houses not only the company's corporate offices, but also the factory where some of General's most renowned cigars are crafted.



In the city of Mao (about an hour outside of Santiago), vast stretches of cloth tents illustrate the incredible amount of tobacco grown on just one of General's plantations.

60 or 70 years ago here in America—sincerely, honestly, and respectfully. It was a pleasure to be in the company of such gracious hosts, and I, a mere Polish blog-writing doofus, was treated like royalty. It is something I'll not soon forget.

While the others did their business thing, I was sent off to watch and learn. The first place I saw was General's main manufacturing facility, where the offices are located. I was taken on an hours-long guided tour by general manager Jhonys Diaz. As I walked past every square inch of this monstrous facility, I saw employees moisten and pile the tobacco and

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devein the leaves, which they then sorted into piles according to size, grade, and color. The raw leaf smell is intoxicating and positively overwhelming. Then I watched in awe as teams of three meticulously created handcrafted works of art. Two workers pick the leaves that compose a blend, then bunch it together for the *torcedor* (that's the roller, you uncultured dolt) to work his magical *chaveta* (the roller's cutting tool, bro—come on, get with the program!). It was a beautiful sight: rows and rows of torcedores waiting for the floor inspector to give the once-over to the neat piles of freshly rolled, naked cigars. "Kid in a candy store" is the only analogy that applied as Jhonys (pronounced Johnny) told me to take *any cigar I wanted*. "Don't mess with my head, buddy," I thought, but he assured me it was okay. Now, I didn't make a pig out of myself,

but I admit that a few Partagas Decadas, Macanudo Vintage 2000s, and Cohiba Vigorosos did make the long flight home.

Seeing how they age the tobacco is really something special. Piles of leaf are stacked atop each other, which induces the fermenting process. The leaves actually cook in the middle, where a thermometer is placed into a long tube, assuring that the temperature doesn't exceed a certain number. The piles are flipped and rotated in order to evenly distribute the fermentation. The tobacco is placed in rooms to further fermentation and allow the natural ammonia gases to dissipate. The ammonia smell is so severe that it literally burns your eyes and throat; it chokes you to death while the workers laugh and call you the Spanish equivalent of "wuss." No kidding, 10 minutes in there and you are a dead man.

When ready, the tobacco leaves are put into burlap bales, dated, and placed on a shelf in the warehouse for a good four years until they are ready to be rolled into cigars. In fact, I watched them take down bales of the 2003 and 2004 crops to be rolled for the various in-house brands. It is all so amazing.

After the cigars are made, they are placed into a deep freeze for three days in gigantic walk-in iceboxes. This kills any beetles, mold, and whatever else you don't want in your stogie. After the freeze, the cigars are slowly brought back at different temperature stages so the cigars don't crack, swell, or implode.

Are you getting the picture of the amount of work and effort that goes into making *just one cigar*? This is the biggest thing you walk away with after a trip of this magnitude. We always tend to picture the romance and skill that the rollers bring when we think about how cigars are made, but the rolling is maybe one half of one percent of the entire operation. Thousands of pairs of hands are involved in delivering your

favorite nightly smoke to your local shop. My appreciation for premium cigars has grown tenfold.

But wait... there's more!

I spent the second day about an hour or so outside of Santiago, in the city of Mao, where one of General's tobacco plantations is. Nestled in a valley between huge mountains and surrounded by banana trees, it is truly magnificent. Unfortunately, the crop had already been picked for the season, but cloth tents stretching farther than the eye could see were enough to indicate that incredible quantities of cigar tobacco had been grown here. Inside the curing barns, the leaf was hanging to dry while gaining its familiar golden-brown color. Some barns were reminiscent of *Gilligan's Island* huts, only gigantic, with tobacco leaf hanging from floor to ceiling, some 50 feet high, while the more modern ones were actually shipped in pieces from Honduras and reconstructed. Each one held as much as 20,000 pounds of tobacco. When you do the math, it's just mind-boggling.

The most impressive thing of all was the farm itself. The workers are self-sustained by raising livestock to eat, and they grow their own fruits and vegetables. Again, it's like the United States a good 70-plus years ago, but after seeing the operation, tasting the home-cooked food, and drinking the fresh-squeezed juices, maybe it's something we should take a hard look back on.



Though some of General's curing barns are modern structures, others are reminiscent of oversized *Gilligan's Island* huts... if the seven castaways had been lucky enough to have row after row of tobacco hanging from floor to ceiling.

My last tour was the box-manufacturing facility, and, again, the *wow* factor went through the roof. Giant planks of wood are shaved into tiny pieces, and cigar boxes are assembled, painted, labeled, and embossed—all by hand; it's like Santa's workshop! Shaking my head in amazement, I wondered how cigars didn't cost 30 bucks each, based on the effort and manpower that goes into making one single stick.

I mustn't forget to share my incredible new appreciation for machine-made cigars! The people who run these machines and make the cigars and cigarillos are highly skilled craftsmen who pay constant attention to the task at hand; one screwup and a finger ends up a Don Sebastian reject! All from the 1950s, these machines are the workhorses of the industry. General Cigar sells millions of this type of smoke and a Macanudo Ascot hangs from Daniel Núñez's lips for most of the workday.

Next Stop: Honduras

All right, Lew *really* wasn't kidding; they made me empty my cargo container of a suitcase and ship it back home... with my dirty laundry inside (how friggin' humiliating). Daniel Núñez gave me his personal carry-on as I was unmercifully teased by the group. Assured that I'd never be allowed to forget my numbskullery, I figured I'd beat them to the punch and tell you guys about it myself.

Back to the private jet, where this time I sat between Rothman and Núñez—the cigar fan's equivalent to Joe DiMaggio and Juan Marichal (who happens to be from the Dominican Republic, and is, of course, a personal friend of Daniel's). In fact, for three days, as we drove together between our hotel and the Cofradia factory (you know, the one responsible for stuff we love, like Punch and Hoyo de Monterrey), I listened

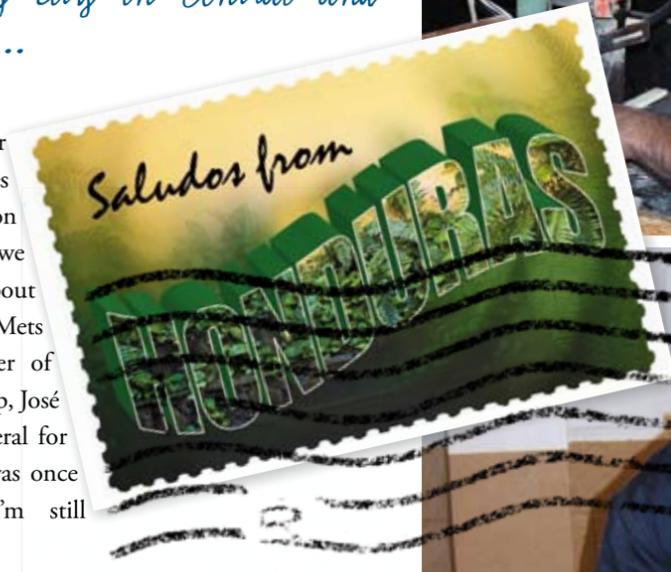
Honduras is basically a poor country, but San Pedro Sula is said to be the fastest-growing city in Central and South America...

to these two swap war stories. Daniel loves baseball—it's a religion in the DR—and we talked passionately about our favorite New York Mets for hours. The mother of superstar Mets shortstop, José Reyes, worked at General for some time, and José was once Daniel's paperboy. I'm still pinching myself, guys.

Honduras is basically a poor country but, of course, us hoity-toity cigar ambassadors got to stay in a four-star Hilton in San Pedro Sula, which is said to be the fastest-growing city in Central and South America. While the hotel itself was spectacular with breathtaking views, we were told never to go outside the doors... because "they" kidnap Americans (great, all I needed was to show up on some extremist's Web site with an AK-47 pointed at my dome while puffing away on a Punch Champion). There were armed guards everywhere, including the restaurants. I suddenly developed a sincere appreciation for automatic weaponry.

The old Villazon factory was where we spent the next few days. It's a bit smaller than the facility in the Dominican Republic, but the methods are pretty much the same—except it was 102 degrees. Fair-skinned Polacks don't do well in oppressive heat and humidity; on the factory tour (during which I almost passed out three times), I splashed myself with bottled water while praying that I didn't look like a total fool.

The factory operation is run by a wonderful gentleman named Manuel Zavala. Under his watchful eye, the likes of



General Cigar has its own boxmaking facility where employees start by cutting each piece of wood for cigar packaging (top) and finish with the application of gold-embossed logos (bottom).



Punch, Bolivar, El Rey del Mundo, Excalibur, and, the most recent sensation, Olvidados, are created with the strictest supervision to assure absolute quality and consistency.

You know, I hate to say it, but my favorite time was probably spent at the dining table! We'd all gather in the factory lunch room as several of the women cooked us the tastiest meals I can ever remember sinking my teeth into—everything is so fresh, either plucked from a limb just outside or from an animal raised on the premises. An obsessive psycho when it comes to food, I stopped eating only to rave *about* eating. Looking down the table, Daniel smiled as he asked, "How's everything, Tommy?" My answer was always the same: "Like you have to ask?" He also inquired if my stomach was all right—he was sure that I'd be cursed with Montezuma's Revenge. I was just fine as I drank and ate freely, convinced I was blessed with a cast-iron stomach... until three days after I got home, that is. Without going into details, let's just say that I had that not-so-fresh feeling for about a week. Nevertheless, you have not tasted lemonade until you've had it fresh off the vine with cane sugar from a neighboring field.

We had a great flight home; everyone was tired and ready to go. Like Lew said, I didn't know Shinola about cigars until I took this memorable tour. The people I met, the places I visited, the food I ate (or, let's be honest, *devoured*), and the cigars I mooched (*sampled*, I mean), made this a week I'll never forget. Unless, of course, I fall prey to the perils of Summer Vacation, Part Three...

Last Stop: Vegas

Again, when the average dad tells the average family that there's a fun-filled Vegas vacation on the horizon, the guy is usually a hero! But in the cigar biz, that means the wife and kids go to the Jersey Shore while I fly to Sin City for four days of stogie madness at the International Premium Cigars and Pipe Retailers show (formerly the RTDA; the Association changed its name for political reasons, intentionally disassociating itself from cigarettes. But not only is IPCPR impossible to remember, it has "CPR" built into the name—I'm not sure that's helping the cause a whole lot right there). It is the granddaddy of all trade shows in the business, and everybody who's anybody is seen there.

Our rooms and the convention floor were in the amazing Venetian Hotel and Casino. The place is opulent and spectacular, and letting a slug like me invade the premises definitely lowered its multistar rating. In fact, every stogie-sucking merchant in the world was there—you can imagine what that was like. The Venetian is almost like its own city; it took 15 minutes to get



If there is one thing to take away from a grand tour of General's factories, it is that many sets of highly skilled hands are involved in the crafting of every single cigar that we smokers purchase and enjoy.

from your room to the show floor, and, so help me, I never left the hotel the entire time.

I walked the floor on Sunday, a day before the show opened just to see who was doing what. Formerly in the advertising business, I had forgotten the intense physical work that a trade show entails. Set-up is exhausting and trekking the rock-hard floor for three days has you limping like Fred Sanford in no time. On Sunday night, the retailers were invited to a poolside mixer but, worried about rain, the Venetian's management moved the gig inside—bad, bad mistake; you've got 2,000 cigar smokers in one room, then six- or seven hundred of them spilling out into the hallway causing mayhem for the regular hotel guests. Not only did it look like downtown London at midnight, I'm sure the hotel exceeded its budget on tankards of industrial-strength Febreze.

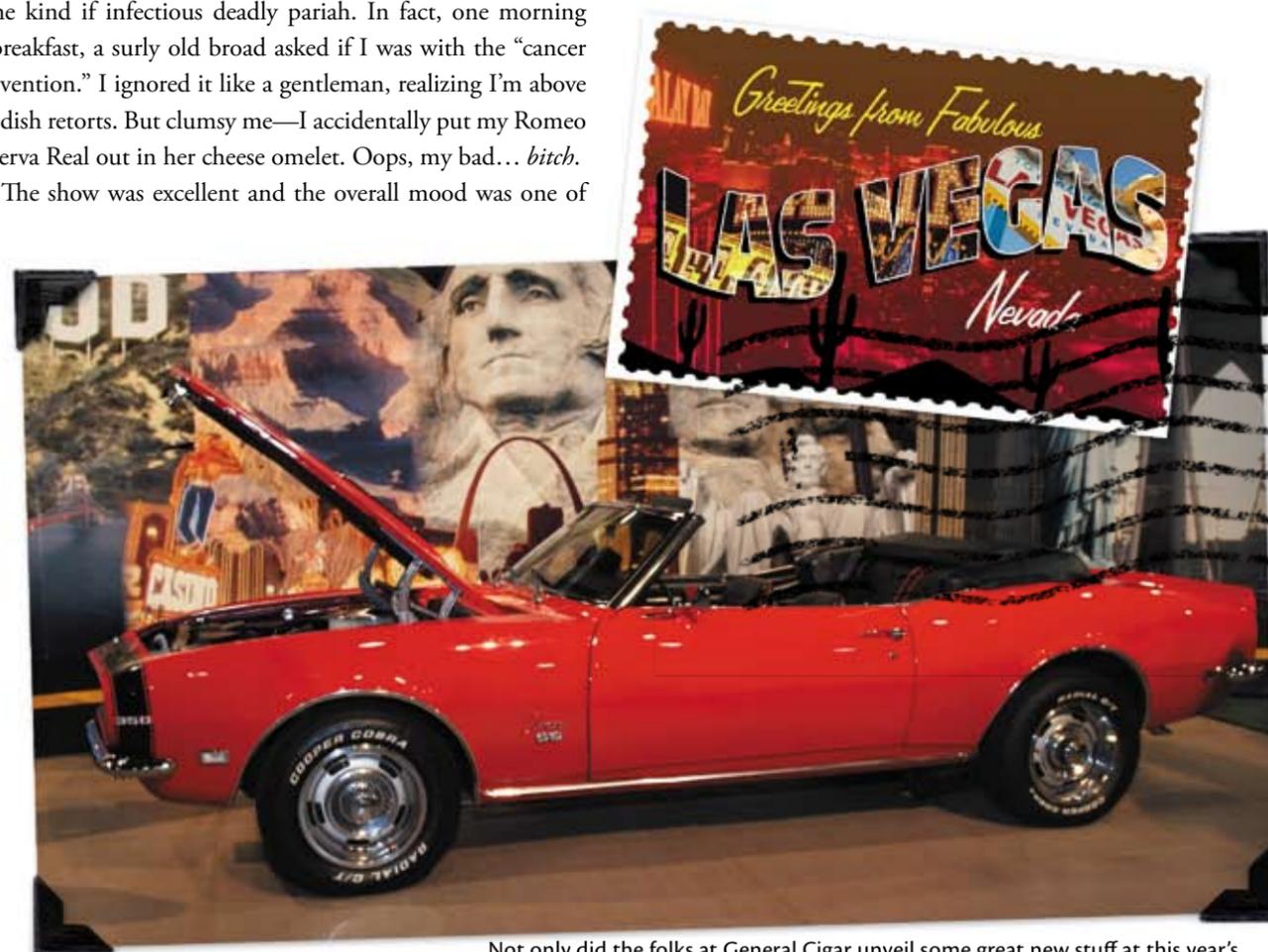
Even in Vegas, smoking is restricted, typically limited to the casino floor, though the hotel made an exception for the convention. But anyone who stepped even one foot outside the convention doors with a stogie was reprimanded as if he were some kind of infectious deadly pariah. In fact, one morning at breakfast, a surly old broad asked if I was with the "cancer convention." I ignored it like a gentleman, realizing I'm above childish retorts. But clumsy me—I accidentally put my Romeo Reserva Real out in her cheese omelet. Oops, my bad... *bitch*.

The show was excellent and the overall mood was one of

unity, as manufacturers and retailers alike realize there's a hell of a fight ahead of them against the smoke Nazis and oppressive taxes. Still, new cigars were introduced, orders were taken, and spirits were high. In fact, I don't think I can remember such a collection of terrific new products being introduced at once.

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I was happy to speak with my wonderful new friends from General cigar again. While Modesta and Jhonys met me with hugs and smiles, Daniel Núñez was a hard man to hook up with—meetings, interviews, negotiations, yada, yada, yada. On the very last day, I met up with him and he said that he'd been asking for me; he couldn't believe I hadn't stopped by! With a spark in his eye and excitement in his voice, he told me of his new "babies"—three cigars he cultivated himself from scratch.



Not only did the folks at General Cigar unveil some great new stuff at this year's IPCPR trade show, they also raffled off this fabulous vintage Camaro to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Macanudo brand.

When I asked why I hadn't heard about the new smokes while I was in Santiago, he revealed that the recipes were top-secret until this event.

First is the Macanudo 1968, which shocked the hell out of everybody. Marking the fortieth year since Macanudo's beginnings in Jamaica, this earthy, full-bodied beauty is loaded with coffee-bean flavor and a nice complexity. Next is the 100-percent-Dominican-leaf Cohiba Puro, a silky, rich bomb with full flavor—a very refined smoke. Third is the Excalibur Legend out of Honduras, perhaps the spiciest of the three. What an impressive introduction General made!

Of course, Altadis hit home with some beautiful new cigars that had the floor buzzing. I just can't stop smoking the Mi Dominicana, created by the master, José Seijas. A full-bodied Dominican puro, this one is definitely for the person who

enjoys a richer smoking experience. The wrapper is a deep brown color, supple and shining with natural oils—a beautifully handcrafted work of art. Hailing from the Flor de Copán factory in Honduras, the Trinidad Habana Reserve has a lot of depth and sports a golden-brown Ecuador Habano wrapper. And the A. Turrent Six Generations is an ultra-premium stick, with a rare Golden San Andrés Corojo wrapper.

Now can you see why I never left the damned hotel? I was too freakin' busy learning about and enjoying some of the finest new smokes I've had in ages!

As you'd expect, other booths were pretty wild and happening as well. CAO's gathering was like a goddamned rock-star party. In fact, company president Tim Ozgener had Lynyrd Skynyrd play at CAO's private first-night bash. The La Aurora booth featured a yellow, Cuban-style mini-building that

actually had a little meeting room inside. Drew Estate didn't disappoint with its funkadelic urban cityscape, complete with the Rastafarian dude from the Acid box. And the Camacho boys were swamped with fans and admirers coming to try their new offerings and speak with Christian Eiroa, the man who is giving the cigar world some tremendous new premium choices.

I got one hell of an education in cigardom that the average Joe (or José) will never experience...

After three and a half days, I was pretty shot—legs were achy, not a whole lot of sleep with that damned three-hour time difference (full course dinners at what would normally be

2:00AM for me), and I'm pretty sure black lung set in sometime during the second day. But, damn it, guys—it was worth it! Most of my friends think I'm full of Shinola, but I swear I didn't gamble, hang out at strip clubs, or do the kind of thing that “stays in Vegas.” I really and truly came to town to work, meet and greet, and learn more about the industry from a firsthand perspective, all of which I'd say I most definitely accomplished. In fact, combining the Vegas trip and the DR-Honduras adventure, I got one hell of an education in cigardom that the average Joe (or José) will never experience.

So that's the lowdown of my summer vacation, and I'm sticking to it. And, it was an official *working* vacation, people, which means I sacrificed and suffered for you and all of the cigar-loving public.

And I'd do it again if I had to. **CM**

Managing from the Heart

by Tommy Zarzecki

Manuel Zavala is a quiet man and a proud man. Actually, I'd say he's a pretty damned amazing guy. Each day, he walks the cigar factory floor in Cofradia, inspects the tobacco, talks with the workers, and meets with his managers to make sure that the operation is running at optimum capacity. This isn't just a job for Manuel, not by any means—this is a deep-rooted passion, a commitment to excellence, and a way of life.

Señor Zavala is the quality supervisor for General Cigar, in what was formerly know as the Villazon factory in Honduras. And when I say he lives for his job, I mean it literally. You see, Manuel and his family live on the premises of the factory with a house at the back of the compound. That kind of thing may be unheard of here in the US, but in this remote corner of Central America, it is the way things get done.

With the help of an interpreter, I listened as Manuel told me what it takes to get to his level in this profession. The mindset required for his job is perhaps somewhat foreign to twenty-first-century America; it may even seem like a throwback to years gone by. But maybe we could all learn a lot from this approach to business and life.

MZ: From the age of 15, I began to work in the tobacco industry. I started in Danli bunching tobacco for 13 years. I then went to work for Señor Estelo Padrón as a quality-assurance bunching supervisor in 1984. Everything I learned was from Estelo. He decided to move me to Cofradia to be by his side so I could learn first-hand from the master. Eventually I became the general quality-assurance supervisor.

TZ: You love what you do, don't you?

MZ: I owe everything I have to the tobacco industry. Everything I am and everything my family has is because of tobacco. It took years of hard work and dedication to get to where I am today and I am so very proud of that.

TZ: And I'm sure you're still learning every day.

MZ: Absolutely. Not only have I learned about the tobacco from great people like Daniel Núñez and Modesta Fondeur, they have taught me about the administration side as well, so I now have a full understanding of the entire cigar operation. I am still learning and improving every single day.

TZ: Was it always your dream to be where you are today?

MZ: When I was younger, I went to university and wanted give up bunching and finish

my studies. But Don Estelo saw in me the attitude and the ability to become a supervisor and convinced me I should not leave the business. That's when he moved me to Cofradia. Once I started to work here, I saw how demanding the work was and I decided to dedicate my entire self to tobacco. I decided to learn and grow and be the best that I could.

TZ: What are the biggest changes you have seen in the industry?

MZ: Before, there were only a limited amount of brands—Hoyo, Punch, etc.—but now there are many different brands like Bolivar, Sancho Panza, and so many new lines to keep up with. I have to work hard and smart to maintain the consistency that the business demands.

TZ: How do you continue to motivate the employees in jobs that can sometimes be very mundane and repetitious?

MZ: One thing I have learned from Estelo and Daniel is how to treat people the right way so they want to do the best job that they can for you. The key is to teach others—my managers—the things I have learned in order to have that same attitude and commitment all throughout the company. There are a lot of people and that is not an easy task, but

you have to look at one person at a time and treat him with respect, the way you would want to be treated in that position. It is the only way to get everyone on the same page, working toward the same common goals.

TZ: What is the most difficult thing about what you do?

MZ: It's definitely managing the people. Handling everyone as individuals is incredibly demanding but it is the only way to be successful here. Being fair and giving clear instructions on what is expected is crucial. Without these people, we are nothing. They are the heart and soul of the tobacco business.

TZ: So, where do you want to get to? What's the next step in this business?

MZ: I want to keep on learning and growing and changing as the business demands it. I could never imagine myself doing anything else. This is my life and what I live for. Of course, my family is important and we spend a lot of time together but, as I said, I owe everything to this industry and I am dedicated for life. The passion for tobacco runs through my blood and I am so grateful.

TZ: Manuel, I know this is very hard work, but I can tell that you're having fun out there.

MZ: Fun to me is making sure that my people can sustain themselves and make a good living. I care about the people; their well-being is important. That may not be the exact answer you were looking for, but it's how I feel. Making sure that they are all busy and have enough work is very satisfying and it means that I am doing my job right. I get very worried when there aren't enough orders and there isn't enough work. These people are my extended family and I care a great deal about them. We are all in this together, Señor Tom.

TZ: Yes, we are, Manuel—yes, we sure are.

