

LUXURY SPECIAL

COLUMN

CIGARS

FROM CUBA, TO THE WORLD

A genuine Habanos is unmatched. Ever newer smokers bear testimony to the everlasting appeal of the Cuban cigar

Photograph by Ritesh Sharma

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WHEN I first brought Habanos to India, around 15 years ago, I was forced to become a role model. I held large cigars at every event, so Indian consumers would feel comfortable doing the same. Today, cigar enthusiasts in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and even the coffee plantations of Coorg — thanks to the Internet — have become not only knowledgeable about cigars, but are looking to integrate them with wine, food and ambience for a complete experience.

A cigar aficionado does not necessarily have to be wealthy. He has to be a person of taste who will not compromise on quality. Most of our Habanos enthusiasts can easily tell a genuine Habanos from a counterfeit (yes, like all top luxury brands, Habanos also have counterfeits!). They don't smoke cigars as an addiction as many do with cigarettes. Cigars are smoked at leisure, completely for pleasure, to catch the nuances of life in the blue of the Habanos smoke. A so-called heavy smoker may smoke as many as four cigars a week, which is why he is willing to pay more for a genuine Habanos. We still have the wannabes who will buy cigars from smugglers that are crackling and dry, bearing the Cohiba label, only to show that they have "arrived". But, thankfully, this class too is starting to see the error in its judgment.

Genuine friends of Habanos are now exploring the full spectrum of taste. Gone are the days when they smoked only established brands, with Cohiba leading



START WITH A MILD APERITIF CIGAR TO GO WITH A GLASS OF BUBBLY, SO THE PALATE IS LEFT UNTOUCHED FOR FOOD



the pack. It's the age of limited editions and new launches. To add to the traditional and beautiful boxes, we now have the H. Upmann No. 2 Reserva Cosecha 2010 in black lacquered cases with gold-plated hinges. It has become a collectible due to its limited availability and exclusivity. In a fast-paced world where time for a smoke is short, Habanos has come up with a series of smaller cigars, with higher ring gauge and full-bodied taste. The Partagas Series D No. 6 (ring gauge: 50 and length: 3.54 inches) follows the earlier Montecristo Petit No. 2 (ring gauge: 52 and length: 4.72 inches) and Romeo y Julieta Petit Churchill (ring gauge: 50, length: 4 inches). To introduce flavours such as the Hoyo de Monterrey and Le Hoyo de San Juan (ring gauge: 54, length: 6 inches), the tobacco blend uses only Seco and Ligero leaves from San Juan y Martinez, the historic Cuban denomination of origin where the brand was born in 1865, and offers a lighter Habano that is delicate and aromatic as well as exceedingly elegant and complex.

With restrictions on smoking in public places, Habanos lovers are forming their own cigar, malt whisky, cognac and wine clubs where they have five-course dinners with food, alcohol and cigars complementing one another. An innovative catering company

The Collectibles
Cigar manufacturers are now coming out with limited edition cases and smaller sizes to attract new smokers

called CAARA — run by the enterprising Alice Helme and her team of European chefs — offers a complete cigar and food experience. Its impeccable service and ability to pair food

with cigars comes from its executive chef Andrew Parsons's passion for cigars. He believes that "cigar and food pairing is an art and not a science".

My advice on pairing would be to start with a small and mild aperitif cigar to go with a glass of bubbly, to create a feeling of lightness and freshness even as the palate remains untouched for food. One can then get into the main course and enjoy the culinary experience, matched with drink. Finally, the star of the evening is the after-dinner cigar that is served with stronger drinks like cognac, aged rum, single malt or an armagnac.

Most of the large Habanos cigars not only allow the flavours of flowers, vanilla, dried fruit, raisins, nuts and chocolates of, for example, an XO cognac, to emerge, the combination almost instantly creates a match with the strong liquor.

As they say, when it comes to dessert, one should remember the four Cs: coffee, cognac, chocolate and cigars. **BW**