



SMOKIN'!

There's only one way to describe the cigars made in the Dominican Republic. By **JA Shapira**

FOR the most discerning smoker, cigars from the Dominican Republic are often the pinnacle of a prized collection. While many novice smokers and casual hobbyists will claim they can't compete with a Cuban, the real arbiter of taste recognises the quality of the tobacco and the craftsmanship that goes into making what can only be described as some of the most superlative cigars in the world.

The year was 1962 and on a frosty day in early February, US President John F Kennedy signed off on the embargo against Cuba, preventing the import of cigars into the world's largest marketplace. Recognising the limitations it placed on revenue streams, a number of Cuban cigar makers decided to open up shop elsewhere and the Dominican Republic proved to be the prime location.

The soil is lush, fertile and superb for growing tobacco. With its tropical climate, the 30-mile zone where most of the Dominican's cigars are manufactured is an unsurpassed breeding ground for some of the most delectable tobacco in the world. Although the Dominican Republic became a staple location in the global cigar industry following the Cuban embargo, it has served as home to the La Aurora cigar company for over a century. However, it really didn't make its mark on the world until the Seventies when free-trade

zones were established which permitted new manufacturers to hang their shingle and craft cigars exclusively for exportation.

Within a decade, exports of cigars snowballed from just shy of six million to more than thirty-three million by 1980. That trend continues to grow, now reaching an estimated 160 million in exports to the United States alone.

Unfortunately, since the prime region is just 30 miles and with such accelerated growth, the Dominican Tobacco Institute's records show that unless production is decreased, the Republic may soon run out of tobacco meaning a cessation of production or a hiatus at best.

Farmers with little training grow 16,000 acres of tobacco northwest of Santiago. With such boundless crops and the uncompromising elements, a vast percentage of the yield is discarded. Since most of the small tobacco farmers lack funding, expertise or proper equipment, their numbers are dwindling as they shift their focus to crops that are easier to grow and maintain. Because the Dominican cigar market caters to a premium buyer, the farmers have difficulty adhering to the strict requirements placed on them by the various producers. The legislation is minimal and they face immense pressure having to compete with industrialised plantations in Cuba, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Yet somehow, the country manages to remain a frontrunner ➤



Above: tobacco grown in the Santiago area. Below: freshly rolled cigars in a pressing device

and the quality of the small supply of cigars still manufactured there ensures they remain some of the most exquisite available.

The Tabacalera de García is the pre-eminent cigar manufacturer, dedicated to the production of premium, handmade cigars crafted for the most discriminating collector.

Tabacalera de García harvests resplendent Olor and Piloto tobacco from the rich soil next to the foot of the Cordillera Septentrional mountain range. Employing a combination of

old-world craftsmanship and traditional techniques, the company hand-rolls cigars for renowned brands such as Don Diego, Santa Damiana, Trinidad, Por Larranaga, Romeo y Julieta, H Upmann and Montecristo.

In order to achieve consistency, this company, one of the largest employers in the country, requires its farmers to adhere to strict operating practice and supply only the very best tobacco. This expectation of perfection is what results in the consistent quality and stunning achievement of being able to produce such a substantial quantity of handmade cigars for export around the world.

Having such stringent standards has resulted in only the best cigars making it past the quality control inspection. A large percentage of cigars produced in the Dominican Republic do not make it off the island as they're disposed for not meeting these standards.

Factories like Tabacalera de García have shown their dedication to the minutest details from how their tobacco is aged to humidification, blending, rolling and – most important – quality control. It's this level of quality control that distinguishes the Dominican Republic. However, it is also its nemesis. If the manufacturers could somehow improve the farming conditions and provide the necessary training and equipment to the farmers, they would be able to care for the tobacco, preventing it from being discarded prior to sorting. Some makers now recognise this and in places such as Villa González, the farmers have been instructed to focus on growing small batches, allowing them to care for the crop without immense losses. There is nothing like enjoying a cigar that's hand rolled from the leaves harvested from these select plantations. ■

JA Shapira is critic for the Gentleman's Gazette.



RECOMMENDED CIGARS

H UPMANN 1844 RESERVE

With a legacy that's rich in history and tradition, the 1844 Reserve by H Upmann is a testament to the exacting standards required by Dominican cigar factories. Despite using the Dominican tobacco as its filler, Tabacalera de García imports the wrapper from Ecuador and the binder from Nicaragua. The hallmark of H Upmann, the 1844 Reserve offers a complex, medium-bodied flavour profile with strong notes of leather and aged cedar mixed with a delicate burst of citrus and the warmth of honey. The flavours and intoxicating aromas grow with the ash and result in a captivating smoke that makes you sit back and relish your next opportunity to smoke such a refined cigar.

DAVIDOFF NICARAGUA TORO

Davidoff is one of the most renowned cigar companies in the world. An elaborate palette of flavours with a graceful intricacy, the Toro is an example of a cigar whose tobacco is imported from Nicaragua because the quality of domestic tobacco in the Dominican Republic isn't good enough. However, the Toro is an example of the extraordinary craftsmanship found there. Davidoff could have saved money and had the cigar rolled in Nicaragua but opted to use the expertise of the Dominican factories to accentuate its rich and elegant flavour profile that's driven with notes of roasted espresso, deep and sumptuous leather and a brilliantly smooth finish with the sweetness of toffee. This is one cigar that is worthy of any collector's attention.



AGING ROOM QUATTRO F55 CONCERTO

A small-batch cigar with an initial run of just 400,000, the Quattro F55 Concerto by Aging Room is difficult to find. It is a truly remarkable cigar that showcases the quality of craftsmanship in the Dominican Republic. With its Sumatra wrapper and expertly harvested Dominican long fillers and binder, the Concerto is a masterpiece like no other that's rich in bitterness with a sweet syrup flavour from the wrapper. Notes of cloves and dried plums accentuate the masculinity of the cedarwood and fierce undertones of sun-soaked leather. Decadent with a full mouth-feel, it's a cigar that will be missed when the last of the batch has been extinguished.