



State of the STOGIE

*In nearly smoke free
New Jersey,
connoisseurs still
celebrate
a great cigar*

BY ROBIN HOLLERAN

Think back to the mid-1990s: Cigars were on fire, and their popularity spawned the launch of *Cigar Aficionado* magazine and the proliferation of Smith & Wollensky-style lounges. But fads fade, and the stogie craze seemed to have been stubbed out for sure when smoking was banned from New Jersey bars and restaurants in 2006. Still, a core of die-hard fans remains, and all is not lost for those in search of hand-rolled cigars.

NOT TO BE DETERRED

In many ways, the new restrictions actually have strengthened the resolve of devoted smokers. The Metropolitan Society, for example, was once just an informal cigar group, but its dinner privileges at regular New Jersey eateries went poof with the passage of the state's anti-smoking law. Rather than cease its much-anticipated once-a-month meetings, the group sold stock and opened a private club in Fairfield—replete with a walk-in humidor and 190 custom-made oak lockers.

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“The real value of our club is its 24-hour availability,” says George Koodray, secretary and board member of the Metropolitan Society. “There’s tremendous camaraderie among a diverse membership that includes entrepreneurs, business leaders and even some police officers who come in when their shifts end at 2 a.m.”

As far as anyone knows, the society is the first private club built around cigars in the United States, and as such, it includes all of the over-the-top amenities you would expect: pool, poker, a plasma television, catered dining and fancy cigar events. That said, members don’t pay much attention to puffing paraphernalia.

“Real cigar smokers don’t spend money on frivolous accessories,” Koodray says. “Cigars are their passion—they read about them, talk about them and then seek out ones they want to try.”

YOUR PICK
Ask a fan of cigars to identify an absolute favorite, and you may get a disquisition with qualifications about the type of food being served, the mood, even the weather. But what you’ll surely hear are highly passionate opinions.

“Cigars are really a matter of personal preference,” says Steve Nathan, corporate training manager at Whippany-based JR Cigars, which claims to be the largest cigar store in the world. “It’s a lot like coffee: If you like it light, you add a lot of milk. Similarly, if you enjoy a lighter cigar, you look for a lighter wrapper, whereas a dark maduro is comparable to a good cup of espresso. And price doesn’t always dictate quality. It’s certainly easier to find a great cigar in the \$8, \$10, \$12 range. The challenge is finding an equally great smoke in the \$2 to \$5 range. There are plenty out there—you just have to do your homework.”

Aficionados agree that, regardless of price, it’s all about proper aging, craftsmanship, quality tobacco and consistency. And a little re-

search can uncover unique histories along with interesting packaging that add to the allure of many brands.

THE HUNT FOR PERFECTION

In Nathan’s experience, seasoned smokers tend to settle on one or two favorite brands, while neophytes are more adventurous. A walk through JR Cigars’ two-story humidor is as close to nirvana as an enthusiast can get. Yet despite more than 200 brands literally within reach—and an additional 128,000-square-foot humidor of goodies in North Carolina—Nathan admits they can’t always fill unusual requests.

“Some smaller manufacturers’ products are difficult to acquire because of limited production, but if a customer requests one of these, we can always recommend another cigar that’s very similar,” he explains.

There are, however, a few boutique shops in the state that specialize in some of the more hard-to-find smokes. For example, Ruben’s Smoke Stack in Hackensack stocks Tatuaje, a first-generation Cuban-seed tobacco grown in Nicaragua, imported to Miami and then rolled by a dozen experts in a small shop in Little Havana.

“We’re also getting the Padron Anniversario, a special 80th-anniversary smoke rolled by only one person who produces just 300 cigars a day,” says proprietor Ruben Abreu. “This is a cigar that very few shops in the country will have. And we’ll be carrying Camacho’s new Triple Maduro, which is the first to use maduro-variety tobaccos for the wrapper, binder and filler.”

Did you know?

- Cigar smoking has been enjoyed by inhabitants of the Caribbean Islands and Central America since as early as the 10th century.
- Cigar wrappers come in 32 colors—and some of the top wrapper leaves, which help determine much of the cigar’s character and flavor, are grown in central Connecticut.
- An expertly rolled cigar can be aged for years if maintained at 70°F and 70 percent relative humidity. But some experts advise that 50-year storage requires a significantly lower temperature of 40°F.
- Some 40-year-old pre-embargo Cuban cigars are still available on the U.S. market.



PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, PHOTOLIBRARY; COURTESY OF DUNHILL; COURTESY OF AZCUBAR CUBAN CUISINE & CIGARS; ISTOCK

Where to get your smoke on

It's one thing to buy a cigar—it's another to enjoy a fine smoke with like-minded folks. Fortunately for aficionados, there are still a few cigar lounges that have managed to survive through a narrow loophole in New Jersey's anti-smoking laws. Here, places to light up that stogie:

- Little Taste of Cuba, Princeton • 609-683-8988, www.cubacigar.com
- Ashes Steakhouse & Cigar Club, Red Bank • 732-219-0710, www.ashescigarclub.com
- Azucar Cuban Cuisine & Cigars, Jersey City • 201-222-0090, www.azucarclubcuisine.com
- Barrister Cigars, Union • 908-964-3000, www.barristercigars.net
- Cigar Alley @ The News Nook, Merchantville • 856-663-9190, www.cigaralleyenj.com
- Cigars and Firetrucks, Bernardsville • 908-953-9070, www.cigarsandfiretrucks.com
- Greentree Tobacco Co., Sewell • 856-374-4010, www.greentreetobacco.com
- Lighthouse Cigars, Hazlet • 732-888-8118, www.lighthousecigars.com
- Mane Street Cigars, Woodbridge • 732-326-9545, www.msicigars.com
- The Metropolitan Society, Fairfield • 973-287-3540, www.metrocigar.com
- RD's Smokers Delight, Union • 908-810-7352, www.smokersdelight.com
- Ruben's Smoke Stack, Hackensack • 201-498-0332, www.rubenssmokestack.com
- Senor Juan's Tabacalero, Belmar • 732-749-3192, www.senorjuancigars.com
- Smoke Chophouse & Cigar Emporium, Englewood • 201-541-8530, www.smokechophouse.com
- Smokers World & Cigar Lounge, Englewood • 201-567-1305, www.smokersworldltd.com
- The Side Bar, Morristown • 973-540-9601, www.famishedfrog.com/sidebar/
- The Tobacco Shop, Ridgewood • 201-447-2204, www.tobaccoshop.com
- White Ash Cigars, Northfield • 609-645-ASHES (2743), www.whiteashcigarsnj.com



Nick Vazquez, chef/owner of Azucar Cuban Cuisine & Cigars, helps customers find the perfect stogie to savor.



STOGIE SCIENCE

While many cigar shops and lounges host music festivals, cigar-friendly car shows, special manufacturer presentations and other excuses for a “smoke-out,” JR Cigars takes it a step beyond by offering two-hour Cigar College courses. The classes cover everything from storage and humidification to how and where stogies are made to myths and facts about those infamous Cuban cigars.

Then, for enthusiasts ready to turn totally pro, there's Tobacconist University, offering online educational resources and an apprenticeship-style learning program that focuses on product knowledge, appreciation and professionalism.

Developed by Jorge Armenteros, the Cuban-American proprietor of a cigar shop in Princeton, the program is slowly expanding, having certified only 200 tobacconists since it began in 1997. Armenteros' goal has been the adoption of a certification system for tobacconists.

“With the current anti-smoking environment, it's important to bring more credibility to the industry,” he says. “And Tobacconist University is a relatively new concept that was inspired by the sommelier designation given to wine experts.”

It makes sense—after all, like a fine wine, a fine cigar inspires great passion. And while aficionados may not get to flaunt their smokes in public establishments these days, the cigar's flame still burns brightly. ☞