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IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
BEFORE THE TRADEMARK TRIAL AND APPEAL BOARD

Proceeding	92025859
Party	Defendant General Cigar Co., Inc.
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Signature	/Andrew L. Deutsch/
Date	09/28/2020
Attachments	GCC NOR Ex. 16 -- Cigar Aficionado - August 2017 (Part 01).pdf(5724928 bytes) GCC NOR Ex. 16 -- Cigar Aficionado - August 2017 (Part 02).pdf(5645796 bytes) GCC NOR Ex. 16 -- Cigar Aficionado - August 2017 (Part 03).pdf(5552056 bytes) GCC NOR Ex. 17 -- Cigar Aficionado - October 2017 (Part 01).pdf(5637212 bytes) GCC NOR Ex. 17 -- Cigar Aficionado - October 2017 (Part 02).pdf(5720065 bytes) GCC NOR Ex. 17 -- Cigar Aficionado - October 2017 (Part 03).pdf(5691976 bytes) GCC NOR Ex. 17 -- Cigar Aficionado - October 2017 (Part 04).pdf(5678877 bytes) GCC NOR Ex. 17 -- Cigar Aficionado - October 2017 (Part 05).pdf(1184450 bytes)

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
BEFORE THE TRADEMARK TRIAL AND APPEAL BOARD

In the matter of Trademark Registration No. 1147309
For the mark COHIBA
Date registered: February 17, 1981

AND

In the matter of the Trademark Registration No. 1898273
For the mark COHIBA
Date registered: June 6, 1995

EMPRESA CUBANA DEL TABACO, d.b.a. CUBATABACO, Petitioner, v. GENERAL CIGAR CO., INC., Respondent.	Cancellation No. 92025859

<u>EXHIBIT 16</u>

<u>TO RESPONDENT GENERAL CIGAR CO., INC.'S NOTICE OF RELIANCE</u>

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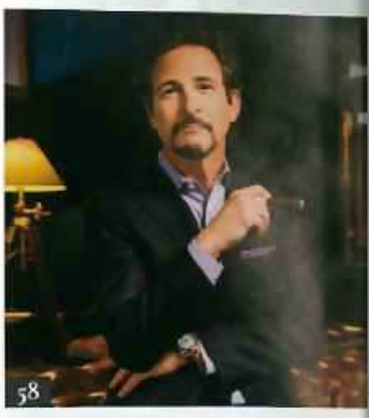

ON THE COVER
Maggie Siff brings her talent to Showtime's "Billions."
photograph by Jim Wright

TOP: TOMAS MUSCIONICO; CENTER: LARRY LAMBRECHT; ON THE COVER: DRESS BY ALEXANDER VAUTHIER/EARRINGS BY JENNY BIRD

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Think of it as the oldest, most complex, most arcane version of flavored vodka imaginable—or just take it as it is: a fine beginning to a great cocktail.

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Editor and publisher Marvin R. Shanken hosted the annual CIGAR AFICIONADO Night to Remember and, amidst the reverie, raised $1.6 million to fight prostate cancer.

141 **BIG SMOKE MIAMI**
CIGAR AFICIONADO brought the world's biggest cigar party to a new venue—Miami—and found another crowd ready and willing to enjoy.

144 **MOMENTS TO REMEMBER**
Photos from our readers as they enjoy themselves and their cigars.

152 **MADE FOR YOU**
A luxury look at lowly burgers; one-of-a-kind watches; a Sgt. Pepper celebration; floating light bulbs; retro ashtrays; and e-bike extremes.

TOP: JEFF HARRIS, BOTTOM: ALTADIS USA

highlights

With monster scores of 94 points, outstanding on our ratings scale, a trio of fine cigars from two of the industry's most popular producers topped this issue's tasting. The Padrón 1964 Anniversary Series Toro, exclusive to Tobacconists' Association of America merchants, paced the robustos while the rare Arturo Fuente Don Carlos Eye of the Shark tied with a Padrón Serie 1926 to lead all figurados. This superb tasting continued with newcomer Archetype Axis Mundi Toro (93 points) leading the corona gorda category, while the Alec Bradley Post Embargo Lancero was the best-performing oddity, scoring 92 points in the miscellaneous category. Cuba's traditional-sized Por Larrañaga Petit Corona (91 points) showed that a cigar needn't be large to make a big impression. Altadis U.S.A. turned to the Plasencias for the Romeo 505 Nicaragua, a modern take on an old brand.

TOP ROBUSTO
PADRÓN 1964 ANNIVERSARY SERIES TORO
This box-pressed cigar, wrapped in natural leaf, is an extension of the lauded Padrón line, sold only in TAA-member shops.

NICARAGUA 94

TOP FIGURADO
ARTURO FUENTE DON CARLOS EYE OF THE SHARK
A gorgeously dark Cameroon wrapper covers the all-Dominican insides of this curiously semi-pressed figurado, which tied with a Padrón Serie 1926 No. 2.

DOM. REP. 94

TOP CORONA GORDA
ARCHETYPE AXIS MUNDI TORO
Rolled by Drew Estate for Ventura Cigars, this smoke sports a dark, Ecuadoran Habano wrapper, Indonesian Sumatra binder and Nicaraguan filler.

NICARAGUA 93

TOP MISCELLANEOUS
ALEC BRADLEY POST EMBARGO LANCERO
This lancero is slightly thicker than standard, and is made with two binders—one from Nicaragua and the other from Honduras.

HONDURAS 92

TOP CHURCHILL
ROMEO 505 NICARAGUA BY ROMEO Y JULIETA CHURCHILL
The first all-Nicaraguan Romeo y Julieta to be made in Nicaragua, this cigar is produced by the Plasencia family for Altadis U.S.A.

NICARAGUA 91

TOP PETIT CORONA
POR LARRAÑAGA PETIT CORONA
In Cuban cigar factories the petit corona is known as a mareva, and this smoke is covered in an attractive, golden-brown wrapper.

CUBA 91

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MICHAEL CROSS

editor's note

An Open Letter to Newly Named FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb

Dear Dr. Gottlieb,

Congratulations on your May 9, 2017 appointment as FDA commissioner. You step into this role at a crucial time.

I am writing you on behalf of a small, artisanal industry—the handmade cigar industry—which has a proud heritage dating back more than 200 years. It is composed primarily of small and medium-sized businesses, many of them family owned.

They fear extinction. Not from market factors, nor from consumers rejecting their products, but from their own government. The Obama Administration moved control of the cigar industry to the FDA, and after years of threats and uncertainty the FDA has shackled the cigar industry with a great number of unmanageable operational restrictions, not the least of which is severely limiting the introduction of new products. Even more restrictions are scheduled to follow in the coming months. All of these prohibitions are starting to strangle the industry.

Millions of Americans smoke handmade cigars. Firefighters. Policemen. Lawyers. Doctors. Professors. Congressmen. Judges. Members of our military. Friends of yours and friends of mine. Adults from all walks of life. Working Americans who every day contribute to our society and our economy.

While President Trump has voiced his outrage at overregulation in the United States, and has taken on deregulation as a major policy initiative, the cigar companies who represent this great industry find themselves in dire need of relief.

More than $3 billion was spent on lobbying last year alone in the United States, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Look at the spending by sector: the pharmaceutical industry alone spent $246 million on lobbying last year. The insurance industry spent $147 million, oil and gas spent $119 million, and the auto industry $62 million.

The small, handmade cigar industry doesn't have that type of financial strength. As a result, it's being swept under the carpet, lumped into the far-larger cigarette and machine-made cigar industries, which it has nothing to do with and wants nothing to do with. The handmade cigar industry has had little say in its own affairs.

In order to comply with the FDA's new restrictions, cigar companies are facing the prospect of enormous new costs—hundreds of thousands of dollars per company—that are onerous, burdensome and most of all unnecessary.

A new study, partially funded by the FDA—yes, your FDA—and published on January 26 in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, documented that premium cigars are not being smoked by the youth of America. The two-year study looked at the behavior of more than 45,000 people, including 13,651 youths, and found that the number of youths who frequently or regularly smoke handmade cigars was less than one percent—statistically irrelevant. Handmade cigars are enjoyed by adults, period.

We need your help. If left unchecked, these new FDA regulations will destroy the handmade cigar industry, and the tens of thousands of American jobs it supports.

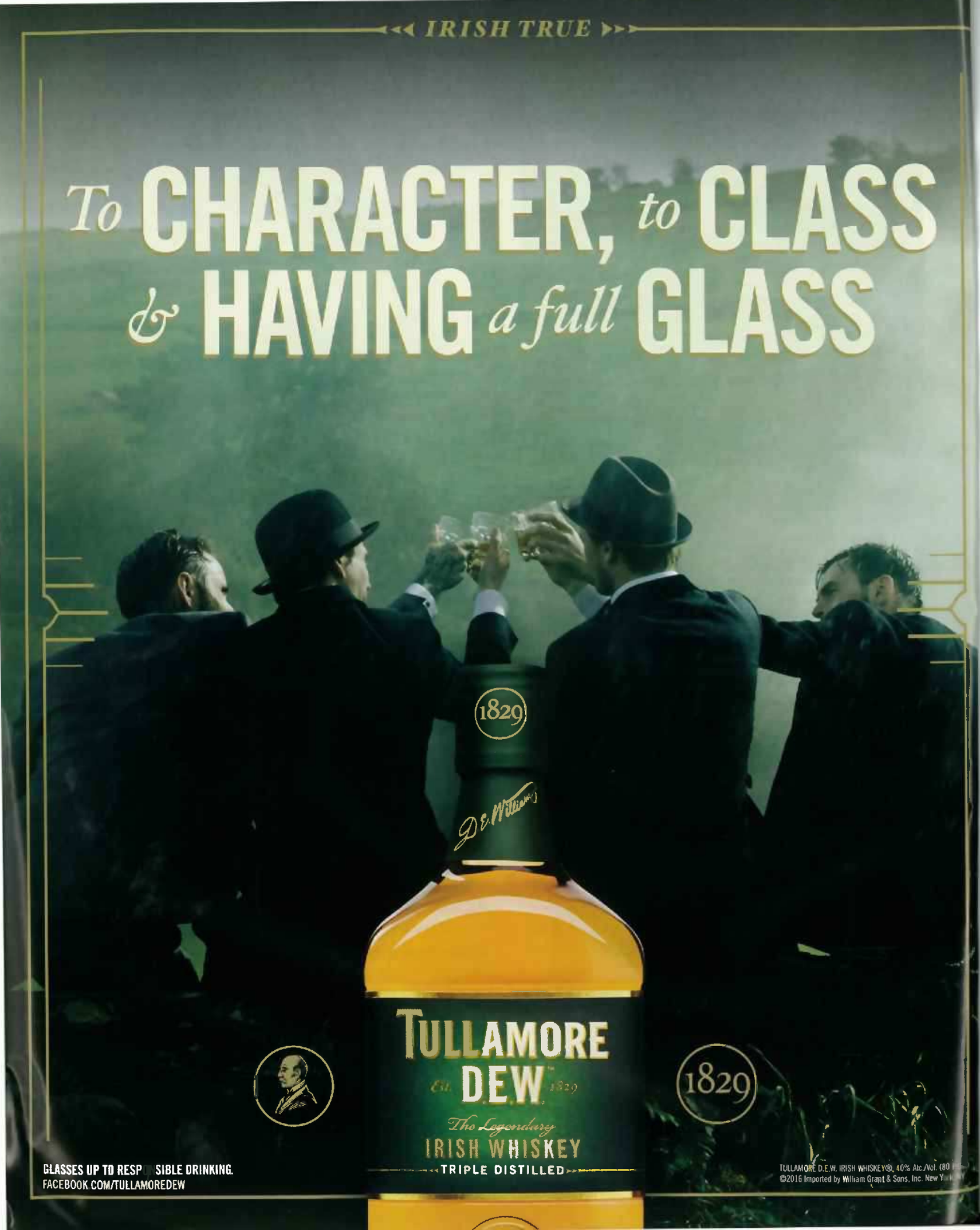
The families who work in this industry are not looking for special treatment. They only ask for just and fair treatment. The right to sell a legal, handmade product to consenting adults. The right to pursue the American dream.

I ask you to please look into these unfair and unjust restrictions the FDA is forcing down the throat of this proud and venerable industry.

My best,

MARVIN R. SHANKEN
EDITOR & PUBLISHER

CC: President Donald Trump
CC: Vice President Mike Pence
CC: Tom Price, Secretary of Health and Human Services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WE NEED YOUR HELP

If you're a friend of the cigar, now is the time to write Washington.

The Food and Drug Administration is making it harder and harder for family-owned, handmade cigar companies to produce and sell their products. The new rules are unnecessary and highly political, and they will drive companies out of business, leaving you with fewer choices in your humidor, changing the cigar industry forever.

It needs to stop.

Write the new FDA commissioner, Dr. Scott Gottlieb, and President Donald Trump. Let them know how you feel. Tell them handmade cigars deserve an exemption from FDA control. It's time to deregulate the handmade cigar industry and let this small, artisanal and venerable business continue without government interference.

Write now:

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Scott Gottlieb, M.D.
Commissioner
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993

You can also visit our website, cigaraficionado.com, to generate a letter, allowing you to let your voice be heard in the halls of the U.S. government.

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

Marvin R. Shanken
Editor & Publisher

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Dear Marvin,
From the first time I watched "Shark Tank," Daymond John ["A Shark with Style," June 2017] impressed me both with his business acumen and his personality. If I were ever on the show, convincing him to make a deal would be my ultimate goal.

Since that scenario is extremely unlikely, instead I'll just hope he soon achieves his own goal of experiencing a well-deserved Cuban Cohiba.
Rich Foley
Fayette, Ohio

Dear Marvin,
I'm certainly glad that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger got back on the cover of CIGAR AFICIONADO ["You're Fired," February 2017]. We missed him. Too bad he wasn't born in America. I think he would have made a great president of the U.S.A.

A recent editorial from *The New York Times* doesn't give President Trump high marks toward his relationship with Cuba. I hope as time goes on that will change.

I'm 72 years old, and to my best recollection I have only smoked two Cubans so far. President Trump may be killing my dream. There's a saying that any guy over 50 years dreams of driving a Porsche and smoking a Cuban cigar.

About one year ago my wife and I went to the Dominican Republic. While staying at the hotel one night my wife had a meeting and I took a walk to the main entrance of the hotel and their pool tables. All was going great and got even better when the perfumed aroma of a cigar came across the room. A fella shooting pool at another table had lit up a cigar. Wow! Later I went over and spoke with him. Even after all this time, the event—and the aroma—still linger in my memory.

Every CIGAR AFICIONADO is a gem. Keep up the great work.
Bob Blauvelt
Rockland County, New York

Editors' Response: Here's to happy dreams of driving a Porsche and smoking a Cuban cigar. Remember: a fine cigar is one of life's truly affordable luxuries. As to the Cuban plans of President Trump, it's far too early to judge how this new administration will look at U.S.-Cuba relations.

"Daymond John impressed me with both his business acumen and his personality. I hope he soon achieves his goal of experiencing a Cuban Cohiba."
—Rich Foley, Fayette, Ohio

Dear Marvin,
I'm an avid reader of your magazine but I also belong to a few cigar groups on various social media platforms. I often see comments in these groups that debunk the CIGAR AFICIONADO ratings as nothing more than a gimmick and shouldn't be taken as any real endorsement or rating of the cigars sampled.

Obviously taste and experience are subjective and we all have different likes and dislikes—for me personally I use the ratings to give me a general idea of what to look out for. The gist of these negative comments is not the ratings themselves, but that you only rate cigars (and rate highly) for producers/brands that you either have a connection with (for example

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those that advertise with you) or those that you have some other vested interest in keeping sweet, to coin a British term.

I've never seen any evidence of this myself and have regularly responded to comments such as these rebutting that theory. However I often get shouted down. It's OK. I'm a big boy and can handle it.

Can you please put to rest once and for all these supercilious comments by explaining the procedures you use to select the products you sample?

All the best from the other side of the pond.

John Papanicolaou
Brighton, England

Editors' Response: Our ratings have great impact upon the cigar industry, and we take them quite seriously. We choose the cigars we rate not based upon advertising but by market presence. We aim to provide our readers with a buying guide to the cigar market, and aim to review cigars that a reader would find when shopping in a cigar store. For that reason, we rate cigars with broad distribution, and avoid those that have little distribution. That's one reason why you won't find private-label cigars in our ratings, cigars that are made for one shop, or one small chain of shops.

We've said it over and over, but it bears repeating: our ratings are conducted blind, meaning the tasters do not know the brand, price, country of origin or any other detail about the cigar when they rate it. In addition, the tastings are managed by our tasting coordinator—who is not a member of the tasting panel, because he knows the code. He buys the cigars we taste at retail shops.

We rate cigars from companies that advertise, as well as companies that do not advertise, and we give high and low ratings to both. The evidence is clear to see for those, like you, who do their research on the subject. Perhaps the most obvious evidence would be our ratings of Cuban cigars, which have never been able to advertise in our pages due to the longstanding U.S. Embargo on Cuba. Cuban cigars have rated highly over the years, and three Cuban cigars have been named Cigar of the Year, our highest accolade.

This is our 25th year of publishing CIGAR AFICIONADO *and reviewing cigars, and we have never compromised our values. Our ratings cannot be influenced by advertising, and they never will.*

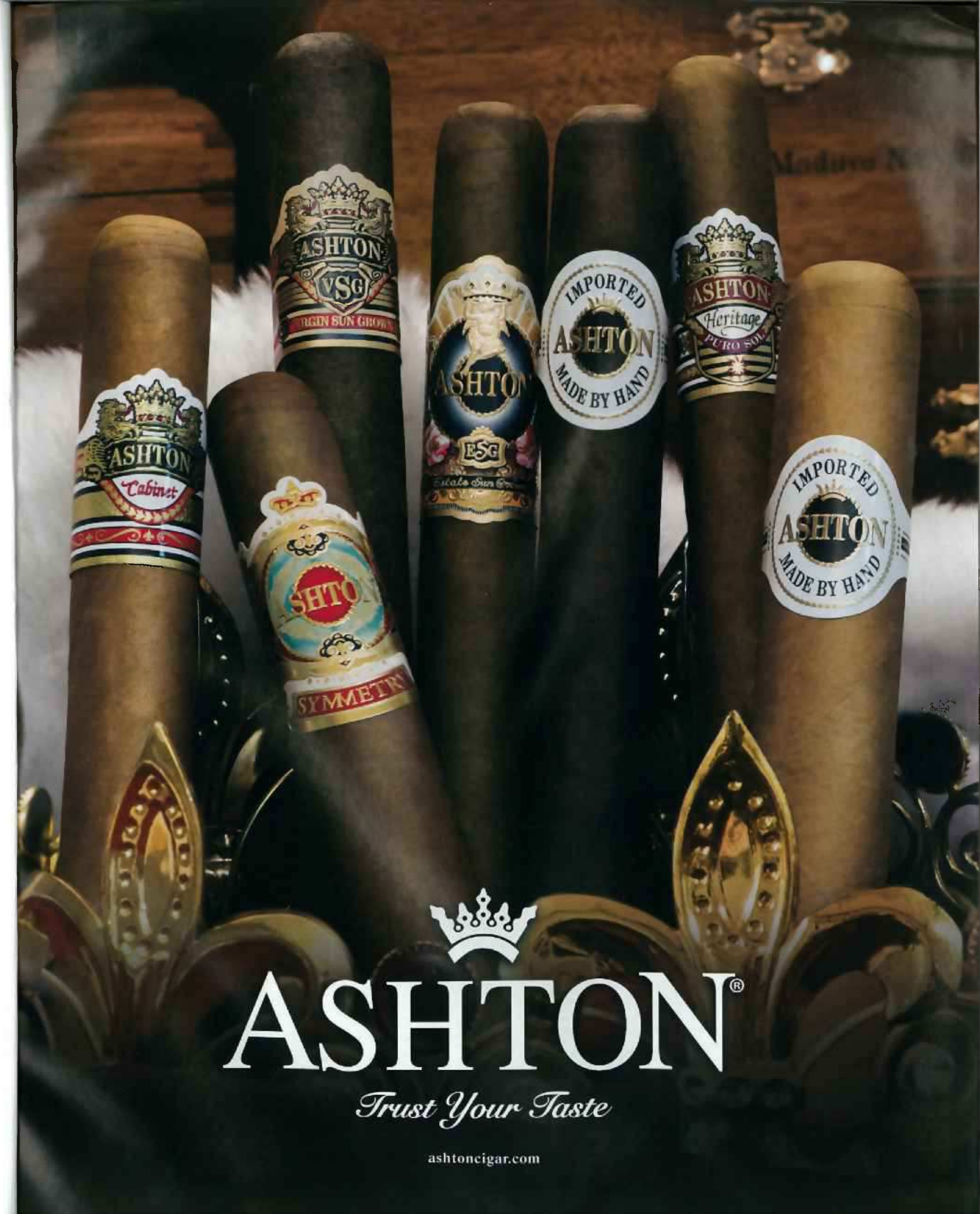
Dear Marvin,

I love your publication and read it cover to cover. I especially love seeing all the cool photos of people enjoying cigars.

I love cigars (I have four humidors myself), and love your publication and what you guys are doing for the industry.

Keep up the good work!

Jason Valchine
Chelsea, Michigan ❖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good life guide

Living well demands that we indulge in things that are of superior quality and excellent origin. This guide aspires to find and recommend the best of everything to aficionados of the good life.

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Bone China Ashtrays

Cigar ashtrays are often oversized statements of masculinity. They could be made from a hefty slab of metal, a portly hunk of ancient wood or perhaps a brick-thick slab of ceramic. These hefty and prominent items are perfectly at home in the man cave or neighborhood cigar shop. But what if you are seeking an ashtray for a space you share with a significant other or in a room where you wish to smoke your cigars while maintaining a certain amount of elegance? Enter the bone china ashtray.

Bone china is strong without being thick, allowing for a less bulky vessel to hold your cigars. Bone china is something you may have once found in your mother's cupboard or on the table of a fancy tea party you were badgered into attending. Nevertheless, bone china makes for a considerably attractive and understated cigar ashtray.

If you think it's not fitting to drop ash in such a lovely thing, know that bone china begins with bone ash, which is made from heated animal bones. That ash is mixed with other materials—kaolin, feldspar and quartz—to make the end product.

"Compared to ceramic ashtrays, bone china ashtrays are stronger and more resistant to chipping," says Keith Park of Prometheus. Then there's the look, that "snow white" appearance that makes it so sharp on your desk. "Bone china ashtrays look translucent," says Park.

Prometheus has had bone china ashtrays in its portfolio since the early 2000s. The art deco Bone China Quadri Ashtray ($89.95), pictured here, has a stately elegance with its platinum accents. The piece measures 8 1/4 by 6 3/4 inches, and its lack of branding makes it especially stately.

Davidoff makes a porcelain bone ashtray, with 14-karat-gold script, along with understated company branding. It retails for $100.

Whatever the choice, know that bone china will never be cheap. They are "always more expensive than ceramic ashtrays," says Park.

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—David Savona

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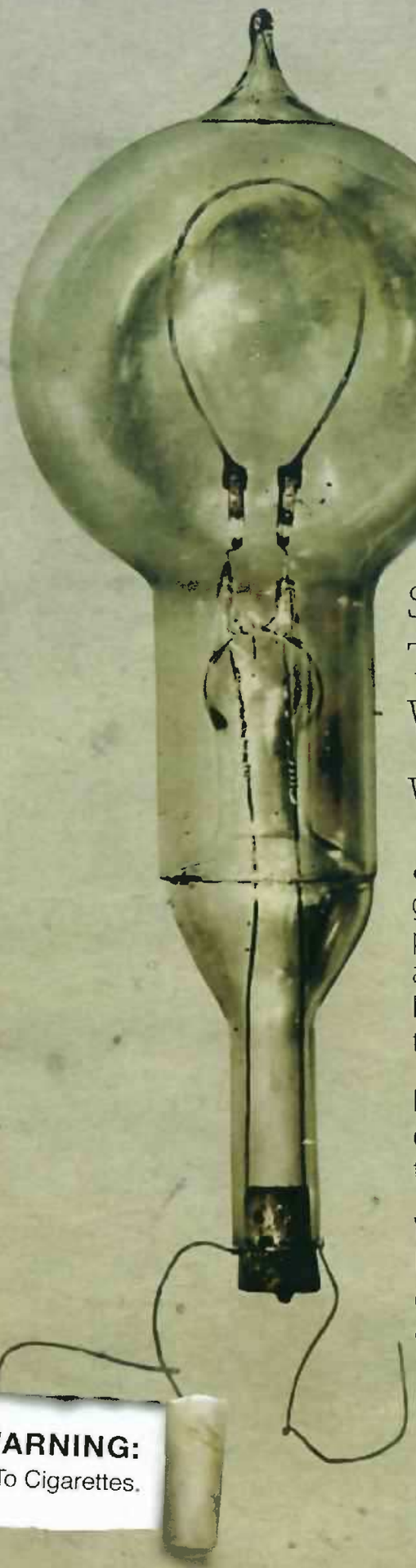

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Lexus LC500

For some folks, a day in paradise means soaking up the Hawaiian sun. For us, it's about climbing behind the wheel of the new Lexus LC500 and heading off to explore the hidden corners of the Big Island.

Since Toyota launched its luxury brand nearly three decades ago, Lexus has built a reputation for delivering quiet, lavishly equipped cars with bulletproof reliability. Where those products have fallen short is in the passion quotient. But if the LC500 is any indication, that's about to change. "I never want to hear the words, 'boring' and 'Lexus,' in the same sentence ever again," proclaimed Toyota Motor Co. CEO Akio Toyoda, as he pulled the wraps off the new sports coupe at the Detroit Auto Show. One glimpse suggests the grandson of Toyota's founder will get his wish.

Originally introduced as the LF-LC concept, few observers expected Lexus would follow up with a production model—or, if it did, that it would retain the show car's defining creases and curves. The LC takes the distinctive, if controversial, "spindle grille" that we've seen on other recent Lexus products to a new level of bold. But the aggressive face, with its slit headlights and impossibly long hood, fits this luxury coupe. The overall look is menacing yet sophisticated: a gangster in an evening jacket.

But what really matters is what we discover as we fire up the LC500's 5.0-liter engine. It's classic muscle, no slick turbos or superchargers, just a big V-8 making 471 horsepower and 398 pound-feet of torque. That's enough to snap your neck and let you sink deep into your seat as you launch down Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway—which the locals call "Crazy K." All the more satisfying is that deep, resonant roar blasting out of the tailpipe. Other Lexus models may be tombstone quiet, but the LC500 warns you it's coming and tells you to get out of the way.

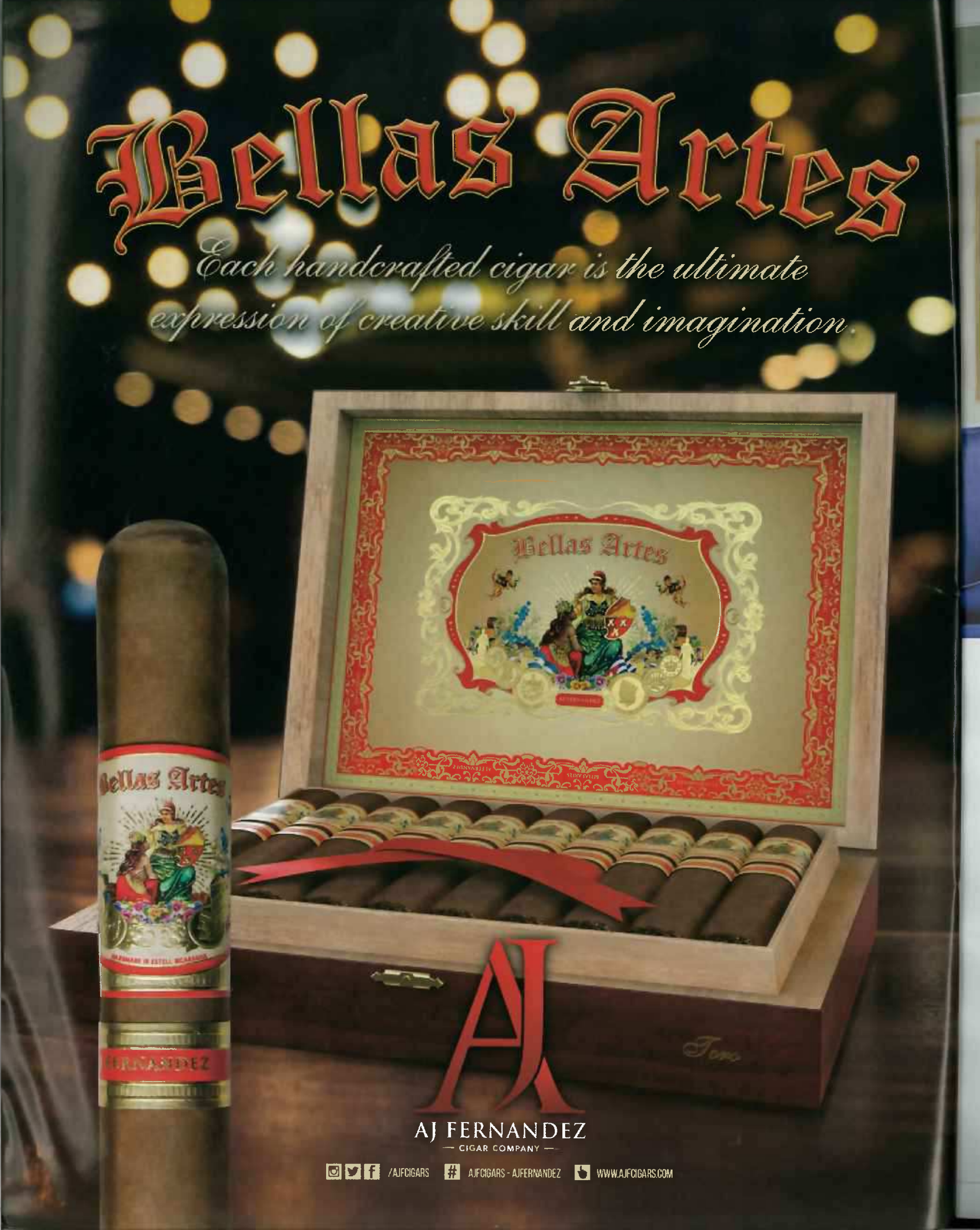
Most of the roads on the Big Island are, to be honest, as boring as classic Lexus design. But we've spent enough time to learn where the twisty bits are found, like Hawaii 250, which winds through the volcanic hills from Waimea to the coast. And the LC500 doesn't disappoint, connecting us to the road and urging us to take each new corner just a little bit faster.

After a long morning adventure, we return to our base and snag the keys to another coupe, this one adding the letter "h" to its nameplate. The hybrid brings together an intriguing powertrain package combining a 3.5-liter V-6 and an electric motor drawing power from a lithium-ion battery. It manages to deliver "only" 354 hp, yet it loses only about 0.2 seconds off the conventional gas model's 0 to 60 times of 4.7 seconds. The only minor disappointment with the LC500h? It delivers more of a whine than a roar out of the tailpipe—though it does yield notably better mileage.

For those who think of Lexus as the boring car your accountant drives, the new LC500 (and hybrid 500h) will quickly change your perceptions, whether you're off for a day's drive in paradise or someplace closer to home. Pricing starts at around $95,000 for the Lexus LC500 and $100,000 for the LC500h.

Visit lexus.com

—*Paul A. Eisenstein*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Boston Harbor Hotel

At very few urban hotels can a visitor arrive by boat. Take the water taxi from Logan Airport to Boston Harbor Hotel, however, and you put your flight behind en route to the private dock of one of the best locations in the city. Within walking distance are Faneuil Hall, the Aquarium, the Italian North End and the new Boston Public Market. But at this luxury gem, one of the nation's best, the prime location is just the tip of a stellar experience.

Even if you prefer a five-minute cab ride, The Boston Harbor Hotel has been one of the finest—and most overlooked—luxury properties in the Northeast for years. Boston Harbor is the city's only independent Forbes 5-Star, and as such, it always tries harder. It could not be rated any higher, yet owners just undertook a comprehensive renovation anyway that remade all 230 rooms and suites (starting at $589). The smallest layout, a "Harbor Superior," provides exquisite waterfront views and a generous use of space that extends to the bathrooms, with their huge walk-in showers. The restaurants were remodeled, the large spa and health club updated and one of the most user-friendly in-room technology systems in the hospitality industry installed. Yet the premium is still on human interaction. After your first visit, everyone remembers your name and it always feels like coming home.

Something fun always seems to be going on at Boston Harbor Hotel. In summer, outdoor movies are played on the waterfront terrace, while a historic schooner offers dinner cruises and private charters. In winter, the Sea Grill restaurant takes on an après ski motif with a fire pit, s'mores and fondue. A pop-up high-end whiskey bar also makes frequent appearances. From January through March, the 4-Star fine dining Meritage restaurant hosts the nation's longest running wine festival. The Boston Wine Festival is a 10-week series of intimate special gatherings, nearly three dozen, mostly sit-down, winemaker-hosted, multicourse pairing dinners featuring an all-star lineup including luminaries such as Opus One and Trimbach. When the festival is not in town, oenophile guests can still enjoy the 1,400 labels and wine-centric menu approach of longtime Chef Daniel Bruce.

Boston Harbor Hotel is like peeling an especially fragrant onion, with layers of little touches that add up to a memorable stay. The hotel is dog friendly, a chauffeured house car is available and the bathrooms feature bespoke toiletries. Even the postcards in guest room desks are custom made by local artists—all as part of a truly one-of-a-kind experience.

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—Larry Olmsted

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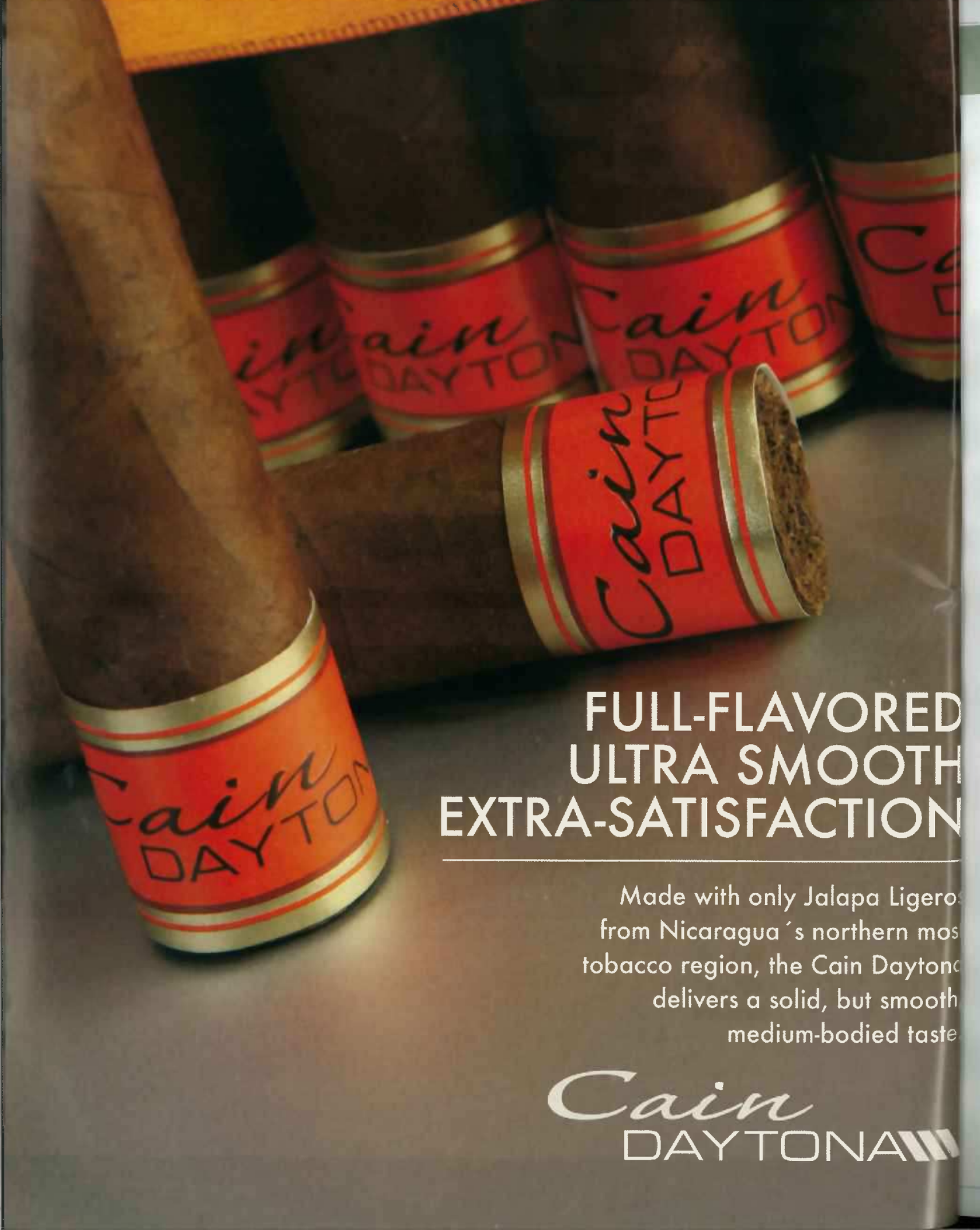
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The Blue Blazer

Sartorial quiz: If a man has but one jacket to pack for a summer weekend, what is it? The answer—the standard blue blazer with its casual, but regimented look—while kind of obvious, shouldn't be taken to mean that there isn't any room to spiff up a part of your wardrobe that you might have dismissed as basic.

Don't worry. We're not suggesting a color change. Blue may not define a blazer, but it is a fairly safe bet. By the original definition, the jacket can come in any color or stripe. In fact, all the blazing, multicolored coats with awning stripes and fat piping that the Brits trot out at the Henley Regatta every year are how the blazer supposedly got its name. (A competing theory is associated to the uniform of a British warship named HMS *Blazer*.) Nevertheless, the garment, as we know it stateside, is decidedly tame in color and pattern. And that's the point. Dandies can wear their Henley jackets once a year to watch a rarified sport. You can wear your blue blazer almost anytime and anywhere. With the exception of formal events and biker bars it is a welcome uniform almost everywhere, including ball games, golf outings, dinner parties and keggers. And it pairs with everything from a necktie and handkerchief to a tee shirt.

But if you're limping along with the same poplin blend jacket with brass buttons that you've worn for years, it's time for an upgrade. Jack Simpson, the always-debonair purveyor of his self-titled, custom-couture line, suggests starting with the fabric. No reason to sport a rough-hewn cloth she might cut her hand on while dancing with you, when you might have his jacket (pictured here) in a soft, luxuriantly draping Escorial wool fabric. For that matter, the coat from a casual mohair suit with patch pockets can be called into service. Next, swap those brass fasteners with horn or pearl buttons. (After all, clunky brass ones were first meant to keep sailors from wiping their noses with their sleeves.) Then rethink the pocket emblem—unless you actually belong to a yacht club.

From there, consider the very elements that make Simpson's styles look so sharp—and the basic blue blazer seem so, well, basic: fit and cut. Boating jackets may traditionally have been fitted loose—but so what? A boxy cut with notched collar puts you in a box. A long, sinuous shape with peaked lapels (which are typical to a double-breasted coat) confers the two things most men want: height and slimness. Talk about looking shipshape.

Visit jacksimpsoncouture.com

—*Jack Bettridge*

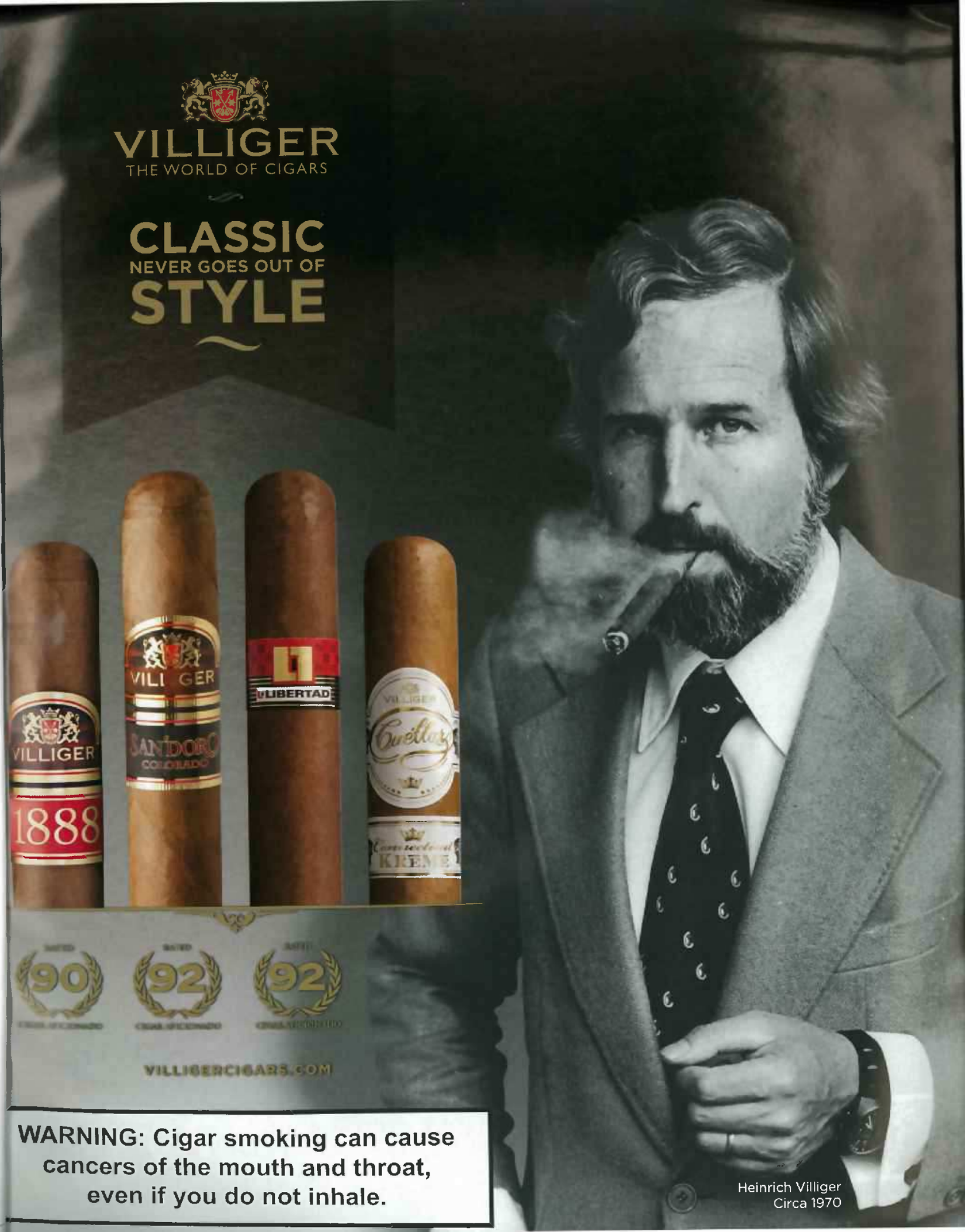
The Customized Gin & Tonic

Blame it on science. When cures for malaria came along, the point of adding tonic to gin was no longer the big blast of quinine that treated, but didn't heal, the symptoms of the disease. It became a simple drink mixer, so bottlers started backing off the bitter alkaloid made from cinchona bark and emphasized the sweetness that the mass market seems to crave. But for those seeking authentic tonic to mix with their gin (see story page 89), the cocktail revival has brought retro quinine waters like Fever-Tree, Q, Fentimans, Stirrings and Jack Rudy, (a syrup to which you add seltzer to taste). The most intrepid will conjure custom quinine tonic to match their taste.

At its simplest it's not hard, although it takes planning ahead and experimentation. Of course, you'll want to source natural ingredients. Combine four cups water and three cups cane sugar in a sauce pan and bring to a boil. Set on low. Add three tablespoons powdered cinchona bark (search the Internet), a quarter cup citric acid, three stalks of chopped lemongrass and the zest of a lemon or lime. Stir and let simmer for a half hour. Cool and strain through a coffee filter. (You may want to do this several times for aesthetic purposes: cinchona tints the mixture bronze, quite unlike the gin and tonic in the photo.) You will end up with a quinine tonic syrup, which will keep up to a month in a glass container. To serve, mix a tablespoon with gin in a glass and add ice and seltzer to taste.

Some on a quinine quest have been known to take it to extremes, however—as does Robby Younes, wine director at Crystal Springs Resort, in Hamburg, New Jersey. As well as wine, he enthuses over gin. He's tried 300 and is at work on his own concoction. Younes makes three different tonics intended for spring (honey emphasis), summer (floral) and fall/winter (juniper). And he goes to the ends of the earth to source components. A typical recipe starts in France with Vittel water. For cinchona, he looks to northern Peru, but, as a cigar smoker, Younes grinds it himself from the tree bark and then gently barbecues it with the cedar used to wrap cigars. His citric acid comes from Israel, and he adds cardamom seeds from Lebanon. Thailand supplies his lemongrass. For zest, he goes to Mexico for limes, lemons and grapefruits. Many hobbyists use allspice berries. Younes' come from the west (not the east, thank you) of India. In summer, he might add lavender from the south of France. The juniper, for his winter mix, comes from perhaps the most esoteric locale of all: a bush growing near the parking lot of his local Starbucks. Try finding that one on the Internet.

—Jack Bettridge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Sailing Watches

Sailing enthusiasts turned their attention to Bermuda in June, when the sport's fiercest competitors and fastest vessels vied to take home sporting's oldest trophy as the victor of the 35th America's Cup match. Meanwhile, watch brands got into the spirit with sporty new nautical designs geared for mariners and landlubbers alike.

Panerai made a big America's Cup splash by taking over as the event's official watch sponsor, in addition to partnering with the defending Oracle Team USA and challenger Softbank Team Japan. The development resulted from a conversation between Panerai CEO Angelo Bonati and his friend America's Cup CEO Russell Coutts. Until then, Panerai concentrated on classic sailing regattas featuring vintage sailboats. The dramatic move lifted the brand to the sport's equivalent of Formula One.

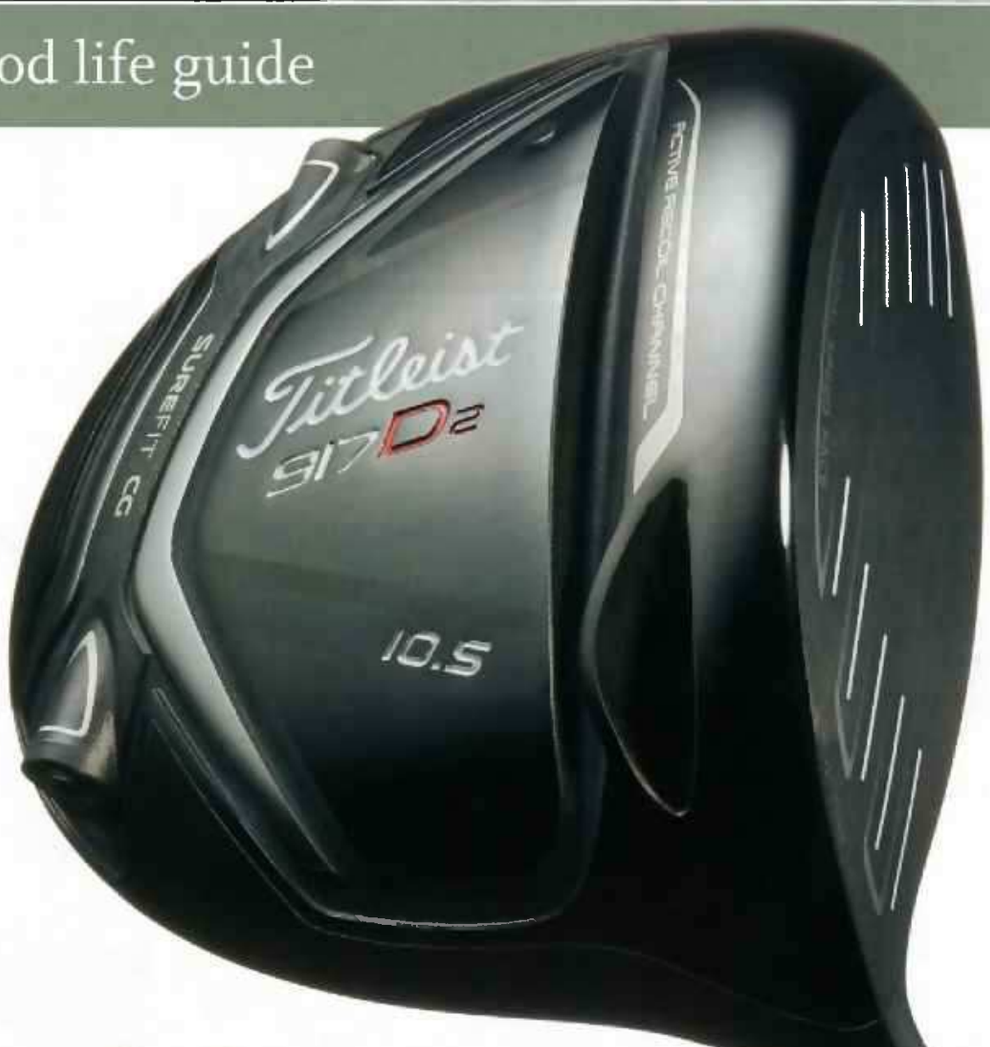
The new partnership comprises five special-edition watches, including a 47-mm Luminor 1950 Regatta Oracle Team USA 3 Days Chrono Flyback Automatic ($15,300, left, in black ceramic; $17,900 in titanium). The flyback chronograph used for timing will stop the elapsing seconds hand and instantly return it to zero to begin timing a second event without first stopping the chronograph. The regatta countdown function ticks down a 15-minute interval before competitors are allowed to cross the start line, with the final five-minute scale in red. A tachymeter scale around the flange calculates speed in knots.

Ulysse Nardin, sponsor of the Swedish Artemis Racing team, also has a new regatta watch with a sweep countdown timer at the center of the dial that can be set for between one and 10 minutes. The bidirectional seconds hand moves counterclockwise as it ticks down to the start, and then instantly changes direction to start timing the race with elapsed time tracked on a sub-dial at 6 O'CLOCK. Ulysse Nardin developed the patent-pending movement with input from renowned yachtsmen Loïck Peyron and Iain Percy, brand ambassadors and Artemis Racing team members. The Marine Regatta comes with a white or blue lacquered dial ($15,900, center), while a limited-edition Artemis Racing version features a special champlevé enamel dial ($29,800).

Louis Vuitton, which is the race's title partner, developed an America's Cup fashion collection that includes a colorful red, white and blue Tambour Navy Chronograph ($6,800). The jaunty design subtly features the tricolor Gaston V—a century-old insignia used by Gaston-Louis Vuitton that also appears in the new America's Cup logo—at 12 O'CLOCK on the dial and on the Damier Cobalt canvas strap. With its rounded drum-like case the eye-catching 46-mm stainless steel Tambour looks shipshape even if you are only navigating city streets this summer.

Visit panerai.com, ulysse-nardin.com, louisvuitton.com

—*Laurie Kahle*



Titleist 917D2 Driver

You've heard the saying a thousand times on the course: drive for show, putt for dough. Leave the big dog in the bag and worry about 100 yards and in.

But where's the fun in that?

If you're like me, you want to murder the tee shot. No one likes to be outdriven or to hear the inevitable barbs from your golfing buddies that follow. (My brother uncorked this gem a season or so ago: "My ball took a photo of your ball when it flew over.")

Hitting the big stick well starts with the right driver. Pro and amateur alike have embraced the Titleist 917D2. Promoting distance with forgiveness, the $550 club has a massive sweet spot and considerable adjustability. The 917D2 also has an active recoil channel—a canyon of sorts that runs across the entire sole allowing the face of the driver to compress at impact and bounce back, boosting ball speed and cutting spin to increase distance. It's the most forgiving of the company's 917 series of drivers.

If you buy a Titleist driver, don't buy one off the rack. You can be custom-fit at one of thousands of fitting centers around the world. Most shops include the fitting fee in the price, and Titleist itself offers complimentary fittings at Titleist Thursday locations.

You step up to the range with a Titleist team member and take a few warm-up swings. After answering some questions about your game (your handicap, typical ball flight, common problems you face) you try a driver. A TrackMan launch monitoring system analyzes your swing speed, spin rate, ball flight and a host of other factors, and the fitter makes adjustments, perhaps changing the shaft, the loft or shaft angle. What may seem like small changes on paper result in real changes in the flight of a ball, and you'll watch as low shots are replaced by high shots and pulls and pushes are replaced by straighter, truer drives. The entire process takes 20 or 30 minutes.

You can still make further adjustments at home using the wrench and weights that come with the club, including changes to the loft, lie and head weight. Even if you think the only cure for your game is a sprinkling of holy water and a switch to tennis, you should notice a difference.

No club will make you hit the ball like a Justin Thomas, who swings the club to great effect (see the June CIGAR AFICIONADO). But dialing in a 917D2 to your own personal specs should certainly help your game.

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—*David Savona*

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Kitchen Knives

If men involve themselves in culinary purchases it is usually with huge outdoor barbecues meant to instill grill envy in their neighbors or cast-iron, gas-driven ranges that lend the kitchen a gnarly motif. What you're probably ignoring is a pursuit that is just as masculine and involves diverse choices that are sure to improve your cooking skills: proper cutlery. After all, it's not worth taking the chance of ruining a prized piece of beef (or your fingers) by using a dull knife, or worse, the wrong one for the job.

Since 1814, family-owned Wüsthof has been crafting fine knives in Solingen, Germany, also known as the "City of Blades," where the art of blade-making is taken so seriously that it's been protected through legislation. Each blade that the company produces has been honed through a proprietary process called Precision Edge Technology that not only creates a sharper edge, but also doubles its retention and optimizes overall balance.

Wüsthof's Epicure seven-piece block set (top, $500), which comes with a 3 1/2-inch paring knife, a 5-inch serrated utility knife, an 8-inch cook's knife, a 9-inch double-serrated bread knife, steel sharpener, shears, and a 17-slot storage block, is just a starting point. Each of the knives sport shaped handles made of Richlite, a composite of recycled wood fiber materials, that have been riveted through the blade. This boosts comfort and aids the cutting motion, and the set will cover all of your basic chopping, mincing, paring and slicing needs.

You'll want to take it to the next level, however. Check out the 10-inch Pro cimeter knife (center left, $55), which features a curved blade to help smoothly saw through animal skin and produce thin slices of meat. The Ikon 5-inch boning knife ($160) is ideal for removing bones in pork, beef or chicken, while the flexible, narrow blade of the Ikon 6-inch Fillet knife ($190) helps separate fish flesh from the skin.

Your cutting arsenal can also be improved with the purchase of the 7-inch Chinese cleaver (center right, $190) that makes chopping fresh herbs and vegetables a breeze, and the 7-inch Santoku knife (bottom left, $190), which features small indentations on the blade so starchy foods like potatoes don't stick. And if you're feeling saucy, the 5-inch tomato knife (bottom right, $85) is perfect for slicing the delicate fruit as well as citrus.

To improve your skills and learn how to properly care for your new toys, be sure to view Wüsthof's Knife Skills Academy videos on their website, and soon you'll be crafting home-cooked meals that are of restaurant quality. Or at least you'll have fun trying.

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—*Andrew Nagy*

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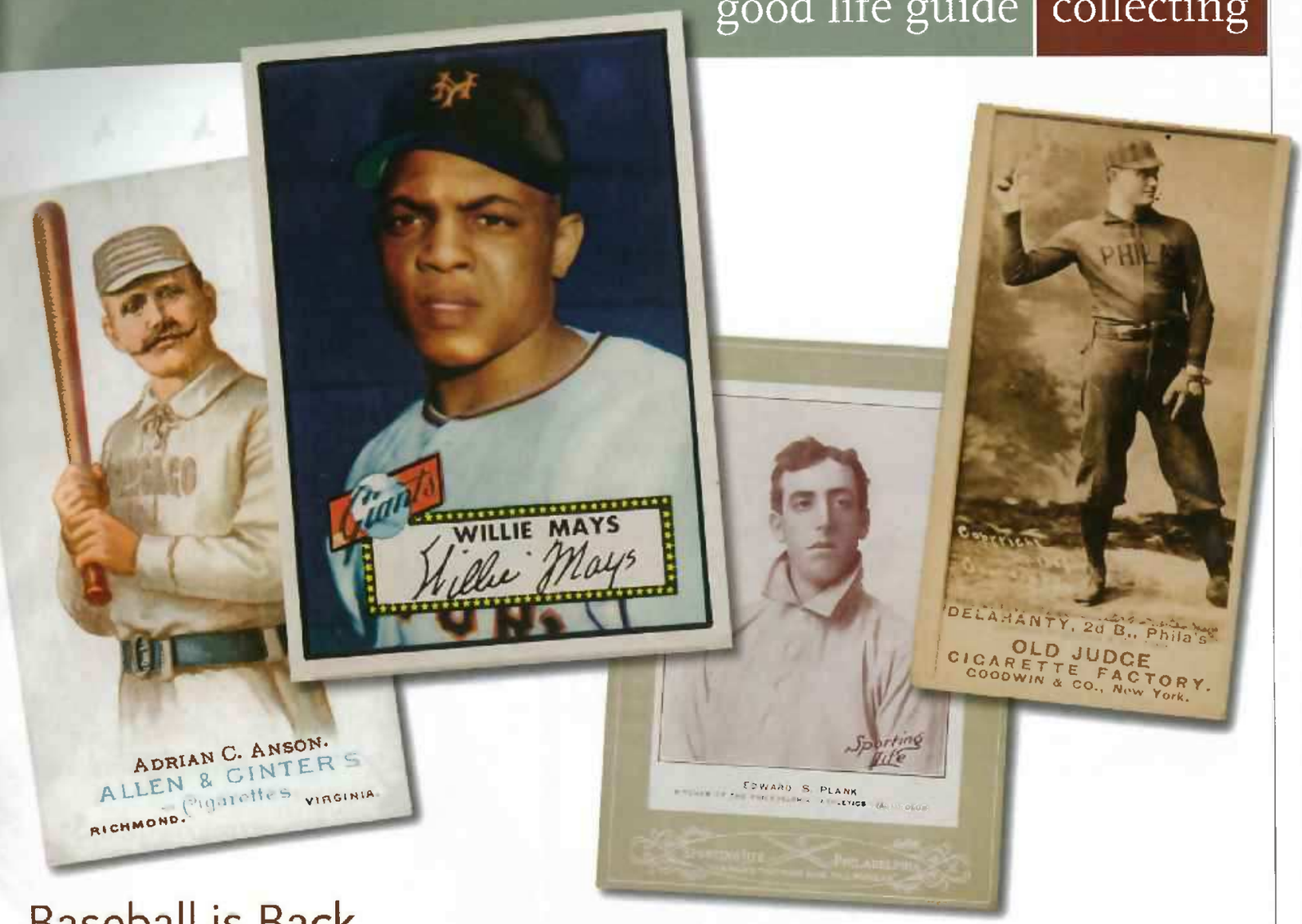

Baseball is Back

Two tenets of collecting that seem axiomatic are that it's always wise to invest in that which is timeless and that men of all ages will collect baseball cards. That second notion was challenged a few decades ago when two natural enemies whipsawed the category. Cards—and, later, autographed pictures and balls—were all the rage for collectors, when so many companies were producing cards that the market was oversaturated. Supply outstripped demand and the cards' value plummeted. And for autographs the buzz became the "F" word: fraud. It emerged on a grand scale, as the FBI estimated that 90 percent of the autograph market in the 1990s was bogus. We adored those looping "Ms" in Mickey Mantle's signature, but they were easy for an imitator to copy.

But for those who stuck by the timeless premise baseball is still the leading sports collectible. Many vintage items that had value decades ago retain value today, and will maintain their worth a half a century from now. "The market is heavily geared toward baseball," says Chris Ivy, director of the sports category for Heritage Auctions, an online auction firm. "Baseball has the longest history, and it is the most collected sport."

Indeed, a Heritage online auction last May featured Hall of Famers Cap Anson, Timothy Keefe, and Ed Delahanty in 1887 baseball cards. Later cards, from 1902 through 1911, included Napoleon Lajoie, Eddie Plank and Honus Wagner. The prices ranged "affordably" from $400 to $27,000. But as excellent as such items are, they are nowhere near the high end.

"Of baseball [collectibles], the Yankees have a good portion of that—the most dominant team, the most collected team and with the richest history," Ivy says. The prices prove it.

Of the 10 most expensive items belonging to individual baseball players sold at auction from 2010 through 2016, eight of those belonged to the Yankees. They included a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle card in mint condition which fetched a staggering $1,135,250 in November 2016. A 1927 home jersey worn by Lou Gehrig went for $717,000. And the bat that Babe Ruth used to hit his then-record 59th homer in 1921 sold for $717,000, the same price as his 1916 card, when he was pitching for the rival Boston Red Sox.

The Yankees aside, vintage items abound elsewhere. The boxing gloves used in the 1965 "phantom punch" bout between Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston sold for $956,000 in 2015. A year later, Honus Wagner's T-206 card made $776,750.

As with immortal players, the finest collectibles stand the test of time. Visit ha.com

—Kenneth Shouler

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She's Worth Billions

"Billions" star Maggie Siff plays some of the toughest—and smartest—characters on television

BY MARSHALL FINE • PORTRAITS BY JIM WRIGHT

STYLING BY KATIE BOFSHEVER • MAKE-UP BY JO STRETTELL • HAIR STYLING BY SASCHA BREUER

THEY PLAY HUSBAND AND WIFE on Showtime's "Billions," but one of the first scenes Paul Giamatti filmed with actress Maggie Siff was far from your usual get-to-know-you moment. • She towered over him in dominatrix gear, including thigh-high leather boots, as he lay trussed up and gagged at her feet. She demeaned him verbally, just before slowly grinding a glowing cigarette out on his chest. The next scene: The two of them, dressed for work and smiling, giving their kids breakfast and getting them off to school.

"Maggie was one of those people I instantly felt comfortable with," Giamatti says with a laugh. "We had fun doing that scene. That kind of trust comes from being a decent, kind, lovely, warm person. We were both very curious about that world and talked to some people who are in it as research. That's one of the fun extracurricular bonuses of being an actor—you get to learn about these other lives.

"What made it comfortable is that Maggie is a great actress. There are times I watch her and I think, 'If I could grow up and be you as an actor, that would be amazing.' I'm amazed by how good she is."

Sitting on a restaurant patio in Los Angeles' Los Feliz neighborhood (not far from her home in Silver Lake), Siff chuckles at a mention of that moment, the attention-grabbing first scene in the pilot for the 2016 series.

"Paul and I got through the awkwardness together," she says. It's clear that she approaches that particular kink in her character, psychotherapist Wendy Rhoades, quite seriously. "For Wendy, I think it's something she allowed into the marriage because he needed it." Siff adds with a grin: "And she ends up being good at it."

You play to your strengths and Siff, a Bronx Science graduate, has built an increasingly noticeable career playing strong, smart women who make their mark in a world of powerful men. From "Mad Men" to "Sons of Anarchy" and now "Billions," Siff has been at the center of some of television's most arresting dramas for the past decade.

"There's a pleasure in swimming with sharks," she says.

She smiles, her green eyes offering a warmth and humor that can turn to chilly intelligence in front of a camera. In the 10 years since Siff got under Don Draper's skin in the very first episode of "Mad Men," she's created a series of characters who blend brains, toughness and vulnerability in a seductive and refreshing way.

"The strength, the confidence, the intelligence, the beauty—you're intrigued as soon as she walks on-screen," says Matthew Weiner, the creator of "Mad Men."

In the high-testosterone, male-ego-driven world of politics and finance depicted in "Billions," the sharpest operator and canniest player swimming among those sharks may just be Siff as Wendy Rhoades, the woman in the middle. Like so many professional people, Wendy confronts the familiar contemporary conflict—career vs. family—with a twist: Her husband and her boss hate each other.

Actually, hate is too mild: They're mortal enemies.

Her boss is a hedge-fund titan, the rule-skirting Bobby Axelrod, known as "Axe," played by Damian Lewis. His Axe Capital employs her as an in-house psychotherapist/performance coach for his team of testosterone-laden traders. But her husband is U.S. Attorney Chuck Rhoades (Giamatti), whose greater political ambitions rest on indicting Axelrod for insider trading and other financial chicanery. It's business, but it's also increasingly personal.

The in-fighting got increasingly brutal in the series' second season, as Rhoades faced scrutiny that nearly cost him his job before reversing his fortunes to become a serious candidate for governor of New York. But Axelrod, who prides himself on his outlaw instincts, chafed at the effort to appear squeaky clean, even as he began to doubt Wendy's loyalty for the first time—despite the fact that she's separated from Chuck and going through marital counseling.

Maggie Siff is the third actor from "Billions" on the cover, joining Paul Giamatti (far left) and Damian Lewis.

The show "Billions" pits the Axelrod family, left, played by Malin Akerman and Damian Lewis, in a battle over money and loyalty with the family Rhoades, portrayed by Maggie Siff and Paul Giamatti.

It all came to a climax in the second season's final episodes. Axelrod bent the law in an effort to bankrupt Chuck and his father, even as Chuck committed transgressions of his own to ensnare Axelrod. The season ended with Axelrod arrested, freed on bail and facing off with Rhoades, who tells his nemesis that, no matter what the cost to himself, if he can bring Axelrod down, it will be "worth it."

Siff plays Wendy as the only one capable of surfing the big waves created when these two huge egos clash. Axe is her boss, but she's also his therapist. Chuck is her husband, but their personal life also includes a bondage-and-domination element that makes him the submissive to her dominant. It's the kind of acting challenge that Siff relishes: The push/pull within each relationship, she says, is what makes the role so interesting.

"You don't have to put a gun to Wendy's head for her to choose her family over her job," Siff says. "But I do think she's susceptible. She's not immune to being seduced by the world of wealth and power. It's just that she's a more well-rounded character, because of her intensive training. In some ways, this show is about what happens when you ignore the things that keep you connected to the world. She watches Axe and sees what happens to him when he disassociates from 'higher values.' That can be a deadly sacrifice. She has the capacity not to make that kind of Sophie's choice."

Siff came to "Billions" at a point when being a mom seemed a lot more important than being an actor. She'd finished six seasons of "Sons of Anarchy," playing Dr. Tara Knowles, a surgeon whose career is compromised by her romantic involvement with the leader of a Bay Area biker gang. At the end of her final season Siff was pregnant, and gave birth to daughter Lucy in 2014. At that point, she felt blissfully cocooned in the baby bubble.

"The script for 'Billions' called to me; it woke me up to want to do it. It felt like a gift."

"Having a family changed some of my fixation on my career and naturally shifted my priorities," Siff, 42, says. "After I had my child, I couldn't imagine ever wanting to leave her. All that artifice of putting on costumes and make-up felt very far away. I was so hunkered down with my daughter in the act of nesting and turning inward—I couldn't imagine leaving the house and spending time away from her."

It was "Billions" that brought her back to acting. "The script for 'Billions' was the first one I read that got my juices going, that I felt myself interested in. It called to me; it woke me up to want to do it. It felt like a gift, something that made me feel that excited."

Executive producers Brian Koppelman and David Levien, cocreators of the Showtime series with Andrew Ross Sorkin, were equally excited

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when Siff decided to audition. They had struggled to cast the role of Wendy, trying out nearly 100 actresses without finding one "who seemed to nail it," Koppelman says.

"We were looking at casting tapes on a Sunday night, each of us at home, and here was this tape of Maggie, sitting in a chair in her living room, saying the words of a scene where she's giving a pep talk to a trader," Koppelman recalls. "There was an intelligence in her eyes, an incredible amount of empathy, and this clear understanding of every nuance and human shading and thought that the character had. It was one of the most compelling auditions I'd ever seen. I called David and said, 'Are you watching Maggie Siff?' And he was."

"It was the most obvious thing in the world," says Levien. "We had read so many people for the role, and she was obviously the only one for the part."

Giamatti agrees. "On the page initially, the character seemed liked she'd be steely. But Maggie brought more warmth and humanity to it. She made it an even more complicated character. Wendy moves between those worlds, studying power."

Though "Billions" seems like a straightforward power struggle between two men on a collision course, the character of Wendy shifts the balance of power dramatically, sometimes to herself. Better than either of them, Wendy, a psychotherapist, knows what makes these two rivals tick.

"I'm a quiet, introverted person naturally," Siff says. "I'm introspective, thinking about people's motives. If I wasn't an actor, I might be a therapist. But Wendy is a lot smarter than I am. All of these characters are incredibly competitive and interested in being king—or queen—of their realm. There's this fixation on mastery.

"Wendy is really comfortable with the male ego structure. She understands it, she enjoys it, she appreciates the fierce competitive nature of the work environment, of her husband and her boss. Wendy, like Rachel Menken [her "Mad Men" character], relishes her role. She's unafraid to stand up in a man's world," says Siff. "Wendy is just fucking good at her job, at doing the work and living the life. She doesn't feel guilt; she doesn't have to apologize for throwing elbows. She's graceful."

"We joke that everybody talks about this as a male, testosterone-driven show," says Levien, "But we knew the secret—that Wendy would win the first season."

Season Two of "Billions" saw Siff continue her role advising Axe Capital's crew, including Mike Wagner (David Costabile, above) and Taylor (Asia Kate Dillon, top left, with Damian Lewis). But her toughest battles came at home, facing her on-screen husband played by Giamatti.

"That's what's so fun about the show, the power switches off between them," Koppelman says. "Sure, with Axe and Wendy, one of them is the boss. But, in any given moment, anyone can take the power, depending on who needs what from whom. She's able to read people and understands all the levers there are, how they move. Essentially, who's zooming who."

That type of situation is one Siff relishes. "I do enjoy playing characters who can stand up in those supercharged worlds and be heard. Wendy is a change-agent for herself and the people around her. Everybody has blinders on about themselves, but her gift is to see through other people's facades. She's a great manipulator, and she mostly uses it for good."

Wendy Rhoades is one in a decade-long series of TV characters with whom Siff has made her mark. From her breakthrough as department-store heiress Rachel Menken on "Mad Men" in 2007 to Tara Knowles on "Sons of Anarchy" (2008–13) and now with "Billions," she's played astute, perceptive women, which means they were casting to type. Siff, after all, was canny enough to follow her mother's advice and attend Bronx High School of

Siff's breakout came in Season One of "Mad Men," with Jon Hamm.

Science, instead of the High School of the Performing Arts in Manhattan.

"Really, my mother made me go there. I actually got into both Science and Performing Arts," Siff recalls. "But my mother pushed me in the direction of Science High. She said, 'Get the best education you can get.' I felt like there would be time to do acting and theater after high school. As a kid, I cared most about being smart and doing well.

"Some part of me knew that from the time I was a kid. So, in high school, I participated in speech and debate. I did dramatic interpretation and rode the bus to the tournaments with all the policy nerds who were debating. But I was also acting; Regis High School was this all-boys school in Manhattan and I got recruited to take the subway into Manhattan to play women in their plays.

"I probably should have started this whole process of an acting career when I was a lot younger. But I wasn't thinking ahead about how that was going to happen, or what I wanted my career to look like. When I would think about the future, all I could see was a big gray wall. I thought, well, shouldn't I be able to see something more? I cared about my education and I liked school. So I prioritized that."

Siff went to Bryn Mawr College, which led to work with professional theater companies in Philadelphia, where she acted during college and for five years after she graduated.

"I was working a lot, but I had this constant feeling of self-criticism. I was really hard on myself," she says. "I wasn't growing in the way I wanted. I was doing a lot of avant-garde, site-specific work and, if that's what you want to do, Philadelphia was a great place.

"But I felt called to explore characters and felt like I needed formal training. So I applied to NYU for graduate school and got in. And by the time I got out, I was 30. You could say I came to Hollywood late, but those three years at NYU gave me a chance to regain the sense of what makes me want to act. It restored my faith and conviction in the craft. It grew me in a way that was incredibly helpful, in terms of sustaining a career over time. It was a way of learning to trust your own instincts and get out of your own way."

As she talks about working in New York theater, the subject of cigars arises, because one of her favorite directors, Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater, used to use rehearsal breaks to enjoy fine tobacco.

"He'd run outside to smoke his cigar, then stash the butt for the next break," she recalls with a laugh. "He had a special spot where he'd stash his cigars and you always knew you'd find him there.

"Actually, he's one of three guys I've worked with who are great smokers. Beside Oskar, there was Ron Perlman and Peter Weller… All of these men are very outsized characters, with charismatic, smart, very big personalities. They're people who are unashamed to smoke a cigar in public. The cigars felt like an extension of the joie de vivre they all possess. It's kind of a trope: this very old-boy, rarefied men's club. For these guys, it's definitely an extension of a certain kind of machismo."

After grad school, Siff did plays in Chicago, then took aim at Hollywood and, after two years of TV guest spots (including a couple of three-episode arcs on "Nip/Tuck" and "Life on Mars"), she got a call from a casting agent to read for the pilot of a new series: "Mad Men."

"I thought it was brilliant when I read it," she recalls. "I'd been auditioning all winter for pilot season. The year before, I'd tested for a bunch of pilots and didn't even get a nibble. It was the last script I read for the pilot season. And I stuck my claws out for this one.

"Originally, I was supposed to read for the character of Peggy Olson [which went to Elisabeth Moss], but my manager said, 'I don't think you're Peggy. You're Rachel.' So that's what I read for. They kept calling me back. Matt [Weiner] had so much specificity about who the characters were and who to cast. I wound up reading for him five times. Every time I went in, I'd think, 'This is mine,' and then I wouldn't get it. My manager and agent were trying to prepare me, saying, 'They're probably going to go another way,' but I wasn't giving up. It happens so rarely where you're really convinced that something is coming to you."

"I wanted someone who had that slight New York vibe," Weiner remembers. "I wanted a little bit of a city edge, but also an assimilated quality. And then we found Maggie—she was so beautiful and she did it so many different ways."

More important, her Rachel Menken clicked with Jon Hamm's Don Draper, in a subplot of marital infidelity and romance that became a central conflict of the first season of "Mad Men."

"There was incredible romantic chemistry," Weiner notes. "You can't plan for it but it really did happen in this case. There was a tinge of vulnerability under her strength that made her seem susceptible to Don. I loved her dry sense of humor. She has an elegance that comes from education, but there's also a toughness. She's so strong, but she's also really feminine. She's a real person, not someone who's putting on a front. There's something amazing about someone who can convincingly let a character's intelligence come through. And there's a conflict when that person makes a bad decision—about Don, for example—that's really dramatic."

It was a year between shooting the pilot and the series going on the air, and then, Siff wasn't sure if the show had a future.

"It was like an art project," Siff says. "In fact, I remember an AMC executive using that term: that the show was like an art project, that it would give the network credibility even if nobody watched it. Nobody had any idea it would do what it did." The show went on for seven seasons, and won a host of Emmys, Golden Globe and SAG awards.

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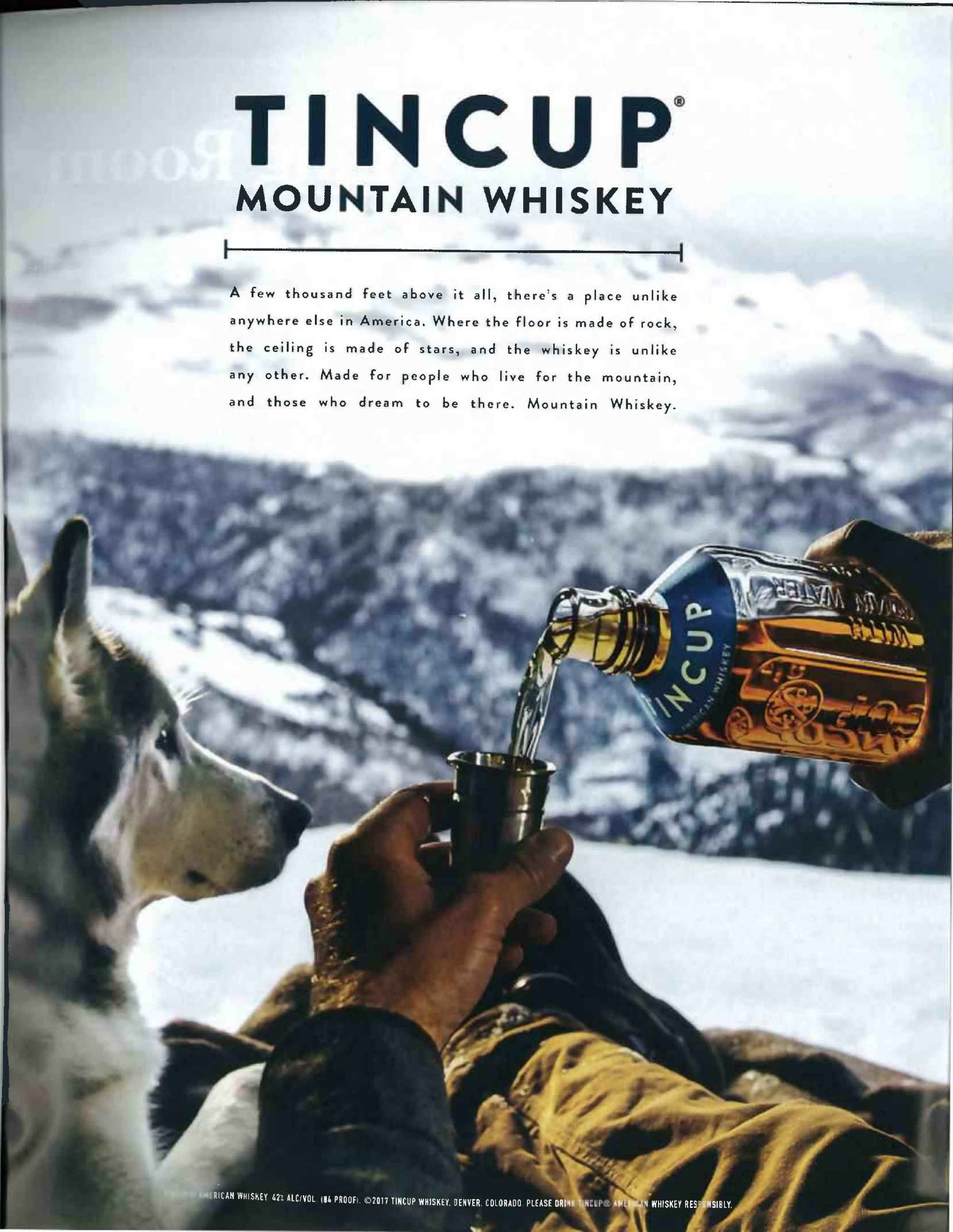

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Siff's character was written out after the first season of "Mad Men," but she segued directly to "Sons of Anarchy." She spent six seasons playing Dr. Tara Knowles in the series about a motorcycle gang that was sometimes described as "Hamlet on Harleys." Among other things, she got to ride on the back of several motorcycles and acted out a brutally violent final scene in a fight with Katey Sagal.

"Every character in that show was in a constant state of managing their PTSD," says Siff. "I did a lot of things on that show that I'd never done before; the thing that was so breathtaking was the violence. Whenever I had one of those scenes and I'd come home covered in fake blood or I'd killed someone, I'd think, 'I can't believe this is my job.'"

"She's a great, great girl who hasn't been affected by all the Hollywood rah-rah," Sagal says. "She's very down-to-earth and sincere. She comes from a theater background, so she upped my game. You want to work with actors who are better than you—and she was very good at what she does."

"I need to work for my well-being. Every job has to call to me in a deep way to feel we'll all be served."

Tara's murder provides an emotional climax to the sixth season of "Sons." She was killed in a particularly gruesome scene: smashed in the head with an iron, then drowned in a sink of ice water while Sagal's character also stabbed her repeatedly in the back with a carving fork.

"That was kind of traumatic," Siff recalls with a laugh. "This was not an ordinary death. On one level, I was glad it was so spectacular because it means you meant something to the show. It was kind of surreal, because we had stunt doubles; Katey and I were taught the fight and we would jump in and out for close-ups. But you're also watching your double enact it at full-speed. It's a long, bloody process. My mother and sister couldn't watch that episode.

"It's intense to live with those characters for that many years and then have to say goodbye. On a practical level, you're cold and wet and covered in fake blood, and that goes on all day. Then for the two days afterward, I had to lie on the floor as a dead body and watch the rest of the characters deal with my death. I still have 'Sons of Anarchy' dreams. It lodges in your psyche. It doesn't die."

Sitting on the patio in Los Angeles, Siff is in a rare quiet moment. She will shoot an independent film in Kentucky before returning to shoot Season 3 of "Billions" after Labor Day. In between is family vacation and spending time with her husband, design consultant Paul Ratliff, and their daughter, Lucy. Siff and Ratliff have been married since 2012, and their child turned three in April.

For the moment, Siff's schedule accommodates her needs as a mother. She hopes to work theater back into the mix, and she realizes that acting is important not only for her, but for her daughter as well.

"I need to work for my well-being, as well as hers," she says. "If I'm not really digging in to express myself in that way, I start feeling a little crazy and that's not good for her. So I'm trying to find the balance. The calculus is more complicated than it used to be, when my romantic relationship and my career filled up my time. That was easier math to do than being a good mom who's really present.

"This year I said no to things that I'd have said yes to before I had a child. At this point, every job has to call to me in a deep way to feel we'll all be served. And I don't regret that for a moment." ❖

Contributing editor Marshall Fine is critic-in-residence at The Picture House Regional Film Center in Pelham, NY.

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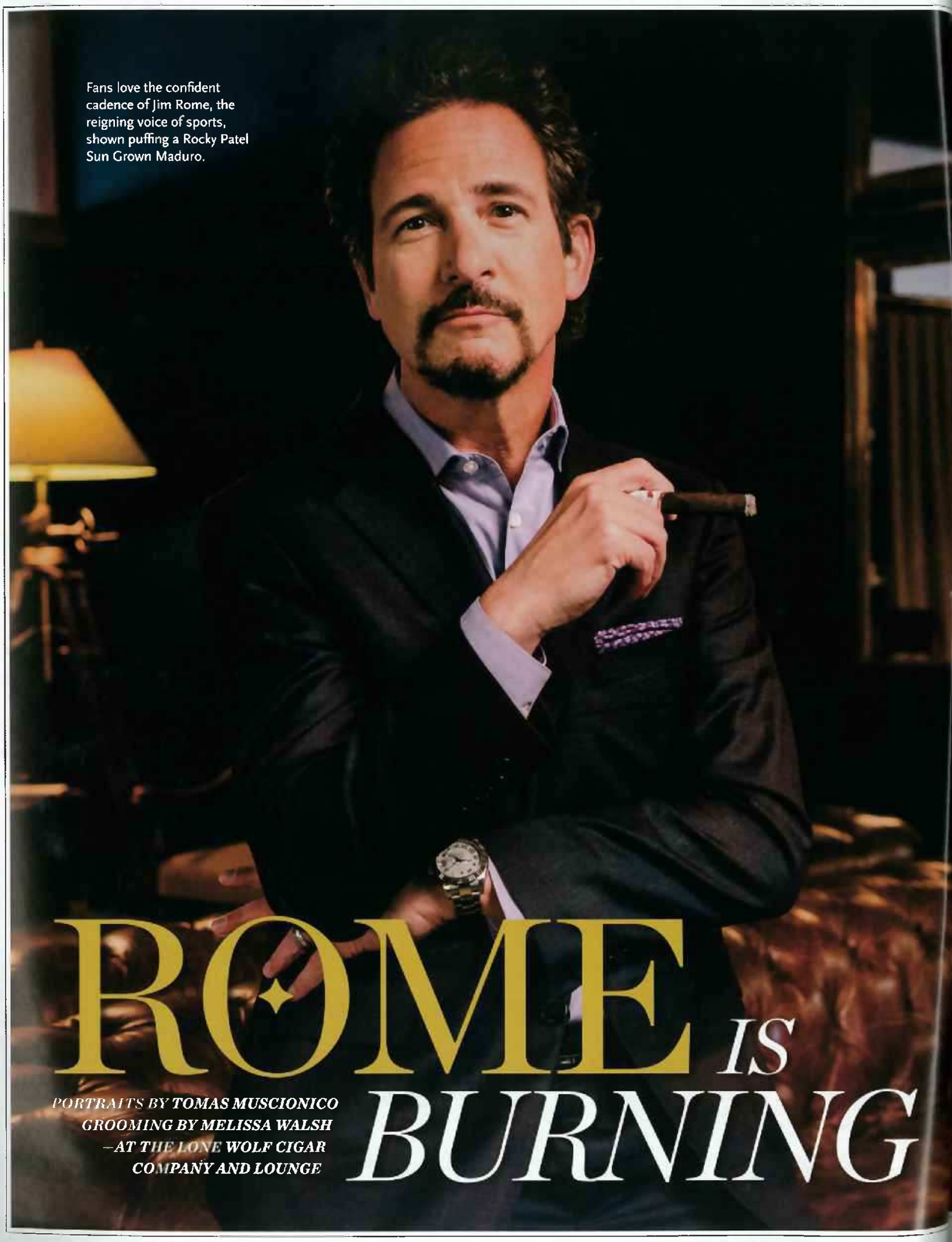

Fans love the confident cadence of Jim Rome, the reigning voice of sports, shown puffing a Rocky Patel Sun Grown Maduro.

ROME IS BURNING

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—AT THE LONE WOLF CIGAR COMPANY AND LOUNGE

Since he was a young boy, Jim Rome has been fascinated with sports, and he has been the ruling voice on the subject for decades // **BY JOEL DRUCKER**

Picture a driver, his car on a highway. There's traffic. Movement. Slower. Faster. Clutter on the right. Construction up ahead on the left. He's got the radio on, listening to The Voice, a sound he's heard for more than 20 years. That game last night was amazing. Will the team make the trade? Should a new coach be hired? Can you believe that guy missed that putt? And what about the next game?

The driver enjoys what he hears. It's like he's listening to a conversation inside a bar, on a playground, outdoors on his buddy's deck. Here's one caller, saying why the coach is a bum. Here's another, dead certain the general manager was the bad guy. Though the next caller takes it in a whole other direction—he wants to repeal the DH rule—the randomness of it all suits the driver just fine. This is what it was like when sports were affordable and accessible and you got into it with people in the nearby seats. Even if he disagrees sometimes, it's all fun: fast, vocal, passionate, combative.

Reigning over all of it is The Voice. The cadence like none other. The snap. The crackle. The pop. Confident. Staccato. Crunch, crunch, crunch. Relentlessly engaged, as if this broadcast could well be his last. As the host sees it, the people who've chosen to hear him have made a choice. Whether they are listening in traffic, on the job, at work, in a bar, in the middle of exercise, whatever the flip, they are here not just on the sidelines, but in the game. Even if they don't call in, they are participating with the heart and mind so unique to a sports zealot. The Voice knows this. He doesn't just understand his audience with studied distance and a glance at some horizontal Excel document. He *is* the audience, has been one of them since he was a kid, grasps what's needed not just in his head but in his bones. It's downright visceral. So the show—any show, every damn show—better be memorable.

The Voice belongs to Jim Rome. Every weekday, from a Southern California studio a short drive away from his home in Orange County, the 52-year-old plays the role of ringleader of "The Jim Rome Show," a CBS Sports Radio program that airs on 205 stations across America, as well as on the Internet. Ninety-one percent of the audience is male. It's a three-hour program, which means Rome's workday starts before dawn as he and his team review and assemble the show. The evenings are often taken up tracking games, trades, news and all else that define America's endless appetite for sports. Much as Rome relishes those off-hours moments when he can retreat to his backyard and enjoy a cigar with his buddies, business beats pleasure every time. Then again, Rome has worked hard to make his pleasure his business.

Sitting at a restaurant on the grounds of The Resort at Pelican Hill, an opulent golf resort located in Newport Beach, California, Rome reflects on a vision he had back in his teens. Unlike many who aspire to broadcast sports, Rome never sought to be a play-by-play announcer.

"I wanted to have a canvas and I wanted to interview athletes and just give my opinion," says Rome, the urgency and sharpness of his speech reinforced by his crisp button-down shirt and the sharp, well-kept lines of his dark moustache and goatee. "And just kind of talk junk and provide some entertainment and information. And I felt like I could not do that as a play-by-play person."

Rome loves to have a cigar at the race track or in his backyard. He has a short list of favorites: Cuban Partagás, Norteño by Drew Estate and the cigar he's smoking here, Padrón Serie 1926.

Junk? Well, the audience knows what Rome is up to, appreciates how he doesn't talk like an omniscient broadcaster. He prefers to speak more like one of the guys. "Make a run or bust it up once and for all," Rome said this spring in a segment about the Los Angeles Clippers. "And everyone knew it. So what happens? They go out and get punked in their own building the very first night."

On a more whimsical but still pointed note, here was Rome waxing poetic about toasted grasshoppers, a new food item offered at Seattle Mariners games: "This is so Mariners, too. Doing anything to distract the world from their god-awful, last-place, 2-7 baseball team... A hot dog? At a baseball game? Not in Seattle, bro. We'd rather slam a bowl full of toasted insects... but I'm sure anything is easier to swallow than a 16th straight season without the playoffs."

The website stucknut.com has a section that it has dubbed "Jim Rome Smacktionary," a glossary of hundreds of terms deployed on the show, be it those christened by Rome or created by devout fans, dubbed "The Clones." "Crying Irish" is reserved for whining Notre Dame fans, "Montanalow" is for the physical resemblance between iconic quarterback Joe Montana and singer Barry Manilow, "Jungle Dweller" for a frequent caller, and the one that describes Rome, "the King of Smack."

HBO announcer Jim Lampley has a keen grasp on Rome's arresting flavor. "If you were looking for a handbook on how to make a show, this would be it," says Lampley, who has been a guest on Rome's show many times. "Make fun of people who would let it be OK. Use repetitive language that would establish membership in the cult. And keep expanding the cult. If you don't understand what's going on here, just keep listening, and gradually you will get the drift."

But if you had to distill the lexicon of "The Jungle" down to its essence—and the urgent, rapid patter of Rome's show begs that you darn well better do this soon—it would likely boil down to a pair of phrases that collectively take up a handful of words.

At runner-up, "don't suck." This has two valid meanings. First, make your comment compelling. The other, less obvious but perhaps more powerful: Don't fawn over the athletes. Just because they play a sport well doesn't mean they are perfect.

First prize goes to the phrase that could well earn Rome a spot in the book, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*: "Have a take." Bring something to the table. But you better be ready to back it up with at least a little evidence. And keep in mind that you likely won't have as much data at your disposal as Rome. As Lampley notes, "I've almost never heard him ask a caller, 'Describe it to me' when referring to a specific game."

The crackling voice with the whip-smart ability to turn a phrase and not suffer fools. The locomotive charging full-speed down the track, spitting out ample opinions that might ruffle more than a few feathers. The engaged mind, fueled by an encyclopedic recollection of sports present and past. It all adds up not just to a leisurely chat, but a verbal form of liquid nitrogen. For some of a certain age, this might sound familiar. Without a doubt, Rome's approach has roots in another broadcasting notable, the legendary Howard Cosell. Back in the '60s and '70s, starting on radio, expanding to ABC's "Wide World of Sports" and "Monday Night Football," Cosell took sports media into new territory. As he wrote in his 1973 autobiography, "I learned early on that sports is a part of life, that it is human life in microcosm, and that the virtues and flaws of the society exist in sports even as they exist everywhere else . . . I have been a shock treatment to many people who have grown up subject to the carefully created notion that the world of sport is, in fact, Shrangi-La [sic], the Lost Horizon."

A frequently held axiom in broadcast media is that the most legitimate analysis comes from the athletes. Cosell dared to challenge that assumption, per usual doing so in a strident way with another of his signature sayings: "I never played the game."

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Says Rome, "This, 'you never played the game' thing has always been very interesting to me. There are lots of people who have opinions about the president who have never been president... If only guys who played the game could talk about the game, where would this leave us in terms of content? I interview lots of athletes who have nothing to say about anything, yet they're going to fill three hours a day? On a radio program or a TV show? So, I know what I am, I speak for the fan. I didn't play the game at the highest level, but I'm well-prepped and I have opinions—and do what you want with those opinions."

But though Cosell also shared Rome's love of a good cigar, a major difference separates the two. Cosell was no man of the people. He fancied himself rather brilliant, had earned a law degree, even for a time toyed with running for Senate. Cosell would tell it to you, in another of his pet terms, like it is. Perhaps as a New Yorker, Cosell saw the world as a series of skyscrapers, life a fixed-in-stone hierarchy where he'd made his way to a penthouse only Cosell could occupy.

To listen to Rome, born and raised in Los Angeles, is to see the conversation around sports as more of a sprawl. Per the title of the popular Guns N' Roses song that's part of the show, "Welcome to the Jungle." Certainly a man who has run his own show for more than 20 years will often have the last word. Hey, it's his jungle, and Rome rules it with surefire authority.

Cosell, alas, began and ended believing he knew more than anyone. It's different in Rome's world. To use a word his audience would likely despise, Rome's show is communal. "Don't call me and ask me a question," says Rome. "You can, but I don't think that's very compelling." His sport of choice in high school being tennis, Rome enjoys a good verbal rally. "Here's my take. What's your take?" he says about his approach. "Let's be aggressive and let's be opinionated, but let's be responsible."

"I speak for the fan. I didn't play the game at the highest level, but I'm well prepped and I have opnions—and do what you want with those opinions."
—Jim Rome

To get an idea of how sports-obsessed Rome has always been, head back to 1980 and the period prior to his 16th birthday. Rome had grown up comfortable since the age of 12 in Calabasas, a suburb west of L.A.'s San Fernando Valley, but thanks to watching his parents run their own business (making and selling medical garments), he was well aware that success required significant effort. Turning 16 in California meant Rome would earn his driver's license, but he also knew that the gift wasn't going to be a car.

Rome's desired birthday present was a large painting of Terry Bradshaw he'd seen in a mall. Bradshaw's Pittsburgh Steelers were Rome's favorite team. One of Rome's first sports memories had been when he was eight years old and witnessed the 1972 "Immaculate Reception," the incredibly dramatic and controversial end to a playoff game between the Steelers and Oakland Raiders. As that 16th birthday neared, the Steelers had won four of the last six Super Bowls.

His passion for sports began at an early age. When he was seven, encouraged by his father Jay, Rome sent a fan letter to a Los Angeles Lakers star, Gail Goodrich. Weeks later came an autographed picture. Bradshaw and Goodrich were half of Rome's childhood Mt. Rushmore, the other spots taken by Dodger third baseman Ron Cey and a tennis star, the stoic Swede, Bjorn Borg. As is the case for the vast majority of adolescents who both play and watch sports, Rome soon enough saw that there was no way he was going to become a professional athlete.

The obsession only accelerated. To read *Sports Illustrated* and *Sport Magazine*. To listen to such L.A.-based broadcasting icons as Vin Scully with the Dodgers, Chick Hearn with the Lakers, Dick Enberg with the Rams. To attend various games with Jay. "And I tried to think about that pretty long and hard," says Rome. "If I'm not going to play the game, what can I do? Well, I could talk about the game." And so, while many teenagers flirted with various career possibilities, Rome was dead certain what he wanted.

One of Rome's schoolmates was a girl named Roselyn Porter. Her father, Ross, was a prominent broadcaster for NBC and the Dodgers. Rome would persistently ask Roselyn if he could talk to her dad about a variety of sports-related topics, but the two didn't meet until a "Career Day" at Rome's school—at which point the aspiring broadcaster asked Porter question after question, an embryonic version of the rat-a-tat style he'd later sharpen.

As Rome continues the story of his youth across the table at Pelican Grill, it's easy to imagine Rome seeing himself from a distance: Who the heck was that kid? And who is the kid now who will one day query Rome?

"And he finally looks at me and he says, 'Young man, what is your name anyway?' I said, 'Jim Rome, sir. Jim Rome.' He said, 'Jim Rome—I've heard all about you.'"

Ross Porter got an early taste of the tough, quick questioning that so many sports fans and pro athletes would later be subject to. Upon arrival at the University of California at Santa Barbara in the fall of 1982, Rome rapidly made his way to the campus radio station. There came an internship opportunity, Rome willingly waking many a morning at 4:30 to work for free. Most Saturday nights, he'd skip a college party to work a game or operate an engineering board. It was the same kind of dedication and discipline one associates with an ambitious, driven and highly fit young athlete, a physical fitness level Rome maintains to this day, an attribute that likely helps boost Rome's credibility with the athletes he encounters.

Then came a hurdle that briefly took Rome off his mission. Passed over at the last minute for a job at a Santa Barbara radio station, Rome felt angered at the rather random aspect of the hiring process—how events, as it were, had taken the bat out of his hands. The best way to control his destiny, Rome determined, would be to join the family business. Jay resisted, pointing out that Jim had never paid a minute of attention to it. But Jim insisted. There followed nine months of Rome proving he was not cut out for this line of work. Soon after, he began to sell other products such as dictation equipment and telephone systems. More failure.

But then, another offer: A month-long gig at KTMS in Santa Barbara, calling news and traffic 30 hours a week for $5 an hour. Rome took the post, earned a full-time spot and in time was given an hour-long sports talk show. Seeking to make a name for himself beyond the world of local Santa Barbara sports, Rome hustled, arranging interviews with such notables as football star Jim Brown and basketball coach Dick Vitale. He'd also send interesting tidbits from his show to media outlets such as *The Sporting News* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Rome's big break came in December 1990, when he was hired by XTRA, also known as The Mighty 690, a San Diego-based station. Says Rome, "That was only the second station in the country to throw the

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switch and go all sports." Five days a week, five hours a night, Rome spoke about sports from 7 p.m. 'til midnight. "You know how weird that was?" he asks. "Every kind of tweaker and weirdo and sports addict imaginable."

He was determined to be different, to be something other than what he calls the bland "Shell Answer Man" sportscaster. But rather than merely seek to be interesting, Rome saw that the ticket was to be interested, to passionately engage in sports the way he had in his youth—to talk and argue and continually chew around opinions and ideas. "I was taking that conversation and putting it out on a 50,000-watt radio station and getting a bunch of new friends to come in," says Rome. "Except not everybody was my friend. All of a sudden not everybody liked it, but they were paying attention, and they were reacting and they were calling."

May 29, 1993 was a major day in the history of "The Jungle." The Los Angeles Kings had upset the Toronto Maple Leafs to reach the Stanley Cup finals for the first time. When the seventh game victory was over, the Kings' leader, the one and only Wayne Gretzky (who appeared on the cover of CIGAR AFICIONADO in 1997), looked into the camera and praised his friend Jim Rome and how the team unquestionably had "Jungle Karma," a Rome term for the good vibes that would flow an athlete's way in the wake of guesting on the show (and the bad ones that would affect those who declined).

There also came controversy. In the early '90s, Rome had learned that several members of the Los Angeles Rams jokingly called their quarterback, Jim Everett "Chris Everett," a reference to female tennis star Chris Evert that cast aspersions on Everett's toughness. Rome began to call Everett that on the air. Everett agreed to come on the show on April 6, 1994. Prior to their interview, according to Rome, his producer, Mark Shapiro, told Everett that Rome planned to call him "Chris" a few times—but not too many. "So we're all ready to go, and I think all the cards are on the table," says Rome. Everett voiced his disdain for the nickname and warned Rome not to call him Chris, and before long the much-larger quarterback flipped the interview table and knocked Rome down to the ground, jumping on him before producers broke up the melee. "I did not want that to happen," says Rome. He also says that for years after, he sought to interview Everett again, but Everett never would. "And I finally stopped asking," says Rome.

"The Jungle" had taken off. As CBS sportscaster Lesley Visser says, "He was original and had the confidence and skill to pull it all off." By 1994, Rome had also become a TV star, hosting his show on ESPN2. (Rome had other stints on television, the latest on Showtime with "Jim Rome On Showtime," which ran from 2012 to 2015.) In 1996 came syndication—the gravy train of life in the media.

Given that sports has consumed Rome his entire life, it makes sense that an athletic endeavor would be a prime spot for him to enjoy a cigar. In this case, though, it involves an athlete he has no possibility of interviewing. A decade ago, Rome and his wife, Janet (the two married in 1997), began to buy shares in thoroughbreds. Within two years, though, it was hardly going well. "I'm ready to pull the plug," says Rome. Opting to give horse racing one last shot, Jim and Janet cast their lot with a horse named Mizdirection, who in time won two Breeders' Cup races. Other than his wedding day and the birth of his two boys, Jake and Logan, Rome considers those moments with Mizdirection the most amazing days of his life.

The race track and in his backyard with friends are the times Rome most enjoys a cigar, and Rome counts three stellar cigars among the favorites in his stable: the Padrón Serie 1926 No. 9, the Partagás Serie E No. 2 and the Norteño Robusto Grande by Drew Estate.

"It's connected to milestones, maybe a new contract, maybe something to celebrate. And mostly socially," says Rome about his cigar smoking. "If I can get with my guys and get to the backyard and pour a cocktail and sit and have a cigar, that's as good a time as you could ever have."

Rome at Lone Wolf in West Los Angeles. "If I can get with my guys and get to the backyard and pour a cocktail and sit and have a cigar," he says, "that's as good a time as you could ever have."

Maybe. For as much as Rome speaks longingly of the desire for peaceful moments, his engagement with sports remains ceaseless. Avoid the bland? Mission accomplished. Be it his own takes, those from callers or the way he sparks it up in his interviews, Rome has created a sports talk community that in some way anticipated today's world of nonstop conversation—beyond radio and TV, to a world where blogs, tweets, podcasts and posts can make anyone a 24-7 host.

But Rome was the pioneer, persistently willing to tell the world that the emperor has no clothes, happy to know that if everyone wanted to be on his show, he wouldn't be doing his job; and, he concedes, the same would hold true if nobody wanted to be on the show. "I do not root for anything other than something to talk about," says Rome. "I'm Team Content."

"His legacy is there," says John Feinstein, the prominent sportswriter who has been a frequent guest on Rome's show. "He did things no one else has done. He's actually touched his listeners."

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TROUBLE in Paradise

A huge influx of visitors to Cuba has brought exorbitant price increases that are dampening enthusiasm for travelers

BY GORDON MOTT

The loosening of travel restrictions to Cuba brings good news and bad news. In the 1990s, the few Americans who were approved to make the trip were smart to bring basic amenities—even toilet paper—and to be prepared for sporadic electricity and nonexistent hot water at hotels. Now, tourism to Cuba is widely available and modernized, but is no longer the great deal it had been. Today's visitor may pay $600 a night for very basic hotel rooms, $350 a day for guides and chauffeurs and $40 for restaurant entrees.

The soaring prices coupled with slow-moving improvements to services and infrastructure are a bitter pill for travelers to Cuba, which could slow down the phenomenal growth in tourism to the island, which increased by 13 percent last year alone.

One of Britain's largest travel tour companies pinpoints Cuba's problems on its webpage: "Having organized tailor-made trips to Cuba for over four years [our] standard of tailor-made experiences are not currently achievable in Cuba, which needs time to catch up with the demand it is facing."

The first evidence of a changing demand in U.S.-based travel has come from the airlines. American Airlines cut back its scheduled flights to Cuba by nearly 25 percent this spring, and JetBlue also reduced its service. Three airlines, Spirit, Frontier and Silver Airways, are planning to terminate their flights altogether. An American Airlines spokesperson said the flights had been dropped "to remain competitive" in the market, but published reports say that the demand for flights has not been as high as anticipated, especially with a 300 percent increase in available seats after the routes were approved.

Local tourism professionals in Cuba, people-to-people tour operators in the United States and others with knowledge of Havana confirm the wide range of difficulties that face travelers heading to Cuba. Across the board, they are bracing for a slowdown in U.S.-based tourism in 2017.

Tom Popper, the president of Insight Cuba, which plans on operating nearly 200 people-to-people visits in 2017 (down from 250 in 2016), says that his primary task is managing expectations. "With those higher

prices," says Popper, "there are higher expectations, but we, with purpose, try to set those expectations. We tell people their visit isn't about the hotel or the food, it's about the experience. Cuba still has its magic...the experience hasn't changed." However, he quickly adds that the "Obama crest has crested" and he expects a new normal to take effect as the travel demand starts to "quiet down."

The changes in Cuba's tourism world began roiling the country in December 2014. After quiet negotiations with the government of President Raúl Castro, President Barack Obama announced a round of diplomatic initiatives that eventually led, in July 2016, to the reestablishing of diplomatic relations between the two nations. While these moves left the trade embargo with Cuba intact, and the strict guidelines for legal travel under 12 authorized categories, the U.S. government relaxed the reporting rules and the stringent interpretations of what constituted legal travel. Late last year, the U.S. government began permitting travelers to bring Cuban cigars (and alcohol) back to the U.S. when traveling abroad, product categories that had either been prohibited or sharply curtained for decades.

Once-affordable Havana hotels have become extremely expensive. The Meliá Habana (above) quoted a price of $678 for a standard room this spring, $847 on an executive-level floor.

At the same time, the U.S. and Cuban governments began negotiating a new air-travel agreement, which led in September 2016 to the inauguration of the first regularly scheduled flights in 50 years. Initially service excluded the capital city of Havana for flights between the United States and nine smaller Cuban cities. Havana routes were added later. Nearly 100 flights now connect the two nations each week. Eight cruise lines were also authorized to start making port calls in Cuba, with Carnival Corp.'s Fathom line becoming the first U.S. carrier to dock in Havana in May 2016. Many experts believe the cruises could bring nearly 170,000 more tourists to the island this year.

Cuba's Ministry of Tourism announced that the country received more than four million visitors in 2016, surpassing even its own predictions of about 3.7 million. That was a 13 percent increase over 2015, and presented more than a 25 percent increase in total since the 2014 changes in U.S.-Cuban relations. The increase in American tourists to Cuba has been even steeper: the 614,000 who visited in 2016, according to the Ministry, marked a 34 percent increase over 2015 numbers.

The booming increase in Cuba tourism highlights an underlying problem: Cuba was not ready for the huge influx of travelers. No major hotels have opened during that period. One large luxury hotel is slated to open its doors this summer: the Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana. While Airbnb now touts Havana as its fastest growing market in the world, most of those accommodations lack such amenities as Wi-Fi or air conditioning, and prices are reported to be rising quickly and exorbitantly. Even while new restaurants open regularly, the best private restaurants, known as paladares, are often solidly booked, and food quality across the island remains problematic. The best restaurant in Havana, La Guarida, often does more than 200 covers a night, and turns tables two or three times. At least one published report suggested that the demand for food in the restaurant universe was creating food shortages for the Cuban people.

John Kavulich, the president of the U.S.-Cuba Economic Trade Council, is blunt about the problems. "We have businessmen coming back with the perception that U.S. company representatives are being abused. They are paying $200, $300, $400 a night for rooms that should be $79.99." Kavulich, whose organization promotes legal business activity between Cuba and the United States, says the Cuban government is promising to tackle the problem and reduce room rates, "but it's too little too late."

If changes or adjustments are coming, they were not evident in early March during a visit to Havana. The Meliá Habana, one of the better hotels in the city, was asking 600 CUC (Cuban convertible pesos) for one night in a standard room, which amounts to $678 when factoring in the penalty for exchanging U.S. dollars into CUCS, the currency used by all tourists in Cuba. An executive level room, which amounts to nothing more than an upgraded single room, was 750 CUCS, or $847, a rack rate that would raise eyebrows in London or New York City.

> *"We have businessmen coming back from Cuba with the perception that they are being abused. They are paying $200, $300, $400 a night for rooms that should be $79.99."*

One Mexican visitor, who traveled on short notice, and stayed at the Habana Libre, a rundown hotel in Havana's Vedado section, was charged 400 CUC, or $452, per night. The new Kempinski, part of a luxury European hotel chain, is expected to debut with room rates between $600 to $700 a night. Touted as Havana's first true five-star hotel, it will need to provide the kind of quality expected from those prices.

Restaurant prices also are quite variable. In past years, restaurant entrees other than lobster rarely topped 20 CUC. Now, 20 CUC is common, and individual item prices can exceed 30 CUC and reach as much as 40 CUC. At one top government restaurant, El Templete, which faces the main dock

One of Cuba's many cigar shops, with a box of handmade Cohibas sitting on the counter. Cigar prices are one of the few things that have remained constant in Cuba during its tourism boom.

in Havana's harbor, an octopus entree on a recent visit was priced at 30 CUC, and lunch for two with two beers came to more than 100 CUC.

In today's Havana, it is not uncommon to spend between 50 CUC and 60 CUC per person at any restaurant with pretentions for fine cuisine. Those prices quickly run much higher if wine is ordered. One tour operator, who asked to remain anonymous, recounted going to a well-known paladar with a group and receiving a bill that came out to 190 CUC per person. "I thought something was wrong," he says, "but when I checked the menu, the dishes were all 40 CUC or higher."

Another tour operator reports that private drivers had previously been charging 150 to 200 CUC as recently as 2016 for a round-trip drive to Trinidad, a city in south-central Cuba that is roughly a four-hour drive from Havana. This year, the price had gone up to 350 CUC. "I got a call recently from one of my usual drivers, who had taken my clients to Trinidad," says the operator. "He threatened to leave without them unless I agreed to pay him $450. What could I do?"

Cuba Prices—Then and Now

ITEM/SERVICE	2016	2017
Cup of Espresso, Hotel	2 cuc	3 cuc
Glass of 7-Year-Old Rum, Hotel	5 cuc	7 cuc
Partagás Serie D No. 4 *(1 cigar)*	7 cuc	7 cuc
Cab Ride in Havana	10-15 cuc	20 cuc
Restaurant Entrée	15-20 cuc	25-40 cuc
Cohiba Robusto *(box of 25)*	340 cuc	340 cuc
Car Ride to Trinidad *(round trip)*	150-200 cuc	350 cuc
Premier Hotel Room	350-400 cuc	600 cuc +

Source: *Cigar Aficionado*

The operator, who deals mostly with private travelers and helps set up people-to-people compliant itineraries, says that clients are comparing Cuba prices to other countries, and the comparison is lacking. "I'm getting a lot of pushback on pricing right now," he says. "People are asking things like 'I can go to Mexico for the weekend for $500. Why is Cuba more than $2,000?'" The operator adds that while the company is still able to offer its clients a wonderful experience, people who are trying to go on their own "are having a terrible time." In part, that is because the big tour operators are able to negotiate somewhat lower prices for bigger groups. Still some of them have said they have gone back to clients between the booking date and departure to ask for more money to cover unexpected price increases.

Happily, prices on Cuba's most famous product, a fine cigar, have remained quite inexpensive, despite the soaring prices in other sectors. Many of Cuba's great cigars still sell for around 10 CUC or less per cigar. You'll pay more for Cohibas and large cigars such as double coronas and Churchills, but there's plenty to buy for a great price. A Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No. 2 sells for 7 CUC per cigar, a Bolivar Belicoso Fino is a mere 7.65 CUC and a Montecristo No. 2 sells for 9.65 CUC. Even more surprising is these prices have been unchanged since 2015.

One Cuban official, speaking off the record, acknowledges that the government knows it has a problem with soaring hotel, restaurant and transportation charges, and had commissioned a study to examine how to control the surge. He recognizes that given the government's history of starting and then rolling back economic reforms, many Cubans were skeptical of rule changes that allowed so much private economic activity. That skepticism also had an effect on people trying to get what they could while they can, he says. But he adds, "We know we can't go back to the way things were. We are not going back. I can promise you that."

Popper says, "Of course, it was inevitable that prices had to go up. But the Cubans have been slow to react. The market is definitely cooling down. And they may find themselves with a lot of empty hotel rooms this summer and fall." He adds that Cuban officials were told about the pushback in 2016, but had not responded.

Micheal Zucato, who is the general director of Cuba Travel Services, another people-to-people tour operator, believes that prices are going to moderate over the next six months. "It is going to take awhile to take effect, and for demand to fully recover. But we still see a lot of demand for people wanting to visit Cuba." He notes that for many such travellers, the price isn't their biggest concern, and they still are getting a wonderful experience.

Another tour operator, who asked to remain anonymous, isn't so sure prices will come down any time soon. "If hotel prices go up and hotels are still full, how can we convince anyone to lower the prices? And private house owners smell money, and due to the influx of Americans, there is still a big pond to fish in...As long as they keep coming and rave about their experiences when they get back home, nobody is going to stop the price hikes. On the contrary. That won't happen until it gets too expensive and other destinations offer a similarly unique experience for less money. But that's in the future." ❖

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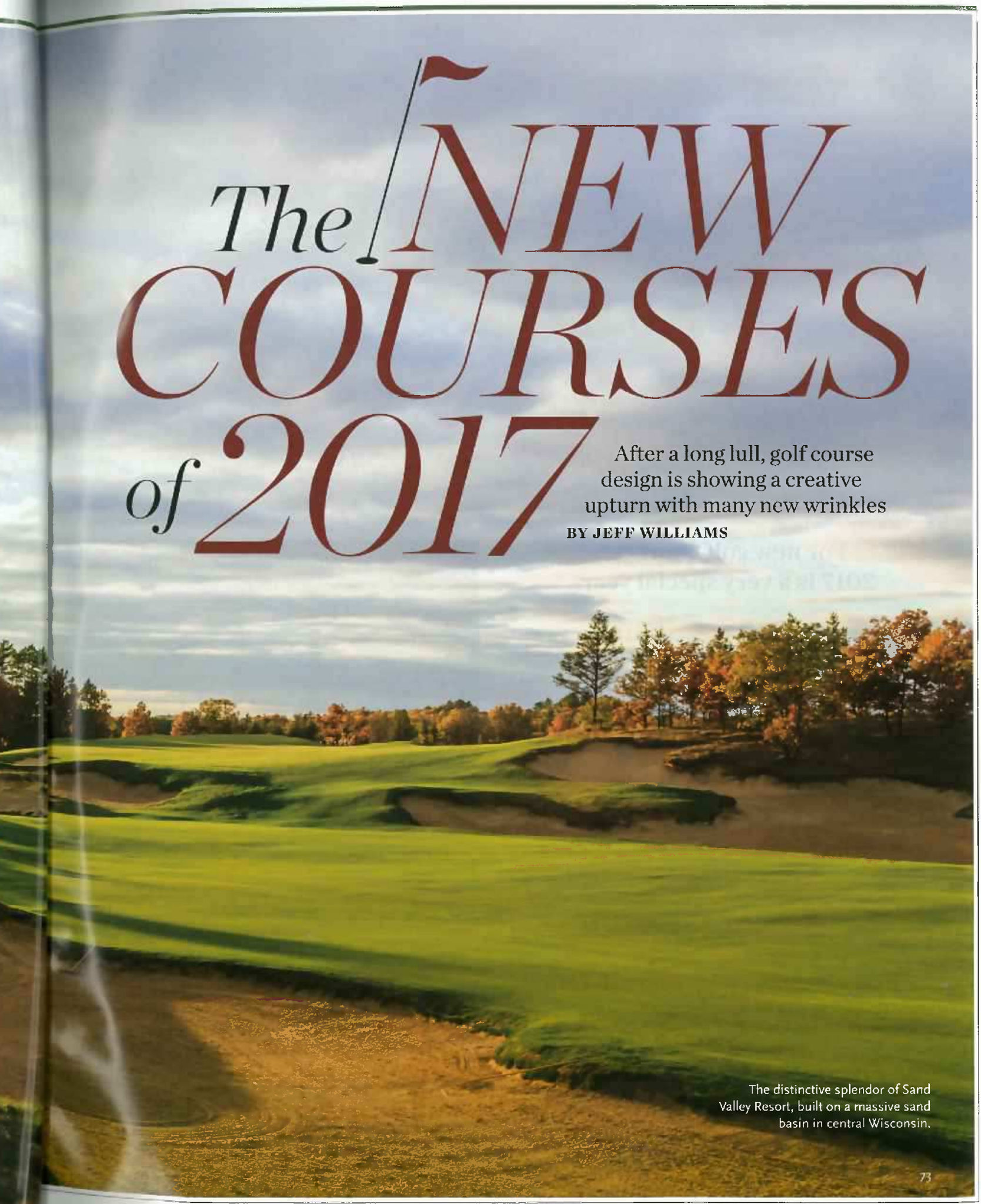
The 5 NEW COURSES of 2017

After a long lull, golf course design is showing a creative upturn with many new wrinkles

BY JEFF WILLIAMS



The distinctive splendor of Sand Valley Resort, built on a massive sand basin in central Wisconsin.

Bring your wedge when you visit Nekoosa, Wisconsin's Sand Valley, which has no shortage of bunkers. The Lake Leopold cottages (below) contain spacious great rooms.

SAND VALLEY

For new golf courses, 2017 is a very special year.

While course development in the United States was shanked out of bounds by the economic downturn of 2008 and new construction is still rare, gems are emerging that are defining a new era of golf architecture.

This year courses are opening across the land, from Pennsylvania to Oregon, from Florida to Wisconsin, from New Orleans to Alameda, California. Many are privately owned resorts, some are publicly owned municipal courses. Some are built on sand located far from the ocean. A couple are designed to be played forward and back. Some are forgiving layouts. One even has a place to smoke surrounded by green. What they have in common are creative, driven developers with a passion for the game and communities that see golf as a centerpiece of their redevelopment.

At the forefront of this renaissance is Mike Keiser, the Pied Piper of remote golf course development, the man who goes out of his way to go out of his way. The first of his two-course Sand Valley Resort complex in central Wisconsin opened this year. The raves were reminiscent of his seminal Bandon Dunes project, where 20 years ago in Oregon he proved if you find exceptional ground, seek out the right architect and make golf, and only golf, the centerpiece of your passion, the players will come.

"Golf courses are again being built for golf reasons," says Josh Lesnik of KemperSports in Chicago, the managing firm for Keiser's Bandon Dunes. "In the '80s, '90s, some of the 2000s, people wanted golf not necessarily for a great course but to sell homes or be close to a good demographic area. They weren't as concerned with building a great golf course as they were with some other business idea."

Keiser has shown the way, and it's been a long, long way, with remote

courses like Sand Valley, which is three hours from the closest major airport, Milwaukee. Jon Scott, whose family-owned Gull View Lake Resort in western Michigan is adding a sixth course this year, sees Keiser as the model for special golf. "Mike is an obvious example if you do it right, even in a declining market, you can be wildly successful."

Golf has also become a tool for economic stimulus. The family-owned Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch in far-eastern Oregon was developed as way to spark the tourism industry in a part of the state which has virtually no tourism.

"The only reason to build anything anymore is if you are doing something that is really special, and have people that want to do that," says Tom Doak, who designed Keiser's second course at Bandon Dunes and a second course at Barnbougle Dunes. "There's no question Mike has

had a huge impact. First of all, he built quite a few places and keeps doing it, and second of all, that's what gives somebody in the middle of nowhere the idea that he can be successful doing the same thing."

Countering the era of the 1990s and early 2000s when courses seemed to be designed to challenge the likes of Tiger Woods, Keiser has also ushered in an age of courses built for everyone: easy enough from the forward tees for the high handicapper, challenging enough from the back for the accomplished golfer. "The architects, the developers, the media, we all bought into the lie that the harder the golf course was, the better it was," says Doak. "The upshot of that was that everyone, including me, built a bunch of really difficult courses. The public voted with their pocketbook—they would play these courses once or twice and not come back. Mike wants courses for the regular guy, and they are voting with their pocketbook by coming back."

We won't detail all the projects here, but those we feel have a special story.

Sand Valley Resort

Nekoosa, Wisconsin

When Mike Keiser found out there was a massive sand basin in central Wisconsin, he sent Josh Lesnik to see it.

"I told him to tell me why I don't want to go look at it," says Keiser. "He said you've got to see it to believe it. And it was unbelievable." He found an incredible landscape hidden under more than a thousand acres of commercially planted pine forest, masking its potential for great golf. On close examination, and fairly physical trekking ("burrowing" as Keiser describes it), this massive remnant of the American Ice Age was just the place for some very special golf.

So he brought in his regulars, Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw and Kidd to create the two courses. The Coore & Crenshaw course, known as Sand Valley, opens this year. Kidd's course, Mammoth Dunes, will have preview play later in the year and full play next year. This is heathland golf at its best.

"We've had fun with Mike at Sand Valley because for years he said he would only go to a site with sand and an ocean," says Coore. "Well, Sand Valley has a tremendous amount of sand but it's quite removed from the ocean." While the site has the earmarks—sand, fescue and rugged looking bunkers—of courses that Keiser and he have created, the designer adds that "this is very different in terms of the land forms. It's not what I would call dunes, it's ridges and valleys."

As for Kidd's course, Keiser had a plan. "Mike took me to Pine Valley twice in a year, so I'm guessing he wants it to be heavily influenced by it," says Kidd. "I love Pine Valley. It's absolutely unique, there's nothing like it in the world I can think of. I'm not trying to copy it in any way, but I'm certainly influenced by it. The scrubby vegetation combined with the sand and forested edges make for a really natural look."

Sand Valley will have a small lodge to begin with, and though it is remote in golf terms it's not far from the Wisconsin Dells vacation mecca, with its many accommodations. It's also an hour and change from Herb Kohler's courses at Blackwolf Run and Whistling Straits.

Sand Valley is a remnant of the last Ice Age, that was later hidden under acres of commercially grown pine.

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Florida's Streamsong, seen at the clubhouse (top), is opening a third (Black) course designed by Gil Hanse. The Blue course (lower left) is the work of Tom Doak, and the Red (lower right) is a Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw design. The latter two courses are comingled, wrapping around each other.

Streamsong

Bowling Green, Florida

Five years ago, when Streamsong opened just over an hour east of the Tampa International Airport, its Coore & Crenshaw and Doak courses (Red and Blue) were instantly acclaimed as among the best public courses in the U.S. Pretty good for a mining company project.

And now Mosaic, that Minnesota phosphate mining corporation that owns around 300,000 acres in Florida, is opening up a third course by Gil Hanse (the Black).

"It's the first opportunity we've had to put our work alongside the…guys we respect the most in the business: Tom Doak and Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw," says Hanse. "Whenever an owner like Mosaic is willing to give you your pick of around 800 acres and it's all sand, that's incredible. What is great about Red and Blue is that they routed them at the same time and they are comingled and wrap around each other and cross over each other. With the Black Course we are off on our own in a big landscape. Our land is not as dramatic as Red and Blue, but we have interesting land forms that the course runs through. Visually there is a lot of similarities between the courses, lots of sand, rough bunkers, but scale-wise is the big difference for Black."

For the Mosaic CFO Rich Mack, who oversaw land management when the project began, demand drove the need for a third course.

"We are in the business in Florida of mining, we own a lot of land," says Mack. "Rather than do the same thing we had been doing essentially for almost a century, we decided to do something different, something more progressive, something that would have more of a long-lasting impact in the context of it employed people. That's a very powerful story for a company that is in the mining business."

As for the Black Course, "It's a very powerful golf course," says Mack. "We have a very compelling feature, a two-acre putting green we are calling The Gauntlet. Inside the green we have a peninsula that will have a spacious fire pit, Adirondack chairs, a perfect area to sit back and enjoy a good cigar. We will have a world-class practice facility, something we are calling the Roundabout—a short course with six green complexes on a free-flowing basis."

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Stoatin Brae, the work of Doak's Renaissance Golf, adds a sixth course to Gull Lake View in Augusta, Michigan.

STOATIN BRAE

Stoatin Brae, Gull Lake View Resort

Augusta, Michigan

Gull Lake View is the biggest, least-known golf resort in the United States. But hey, it's in Augusta…Michigan.

And this year it adds a sixth course, Stoatin Brae, designed by Tom Doak's crew at Renaissance Golf. This is a family-owned-and-operated business, which has designed and built four of the courses and sells more than 120,000 tee times a year, with consistent repeat business from Detroit, Chicago and Indianapolis areas.

"I'm a little embarrassed about it and not a little surprised," says Jon Scott, when asked about Gull View's lack of national visibility. "It's a family business, fourth generation, my grandfather started the business in 1962. We've grown it from nine holes to 108. We've always been this small family business that over time we've grown big enough to now, we're a fairly big resort. We're dirt guys. We designed and built four out of the six courses ourselves. We've always been word-of-mouth, under the radar."

Stoatin Brae will likely expand Gull View's blip on the golf radar. It's quite different from the other Gull View parkland offerings, a big piece of land high on a hill with expansive views.

"This course is so different from the others," says Scott. "There are like five trees, pretty windy up on top of the hill there. Huge long views. It's different from what we have which is why we built it. We got Doak's group to help us out. We did a lot of the work ourselves. There were a lot of things making this economically viable in a market that is otherwise losing share."

Doak, who was busy on other projects, had his associates do the job and reports, "I think it turned out really good. It's an understated thing, but it's a pretty piece of ground with good views off the top, there are some really good golf holes on it."

On weekends, it will be about 100 bucks to play it. Now that is something new and refreshing and decidedly under the radar.

The Loop at Forest Dunes

Roscommon, Michigan

Tom Doak had this idea for a long time, itching to do it—a reversible golf course, 18 greens with tees that allow it to be played in both directions.

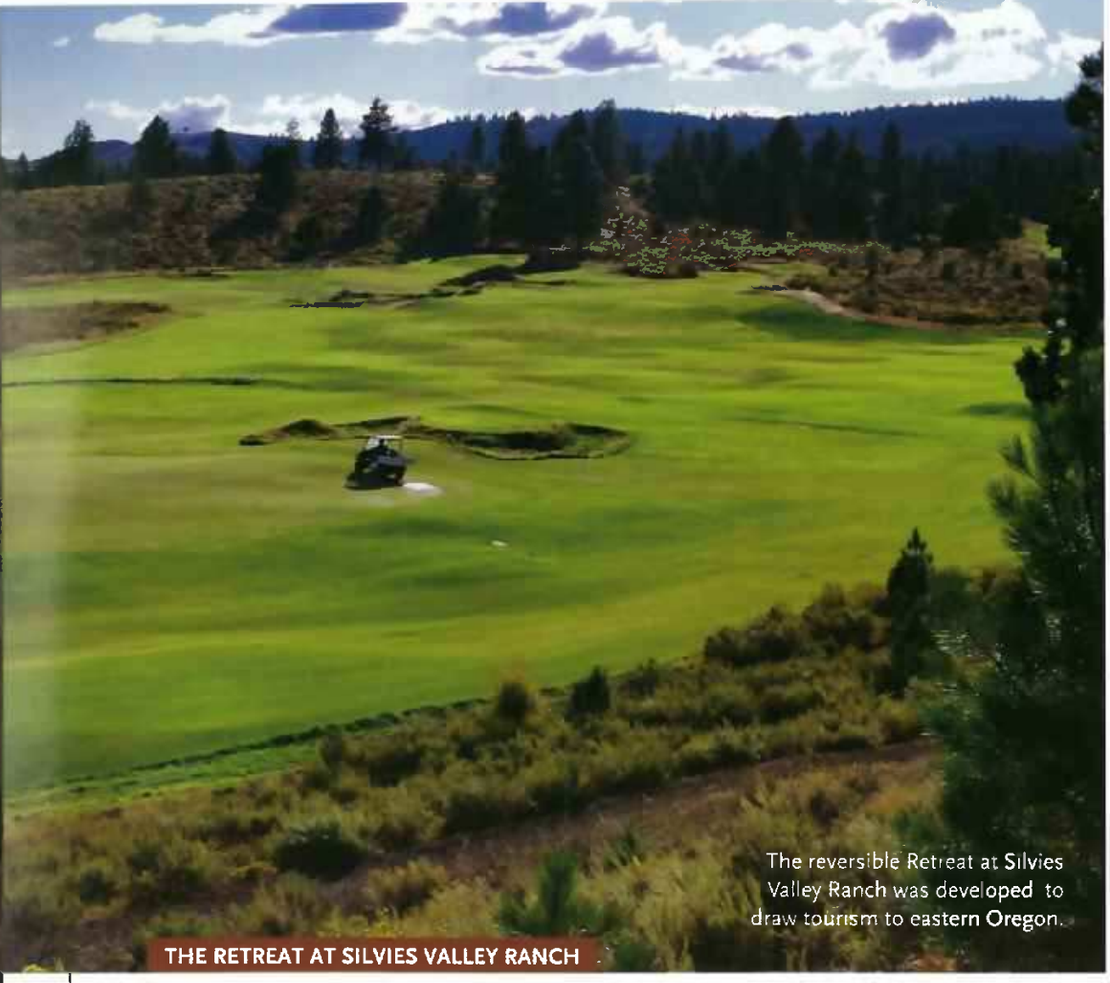
"There is a little bit about it in the appendix to Tom Simpson's book on golf course design written in the '20s," Doak says. "He used to build estate courses for wealthy people, three holes or six holes and to make them more interesting occasionally he would build one that you could play forwards and backwards. I looked at the drawing a long time ago and said what a cool idea, I'd love to do that if I found the right client."

Then Lew Thompson, the owner of the Forest Dunes Resort, called him about doing a second course at his facility. He wasn't thinking about a reversible golf course, but after Doak saw the property "it seemed perfect for the concept," says Doak. "It wasn't a dramatic piece of ground visually, relatively flat and sandy which would be conducive to making this concept work. Didn't have a lot of specimen trees on it, because if you have they are probably going to get in the way going one direction or the other."

This is the first full season for The Loop, its courses are named the Red and the Black and are played in one direction one day, the opposite direction the next. So, in a way, Forest Dunes now has three courses.

"A hilly property, you are going to have trouble," says Doak. "A big elevated tee, you can't play back up that slope to the previous green. If you play up to the top of a hill or over the hill and back down, it might work one direction, but probably a blind hole going the other way."

So instead, Doak took an average piece of ground and transformed it into an above-average experience.



The reversible Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch was developed to draw tourism to eastern Oregon.

THE RETREAT AT SILVIES VALLEY RANCH

The Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch

Burns, Oregon

Way out in eastern Oregon, as remote as it gets in the American West, is Silvies Valley Ranch. When veterinarian/entrepreneur Scott Campbell bought its 140,000 acres in 2007 the idea was to find a way to stimulate a regional economy that had hit bottom after the lumber industry abandoned the area.

"My wife and I grew up here. We were looking for something that could create jobs, the services you need," says Campbell. "The only thing that showed potential was tourism, since it's beautiful. We have done a lot of habitat restoration on the ranch."

But another possibility suggested itself. "Brought a bunch of my friends that were serious golf fanatics and showed them this property without saying what we were thinking about. Everyone of them said 'God, this would be a great place to have a golf course.'"

Not just a conventional one either. Architect Dan Hixson designed his own version of a reversible course, this one with 27 greens. He also created a par-3 course and is finishing up what he describes as a challenge course on some extreme terrain.

"We are all aware that Silvies Valley isn't truly a links course between the sea and farmland, but I do enjoy that style," says Hixson. "I technically would be called a minimalist, have worked on land that didn't require a lot of earth moving, so it's in the spirit of the links course, it's built that way. It really just lies on the land. If Mother Nature made a bump there and a ditch here, it's pretty much used whenever possible."

And golf is made possible again in the most remote of areas, five hours from Portland, maybe three and a half from Boise, Idaho. Silvies Valley Ranch awaits the adventurous.

Mossy Oak

West Point, Mississippi

George Bryan, the founder of the private Old Waverly Golf Club (host of the 1999 U.S. Women's Open), had wanted to add a public course in the area, but the economic downturn held him back. For a while.

When things improved, he partnered with the Haas family—owners of the Mossy Oak outdoor clothing brand—to acquire a piece of land virtually across the street from Old Waverly that looked just right for golf, and it had its share of old mossy oaks.

He called in Gil Hanse, who saw the property's potential. "George wanted to build something a little more rustic, a little more natural looking and feeling (than highly manicured Waverly)," says Hanse. "When you think of Mississippi, you think of dead flat, but this piece of ground has nice roll, contours, feels a little like Shinnecock."

It was a feel-good project for Hanse. "Part of what made Mossy Oak so terrific from our standpoint is that I've never been in a community or even a state where the people have such a passion for their state, to do something good for the local community."

Shepherd's Rock, Nemacolin Woodlands Resort

Farmington, Pennsylvania

Nemacolin already had two courses. Its Mystic Rock, by the iconic and occasionally outrageous Pete Dye, had hosted a PGA Tour event. But the uninteresting second course wasn't driving golf revenue.

So why not call in Pete Dye again?

"The key point is, one Pete Dye golf course is great for a resort, but when you get two Dye golf courses, it becomes a destination," says Tim Liddy, Dye's on-site project architect for Shepherd's Rock. Liddy was given both the second course property and additional land, putting him on top of a mountain.

"For an inland golf course, it doesn't get any better," says Liddy. "Long views to other mountain ranges. Beautiful fall colors. You play through three or four environments. You start off playing through a wetland corridor along a stream, then you go out into pasture ground, you come back into the rocky mountain side and then the back side there is more pasture ground, great views of mountains, a spectacular view from the 18th green. A lot of texture to the course, the smooth fairways against fescue rough and the tree lines. The big rocks along the mountain and the mountain ranges in the background."

The Mystic Rock course is still the tough championship track. Shepherd's Rock is the friendlier version of classic mountain golf. "It will give players another course to talk about," says Jones.

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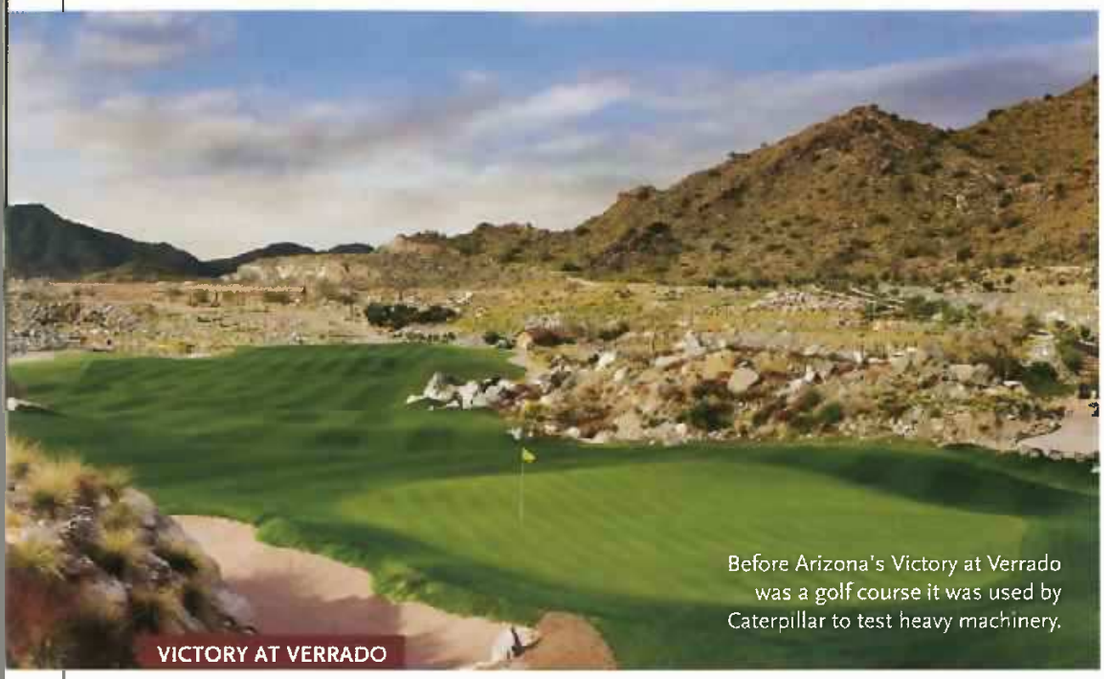
Victory at Verrado

Buckeye, Arizona

The occasional golf course built in conjunction with real estate development still occurs, and Champions Tour player Tom Lehman, an occasional but accomplished architect, has added a second course to this planned community just to the west of Phoenix. It's not a remote destination, but has an expansive landscape that impressed even Lehman. The course is called Victory and for Lehman, it's a winner.

"It's right at the base of the White Tank Mountains in an area that was used for years and years by Caterpillar as their proving grounds," says Lehman. "They created a whole bunch of interesting shapes proving their equipment."



VICTORY AT VERRADO

Before Arizona's Victory at Verrado was a golf course it was used by Caterpillar to test heavy machinery.

It gave Lehman and his team dramatic backdrops and framing, but he didn't let many of the rugged features get in the way of fun golf. It's wide open, and from most of the tees there aren't the forced carries associated with desert-style golf.

"There is lots of drama with rocks, with boulders and outcroppings," says Lehman. "Most of those areas are places where you don't hit it, so they mostly don't interfere with play." He describes it as fun a golf course to look at and a very fun course to play—and one that you can find your golf ball on.

Now that's a novel idea.

Bayou Oaks

New Orleans, Louisiana

Bayou Oaks, on the site of two courses destroyed by Hurricane Katrina flooding in 2005, has just opened, the handiwork of architect Rees Jones. The course, played through some of the great old oaks left standing, in the urban New Orleans City Park, is abiding, but its story is compelling.

After the storm's devastation, the Bayou District Foundation was formed to redevelop the ruined St. Bernard housing development area near City Park. The success of the East Lake (Atlanta) model with golf as a catalyst for the overall renewal of an impoverished area was brought to the foundation's attention. "The point was made that golf could be a redevelopment tool in New Orleans post Katrina," says J.T. Hannan, director of governmental and public affairs for the foundation. "You won't just redevelop a few blocks of housing, you will have an enormous impact on a wide swath of the city." He adds that St. Bernard, which had been in complete disrepair, "has been transformed into a mixed-income project as they did at East Lake. Layer in retail and cradle-to-college pipeline within the neighborhood. The East Lake model of using golf as a fundraising mechanism is something that is going to be ubiquitous moving forward. It produces revenue they can leverage into larger grants."

"It's for the people of the city of New Orleans," says Jones. "It's got plenty of room because it took the envelope of two golf courses. Not overly long, it maxes out at 7,300 yards, 46 bunkers. It incorporates lagoons that were there from the previous golf courses. The major attribute are these beautiful oaks."

But the real major attribute is that golf at Bayou Oaks is helping a community recover and grow.

Jack Clark South Course

Alameda, California

Jones is also involved in another innovative municipal project in Alameda, California, at the Chuck Corica Golf Complex—right off the runways of Oakland's international airport. One of its two courses, the Jack Clark South Course, has undergone a total transformation, along with a brand new par-3 course and a completely redone practice range. This has all been done by Greenway Golf, which was granted a lease to the complex that required renovation of one of California's busiest facilities.

"At one point this was the second busiest golf course in California behind Torrey Pines," says Mark Logan, head of Greenway Golf. "We knew the property had potential, the infrastructure was dilapidated and we had come up with a plan."

And what a plan. The entire golf course, which is at sea level, was raised several feet using sand and fill from the Trans Bay Tunnel. The artificial turf from the old driving range was used to line the new sand bunkers. The new parking lot is recycled asphalt and concrete. In water-challenged California a stormwater capturing system was installed to significantly reduce water purchase during the dry season and a hybrid Bermuda grass was used on the fairways that consumes 40 percent less water.

While Logan, an Australian, has been in the golf development and management business in the states for nearly 20 years, the new South Course still has a bit of an Australian feel, taken from the Sand Belt courses near Melbourne.

And guess what. Mike Keiser, the Pied Piper, showed up at the crack of dawn to take a look at what was going on. "He sent me an e-mail saying it was a very impressive project," says Logan "He was impressed with the design, the way it looked like an Australian course, the way we went about using recycled materials."

Coming from Mike Keiser, that's an exclamation point. Enough said. ❖

Jeff Williams is a contributing editor of CIGAR AFICIONADO.

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Gin's the Thing

The classic mixing spirit is roaring back with newfound flavors and a revived role at the bar

IF YOU SEEK one spirit to give you endless enjoyment and room for exploration, look no further than the bracing, zesty, alluring charms of gin. It lies at the core of all true Martinis (sorry vodka) and is the source of a plethora of classic and newfangled cocktails. With dozens of flavoring botanicals to choose from—sometimes you'll find that many in a single bottle—it's no surprise that this juniper-driven drink has hundreds of separate brand expressions across the globe. You might be tempted to lump gin with flavored vodka, but it has a far longer history dating back hundreds of years and its complicated distillation process gives gin incredible complexity in each sip. This mercurial quaff will refresh you all summer and hold you in warming stead all winter.

Its heritage began in Holland as a quite different drink—old gin was a malty spirit named jenever (juniper in English) for its defining flavor. The

BY JACK BETTRIDGE
PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF HARRIS

British co-opted it, making the drink lighter, brighter and drier, and exporting it to the world as London dry gin. Nineteenth-century American bartenders used it to create scores of classic cocktails, flips, smashes, cobblers, fizzes, sours and, of course the regal Martini. But don't think of gin as your grandfather's drink. The recent revival of the classic cocktail culture has brought gin storming back with self-styled bar chefs rediscovering the originals and inventing new concoctions of their own. The so-called craft whiskey movement also did its part to jumpstart the category. Micro-distillers found they could quickly market a gin (a drink that takes relatively little time to finish), while they bided the years it would take for their whiskey to mature. That brought creativity and novel flavors, even while the popularity of the timeless, tangy London dry version has burgeoned. Here are some of our favorites from both worlds.

Beefeater Undoubtedly you know Beefeater from the yeoman warder pictured on its label. Born in London in 1863 and still operating there, it's earned the pictured heritage. This quintessential, full-bodied juniper-driven London dry gin makes no secret of its recipe. The other eight botanicals are almonds, angelica root, angelica seed, coriander seed, lemon peel, licorice, orris root and Seville oranges. They come together beautifully for a traditional Martini. Beefeater 24 adds Japanese sencha, Chinese green tea and grapefruit peels for zestiness. The distiller is on the second edition of its small-batch Burrough's Reserve (named for the founder). A short resting in red and white Bordeaux casks gives it creamy wood and fruit notes as well as a bronze hue. (London Dry, 94 proof, $20; Beefeater 24, 90 proof, $25; Burrough's Reserve 86 proof, $75, prices vary)

Bluecoat American Dry Philadelphia is its home, and the name is a not-so-subtle thumbing-of-the-nose at British gin invaders. Bluecoat fights back with a simple recipe distinctive by its use of organic juniper and American citrus. This type of juniper berry gives it a fruitier taste and the citrus is prominent and slightly sweet. At the same time, the gin is toasty and almost earthy. The Philadelphia Distilling Co., launched in 2005, also makes 1681 Vodka from local organic rye, although the spirit for its gin is fermented from rye, corn, barley and wheat. (94 proof, $30)

Bombay Sapphire The name may be a bit misleading—this gin comes from England, not imperial India—but the spirit is still quite forthright about its contents, listing its botanicals right on the bottle. For Sapphire they number 10. During final distillation, the flavors are infused in a mesh basket at the top of a special still. The Sapphire East edition adds two more ingredients—lemongrass and Vietnamese black peppercorns—to the bin with the effect of amping up zest and spice. Both gins are slightly dialed back from the London dry standard, allowing the aromatics to show through. (Sapphire, 94 proof, $22; Sapphire East, 84 proof, $22)

Caorunn The land best known for whisky (Scotland) is becoming a source of many quirky gins, and Caorunn (pronounced ka-roon) is especially emblematic of the trend with the use of locally foraged botanicals along with traditional London dry flavors. Along with some of the more traditional botanicals, it also employs herbal dandelion, bitter rowan berries, slightly sweet Coul Blush apples and floral heather. The result is at once lush, hearty, perfumed and fruity. (83.6 proof, $35)

Citadelle Another gin that goes against the local grain (so to speak) is Citadelle, which is made with soft wheat, not grapes, in Cognac by the brandy maker Pierre Ferrand. The distillation is done in traditional Charentaise pot stills in the off-season, when Cognac can't be made. A total of 19 botanicals are used, adding outliers like violet root, cinnamon, nutmeg, savory and grains of paradise. The profile is spicy, floral and complex. Citadelle also makes a higher marque, Reserve, which adds exotic ingredients such as Korean yuzu, génépi flower and Bleut flower and takes the unusual, but historically sound, step of a short aging in French oak casks, which rounds out the flavors. (Citadelle, 88 proof, $25; Reserve, 88 proof, $35)

Death's Door The name sounds ominous, but the gin is not. The moniker comes from a treacherous strait on Lake Michigan, between Door County, Wisconsin, and Washington Island, where its wild juniper berries and organic wheat are gathered. Its recipe stands out for its simplicity: just juniper, coriander and fennel seeds. While avoiding a muddled profile, the triad still discovers a wealth of flavors that includes pine, hearty licorice from the fennel and plenty of citrus and spice. (94.6 proof, $30)

Hendrick's Another Scottish entrant, Hendrick's fairly turned the gin world around almost two decades ago when it introduced itself as a self-described "most unusual gin." Innovation started with some oddball botanicals (including yarrow wildflowers, elderflower and chamomile), then proceeded to distillation which occurs in two different types of stills: First, a kind of pot still that emphasizes juniper flavors, then a Caden-Head still, with a copper botanical basket at its top to express the subtler floral notes. The two spirits are later blended. At this point, comes the most defining difference in the gin: the infusion of Bulgarian roses and cucumber, the latter being particularly recognizable in the mix.(88 proof, $35)

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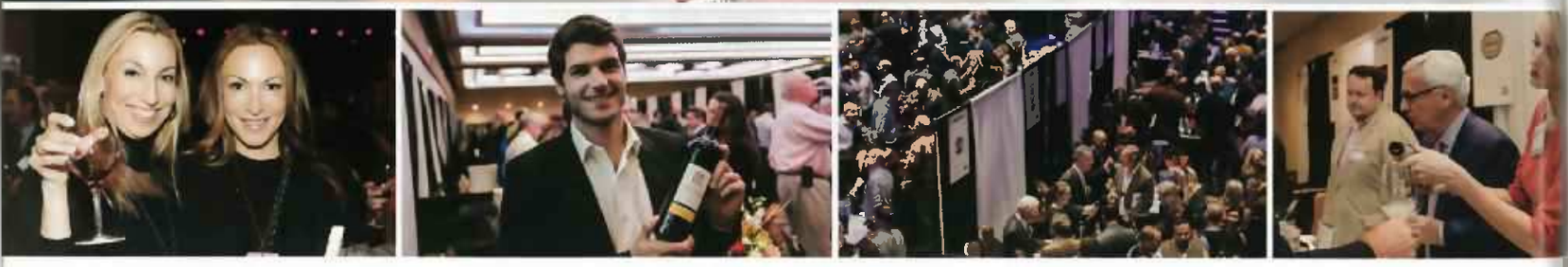

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The Martini and Gin & Tonic

Dozens of cocktails were developed with a gin base long before most Americans ever tasted vodka. Before James Bond, few would even have considered calling something a Martini without it being made from gin. The drink was quite a different quaff when it was born, developed from a mix of gin and red vermouth (or wine) at a 50/50 ratio. Later dry vermouth was introduced and its use—and not the lack thereof—defined a dry Martini. Proportions are the subject of endless arguments and vary from two parts gin/one vermouth to virtually no vermouth at all. Stirring the combination with ice in a pitcher dilutes it less. Shaking gets it colder. Consider using orange bitters. The classic garnish is an olive. Use an onion and it becomes a Gibson.

Originally a palliative for malaria, the Gin & Tonic seems to describe itself: one part gin and one to two parts tonic water mixed over ice in a highball glass with a wedge of lime. But a recent revival (especially in Spain) has suggested many options. As well as the vast gin choices, there is a spectrum of artisanal tonics, and you can even make that component yourself (see Good Life Guide, page 32). Then there is the garnish, which you might want to customize to the gin. Even the glass is a subject of debate, with many choosing snifter-type vessels to enhance aroma. Not so simple now, is it? *—JB*

Malfy G.Q.D.I. Maybe it shouldn't come as a surprise since Italy (after Spain) is one of the foremost champions of the Gin & Tonic, but this brand makes the unusual claim that gin originated in Italy, rather than Holland. Malfy is relatively new, but undeniably Italian, with its huge component of lemons from the Amalfi Coast that make for a fresh summery flavor. Its soft juniper taste comes from Italian berries as well. The initials stand for Gin di Qualitá Distillato in Italia. (82 proof, $30)

Martin Miller's The British entrepreneur/rock promoter/publisher Martin Miller freely admits that he knew nothing about making spirits when he started in the business. But he did detect a need for a gin that you could drink neat and so he hired experts to create it for him. What they came up with was a drink with the standard botanicals, but with a twist in the production. After the gin is distilled at high strength, it is shipped to Iceland where local waters bring it down to bottling proof. That is what gives it its distinctive soft mouthfeel. As well as drinkability, the gin also displays prominent orange and lemon notes and a spicy sweetness. (90 proof, $30)

Nolet's Even while the Dutch precursor of gin—jenever—is known as a malty spirit, this product of Holland weighs in as a luxury dry gin. Nevertheless, the Nolet family, the 10th-generation distiller of Ketel One Vodka, couldn't resist a unique direction. Nolet's distinguishes itself from the typical London effort by backing off on the juniper quotient and ramping up floral and fruity flavors. Among its botanicals are Turkish rose, peach and raspberry. Already along the pricey side with the initial Nolet's Silver, it kicked the jambs out with its follow-up, the hyper-premium, limited edition Nolet's Reserve. With the addition of saffron and verbena, it is exquisite. (Silver, 95.2 proof, $45; Reserve, 104.6 proof, $700)

Plymouth The oldest gin made in England (it was created in 1793) Plymouth occupies a gin subcategory all its own, also called Plymouth gin. The name arises from the Devonshire city that such gin must be made in. Similar to a London dry gin, but less juniper forward, it prefers to show off its orange and lemon notes. Still, it parades many of the other botanicals (coriander seeds, angelica root, orris root and cardamom) of the gins named for the capital city. Plymouth is more hearty than crisp, with a slight nutty character. The Naval Strength version, developed to be drunk by mariners, is higher proof, but also hotter, obscuring some of its charms. (Plymouth Original, 82.4 proof, $33; Naval Strength, 114 proof, $50)

Ransom Old Tom This Oregonian gin is made in the old-fashioned, but now rare style called Old Tom. Sweeter than London dry, it was most popular in the 19th century and all but disappeared after Prohibition. Ransom, a distiller of grape and grain spirits, follows tradition by subtly aging the gin, which is made from corn and malted barley. When possible the botanicals are local and organic. It is fitting that cocktail historian David Wondrich had a hand in the formulation of Ransom Old Tom, as many of the classic gin drinks of which he has written were invented using this style of gin. Fuller bodied than most gins, it has malty, almost leathery notes and smacks of orange, spice and pine. (88 proof, $45)

Tanqueray Although it is now made in Scotland, Tanqueray (founded in the 1830s and pronounced tanker-ray) remains solidly in the crisp London dry gin category with such botanicals as the required juniper as well as coriander, angelica root and licorice. The standard release lacks a citrus component, but you'll add that anyway when you squeeze lime in for a Gin & Tonic. The superpremium Tanqueray No. Ten, made for use in a Martini, boasts citrus with a particular grapefruit note. The distiller also makes the lower-proof, Rangpur, using an east Asian variety of lime. The brand is particularly popular in the U.S., where it is said to have been Frank Sinatra's favorite. (Tanqueray, 94.6 proof, $25; No. Ten, 94.6 proof, $34; Rangpur, 82.6 proof, $26) ❖

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THE *Blackjack* BALL

The most notorious casino gamblers congregate once a year for a secret party that's invite only

BY MICHAEL KAPLAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DIETER BRAUN

IT SEEMS LIKE a typical Saturday night in Las Vegas. Slot machines clang from one end of the Strip to the other. Various iterations of Cirque du Soleil shows go off precisely as anticipated. Poker games rev up and craps tables teem with action. And while casino blackjack pits don't show any noticeable dips in activity, surveillance and security personnel can probably take it a little easy tonight. On this particular evening, all the world's most lethal blackjack players have taken the night off. They're not at the blackjack tables counting cards or tracking shuffles or exploiting the other weaknesses of the house. Tonight, they are attending the 21st annual Blackjack Ball.

A mile or so from the city's neon-laced gambling dens, multimillion-dollar winners congregate inside an earth-toned clubhouse on the grounds of a gated housing development. Notorious advantage players and infamous card sharks sip fine Champagne, nibble on canapés and socialize in an open, relaxed manner. This is a rare Vegas opportunity for people whose very livelihoods rely on maintaining low profiles and pretending to be unskilled at games that they have devoted thousands of hours to fleecing.

The Blackjack Ball ranks as the gambling world's equivalent of the G2 Summit or World Economic Forum. Elite players fly in from around the world to socialize, rub elbows with one another, discuss future playing arrangements and make good on past ones.

Put yourself in the company of those who have innovated techniques for beating all manner of casino games, and you recognize your place in a fascinating world. "Attending the Blackjack Ball confirmed to me that I don't have to live a mundane existence," says veteran card counter Joanna Henderson. "People there support a vision so different from that of my mainstream friends. It feels like a secret society where members who have a focus on one thing can get together and share their views and experiences."

Certainly, it is one of the few gatherings where someone like Darryl Purpose will whip out an iPhone to show off a stunning minute of casino surveillance footage that focuses on him. Tall, buzz-headed and favoring thickly rimmed eyeglasses, Purpose was once called the best card counter in the game by the late blackjack god Ken Uston.

A few feet away, retired card cheat Dustin Marx shows off his moves, putting on a display of subterfuge and slight of hand that once allowed him to relieve casinos of untold sums.

Later on in the evening, some of the sharpest gamblers alive will use relevant skills to square off in a competition, showing the room just what they are capable of doing against casinos. Winner will be deemed Player of the Year. "How would you like to be the director of surveillance from MGM International and come to my party?" Max Rubin, the host of this event, asks dryly. "That will never happen and I'm not worried about them showing up. We don't sweat any of that. We have guards at the door. And they are serious security, not just on hand for show. My guys make sure that no one comes who is not on the approved list. Hell, we stock more than $10,000 worth of Champagne here."

And that's to say nothing of the pockets full of cash that attendees routinely carry on them. Anthony Curtis, formerly a professional gambler and currently the owner of Huntington Press, a publisher that specializes in gambling books, figures that it's hardly unusual for partygoers to have five-figure sums stuffed in their pockets. Some of the money goes toward gambling on events that will take place over the course of the evening. More of it, says Rubin, is for friends and collaborators who rarely see one another to settle up. As he puts it, "This is the only place on the planet where over 100 people affiliated on the highest end of blackjack and other gambling opportunities can gather socially without being discovered."

While it's common knowledge here that many card players have made the 21st century move of expanding to capitalize on weaknesses in machine games, nobody is especially forthcoming about exactly what is up. After all, as much as these people are friends, they are also friendly competitors. They angle to capitalize on the same opportunities and deploy similar gambits. No need to tip off the competition too much.

Invitations to the Ball are so coveted that people rally for gaining admission by begging Rubin and his influential friends for plus-ones. One of those influential friends is Edward Thorp, author of *Beat the Dealer*, the book that provided the original blueprint for card counting, which Thorp himself invented. He's become a regular at the ball, functions as a big draw for others and is appropriately treated like royalty. As one guest puts it: "Everybody bows down to Ed—and they should." This year he is on hand to celebrate the publication of his

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autobiography, *A Man For All Markets*, which is not a titular exaggeration. Having long ago moved on from cards and casinos, Thorp has devised blackjack-inspired systems for making hundreds of millions of dollars from Wall Street's financial markets.

His rock star status is evident in the excitement felt by normally blasé John Chang (a founding member of the famous MIT blackjack team and a model for Kevin Spacey's character in the movie *21*) when he and a couple of buddies got to play several double-deck rounds with Thorp after a recent Ball. "Considering who he is, playing with Thorp was really amazing," says Chang. Recalling that the inventor of card counting did not get very far out of line, even when the count was high, Chang adds, "In his book, he talked about the importance of getting comfortable in your environment and not pushing things too early. I witnessed him doing that very thing. I moved my bets around, going from $800 to $1,200 as the count rose, and he only went up from $100 to $200! Apparently, I figured, he's not comfortable playing at this time. We all won, got up from the table, walked away, and Thorp said, 'That's the first time I've played in 40 years.'"

The Ball's guest list is kept tidy by Rubin and his invitation committee, which is made up of Blackjack Hall of Famers. The Hall, believe it or not, is a real thing, with a Cooperstown equivalent at Barona Resort & Casino near San Diego. It's where Rubin consults as a game-protection specialist. There's even a corridor that's been dedicated to blackjack's top practitioners. Guys like James Grosjean, Ken Uston, Richard Munchkin and Bill Benter are well represented. Less-than-revealing photos can be seen on display. "I'm concerned about people knowing how I look," says middle-aged Tommy Hyland, a Hall of Fame member who has been extremely successful at managing teams that beat games around the globe. "So I gave one of my old college pictures. Obviously, I look nothing like that at this point."

Because the Ball is a gathering of gamblers, there is Calcutta-style betting set up... Early on, arm wrestling counted among the events in the Player of the Year contest.

The committee makes sure that interlopers and troublemakers are kept out of the party. "A minimum of five Hall of Fame members vet who comes," says Rubin. "Each has veto power and if there is anybody who may cause a problem, they are not allowed in."

It's strict enough that one of the biggest gamblers of the moment was refused an invitation this year because of questions about her associates. Another, who had long attended the ball and was portrayed in the blackjack flick *21*, received the kibosh over suspicions of dodgy behavior. Then there's the esteemed statistician who began working for a major gaming operator, helping executives there to thwart advantage players looking for edges on side bets. "He can't come anymore," Rubin says flatly. "He understands why and is a gentleman about it."

For those who are lucky enough to land invitations, there are just two requirements: Show up with a bottle of chilled premium Champagne (if you bring a guest, bring two bottles) and agree to never play at Barona, which sponsors the event and underwrites its cost. "That's a genius move on the part of the Barona," says Richard Munchkin, who, like other Hall of Fame members, receives unlimited food, beverage and room comps there. "Whatever the party costs is nothing compared to the money they save by Ball attendees agreeing not to play."

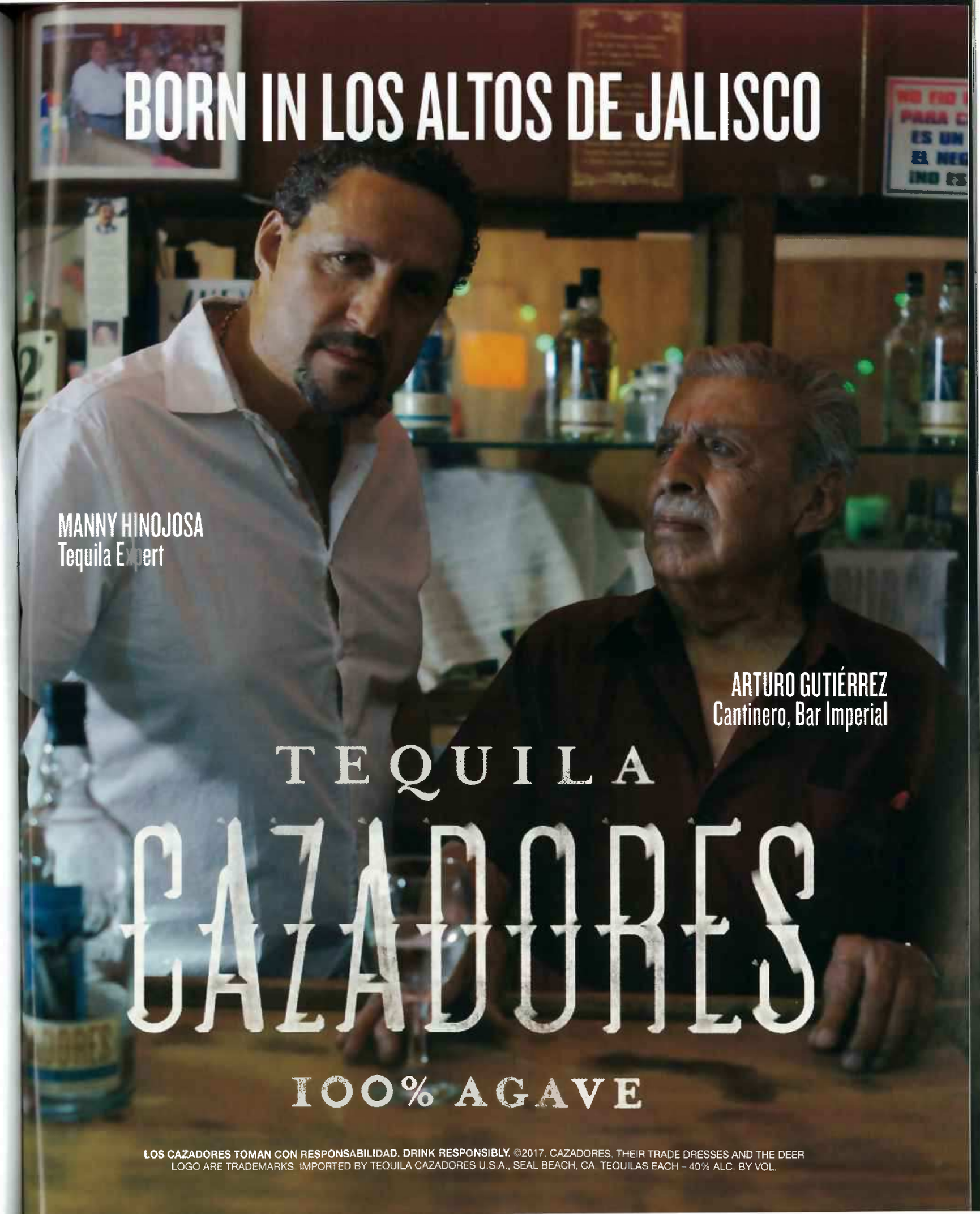
Beyond that, woe to anyone who fails to follow Rubin's carefully worded dictate on the beverage to be brought. "Max is rigid about Champagne," says Joanna Henderson. "Last year I saw him kick someone the fuck out for bringing a split of Champagne. He didn't even tell him to go to the store and buy a full bottle. He just booted him out. One year I brought a single bottle for two people and it wasn't Dom Perignon. Max really let me have it. But after that I always brought Dom—and two bottles."

The Blackjack Ball began in a small, organic way during the early days of 1997. Fittingly, it was initiated by a casino glitch that benefited the sharpest professional gamblers. For some reason, according to Rubin, MGM Grand chose not to subscribe to the Griffin Book. Produced by a local detective agency, the Book tracked cheaters and advantage players and was a literal book with photos of people that casinos did well to keep off of their tables. At the time, it was the best way to identify card counters and others who played games advantageously.

As a result of the nonexistent system for recognizing gaming-world professionals, MGM had the dubious distinction of attracting all the best blackjack players in the business.

During big weekends and special events—when the casino was particularly crowded—team-members filled the tables and signaled one another to announce counts and call big bettors into the games. "Everybody learned everybody else's signals and the teams were continually picking each other off and jumping in on one another's action," remembers Rubin. "There was a big fight over this and it got really acrimonious."

Then Rubin, who always seems to be in the thick of things (Rick Blaine, author of *Blackjack Blueprint*, describes Rubin as "a power broker"), offered a solution to aggrieved friends: "I suggested that if somebody picks off the signal from another team, he should pay a fee for joining the game. Everybody started compensating each other and the players became more cooperative. If someone was ace-tracking [which would be hurt by another player jumping into the game], people backed off. Every night they met at Denny's, near the old Sands, and settled up. There were lots of verbal signals. One guy came over and asked what time it was, he was told 13 o'clock [meaning that the count of cards was 13]. Then a bunch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of low cards came out and the player announced that it was now 17 o'clock. The dealer looked at the guy like he was crazy, but suddenly big bets hit the table and it was all Rembrandts [gambling slang for picture cards] on the next hand."

Rubin remembers there being 35 or 40 top professional players in town at the time. He decided to throw a party on the Saturday after New Year's Eve, which is always a big night for card counters and the like. "The entry fee was a comped bottle of Dom," Rubin says, explaining how the tradition got set. "Some guys even brought the silver ice buckets from their rooms." He adds that this was back in the day when casinos gave out bottles of Champagne the way they now provide chocolates on pillows. Circa 2017, attendees at the Ball are likelier to buy their bottles at Vegas liquor shops than to get them for free from casino hosts.

They're also less likely to get injured during the annual challenge that Rubin puts together (Blaine won it in 2016). From the start, Rubin intended the party to be more than just an occasion to socialize. He included a contest where attendees play to be deemed the greatest blackjack player for the coming year. Competition begins with a trivia contest—which includes tricky brain teasers about the odds of various card playing situations and questions concerning games to be found in casinos that the attendees tend to frequent. The top five finishers there compete in feats of skill that include cutting to a specific number of cards, chip shuffling, pitching cards, playing through various situations and old fashioned card counting.

The first time I attended, back in the early 2000s, I knew very little about the strategies deployed by serious advantage players. So when I saw Richard Munchkin expertly taking down the card-cutting portion of a competition, I thought it was kind of silly, like a cute parlor trick. I had no idea that this skill had earned him loads of money in casinos. But, it should be noted, that year I also won the so-called "jackass trophy." It's a small, cheap memento that has a kicking donkey above the trophy's base. It goes to the person with the lowest trivia-contest score. The first year I attended, that was me.

Because the Ball is a gathering of gamblers, there is Calcutta-style betting set up in which guests bid to wager on the players who they think will win. The prize pool routinely clears $10,000. Early on, arm wrestling counted among the events in the player of the year contest. A former college wrestler, Anthony Curtis had proven himself to be a tough competitor on that leg of the donnybrook. But when he came up against his buddy Mike Castellano ("Fit as shit" is how Curtis describes him), Curtis knew that he was an underdog.

He had to devise a way of beating Castellano that would not require brute force. "We were going left handed," remembers Curtis. "I looked over my right shoulder and thought I had the perfect way to anchor myself under the table. I hit it at exactly the right second, floored Castellano, and the place was stunned. John Chang saw it happening and took a picture."

People checked out the shot and wondered whether or not Curtis had broken any rules. "I saw it and congratulated Curt," says Castellano. "I figured that what he did was an advantage play. It was allowed within the confines of the Blackjack Ball's rules."

Not long after, though, Curtis confronted an opponent against whom table-holding tricks would not work. "The guy weighed 250 pounds, I did my best to beat him and heard something in my arm crack," recalls Curtis. "He tore my elbow's ligaments. A day later, my whole arm turned black. That was the end of arm wrestling."

The 2017 Blackjack Ball counts as the most star-studded gathering yet. Such a turn is fitting when you consider that it's the 21st annual event, and even the most casual blackjack player knows the importance of the number. Ed Thorp gives a heartfelt speech about loving the game—even though his stock trading algorithms have generated far more money for him than casino gaming ever could—and his talk resulted in a standing ovation.

On his feet, and dominating the front-and-center table, is Don Johnson—not the actor but the former jockey who's used crafty techniques to extract 10s of millions of dollars from blackjack tables across the United States. Poker superstar Phil Ivey sits alongside him. Other gambling world luminaries with intentionally low profiles but staggeringly large bank accounts fill out the remaining seats. Curtis classifies it as the night's "VIP table."

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Johnson is particularly keyed up because he is on the ballot for the Blackjack Hall of Fame and views himself as a favorite to get in. He's so confident that he brought his laptop with an acceptance speech on the screen. Ratcheting things up further is the fact that the Hall of Fame winner—decided by voting at the Ball—will receive a 15-liter Nebuchadnezzar of Luc Belaire rosé sparkling wine. Johnson has an endorsement deal with the company and provides the bottle. Maybe a little too optimistic about their guy, the folks at Luc Belaire engraved Johnson's name on the bottle before shipping it over.

Max Rubin holds a very visible black marker, making it clear that if Johnson loses the election, Rubin will black out his name and put in that of the winner. Taking few chances, Johnson has loaded tables with magazines that contain articles about him. Additionally, he has not been shy about campaigning. "I called all my bros and said, 'Listen, either you vote for me or we are not friends anymore,'" he recalls.

Apparently the strong-arming worked. Johnson won his award and took out a small posse of friends to celebrate. "I think we went to Omnia and it was an easy night," says Johnson who's famous for blowing cash in nightclubs. "It only ran $50,000."

Less splashy was Anthony Curtis. After coming close many times, he finally took down first place in the Blackjack Ball Player of the Year competition, garnering a giant booze bottle of his own. "There were years where winning would have automatically meant a lot to me," he says. "But by 2017, I wasn't even thinking about it. Then, when I finished first, I was surprisingly happy. It felt like a big deal—and I have the big bottle of Luc Belaire to show for it. Next day there was a party at Munchkin's house. I brought the bottle but we never got around to opening it. Now the Luc Belaire sits in my office, and it feels like a nice trophy to have." ❖

Michael Kaplan is a CIGAR AFICIONADO *contributing editor.*

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Mercedes Revs Up

With its AMG line, the diverse German carmaker with a reputation for luxury bolsters a knack for performance

BY PAUL A. EISENSTEIN

Arizona Route 89A is not for the faint of heart. One blind curve flows into another, the hilltops linked by short straights of well-worn asphalt with sheer cliffs menacing on either side. It's the sort of road that locals avoid and tourists dread, a narrow ribbon tracing the mountain spine linking Old West Prescott and New Age Sedona.

Yet another breed is entirely drawn to roads like this. We've spent the last two hours working our way north from Phoenix, skipping the interstate in favor of the more entertaining back roads. Of course, we're not driving a Winnebago or an old pickup. Our car of choice is the new Mercedes-AMG GT C Roadster.

Only the second model ever designed specifically for the Mercedes performance brand-within-a-brand, the GT C puts 550-horsepower at the command of one's right foot, enough to tear from 0 to 60 in 3.8 seconds. But this is no classic muscle car. It delivers the sort of precise steering and handling expected from a racecar. As you carve the curves you're encouraged to pick up your pace, with only the occasional encounter with a nervous traveler holding you back.

"It's the sort of car that will change your perception of Mercedes-Benz," says Larry Printz, a judge at numerous classic car shows, who is along for the ride in the convertible. For a long time, Mercedes was the 'old man's German car,'" he says, better known for a plush, if uninspiring, ride than for its performance and handling. These days, contends Printz, products like the GT C are helping redefine the brand, delivering "some of the best-handling cars in the world."

Don't worry, if a high-performance two-seater isn't quite your style, the German maker still offers plenty of other options, from the surprisingly affordable little GLA crossover-utility vehicle to the big Mercedes-Maybach S600 sedan, about as close as you can come to a business jet on wheels. There are sedans and coupes, as well as coupe-like sedans and a growing list of classic SUVs and car-based CUVs that balance on- and off-road manners.

And for those who might disdain the big, gas-guzzling V-8s and V-12s that have long powered products with the tri-star on their grilles, Mercedes is rolling out an array of new high-tech, higher-mileage alternatives. By the end of this year, it plans to offer 10 plug-in hybrids in its global fleet, as well as an assortment of more conventional hybrids. At last year's Paris Motor Show, Dieter Zetsche, the head of the Mercedes brand and CEO of parent Daimler AG, pulled the covers off the Mercedes Generaton EQ Concept. Mercedes-EQ is going to be the name of another new sub-brand focused on the pure battery-electric and other plug-based models that many experts believe could dominate the global luxury car market in the decades to come.

If that isn't a broad enough assortment, the Teutonic team has been hinting at more to come with concept vehicles like the Mercedes F 015, essentially a living room on wheels. What just a decade ago might have seemed a fantasy in chrome is now meant to be seen as "the forerunner of a mobility revolution," according to Zetsche, and likely to influence the first fully driverless vehicle Daimler plans to bring to market by 2021.

How far the company has come since 1885 when Karl Benz rolled out his Patent-Motorwagen, considered the world's first true automobile. Many now credit Karl's wife Bertha with turning the Motorwagen into the foundation of a successful enterprise. Without advising her husband, she made a perilous, 121-mile trip to visit her family, proving the one-cylinder, two-horsepower buggy's viability. Upon her return, she offered engineering advice—and also lent her husband money from her family fortune to put the Motorwagen into production. Last year, Bertha Benz was inaugurated into the Automotive Hall of Fame in Dearborn, Michigan.

Just 60 miles away, Gottlieb Daimler was perfecting something dubbed the "Grandfather Clock." He used the gasoline engine to power the Petroleum Reitwagen he built in 1885. The two men quickly became bitter competitors, battling over patent rights. It was only in 1926, a quarter-century after Daimler's death and a few years before Benz's, that the companies merged. First called Daimler-Benz, it soon adopted the name Mercedes-Benz, incorporating the title of an early Daimler model that the Austrian automotive pioneer Emil Jellinek had developed and named for his daughter.

The Mercedes lineup features models for most every driver including the AMG GT C roadster (top) aimed at high performance, the traditionally luxurious S-Class sedan (below left) and the EQ (below right), which is a plug-in, pure-battery electric vehicle.

The corporate name would change once again with the 1998 "merger of equals" that became DaimlerChrysler AG. It was anything but equal, however, and certainly not a success. Daimler dumped the old Chrysler Corp. in 2007, just as the U.S. economy started to collapse. It was a painful and financially damaging divorce, but it marked a major turning point for what emerged as Daimler AG.

More than 130 years after Karl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler rolled out their first, primitive cars, the automaker remains based in Stuttgart. The quaint, southern German city has grown rich off the hometown manufacturer, which employs a sizable share of the local workforce through Daimler's corporate offices, design and engineering center and local assembly operations. But the carmaker also operates product development and manufacturing operations in the U.S., China, South Africa and a variety of other locales. It's the sort of empire needed by a company that last year sold 2.2 million vehicles, a 10 percent year-over-year increase, making Mercedes the largest luxury car brand in the world.

The Daimler empire covers a lot of territory—and a lot of brands. There's Smart, producer of urban microcars like the Smart Fortwo, plus an array of military vehicle, bus and truck marques, including the U.S.-based Freightliner. And there's that growing list of Mercedes sub-brands.

For years, Mercedes was content to maintain a modest automotive product portfolio, with only a handful of models like those now known as the E- and S-Class. There was a near revolt within its supervisory board when the idea of a compact luxury car was first introduced. The proponents won and the 1993 Baby Benz—the grandfather of today's C-Class—proved an immediate hit.

How times have changed. These days, Mercedes is intent on filling seemingly every possible "white space," as product planners like to call it. Along with the classic C-, E- and S-Class sedans, coupes, wagons and convertibles, Mercedes showrooms are now filled with the likes of the coupe-like CLA and CLS sedans, the G, GLC and GLE utility vehicles, the SL and SLC roadsters, among others. It's a veritable war as parent Daimler rushes to counter the moves made by key competitors BMW and Audi, both of which have announced plans to bring dozens of their own new models to market before the end of the decade.

Mercedes now has organized its model range into three sub-brands, with a fourth coming. That starts with the familiar Mercedes-Benz marque which will cover the company's mainstream models, like the recently updated 2017 E-Class and the 2018 S450 sedan set to reach showrooms this autumn.

As lavish as the S-Class might seem, Mercedes has long aimed to connect with the luxury market's most elite buyers. In 1997, it introduced Maybach as a standalone marque that it hoped would compete with the likes of Bentley and Rolls-Royce. But the brand fell far short of expectations and, in 2011, CEO Zetsche announced plans to kill off Maybach. Three years later, it was given a reprieve, although its rebirth was less audacious. The Mercedes-Maybach badge adorns the most exclusive versions of the S-Class, and the G-Class SUV, vehicles that push well north of $250,000 on the price sticker.

Where might Mercedes take Maybach next? At a full 18.7 feet, and painted in a vibrant, eye-catching red, the Vision Mercedes-Maybach 6 made its debut at the 2016 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. While the maker bridles at the term, "retro," there is no question the striking show car delves into the brand's past for inspiration, says Davis Lee, the senior designer who gets credit for the concept. "Fundamental beauty never changes," he explains, adding that, "This is very true" to Mercedes' history, and just might hint at something in the works.

As for the highest performers within the family, they now wear the Mercedes-AMG badge. AMG was founded in 1967 by former Mercedes engineers Hans Werner Aufrecht and Erhard Melcher—the "G" in the company's name standing for Grossaspach, where Aufrecht was born. They originally set out to build a faster Mercedes racecar but quickly started producing limited-edition versions of the German automaker's street vehicles.

The top of the S-Class family is the S65 sedan, with its massive 621-hp V-12 engine. It may be plush but it'll also make your neck snap when you slam the pedal to the floor. And to help deliver all their power to the pavement, most AMG models will come with standard all-wheel-drive going forward.

The proliferation of new AMG models might come as a surprise to those who remember an earlier era, when Mercedes would offer only one of the performance models at a time, and usually for just a limited run. It wasn't uncommon, back in the 1990s, for the likes of an AMG-tuned E-Class to command a higher price on the used car market than it did when it originally rolled out of the showroom.

While most AMG offerings are retuned versions of stock Mercedes-Benz models, the GT recently became the second model specifically designed only to carry the AMG badge, following up on the earlier AMG SLS supercar. "It can be kind of a beast—like *Beauty and the Beast*,"

Maybach, once a standalone brand, is now solidly in the Mercedes fold and includes the G650 (top). The driverless concept car F 015 (bottom) has swivel seats that may become a feature in future production models.

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The Vision Mercedes-Maybach 6, a concept car, recalls elements of the company's design esthetic with gullwing doors.

laughed GT program director Jörg Letzel, as we dutifully returned from our drive up to Sedona a few months back. Offered in both coupe and roadster form, Mercedes recently revealed that still more variants are in the works when it unveiled the AMG GT Concept at the 2017 Geneva Motor Show. Expect to see "a four-door variant," announced the sub-brand's Chairman Tobias Moers.

Some things will never change, Moers stressed. The engine in each AMG vehicle is produced by a single technician whose name is stamped onto the block. But the GT Concept suggests that the type of engines AMG uses could soon go through some dramatic changes. The Geneva show car not only added another pair of doors but what AMG officials described as a "performance hybrid powertrain" capable of thrusting out 805 horsepower—enough to launch the show car from 0 to 60 in less than three seconds. The system, officials have privately confirmed, is based on the Kinetic Energy Recovery Systems, or KERS, technology developed by Mercedes for its winning Formula One team.

Don't be surprised to see KERS technology show up in a production model in the near future. Indeed, Mercedes is spending billions of dollars to develop a range of alternative propulsion technologies that will meet the strict new emissions and mileage standards going into effect around the world. Those include hybrids, plug-ins, battery-electric vehicles, advanced diesels and even hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles. The good news is that many of these new powertrains will deliver enhanced performance, as well as lower emissions and higher fuel efficiency.

Expect to see some of the more advanced of these powertrains land in the new Mercedes-EQ brand. "The emission-free automobile is the future," said Daimler CEO Zetsche during the Generation EQ's Paris preview.

But that show car didn't stop with a battery drivetrain, stressed Zetsche, pointing out that "our new EQ brand (will go) far beyond electric vehicles. EQ stands for a comprehensive ecosystem of services, technologies and innovations." Going forward, Mercedes will focus on four pillars, according to the CEO, "connected, autonomous, shared and electric." Their initials make a "CASE" for a number of trends reshaping the global industry, all captured within the Generation EQ concept—and other recent prototypes like the F 015.

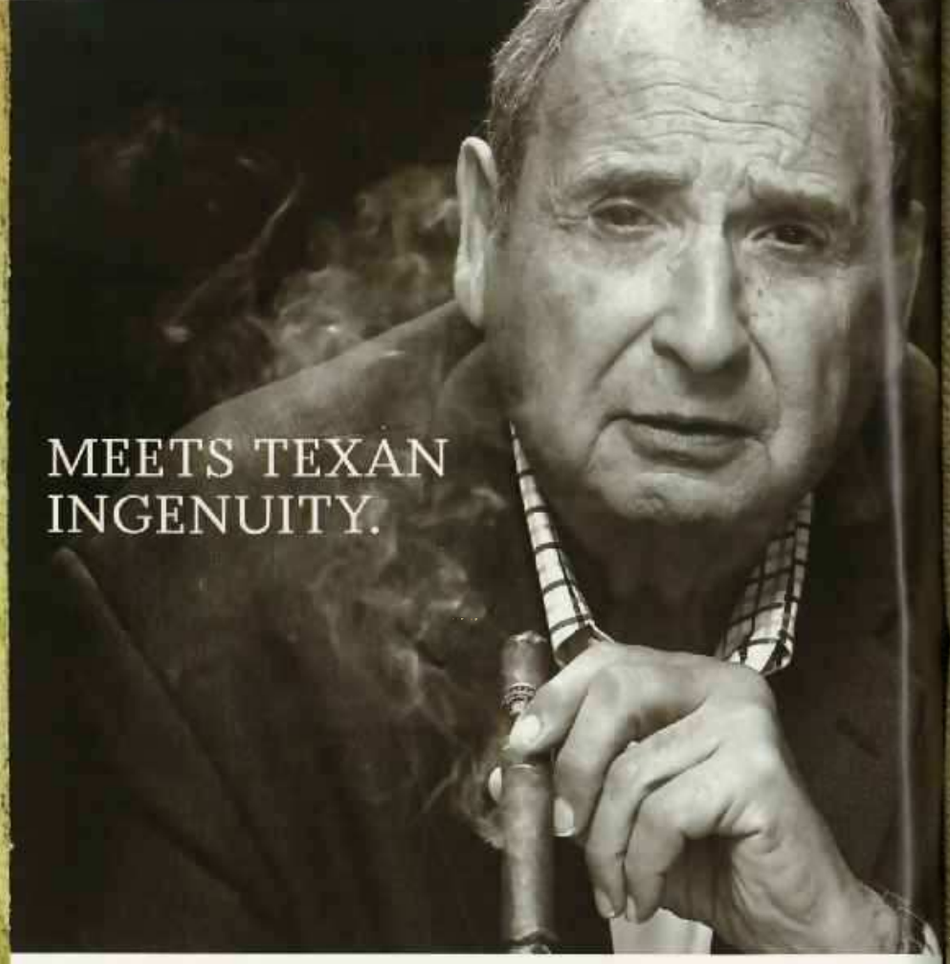
You don't have to wait to get an idea of what's coming. The Mercedes-Benz S-Class is arguably the most technologically sophisticated vehicle ever to go into mass production. The outgoing model already features infrared night vision capable of spotting animals, pedestrians and other obstacles beyond the range of normal headlights—and an automatic braking system that can bring the car to a stop if the driver fails to respond. The 2018 update adds features like Active Steering Assist; tap the turn signal and it will pass slower vehicles without you needing to touch the steering wheel.

According to a new study by Navigant Research, Mercedes is running one of the industry's most advanced autonomous vehicle programs. Not content to stop with vehicles that must have a backup "operator" behind the wheel, it plans to have a completely driverless vehicle in production by 2021. Like the F 015 concept, it's likely to feature seats that can swivel 180 degrees, so riders can face one another as if in a mobile living room. It remains to be seen if such vehicles will be sold directly to the public.

Significantly, parent Daimler recently announced a partnership with ride-sharing giant Uber, which has an aggressive self-driving vehicle program of its own in the works. Many experts—including Zetsche—are betting that, by 2030, millions of motorists will opt to use services like Uber, rather than owning and operating vehicles of their own, especially in dense urban areas. Daimler wants to make sure that if you're calling for a ride and can afford the up-charge, you'll opt for a Mercedes.

That said, there are likely to always be those who will want to keep their eyes on the road and their hands on the wheel. And for them, Daimler wants to make sure a Mercedes-Benz, Mercedes-Maybach or Mercedes-AMG will remain the car of choice. The German maker, which lays claim to having invented the automobile in the first place, is intent on leading, rather than following in an era of dramatic change that could yet reshape the industry in ways unseen. ❖

Paul A. Eisenstein publishes www.TheCarConnection.com.



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cigars

112 CIGAR REVIEW: 80 BLIND TASTINGS
In our latest lineup, our panel of cigar-puffing editors takes on an assortment of 80 cigars to see how they rate in a blind taste test.

126 A PERFECT SMOKE
A pre-Castro Cuban puts on a 100-point performance in this edition of Connoisseur's Corner. Also, several big Cubans perform well, as do a pair of aged, standout cigars from the Dominican Republic and Miami.

128 OLD SEEDS, NEW TRICKS
The newest thing in cigar tobacco begins with something old—heirloom seeds saved from generations ago. Tobacco men are looking to these old seeds for new flavors and bringing back a taste of the good old days.

136 A GREAT NIGHT FOR CHARITY
CIGAR AFICIONADO'S Night to Remember dinner brought together cigar lovers in an evening of amazing generosity, raising $1.6 million for prostate cancer research.

141 THE BIG SMOKE RETURNS TO MIAMI
Scenes from The Big Smoke Miami, home to more handmade cigarmakers than any other city.

JEFF HARRIS

churchills

Altadis U.S.A. has taken aggressive steps to ensure that its heritage brands stay relevant in the world of premium cigars. Romeo 505 Nicaragua by Romeo y Julieta is a perfect example. The Churchill scored 91 points and is a creative collaboration between Altadis and the Plasencia family, one of Nicaragua's most prolific growers of tobacco. In this case, both parties stand to benefit. Altadis not only gets a fresh, new interpretation of its Romeo y Julieta line, but can now boast its first truly Nicaraguan Romeo—the Romeo 505 tobacco is all-Nicaraguan and made in Nicaragua as well. The Plasencias, in turn, get to showcase their tobacco using the platform of a major, national brand. The consumer gets a rich and flavorful cigar without paying too much money. Everybody wins. If the La Historia E-III by E.P. Carrillo looks familiar, it's because it was named the No. 2 Cigar of 2014 by this magazine. At 90 points, the cigar is still performing well. The Cuban Montecristo Dantés Edición Limitada 2016 also scored 90 points. It's late—it was supposed to come out in 2016, but didn't appear on the market until earlier this year.

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ROMEO 505 NICARAGUA BY ROMEO Y JULIETA CHURCHILL
A gorgeous Churchill wrapped in a dark, oily cover leaf. The sweet, cedary smoke also shows savory notes of leather with hints of roasted nuts and black pepper.
U.S.: $10.50 U.K.: N/A

91

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6 7/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: MEXICO

E.P. CARRILLO LA HISTORIA E-III
The leathery, cedary intonations of this cigar are balanced by a caramel and nutmeg sweetness. It builds to an earthy finish.
U.S.: $10.40 U.K.: N/A

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 6 5/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: OCTOBER 2016

MONTECRISTO DANTÉS EDICIÓN LIMITADA 2016
A large cigar with an even draw. There's a sweet-and-salty character to the smoke, with some earthy notes, a touch of graham cracker and a cinnamon finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £32.10

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 49 LENGTH: 6 3/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ASHTON SYMMETRY PRESTIGE
Softly pressed with a flat head and attractive wrapper. Initial notes are bready and yeasty with notes of light chocolate and pecan before a tangy, woody finish.
U.S.: $12.75 U.K.: N/A

89

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 7 1/4"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

HOYO DE MONTERREY EXCALIBUR NO. 1 MADURO
Big, predominant notes of cedar usher in a leathery, meaty smoke that becomes tangy, especially on the finish.
U.S.: $8.19 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7 1/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA GALERA 1936 BOX PRESSED CHURCHILL
Notably tangy with strong notes of leather and cedar, this Churchill becomes more subdued, showing an herbal finish.
U.S.: $8.50 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

PADRÓN DÁMASO NO. 17
A large, blondish Churchill that's sweet and fruity with woody, floral undertones a nutty finish. It's a mild cigar, but flavorful.
U.S.: $17.50 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

MY FATHER LE BIJOU 1922 CHURCHILL
Earthy and full-bodied, this dark Churchill also imparts hints of mesquite and leather. Some metallic notes and dry wood affected the score.
U.S.: $11.90 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

NAT SHERMAN TIMELESS COLLECTION CHURCHILL
A cedary, leathery Churchill with some intermittent tart, oily notes and a bready, earthy finish that's fairly full bodied.
U.S.: $9.00 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 47 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA, PERU
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA AURORA 1495 CHURCHILL
Somewhat of a muted cigar, this streaky cigar delivers thin notes of lemongrass and wood before the mild floral finish. Could use more body.
U.S.: $8.00 U.K.: N/A

87

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

UNDERCROWN SHADE CORONA DOBLE
Big and blond with a near-perfect burn and solid white ash. It's a grassy, woody Churchill with a vague nuttiness and reedy finish. A mild cigar.
U.S.: $9.79 U.K.: N/A

87

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: MEXICO

HAMMER + SICKLE TRADEMARK SERIES MADURO CHURCHILL
A dark Churchill with a reddish tint, and notably firm draw. Notes of clove, earth and cinnamon come through, but the draw and body could be more substantial.
U.S.: $9.25 U.K.: N/A

86

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROMEO Y JULIETA RESERVA REAL CHURCHILL
Tart minerals underscore touches of chocolate and earth,but the finish of this cigar is laden with recurring mineral notes.
U.S.: $7.73 U.K.: N/A

86

corona gordas

While the name Ventura Cigar Co. may not be known to every cigar enthusiast, the Archetype Axis Mundi brand might be more easily recognizable. The Toro scored 93 points thanks to the creative blending of Drew Estate in Nicaragua, where the cigar is made. Archetype consists of four different brands, Axis Mundi being one of the more full-bodied blends in the Archetype portfolio. According to Ventura, the cigar was named for the repeating characters (or archetypes) that recur in the dreams of all people and myths of all cultures. Both the Honduran Eiroa The First 20 Years 54 x 6 Prensado and Nicaraguan Rocky Patel Special Edition Robusto scored 92 points.

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: INDONESIA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ARCHETYPE AXIS MUNDI TORO
Rolled with a dark and toothy cover leaf, this cigar exhibits a rich vanilla, nut and caramel quality, balanced by hints of cedar and coffee bean. A delicious smoke.
U.S.: $12 U.K.: N/A

93

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: HONDURAS
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

EIROA THE FIRST 20 YEARS
54 X 6 PRENSADO
Pressed and oily, this dark maduro delivers a chewy, concentrated smoke fortified with notes of nougat, cloves and sweet star anise. The finish resonates with leather and wood.
U.S.: $13.36 U.K.: N/A

92

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROCKY PATEL SPECIAL EDITION
ROBUSTO
Neatly pressed into rectangular form, this cigar shows a tasty balance of earth and nuttiness, leaving clear impressions of chocolate-covered almonds, roasted coffee bean and a tangy cedar finish.
U.S.: $10.45 U.K.: N/A

92

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ILLUSIONE HAUT 10 ROBUSTO EXTRA
Crafted with a three-seam fantail cap, this attractive cigar shows notes of almond, hickory wood and vanilla bean before a long, cinnamon and almond paste finish.
U.S.: $15.95 U.K.: N/A

91

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

ROCKY PATEL DARK DOMINICAN SUPREMO
Wearing a dark, near oscuro wrapper, this cigar exhibits a rich, earthy character and caramel sweentness with underlying toastiness. The finish hints of crème brûlée.
U.S.: $10.50 U.K.: N/A

91

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

CORNELIUS & ANTHONY VENGANZA
SILENCER
This attractive, gleaming cigar shows notes of caramel and vanilla bean that are underscored by touches of cedar and sassafras.
U.S.: $9.15 U.K.: N/A

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: DECEMBER 2016

PUNCH PUNCH 48
First puffs of this cigar are woody and floral with lots of hazelnut and pecan impressions. Notes of bread and cinnamon also develop.
U.S.: N/A SWITZ.: 15.50 SW. FR.

90

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: U.S.A./CONN. HABANO
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

PUNCH SIGNATURE PITA
The smoke of this dark, oily cigar is bold and hearty with prominent notes of oak and earth that hint of cappuccino and toffee. The finish is pleasantly sweet.
U.S.: $6.99 U.K.: N/A

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 5 5/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

VIAJE EXCLUSIVO NICARAGUA CG
Crafted with a closed foot and a well-made cap, this slim cigar offers bold impressions of cocoa bean and leather. The finish suggests a raisin sweetness.
U.S.: $8.40 U.K.: N/A

90

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP., HONDURAS
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

CAMACHO CHECK SIX TORO
The large, visible pores of this rosy wrapper give it a slightly rustic appearance. It's a sweet and bready smoke with hints of earth and oak leading to a mineral finish.
U.S.: $12.50 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

E.P. CARRILLO SHORT RUN 2016 NICARAGUA SUPER ROBUSTO
A ruddy-hued cigar made with a three-seam cap and a very soft head. It's primarily woody and charry, leaving hints of leather and minerals on the palate.
U.S.: $13.50 U.K.: N/A

88

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 5 5/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: MAY 2014

JUAN LOPEZ SELECCIÓN NO. 1
There are lots of stains and green spots on the wrapper of this medium-claro robusto, but it draws and burns evenly. Its leather notes and cinnamon sweetness dissipate, leaving a chalky finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £18.83

88

BRAZIL
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: BRAZIL
BINDER: BRAZIL
WRAPPER: BRAZIL

VILLIGER SAN'DORO MADURO TORO
Woody and floral, this reddish-brown toro becomes notably sharp, leaving a slightly acidic finish.
U.S.: $8.60 U.K.: N/A

87

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

J. FUEGO 777 MADURO SILVER CORONA GORDA
A predominantly woody, oaky smoke with hints of licorice and a flinty, mineral finish. It draws and burns evenly.
U.S.: $6.75 U.K.: N/A

86

figurados

From pressed perfectos to tapered torpedos, this category has a preponderance of high-scoring cigars, but two near-classic smokes flirted with perfection. Each scored 94 points and both came from two legendary producers. Made in the Dominican Republic, the Arturo Fuente Don Carlos Eye of the Shark is so named because of its shape—the lower half is box-pressed, the upper half round and tapering to a point, giving it a curiously sharky appearance. Eye of the Shark is attached to the Don Carlos line, but brand-owner Carlos "Carlito" Fuente is a consummate tinkerer when it comes to his cigars, and he's changed the blend for this unusual shape. The result is a resoundingly complex cigar that's as interesting to look at as it is to smoke. Padrón, on the other hand, decided to go all the way with its box-pressing. The Serie 1926 No. 2 is a fully-pressed cigar with a belicoso tip. There's something about its blend of Nicaraguan tobaccos, the trunk-shaped form and the tapered head that all conspire to deliver a dense, earthy smoke rich in elemental flavors. It achieves an uncommon balance of rusticity and refinement.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5 3/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

ARTURO FUENTE DON CARLOS
EYE OF THE SHARK
An attractive torpedo with a squarely pressed foot. Its lush draw delivers big notes of cedar, nuts and leather with a finish that smacks of cider. Tasty and complex.
U.S.: $12.25 U.K.: N/A

94

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

PADRÓN SERIE 1926 NO. 2
A box-pressed belicoso with a nipple tip. Strong earth and coffee notes lend richness to the smoke while its woody, strong black tea finish make this cigar balanced and delicious.
U.S.: $17.70 U.K.: N/A

94

U.S.A.
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

CASA FERNANDEZ AGANORSA LEAF
TORPEDO
The salted caramel and chocolate notes of this box-pressed torpedo have the rich sweetness of a candy bar. The finish is woody and light.
U.S.: $8.20 U.K.: N/A

92

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: CAMEROON
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ENCLAVE FIGURADO
Sweet and rich like a candy bar, this big figurado imparts a dense, chewy smoke with plenty of cocoa bean and a long fresh tobacco finish. A medium to full-bodied cigar.
U.S.: $7.60 U.K.: N/A

92

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

REGIUS EXCLUSIVO U.S.A.
PRESSED PERFECTO
An interesting, box-pressed perfecto whose even, open draw offers plenty of earthy cocoa notes balanced by pistachio nuttiness, hints of lemon peel and a sweet woody finish.
U.S.: $12.95 U.K.: N/A

92

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5 1/8"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

ALEC BRADLEY MUNDIAL NO. 5
Made with a rounded head, multiseamed cap and tapered foot, this figurado shows bold notes of semi-sweet chocolate, sweet wood and nuts. A rich and tasty cigar.
U.S.: $9.00 U.K.: N/A

91

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 57 LENGTH: 7 1/4"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: SEPTEMBER 2016

CUABA SALOMON
This salomon is heavily creased from the cigar mold. It's a floral, woody smoke with an underlying nuttiness. A pleasant and medium-bodied cigar.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £38.93

90

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: MEXICO

PADILLA VINTAGE RESERVE FIGURADO
A neatly box-pressed, double-tapered salomon whose sweet, earthy smoke carries hints of molasses, wood and coffee.
U.S.: $9.00 U.K.: N/A

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: OCTOBER 2015

PARTAGÁS SERIE P NO. 2
Light, nuanced woodiness becomes more pronounced, picking up light chocolate notes, leather and a malty finish. A medium-bodied torpedo.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £26.06

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

THE TABERNACLE TORPEDO
Draped in an oily, dark wrapper, this tiny belicoso burns evenly. It offers notes of rich woods, cocoa and hints of salt and pepper. The finish is long and sweet.
U.S.: $10.50 U.K.: N/A

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA AURORA PREFERIDOS 1903 EDICION DOUBLE BARREL AGED PERFECTO
A beautiful old-fashioned perfecto with plenty of leather and strong cocoa bean notes. The finish is earthy and rustic.
U.S.: $22.50 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. SHADE

MONTECRISTO CLASSIC NO. 2
Mild and slightly sweet, showing tea and vanilla cookie notes that become a bit heavier with breadiness, and a hint of marshmallow.
U.S.: $15.70 U.K.: N/A

87

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/8"
FILLER: COSTA RICA, NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

GRAN HABANO COROJO NO. 5 PYRAMID
An earthy pyramid with lemon and vanilla notes that become a bit sour. The finish hints of bread and damp mushroom.
U.S.: $7.30 U.K.: N/A

84

miscellaneous

This category is an assortment of mostly squat, fat cigars that have been rolled for the express purpose of delivering large volumes of smoke in short periods of time. A few deviate from that mission, most notably, the Alec Bradley Post Embargo Lancero, our category leader. It scored 92 points. At a thickness of 41 ring gauge, it's just a bit too fat to fit the girth parameters of our panetela category, so here it stands, a thin baton among these dwarfish cigars. The sweet and savory aspects of this lancero's smoke are brought together by an intermittent earthiness that adds balance and body. Note its two binders, one from Honduras, the other, Nicaragua. The Cohiba Medio Siglo is the first addition to the brand's Linea 1492 (aka the Siglo Series) in 15 years. It scored 91 points and has the length of a Siglo I and the thickness of a Siglo VI. While the cigar was introduced at the 2016 Habanos Festival, there was little commercial trace of the Medio Siglo until this year. The Ashton Virgin Sun Grown Trés Mystique, which scored 90 points, has been on the market for years. It's made by the Fuentes in the Dominican Republic.

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 41 LENGTH: 7 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, HONDURAS
BINDER: NICARAGUA, HONDURAS
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

ALEC BRADLEY POST EMBARGO LANCERO
The wrapper of this long, thin cigar gleams with oil. Savory notes of leather and briny olive take on a malty earthiness before a sweet finish redolent of chocolate-covered raisins.
U.S.: $8.50 U.K.: N/A

92

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 4"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: N/A

COHIBA MEDIO SIGLO
A short robusto with a substantial draw and even burn. It starts out a bit peppery but becomes floral and creamy before developing nuttiness with a hint of cinnamon.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £26.60

91

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 4 3/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ASHTON VIRGIN SUN GROWN TRÉS MYSTIQUE
Solidly rolled with a dark, streaky wrapper, this little smoke has a firm draw but imparts a bright, zesty smoke full of cedar notes, hints of orange blossom and a bit of butterscotch, though the finish is a bit dry.
U.S.: $9.80 U.K.: N/A

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 3 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: DOM. REP.

A. FLORES GRAN RESERVA 1975 HALF CORONA
First puffs of this little corona are cedary and slightly acidic before taking on strong notes of earth and coffee. Touches of cinnamon emerge as well.
U.S.: $5.09 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 45 LENGTH: 4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

COHIBA NICARAGUA N45
A dark little robusto with an oily wrapper and sweet smoke that exhibits a molasses and licorice sweetness and a reedy finish.
U.S.: $11.49 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 43 LENGTH: 3 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

DAVIDOFF 702 SERIES
ANIVERSARIO ENTREACTO
Draped in an oily brown wrapper, this tiny cigar has a lush draw that delivers earthy notes with hints of leather, nougat and tangy citrus.
U.S.: $11.40 U.K.: N/A

89

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 3 1/2"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: JULY 2016

H. UPMANN HALF CORONA
Small and stubby with a lopsided cap, this cigar begins floral and bready before picking up a salty earthiness. The finish leaves a bit of grit on the palate.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £10.08

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 60 LENGTH: 4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: BRAZIL

NUB MADURO 460
The wild, woodland underbrush twang of this short, squat robusto combines notes of earth, bark and freshly dug roots before a tangy finish.
U.S.: $8.09 U.K.: N/A

89

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 4 3/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: SEPTEMBER 2016

RAMON ALLONES
PATAGÓN EXCLUSIVO CONO SUR
An attractive petit robusto crafted with a three-seam cap. First puffs are floral, but the cigar warms to show stronger notes of spice, leather and a hint of licorice.
U.S.: N/A CHILE/ARGENTINA: $22.00

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 58 LENGTH: 4"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: CAMEROON
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

FRATELLO ORO SHORTY
The initial flintiness of this smoke dissipates giving way to earthy and rich woody notes. The draw and burn are lush and even.
U.S.: $8.00 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 3 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

LAST CALL MADURO BY A.J. FERNANDEZ
CHIQUITAS
Rolled with a dark wrapper and uncut foot, this cigar is spicy and earthy with hints of licorice and leather, and a touch of bitterness on the finish.
U.S.: $4.46 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 3 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA BOHÉME MIMI
A small, half-sized cigar that burns a bit hot. It's salty and brassy with a touch of wood. Medium to full-bodied.
U.S.: $7.25 U.K.: N/A

87

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

PERDOMO SMALL BATCH SERIES
MADURO HALF CORONA
Covered in a spotty, matte wrapper, this cigar offers a nougat sweetness, but leaves the palate dry with notes of walnut shell, cereal and a woody, reedy finish.
U.S.: $5.00 U.K.: N/A

87

petit coronas

Once a large Cuban brand with many sizes, Por Larrañaga today is made up of only two or three regular-production cigars. Rather than mourning the loss of discontinued vitolas, we'd rather celebrate what's left—a delicious Petit Corona that scored 91 points. These particular samples were produced in May 2016, so there's plenty of aging potential should you choose to put them away for awhile. Made in Nicaragua, the Oliva Serie O No. 4 scored 90 points. Once owned by the Oliva family, these cigars are now owned by J. Cortés, which purchased the company last year. The Cuban Romeo y Julieta Romeo No. 2 scored 90 points as well and comes in a handy aluminum tube.

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 1/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: MAY 2016

POR LARRAÑAGA PETIT CORONA
There's a salty, nutty quality to this veiny petit corona that remains medium-bodied throughout. Hints of walnut shell lead to an oaky finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £12.01

91

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 43 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

OLIVA SERIE O NO. 4
Fairly dark in appearance, this neatly rolled petit corona combines the spicy notes of white pepper, cumin and cardamom with a malty, light cocoa character.
U.S.: $5.63 U.K.: N/A

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 1/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: JULY 2016

ROMEO Y JULIETA ROMEO NO. 2 (TUBO)
The overpacked head of this little cigar causes a firm draw, but it still imparts lots of leather, toast and ginger-snap notes.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £15.15

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 4 3/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

CASA MAGNA COLORADO PIKITO
A dark, oily petit corona with a slight reddish hue. The dense smoke imparts tart, earthiness balanced by nutty notes and a fruity, dried-pear finish.
U.S.: $5.95 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: BRAZIL

LA FLOR DOMINICANA PETITE LA NOX
Tart at first, this full-bodied cigar takes on heartier notes of wood, coconut and sweet licorice before a sweet-and-sour finish.
U.S.: $7.40 U.K.: N/A

89

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 4 3/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: DECEMBER 2016

QUAI D'ORSAY SECRETO CUBANO EXCLUSIVO FRANCIA
A golden-brown petit corona with a three-seam cap. It starts floral and woody but builds to a earthy, peppery character with a hint of cream espresso on the finish.
U.S.: N/A FRANCE: 7.90 EURO

89

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 4 3/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: SEPTEMBER 2016

TRINIDAD REYES
Pale and pigtailed, this petit corona is more full-bodied than it looks. Initial notes of salt and dried flowers become sweet-and-spicy with a briny, rustic finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £11.93

89

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 4 1/4"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA, COLOMBIA
BINDER: COSTA RICA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

7-20-4 FACTORY 57 DOG WALKER
Lots of smoke comes off each puff of this little cigar. It's nutty and spicy with cinnamon notes and a mineral finish.
U.S.: $6.00 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 4 3/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA IMPERIOSA MINUTOS
Notes of raisins and leather manage to get through the firm draw of this dark little cigar, but the smoke turns a bit sharp with heavy charcoal.
U.S.: $6.30 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

TATUAJE HAVANA VI VEROCÚ NO. 5
Very strong, acidic first puffs calm down leaving earth and coffee bean impressions on the palate along with an earthy, bitter chocolate finish.
U.S.: $4.50 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP., MEXICO
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. SHADE

MACANUDO CAFÉ PETIT CORONA
A light, mild cigar whose straw-and-hay qualities are fortified with toasty vanilla notes and a flinty finish.
U.S.: $5.99 U.K.: N/A

87

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 38 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

ARTURO FUENTE PETIT CORONA MADURO
This pressed petit corona begins tart and earthy with hints of brown sugar and cereal that lead to a charcoal finish.
U.S.: $4.80 U.K.: N/A

86

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 41 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

DAVIDOFF SIGNATURE PETIT CORONA
Notes of fruit and flowers have a woody, cedary undertone but are offset by damp earthiness and a slightly musty aroma.
U.S.: $12.30 U.K.: N/A

86

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 4 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

LA PALINA EL DIARIO KB
Strong and spicy, this powerful cigar is overwhelmingly earthy and tarry with a woody core. It could use more balance.
U.S.: $7.50 U.K.: N/A

85

robustos

It shouldn't come as a big surprise to read the words finesse and elegant to describe a Padrón 1964 Anniversary Series cigar. Seeing how the Toro size scored 94 points, the word consistent should also come to mind, as this brand is usually on top, or at the very least, at the upper echelons of any CIGAR AFICIONADO tasting category it happens to be part of. This blend does not emphasize power so much as it does balance. While strength for strength's sake is more the domain of other brands, the 1964 Anniversary normally has a core of medium-bodied chocolate notes and builds from there. This Toro is no exception. That's not to say that this is a mild smoke—far from it. But the strength seems only incidental to its richness. With more body will naturally come more power. The cigars are made in Nicaragua under the supervision of Jorge Padrón and his father, José Orlando Padrón. The 601 Red Label Habano Robusto scored 90 points and is made in Nicaragua at the La Zona factory. The 601 Series comes in many varieties since the brand was introduced in 2005, but the Red Label Habano is one of the originals.

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 56 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

PADRÓN 1964 ANNIVERSARY SERIES TORO
Every puff of this lush cigar finesses the palate with elegant layers of toasty, floral smoke, buttressed by hints of almond, walnut shell and a chocolate finish.
U.S.: $15.30 U.K.: N/A

94

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

601 RED LABEL HABANO ROBUSTO
Rich notes of vanilla, earth and cedar build to a bold core of roasted coffee bean and nuts. The finish is earthy.
U.S.: $7.50 U.K.: N/A

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

JOYA DE NICARAGUA CUATRO CINCO RESERVA ESPECIAL PETIT CORONA
A dark, box-pressed robusto that exhibits a brawny, meaty smoke with plenty of white and black pepper notes and a sweet, woody finish.
U.S.: $8.00 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA FLOR DOMINICANA RESERVA ESPECIAL ROBUSTO
Slightly flattened and pressed, this robusto delivers a tangy, sweet-and-sour smoke with hints of raisin and a wine-like finish.
U.S.: $8.90 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: BRAZIL
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. HABANO

LIGA PRIVADA T52 ROBUSTO
Woody and oaky, this dark cigar forms a solid ash. Notes of licorice precede a bitter chocolate finish.
U.S.: $12.70 U.K.: N/A

89

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5 3/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: JUNE 2015

MONTECRISTO EDMUNDO (TUBO)
Initial puffs of this plump cigar are floral and nutty. It gains strength and intensity, taking on notes of espresso and earth before a heavily floral finish
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £24.80

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: MEXICO, NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

TATUAJE NÉGOCIANT MONOPOLE NO. 1
Slightly tapered at the shoulders, this tan cigar is floral and sweet with tart hints of citrus and a black tea finish. A pleasant, mild to medium-bodied smoke.
U.S.: $10.00 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

QUESADA TRIBUTO JULIO
An attractive robusto with a big, spicy cardamom aroma. Its earthy core is framed by notes of brown sugar and chocolate, but the finish is a bit metallic.
U.S.: $7.43 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

VEGAFINA NICARAGUA ROBUSTO
Covered in a discolored wrapper, this cigar delivers a scattered array of flavors that range from almond, wood and leather to damp earth and slight waxiness.
U.S.: $6.30 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: BRAZIL

BRICK HOUSE MADURO ROBUSTO
Notes of cedar, charred oak and bittersweet chocolate become herbal and piney, leaving a eucalyptus aftertaste.
U.S.: $6.00 U.K.: N/A

87

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

OLIVEROS GRAN RETORNO BANJO
A dark and alluring robusto with a hearty smoke smacking of black pepper and coffee bean that segue into a tangy mineral finish.
U.S.: $7.92 U.K.: N/A

87

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

MY FATHER NO. 1 ROBUSTO
Strong and spicy with a tangy affect that's joined by notes of earth and minerals. It's a dark and oily cigar.
U.S.: $9.70 U.K.: N/A

86

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, HONDURAS
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

ROCKY PATEL TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY MADURO ROTHSCHILD
The cap of this box-pressed cigar seems to be unpeeling itself. Brawny notes of leather, spice and earth lose intensity, becoming muted and faint.
U.S.: $10.35 U.K.: N/A

86

tasting summary

RATING SUMMARY BLIND TASTE TEST NO.139

Cigars are listed first by country and then by score. Please refer to the main tasting pages for notes and prices.

CIGAR AFICIONADO'S 100-POINT SCALE

Classic
95–100

Outstanding
90–94

Very good to excellent
80–89

Average to good commercial quality
70–79

Don't waste your money
0-69

Not available
n/a

Note: all prices are manufacturers' suggested retail, before taxes.

BRAZIL

87 Villiger San'Doro Maduro Toro

CUBA

91 Cohiba Medio Siglo
91 Por Larrañaga Petit Corona
90 Cuaba Salomon
90 Montecristo Dantés Edición Limitada 2016
90 Partagás Serie P No. 2 (Tubo)
90 Punch Punch 48
90 Romeo y Julieta Romeo No. 2 (Tubo)
89 H. Upmann Half Corona
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94 Arturo Fuente Don Carlos Eye of the Shark
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90 Ashton Virgin Sun Grown Trés Mystique
90 E.P. Carrillo La Historia E-III
89 A. Flores Gran Reserva 1975 Half Corona
89 Ashton Symmetry Prestige
89 Davidoff 702 Series Aniversario Entreacto
89 La Aurora Preferidos 1903 Edicion Double Barrel Aged Perfecto
89 La Flor Dominicana Petite La Nox
89 La Flor Dominicana Reserva Especial Robusto
89 La Galera 1936 Box Pressed Churchill
88 E.P. Carrillo Short Run 2016 Nicaragua Super Robusto
88 Fratello Oro Shorty
88 Nat Sherman Timeless Collection Churchill
88 Quesada Tributo Julio
88 VegaFina Nicaragua Robusto
87 La Aurora 1495 Churchill
87 La Bohéme Mimi
87 Macanudo Café Petit Corona
87 Montecristo Classic No. 2
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92 Alec Bradley Post Embargo Lancero
92 Eiroa The First 20 Years 54 x 6 Prensado
91 Alec Bradley Mundial No. 5
90 Padilla Vintage Reserve Figurado
90 Punch Signature Pita
89 Camacho Check Six Toro
89 Hoyo de Monterrey Excalibur No. 1 Maduro
88 7-20-4 Factory 57 Dog Walker
86 Rocky Patel Twentieth Anniversary Maduro Rothschild
85 La Palina El Diario KB
84 Gran Habano Corojo No. 5 Pyramid

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93 Archetype Axis Mundi Toro
92 Enclave Figurado
92 Regius Exclusivo U.S.A. Pressed Perfecto
92 Rocky Patel Special Edition Robusto
91 Illusione Haut 10 Robusto Extra
91 Romeo 505 Nicaragua by Romeo y Julieta Churchill
90 601 Red Label Habano Robusto
90 Cornelius & Anthony Venganza Silencer
90 Oliva Serie O No. 4
90 The Tabernacle Torpedo
90 Viaje Exclusivo Nicaragua CG
89 Casa Magna Colorado Pikito
89 Cohiba Nicaragua N45
89 Joya de Nicaragua Cuatro Cinco Reserva Especial Petit Corona
89 Liga Privada T52 Robusto
89 Nub Maduro 460
89 Padrón Dámaso No. 17
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88 La Imperiosa Minutos
88 Last Call Maduro by A.J. Fernandez Chiquitas
88 My Father Le Bijou 1922 Churchill
88 Tatuaje Havana VI Verocú No. 5
87 Brick House Maduro Robusto
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87 Perdomo Small Batch Series Maduro Half Corona
87 Undercrown Shade Corona Doble
86 J. Fuego 777 Maduro Silver Corona Gorda
86 My Father No. 1 Robusto

U.S.A.

92 Casa Fernandez Aganorsa Leaf Torpedo

For my humidor, I use Boveda.

CHRISTIAN EIROA

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connoisseur's corner

A corona-sized pre-Castro Cuban joined our small club of perfect cigars. The cigar, wrapped in a sleeve of cedar for the last 60 or so years, exhibited not only a perfect draw and burn, but a panoply of fine flavors. Three younger and far larger Cubans (a Bolivar, Ramon Allones and Hoyo de Monterrey) also scored well, each earning our classic accolade. ■ Some believe that only Cuban cigars improve over time. They are mistaken. There is a pair of non-Cubans in this impressive roundup. A Coronado by La Flor, rolled in the Dominican Republic seven years ago, earned a classic rating. A Miami-made Padilla with a decade of age also scored well. When it comes to aging a cigar, you only need to start with a fine smoke. Don't fret about where it was rolled.

POR LARRAÑAGA LARRA EN CEDRO N.C.H.W. (CIRCA 1957) — 100

This cigar is elegant and mild, with a superb mix of sweet spices such as nutmeg and cinnamon. The draw is divine, perfect, delivering rich smoke to the palate with just the right amount of tug, and the finish is slightly flinty. Absolutely delicious. —*Marvin R. Shanken*

HOYO DE MONTERREY DOUBLE CORONA (1993) — 98

The wrapper on this lovely big cigar is the color of a bar of milk chocolate, and the foot takes hungrily to the soft flame of a butane lighter. The draw is spot on, and the burn quickly evens out after a rough start. The old cigar takes time to awaken, revealing light sprinkles of baking spices and cream, building in power to show cedar wood, slate and a touch of earth as the smoke goes on. Quite elegant at this stage, if not as robust as it was in its youth. —*David Savona*

BOLIVAR CORONA GIGANTE (1995) — 97

This stately, box-pressed Churchill takes a bit of time to warm up, showing some earthy grit at first. As it warms, the flavor blossoms, with a blast of sweet nutmeg spice, toasted corn and savory coconut. It gets sweeter as it goes, eventually taking on a honeyed wood character that's wonderfully pleasant. The cigar burns and draws like a charm, with balance and big flavor. Despite being 22 years old, it seems far from its peak. —*David Savona*

CORONADO BY LA FLOR LANCERO (2010) — 96

A wonderful, full-bodied smoke with a great draw and burn. There is a robust coffee note at the start, which smooths out, taking on a solid nuttiness on the mid-palate. The long finish has a pleasing sweet earthiness with a touch of leather. This cigar still has many years of aging left. —*Gordon Mott*

RAMON ALLONES GIGANTE (2009) — 96

This beautiful double corona has the refinement of age while retaining the vigor of youth. It's a toasty smoke throughout, picking up sweet, chewy notes of almond-studded nougat before showing the meaty, unctuous qualities of sizzling beef fat. Final puffs are of black tea and freshly muddled mint. A cigar that smokes like a full dinner service in five solid ashes. —*Gregory Mottola*

PADILLA SIGNATURE 1932 OSCURO CHURCHILL (2007) — 92

The brownish tint of the cellophane speaks to the age of this Miami-made cigar. It's spent more than 10 years in a limited-edition humidor, and there aren't many of these left. Time has tempered this once powerful smoke. Ghostly hints of black pepper, earth and coffee are far more nuanced. It's become a sweet, herbal cigar that calls to mind molasses, dried flowers and the woodiness of its own humidor. —*Gregory Mottola*

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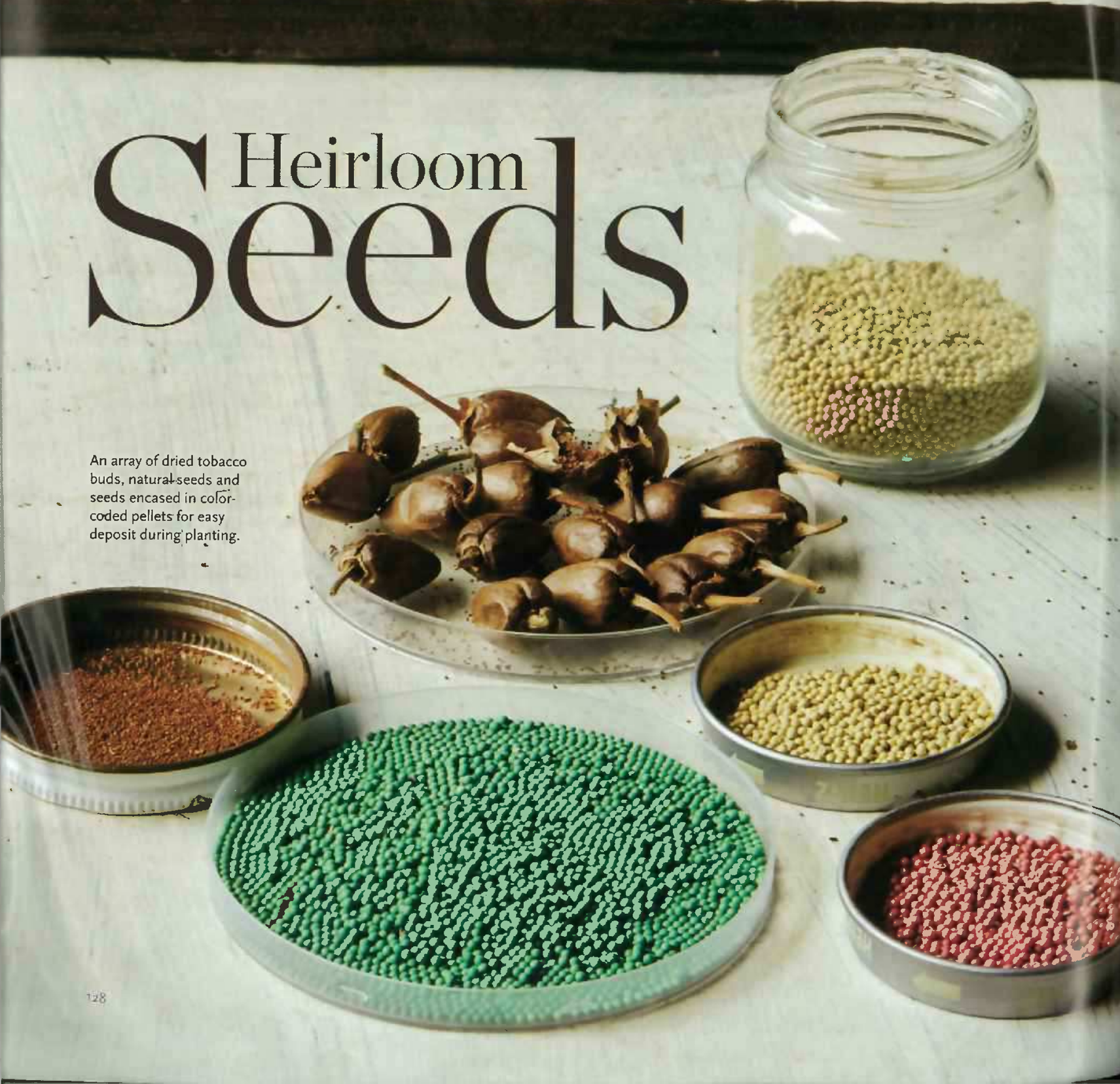
Heirloom Seeds



An array of dried tobacco buds, natural seeds and seeds encased in color-coded pellets for easy deposit during planting.

Perhaps more valuable than cold cash, shelves of tobacco seeds are well protected in General Cigar's seed bank, a refrigerated vault of restricted access.

Tobacco growers are looking to the past for new flavor, working with old seeds once lost to the annals of time

BY GREGORY MOTTOLA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID YELLEN

Have you ever heard the cranky old-timers complain that the cigars they used to smoke tasted different? They're not just waxing poetic about a bygone era. They're actually correct. Cigar tobacco today certainly isn't the same as it was 50 years ago. As time goes on, older strains of tobacco varietals have been replaced with newer strains that are more disease resistant, or yield more leaves per plant and more tobacco per acre. Once a new tobacco is deemed more robust or fruitful than its predecessor, the old seeds are retired, and with it, the old taste.

Some of those old tobaccos are probably gone forever, but today, a few of those old heirloom tobaccos are finding new life in the cigar market through careful, selective seed regeneration programs. Companies such as Altadis U.S.A., Plasencia, and General Cigar have gone into their seed archives and resurrected tobaccos that we haven't smoked in as much as 50 years.

"What's old is new again, that was the idea," says Ernest Gocaj in an Albanian accent. He's the director of tobacco procurement for General Cigar and instrumental in its seed regeneration program. Gocaj stands in a chilly, refrigerated room along with Jhonys Diaz, General's vice president of operations in the Dominican Republic, and Francisco "Don Quico" Hernandez, general manager of tobacco growing and long filler processing. These are the heavyweights of General's tobacco team, and they seem unbothered by the cold air. They're far more interested in what's in front of them: seeds. Shelves and shelves of jarred tobacco seeds.

This is the seed vault. To the average person, the room may look and feel like nothing more than a walk-in refrigerator, but to General Cigar, it's the heart, heritage and history of the entire company.

The vault is fire proof, and protected by two sets of locked doors, one of them made of steel. It's cloistered within General Cigar Dominicana, the large factory in Santiago that produces brands like Macanudo and Partagas. It's kept at 39 degrees Fahrenheit, sometimes cooler but never warmer. At this temperature, a seed can last for decades, and that, of course, is the idea. The room contains heirloom seeds from long ago, current hybrids and experimental seeds. Altogether, there are enough seeds here to grow more than 250,000 acres of tobacco.

"In 2010, the market was pushing us to create something different and unique," says Diaz. "We were always doing this type of R&D in the past, but 2010 is when there was a large effort to do something very creative."

Being creative meant turning back the clock, trying to present the modern cigar smoker a chance to see how Macanudos or non-Cuban Partagas cigars used to taste. The company has resurrected some of its heirloom tobaccos, using them as the foundation for modern hybrids aimed at creating period-piece cigars for today's smoker.

General's seed library is vast, and each jar contains millions of seeds, all labeled rather unceremoniously with handwritten stickers, classified by seed type, farm and year. A jar of seed 911, codename "Moses 14," for example, sits next to a jar of Havana 2000, codename "Tower 21."

Tower? 911? It all seems rather ominous until Gocaj points to Moses.

"That's an old seed. It was Senior's favorite," he explains, referring to the late Edgar Cullman Sr., former owner and patriarch of General Cigar. "It's an old Connecticut seed and produces slightly darker leaves than normal Connecticut tobacco, but we couldn't make it in commercial quantities. The yield was too low."

The process of resurrecting an heirloom tobacco is long and expensive. General tried to bring back about 21 heirloom seeds, but most didn't perform as well as hoped. For some seeds, the yield was far too low. For others, the tobacco's original flavor profile and characteristics seemed to have been compromised in the growing process. Others still had leaves that did not grow to adequate size, and there were some that still proved too susceptible to the many diseases that can harm a tobacco plant.

General finally found success with two seeds from antiquity. They called the final seeds M01 and M02.

"The first and second years of cultivating this seed was very difficult because the plantings were dying," recalls Gocaj. "They don't all survive. You only collect the seeds from the plants that survive. Then you do the crossing again. After several crossings you get the disease resistance. Once the tobacco can resist black shank, you have to back cross it with the original seed again to achieve the flavor characteristics."

Seems like farming 101, but it's a long process of selection that took four years to complete. General grew plots of its experimental tobacco both in Connecticut and in the Mao region of the Dominican Republic in order to see which climate the tobacco preferred. It fared better in Mao.

"Climate imparts the flavor, but soil affects the texture and the thickness," Gocaj says. "Backcrossing preserves the most desirable attributes while crossing gives the original seed new characteristics such as disease resistance." So it required General to move forward and backward at the same time.

Left: A germination station of seed trays in Mao, the Dominican Republic at General's farm. Seedlings must grow into plants beofre they go into the field. Right: Yargüera tobacco for Altadis thrives in Honduras. The heirloom seed was brought to Honduras in the 1960s and recently resurrected for Altadis.

The M01 strain is based on a 50-year-old seed associated with the first non-Cuban Partagas cigars. Today, it has been reincarnated as the Partagas Ramon y Ramon brand, a line of cigars introduced last year. It was blended as a tribute to Ramón Cifuentes Toriello who carried the Partagas brand from Cuba to the Dominican Republic.

The M02 cultivar comes from the same seed type used on Macanudos from the 1960s. This resurrected tobacco can be found in a brand called Macanudo Mao, which is a limited edition that came out in 2016.

Here's how they did it: First, the company went into its archives and found the heirloom Dominican seed from the 1960s, which it dubbed seed "M" (most likely for Macanudo). Then, it created a hybrid, cross-polinating the M seed with another old Connecticut seed called D3, which is a strain that resists black shank, a fungus that can rot the roots of a tobacco plant. After that, General continued to backcross the resulting seeds with the old "M" seeds in order to create a tobacco that inherited the disease resistance of D3 yet still retained the desired flavor and aroma characteristics of the original heirloom.

By 2013, the M01 and M02 tobaccos were agriculturally well established, but it took another few years to properly age and ferment these leaves. Once the tobacco was deemed smokable, General began to experiment with blends, using the special tobacco as part of a filler blend and supplementing with tobaccos that showcase the vintage varietals rather than overpower them. In the case of Partagas Ramon y Ramon, the M01 strain was complemented with Cameroon wrapper and Nicaraguan filler. For Macanudo, the vintage filler was fortified with leaves from Nicaragua and Colombia.

Other cigar companies are also taking a hard, new look at some very old seeds. Altadis U.S.A., makers of famous non-Cuban brands like Montecristo and Romeo y Julieta, has made an aggressive effort to keep its heritage brands modern and relevant, and part of that strategy involves a true heirloom product. Working in the Dominican Republic with their contract growing partner José Mendez & Co., they resurrected a seed from the 1960s called Pilotico, a tobacco that has been off the cigar market for more than three decades.

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FEATURED CIGAR

ASHTON SYMMETRY BELICOSO

DOM. REP. • PRICE: $12.25 • BODY: MEDIUM TO FULL

For a full tasting, see page two

93 POINTS

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TOP 25 CIGARS OF 2016

THE BEST CIGARS OF THE YEAR will be showcased in the February issue of *Cigar Aficionado* along with the top-rated Best Buys and most exciting New Releases of 2016. But don't forget the regular tasting section, where we also rated 23 cigars. For a preview of the issue's top-scoring smokes, turn to page two.

FIDEL CASTRO: 1926–2016

THE ASHES OF CUBA'S FORMER PRESIDENT FIDEL CASTRO were interred on Sunday in a tomb that reads "Fidel" on a plaque. He died on November 25 and was cremated before his ashes were brought to Santiago de Cuba, 540 miles southeast of Havana and the birthplace of Castro's Revolution. He ruled Cuba for decades after overthrowing the previous Batista regime in 1959 and has been widely regarded as a controversial figure ever since. Many mourned Castro's death as the passing of a benevolent leader. A few hundred miles away in Miami, others saw him as an oppressive dictator and celebrated his death in the streets. Turn to page five for the obituary.

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CIGAR WATCH

FROM THE EDITORS OF CIGAR AFICIONADO

SEPT. 27, 2016 | SIGN UP

COHIBA MACASSAR

FEATURED CIGAR

Punch Gran Puro Santa Rita (91 Points)

The Punch Gran Puro line came onto the scene in 2003 as General Cigar's only Honduran puro, meaning that it uses only tobacco from Honduras. The Santa Rita size (4 1/2 inches by 52 ring gauge, $5.29) recently impressed our tasting panel with notes of cashew, hints of fresh coconut and a toasty finish, earning a score of 91 points in August's *Cigar Aficionado*.

Click For More Punch Gran Puro Ratings

11 Cigars You Should Be Smoking Right Now

Cigar Aficionado's 133rd blind tasting, which appeared in our August 2016 issue, is now live on our website. Of the 82 cigars rated by our panel of editors, 11 non-Cuban cigars scored 91 points or higher. These cigars are considered outstanding on our 100-point scale. So if you're heading to your local brick-and-mortar, here are a few cigars that are sure to please right now.

Read Full Story

La Palina Launches Value-Priced Goldie

La Palina Cigars has shipped a modified version of its popular Goldie blend called Illumination. The cigar features the same component tobaccos as Goldie minus the rare and expensive medio tiempo leaf that's nestled inside the limited-edition line of Goldie cigars.

Read Full Story

La Palina Cigar Ratings

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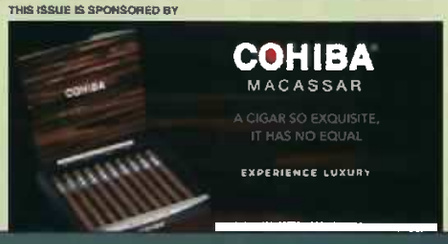

cigar aficionado

"In the Dominican Republic, we can only grow one crop in a year and that limits the amount of trials we can perform. It becomes a matter of knowing the current diseases that affect the plants of the seeds you want to regenerate." —*Siegfried Maruschke*

"These were the original seeds my grandfather had grown in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s and hadn't been planted commercially for more than 30 years," says Siegfried Maruschke of José Mendez & Co.

Pilotico is a derivative of the Piloto Cubano varietal, and seems to run counter to everything a farmer would want. Piloto Cubano is small to begin with, and Dominican farmers are often tempted to grow the more vibrant hybrid San Vicente, which grows more tobacco than Piloto. But Pilotico is even smaller than Piloto, producing a mere 14 leaves per plant as opposed to Piloto's 18 leaves.

Siegfried Maruschke of José Mendez & Co. resurrected the old Pilotico tobacco for Altadis U.S.A.

"The time it takes to regenerate a seed can vary from two to six years," Maruschke explains. "In the Dominican Republic, we can only grow one crop in a year and that limits the amount of trials we can perform. It becomes a matter of knowing the current diseases that affect the plants of the seeds you want to regenerate."

The regenerated Pilotico tobacco was grown in the Navarette region of the Dominican Republic and debuted commercially in 2015 as part of the filler blend for the limited-edition Montecristo 80th Anniversary cigar.

Seeing how only 40,000 of these anniversary Montecristos were produced, not many people got the opportunity to try the heirloom tobacco. Not at first, anyway. The next year, Pilotico became more available. Once José Mendez & Co. could produce the heirloom in commercial quantities, Altadis introduced the Montecristo Pilotico Pepe Mendez brand.

Altadis recently put out another brand with heirloom tobacco called Yargüera H. Upmann, and it contains a resurrected leaf from nearly 50 years ago.

"In 1960, Don Jorge Bueso Arias, founder of La Flor de Copan, brought a variety of seeds to Honduras directly from Cuba," says Joel Alvarenga of Altadis U.S.A. He runs the company's Honduran operations, which includes the Flor de Copan factory. Altadis wanted to bring back the taste of that old seed, naming it Yargüera 2013 after the estate where the leaf is cultivated, in the mountainous farmlands of northeast Honduras.

"It adapted to our soils and climate, thus reaching the desired, unique characteristics: sweet flavor and concentrated aroma," he says.

In order to work with this particular heirloom seed, Altadis (which has seed vaults of its own) looked to its team of agronomists and decided to cross it with a strong Criollo '98 seed, which was selected for its ability to resist disease, grow large leaves and produce bountiful yields. While it might be everything a tobacco grower wants in the fields, the end product still needs to taste and smell like the original specimen after barn-curing and fermentation.

"By doing this crossing, it was expected that we would obtain a variety with the best characteristics of both seeds, and therefore be able to offer the market novel blends with unique characteristics," Alvarenga says.

As a commercially viable tobacco, the Yargüera hybrid took four years to develop, starting in 2009 and ending in 2013. After each seed crossing, the tobacco was smoked and analyzed.

"It's a complex process that requires resources and expert smokers so that in each step, you can select the best plants and at the same time, smoke these tobaccos and find the ones with the best flavor and aroma," Alvarenga explains.

Once the seed was established and the phenotype locked into the leaf, the Yargüera tobacco was fully cultivated. After curing and fermentation Altadis' "Grupo de Maestros" got to work blending the tobacco and Yargüera was finally released as a brand last year.

But the word Yargüera on its own doesn't really resonate with the average cigar smoker, so Altadis attached it to one of its heritage brands, H. Upmann. It made perfect sense—an heirloom tobacco for a heritage cigar. Yargüera H. Upmann was born, and with it, the marketing words "estate tobacco."

Other cigarmakers have been using heirloom seeds for decades. Consider the Eiroa family, former owners of the Camacho brand, who claim to have the original Corojo seeds from the Rodriguez family from Cuba.

The Eiroas made the word "Corojo" a household name among American cigar smokers with their Camacho Corojo brand released in 1999, before it was sold to Oettinger Davidoff.

"Authentic Corojo seed disappeared from Cuba due to blue mold and low yield," Christian Eiroa recalls. He no longer is part of Camacho, but he now has his own cigar company, CLE, that uses Corojo grown by his father Julio. "It was in 1997 when my father grew the first crop in Honduras. He had gotten the seed from Daniel Rodriguez himself who had been growing it in Nicaragua. His grandfather, Diego Rodriguez originated the seed in his farm, Santa Inez del Corojo."

Corojo was a legendary leaf in Cuba, but the seed proved vulnerable to blue mold and was retired from Cuban production, eventually replaced by a more disease-resistant hybrid called Havana 2000, which was itself replaced by later seeds in a drive to grow tobacco that would fare better against disease. Eiroa is clear that he does not grow any of those newer hybrids, but has stayed faithful to the Corojo heirloom and uses it to this day for his Eiroa 20 years brand.

"For the first three years we were using the original seed as was handed to my father from Rodriguez," Eiroa explains. "Nothing was done to those seeds. The germination rates were low," he says. "After the fifth year we began to plant the seeds that were generated from the first crops of the original seeds."

The Eiroa 20 Years Colorado is a perfect showcase for this heirloom tobacco, because the entire cigar, from filler to binder and wrapper, is made from Corojo seed. When grown in Honduras and aged properly, Eiroa believes the resulting tobacco is pungent and distinct.

"It's a very rugged tobacco aroma, but with a hint of honey," he explains. "The flavor is very old-fashioned and only a tad sweet."

Another fickle Cuban heirloom seed is Pelo d'Oro. Translated to "golden hair," this tobacco was first grown in Cuba back in the 1930s. It has always been prized not only for its excellent flavor and aroma, but

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for its uniform leaves and high percentage of wrapper—that is, when the plant didn't die from disease. Despite Pelo d'Oro's otherwise beautiful properties, it wasn't particularly robust in the field, and highly vulnerable to the black shank disease.

A few Cuban farmers still grow it today but not in commercial quantities, so for all practical purposes, Pelo d'Oro is a retired seed.

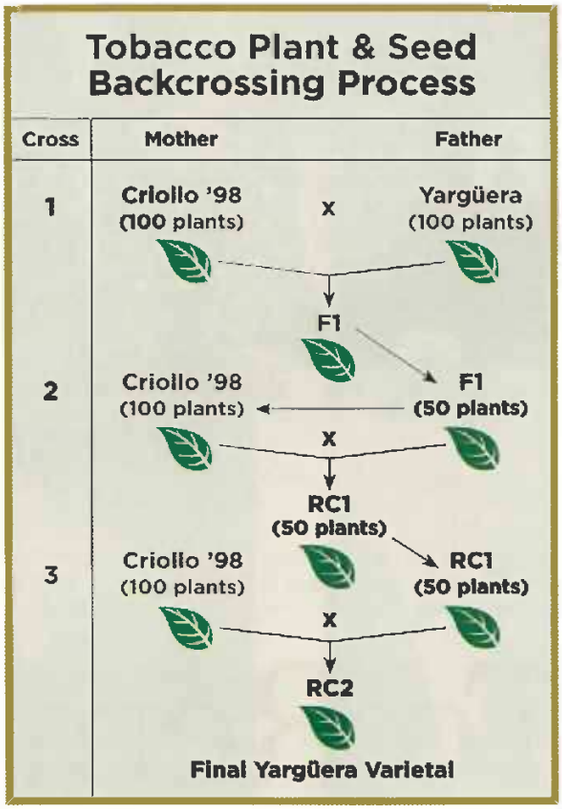
While Cuba may no longer be interested in Pelo d'Oro, the whimsical tobacco has intrigued growers from other countries. Jaime Gracia of My Father Cigars has been growing it in Nicaragua since 2007. He started by planting Pelo d'Oro in Estelí, but now plants it in the Jalapa region as well.

"It is a very difficult seed" he says. "Very susceptible to disease, but it's responded very well here due to the characteristics of the soil in Nicaragua."

When he first started with Pelo d'Oro, Garcia planted only two manzanas (about three and a half acres) of the tobacco. Today, between both regions, he grows 20 manzanas (about 35 acres).

"Its aroma is strong and very pleasant which makes this seed very unique," Garcia explains. "It's sweet on the palate, but the ligeros are very strong."

The Pelo d'Oro he grows comes from original seeds that have not been crossed with other varietals, so the resulting tobacco could be considered genetically Cuban with a Nicaraguan accent. Garcia doesn't grow enough of it for any of his regular-production cigars, but his Pelo d'Oro can be found in small releases such as the Jaime Garcia Reserva Especial Limited Edition 2017 as well as the Garcia & Garcia brand.



An heirloom seed is regenerated through a series of cross-pollinations. The original seeds are crossed with Criollo '98 until the final Yargüera varietal is achieved.

The strange seed also piqued the curiosity of A.J. Fernandez, who produces around eight acres of Pelo d'Oro on a farm he calls San Diego, also in Nicaragua's Estelí region.

"I grow the original seed but with lots of care because it's extremely susceptible to disease," he says. "For me, it has become a real challenge, but one I have embraced. Pelo d'Oro is very sweet and aromatic but also adds balance, which is one of the most important characteristics I try to implement in my blends."

Right now, Fernandez's Pelo d'Oro tobacco can be found in a contract brand he produces for Boutique Blends Cigars called Aging Room Small Batch Pelo de Oro.

"I'm also putting away some crops for a very special blend. A future AJ Fernandez brand," Fernandez says.

Fans of broadleaf cigars may not realize that they are smoking an heirloom when they puff. Only in Connecticut, tobacco heirlooms are referred to as "foundation" tobaccos. Grown in the Connecticut River Valley, the foundation strains used today are referred to as C9 and C33 and are direct descendants of 50-year-old seeds.

Broadleaf tobacco as we know it didn't arrive in the Connecticut River Valley until 1833, when B.P. Barbour of East Windsor planted a seed from Maryland that produced fatter, broader plants than the variety known as shoestring that was prevalent before. According to P.J. Anderson's book *Growing Tobacco in Connecticut*, the new tobacco was so superior to the type previously grown that within a few years it entirely supplanted shoestring.

"I am not sure of anyone that has the original Barbour seeds," says Nick Melillo, owner of Foundation Cigar Co., who relies on foundation broadleaf for his Tabernacle and Charter Oak brands. "There was also said to be some old sub-types called John Williams, Hockanum and Bantle. I'm not too familiar with these and I am not sure if they still exist. There is another old strain called Frank Roberts but I have only seen it in books and have never seen any farmers with it. But C9 and C33 are heirloom."

In Nicaragua, the Plasencia family is looking to bring back some heirlooms of their own and examining some of Central America's oldest seeds. The Plasencias are one of the largest growers of premium tobacco in Nicaragua.

"Our genetic department is working on regenerating the old seeds grown in Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama," says Nestor Andrés Plasencia. "The old Nicaraguan seed is called Chicagre [a portmanteau of the words chilli, picante and agre], in Panama, the seed is Negro Panama. They happen to be very susceptible to disease."

So far, he only has two out of three. Plasencia says that he hasn't found the oldest Honduran seed yet, a forgotten tobacco called Copaneco. As for the seeds he does have, Plasencia is planting them in areas known to be infested with black shank. His agronomists collect the seeds from the tobacco plants that best resist the fungus and save them to produce a stronger generation of plants. It's simple natural selection.

"The Negro Panama is strong and takes longer to ferment, but it has a great taste," Plasencia says. "There are some studies that say the Nicaraguan seed dates back to the 1700s," he adds. What Plasencia plans to do with these old tobaccos exactly is still up in the air. Perhaps he will sell it to a cigarmaker who wants something different. Or perhaps he will put it in one of his own brands.

Whether these companies truly succeed in faithfully recreating the taste of tobacco from 50 years ago doesn't really matter. What's important is that it's something different. Unlike the cultivation of heirloom vegetables, heirloom tobacco isn't necessarily about historical preservation, nor is it a revolt against genetically modified organisms. In the small world of premium tobacco, heirloom revival is simply about novelty and flavor.

Right now, the cigar industry is bogged down by the nagging demand for new products and new smoking experiences. For the time being, heirloom tobaccos might satisfy that need. If cigar-smokers get tired of the current crop of antiquated varietals, there's always the next new, old seed. ❖

The 2017 Night to Remember featured outstanding generosity, raising $1.6 million. At the head table, from left: John Salley; former New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani; Michael Milken; Hazel Shanken; Marvin R. Shanken, editor & publisher of CIGAR AFICIONADO magazine; Ray Lewis and Rush Limbaugh.

Night To Remember

A $1.6 Million Charity Dinner for Prostate Cancer Research

BY GREGORY MOTTOLA • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN LOCKWOOD SMITH

Marvin Shanken, editor and publisher of CIGAR AFICIONADO magazine, was looking squarely at Rush Limbaugh, who had an unlit cigar in his mouth, impatiently waiting to light up. Limbaugh, the radio star, was seated at the head table with an unlikely mix of people: Ray Lewis, who won two Super Bowls with the Baltimore Ravens; former NBA superstar John Salley; financier Michael Milken and Rudy Giuliani, who stood tall as Mayor of New York City on 9/11. Despite their vastly different backgrounds, they were brought together by the Night to Remember, the charity cigar dinner created by Shanken to raise money for prostate cancer research. On this particular April evening, the event raised $1.6 million.

"Welcome to the 23rd Night to Remember," said Shanken. "I haven't added it all up exactly, but over the years, we've raised $20 million to $30 million for prostate cancer." The money has come from the generosity of the cigar, wine, spirits and financial industries, reducing the mortality rate of prostate cancer, and the well-funded research brings breakthroughs in immunology and treatment.

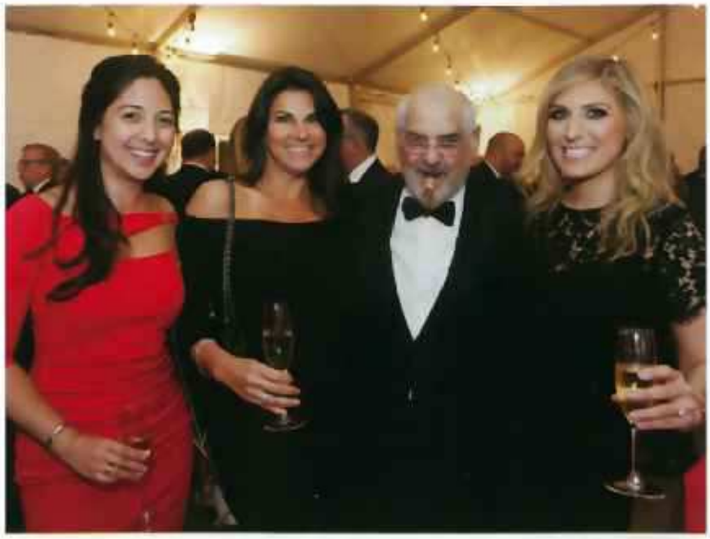
Limbaugh still fretted with his cigar, but Shanken made it clear—he couldn't smoke. Not in The Pool restaurant anyway. If The Pool doesn't sound familiar, you may know it as the former Four Seasons Restaurant. It's now under new ownership, and while it looks pretty much the same, new rules imposed by the building meant that Limbaugh and 220 guests had to smoke in a tent outside on Park Avenue.

"I was told that the owner of the building forbids smoking," said Shanken. "But we're here, and we have a spectacular tent."

A semi-smokeless Night to Remember may have been an unexpected twist for this charity event, but Shanken's Mystery Auction has always been one of the most intriguing highlights of the evening—and one that's provided some of the most entertainment. Bidders don't know what they're actually bidding on. All they know is that it's a rare wine and that the winner has to open up the bottle and share it with the table.

"We're breaking every rule that Christie's and Sotheby's has when it comes to auctions," he said as he started taking bids. "We just make up prices."

Each mystery lot sold for $40,000 or more, but one in particular—two



Enjoying cigars before the Night to Remember began, from left: Meera Levin, Jeanne Levin, Marvin R. Shanken and Jessica Shanken.

Enjoying fine smokes and premium libations, from left, Stephen Barbo, John Bonello, Munir Dauhajre and Michael Gelband.

Jimmy John Liautaud (left), with Rick Rodriguez, approves of his box of pre-Castro Montecristo cigars, which he acquired at the evening's auction.

Three of the cigarmakers at the Night to Remember enjoying handmade cigars. From left, A.J. Fernandez, Javier Estades and Rafael Nodal.

Chuck Wagner (left), the winemaker of Caymus, takes a moment over cigars and libations with Alan Rubin, owner of the Alec Bradley cigar brand.

Ernesto Perez-Carrillo, Marvin R. Shanken, Wayne Suarez and Ed Rabin puff away after the Night to Remember, which raised $1.6 million for charity.

The event was held at at the recently renovated Pool Restaurant, which is now under the ownership of Major Food Group and chef Mario Carbone.

magnums of Bordeaux—was bought and re-donated twice before closing for $220,000. In an unexpected turn, Shanken allowed a bottle of rare Scotch in the auction, which was revealed to be a Port Ellen 37 Year Old, 16th Release, distilled in 1978 and donated by Diageo North America. And the final mystery wine wasn't a wine at all, but a box. Wrapped in the customary brown paper, it was revealed to contain two boxes of pre-Castro Montecristo Cuban cigars. They went for $60,000.

"These were bought by Edgar Cullman Sr. in 1958," said Shanken, referring to the former owner of General Cigar Co. The boxes were donated by his son Edgar Cullman Jr., who was at the dinner.

The mystery wines, Scotch and cigars alone raised $550,000, and the main auction began. It consisted of 13 lots of top-rated wines, exquisite humidors filled with rare cigars, fine whiskies, golf outings, trips around the world and even a humidor signed by Arnold Schwarzenegger. The main auction raised $329,000, and that total was matched by Milken, bringing the auction totals to $1.2 million. Adding other donations and the amount raised by tickets to the event, the total came to $1.6 million.

As dinner was served, the evening took its customary turn to speeches. Limbaugh, who makes his living on his words, could stay silent no more.

"I really want to thank the cigar manufacturers here in this room," he said after the auction in his best broadcast brogue. "Cigars establish a commonality and an opportunity to meet and connect with people you normally wouldn't have. That's what cigars are about."

Giuliani also addressed the crowd. "I came to this dinner 18 years ago because Marvin invited me," he recalled. "My father had prostate cancer. The next year, I had prostate cancer. The first person to reach out to me was Michael Milken. He and I didn't exactly have a close, personal relationship."

Giuliani prosecuted Milken in the '80s when he was the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

"Michael and I have become very good friends," he said. "Now when I hear the word cancer, I don't hear the word death. I hear the word challenge. And in a few years, because of Michael, Marvin and Hazel [Shanken], when I hear the word cancer, I'll hear the word cure."

Foundation founder Michael Milken spoke about advances in cancer research and how the event has had a direct impact on its progress.

"Fifteen million Americans are in remission," said Milken, who is also a survivor of prostate cancer. "A lot of it began with the idea that Marvin and Hazel had so many years ago."

The evening closed with inspirational words from Ray Lewis, who spoke with the cadence of a preacher to his audience.

"Tonight, I see my name next to trailblazers—not pathfinders, but trailblazers—who will one day cure cancer," he said. "And I'm here with people sitting in the room who took control of the moment."

After dinner, the guests enjoyed cigars in the smoke-friendly tent.

"I look forward to this event every year," said Litto Gomez of La Flor Dominicana as he puffed away in the tent on Park Avenue. He was one of many cigarmakers present at Night to Remember and seemed unbothered by having to smoke outside. "It's really great what they do. Not just for us now, but in the future," he said. "I'm not even thinking of myself but my kids. Everyone's kids." ❖

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Fox Tobacco & Liquor
Franklin Cigar LLC
Freeport Trading Company
Fumar Cigars - AZ
Fume Cigars

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Genuine Tobacco Company - Columbia
Georgetown Tobacco--DC
Good Karma Cigar
Goodfellas Cigars MI
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Mayan Import Company
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Monte's Pueblo Pipe Shop
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Native Pride
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The Big Smoke Miami was held on a gorgeous night in South Florida, where hundreds of cigar lovers enjoyed some of the finest cigars in the world.

BENJAMIN RUSNAK

A Big Smoke For Miami Beach

The crowd was festive and lively, their excitement equaled only by that of the cigarmakers. It was CIGAR AFICIONADO's first Miami Big Smoke in nearly 20 years, and the cigar show was being held in the hometown of the premium cigar industry. It was a night of cigars, great cocktails and some of the biggest names in the business.

Held at the luxe Fontainebleau Hotel on Miami Beach on Friday, April 7, the event drew hundreds of eager cigar lovers not only from around Miami but from the New York area, other parts of Florida and the United States and even from Toronto, Canada.

"The Miami Big Smoke was a smashing success," said cigar star Jonathan Drew. "The biggest cigar event in Miami," said Rafael Nodal of Boutique Blends Cigars.

Bacardi was the exclusive drinks sponsor of the evening, and a series of bartenders were kept busy by the thirsty crowd, mixing drinks from the spirits company's large library of brands. There was a D'USSÉ Cognac Lounge, the John Dewar & Son's Fine Scotch Emporiums, Hatuey Beer and Bacardi 8 aged rum. Specialty cocktails included Bacardi 8 Old Fashioneds, D'USSÉ Sidecars and The Penicillin made with Dewar's.

The format was different from other Big Smokes. The audience walked into the ballroom, which was filled with cigarmaker's booths, two full-sized bars, a spread of fine food, a stage with a live band and seating areas. After getting cigars from each station—a ticket entitled you to 36 cigars—you could walk outside to the patio overlooking Miami Beach for a cigar. The patio also had several bar stations, and the drinks flowed all night. Those who wished to break up the evening could move back and forth between the patio and the inside room.

Cigar stars on hand included: Carlos Fuente Jr. of Arturo Fuente Cigars; Jorge Padrón of Padrón Cigars; Litto Gomez of La Flor Dominicana; Rocky Patel, Nish Patel and Nimish Desai of Rocky Patel Premium Cigars; Ernesto Perez-Carrillo, Lissette Perez-Carrillo and José Blanco of EPC Cigar Co.; Manuel Quesada of Quesada Cigars; Pete Johnson of Tatuaje; Janny, Jaime and other members of the Garcia Family from My Father Cigars; Alan Rubin of Alec Bradley Cigar Co.; Nestor Andrés Plasencia of Plasencia Cigars; A.J. Fernandez of AJ Fernandez Cigars; Jonathan Drew and Willy Herrera of Drew Estate; Javier Estades of Altadis; Rafael Nodal of Boutique Blends; Christian Eiroa of CLE Cigars; Michael Herklots of Nat Sherman; Bill Paley, Clay Roberts and Sam Phillips of La Palina; Chip Goldeen of Ashton Distributors; Régis Broersma of General Cigar Co.; Steven Bailey of Cornelius & Anthony Cigars; Erik Espinosa of Espinosa Cigars; Jochy Blanco of Tabacalera Palma; Paul Palmer-Fernandez of Casa Fernandez; David Wagner of Oliva Cigars; Jason Carignan of Ventura Cigars; Jason Wood of La Aurora Cigars; Kevin Newman of El Artista Cigars; Mehul Shah of MBombay Cigars; and Edel Gomez representing Micallef Cigars.

The next Big Smoke takes place in Las Vegas on November 17–19. To order tickets, visit cigaraficionado.com ❖

—David Savona

Representing the University of Miami Hurricanes, from left: cornerbacks coach Mike Rumph, school of communications dean Gregory Shepherd, defensive coordinator Manny Diaz, Cigar Aficionado's Marvin R. Shanken, assistant head coach Craig Kuligowski and safeties coach Ephraim Banda.

It was a beautiful night to be on South Beach, and smiles and smokes abounded. Bo Brandt, left, enjoying great cigars and cocktails on the patio of the Fontainebleau Hotel with Luke and Rachel Branyan.

The mood was festive, and the hundreds of consumers who attended the Big Smoke Miami lit up and smoked to their hearts' content.

Consumers had the chance to mingle with some of the biggest names in premium cigars, including Jonathan Drew (left) at the Drew Estate booth.

John Fought, Michael Masters and Ray Lefto traveled from Tampa to Miami for the Big Smoke, and dressed for the perfect Miami weather.

You get more than cigars at a Big Smoke. Enjoying the fruits of the open bar are Ernesto Cayro, Rafael Diaz and Julio Cayro.

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moments to remember

Please send all submissions to: Cigar Aficionado/Moments to Remember, Worldwide Plaza, 825 Eighth Avenue, 33rd Floor, New York, NY 10019. Or e-mail them to: momentstoremember@mshanken.com. To order additional copies of Cigar Aficionado, call 1-800-344-0763.

Dave Sudjian, Bob Zakian, Richard Keshgegian, Mark Santerian, Vaughn Hoplamanzian and Alberto Gaudagnini enjoying fine cigars in Tuscany, Italy.

Paul Essa, Dwayne Brydie and Pete Essa of Smoky's Fine Cigars in Bloomfield, Michigan, light up a few premium cigars aboard the Detroit Princess Riverboat.

Edson Llanes and Luis Perez savor cigars before watching Real Madrid play FC Barcelona in El Clásico at the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in Madrid, Spain.

Patrick Abbott, left, celebrates his wedding day by sharing Nub Cameroon cigars with his father Ron and his groomsmen on Tybee Island, Georgia.

Friends Eber Dominguez, Roberto Alvarez-Cano, Carolina Sanchez, Shermelle Carrasco, Willy Santiago, Michael Benvenutti, Jessica Banda and Yessica Chagray puffing away at the Grand Havana Room in New York, New York.

After playing 18 holes at Pinehurst Resort, the Williams, Venanzio and Massoud families enjoy premium libations alongside their favorite cigars while lounging on the back porch overlooking the 18th green of the No. 2 course.

Ron Johnson and Wes McSpadden light up a couple of Cohibas during a round at the Winter Creek Golf and Country Club in Blanchard, Oklahoma.

University of Houston alumni Rod Johnson and Gregory Perrin savor a couple of premium cigars at an Alpha Phi Alpha reunion party in Houston, Texas.

On his birthday, Jim Schoonveld enjoys the finer things in life, sipping a cold beer while puffing on a cigar alongside his wife Deb in Chesapeake, Virginia.

Charles Evans and Steve Miller share a few cigars with Rocky Patel of Rocky Patel Premium Cigars at Old Havana Cigar Shop in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Michael Ratzker of Englewood, New Jersey, and Carlos Hernandez of Germany pair a couple of tall beers with premium cigars in Munich, Germany.

Wayne Foster and Robert Owen send a chilly cheers from Canada as they enjoy cigars and Scotch after clearing their dirveways of snow in Sudbury, Ontario.

Stelios Chrysandreas and his daughter Elena bond with a couple of Davidoff cigars inside New York City's Paley Park.

Cousins Fulvio Savini, Ezio Savini, Bruno Savini, Emidio Conte, Rudy Savini and Peter Mancini puff on premium handrolled Honduran cigars during a family barbecue in Woodbridge, Ontario, Canada.

Celebrating freedom with premium handrolled cigars, Dan and Sheila Powers host a Fourth of July party at their home in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where guests hoist their fine smokes from Drew Estate, Rocky Patel Premium Cigars and Oliva Cigar Co. (along with a couple of issues of a certain cigar magazine).

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Alex Gross and Joanne Chesler Gross pair cigars with fine whiskies during a tasting event at New York Prime in Atlanta, Georgia.

Christina Holgate of Calgary, Canada, meets Jorge Padrón of Padrón Cigars at Cigar Aficionado's Big Smoke in Las Vegas, Nevada.

A family that smokes together stays together. Larry Rosinski and his sons Andy, Frank and Larry light up Montecristos after watching Cactus League spring training baseball in Chandler, Arizona.

Jennifer Rodriguez and Chris Rogers savor a lovely wedding day in Tampa, Florida, by lighting up a couple of premium handrolled cigars.

Jason Valchine puffs on an Oliva Serie G alongside his cousin Katie Kidd on her wedding day at Frutig Farms in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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Taylor Hiott, Greg Myers, Shawn Carroll and Mark Jenkins from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, pose for a picture outside of La Gran Fabrica Drew Estate during the Cigar Safari in Estelí, Nicaragua.

Cyril Kalkman, Han Hilderink and Patrick Habing share a premium cigar with CAO's brand ambassador Rick Rodriguez (center left) at the Whisky & Cigar Salon in Gronau, Germany.

Pearl Harbor survivor and World War II veteran David Mears celebrates his 95th birthday with a premium cigar and an ice cold beer alongside his nephew Justin Rains in Fresno, California.

Jeffrey Fishel and Jeannine Feltman celebrate their June wedding by savoring cigars alongside their wedding party at the Redondo Beach Historic Library in Redondo Beach, California.

Newlyweds Paul-Anthony Dudzinski and Diana Mary Mazurek puff on Don Pepin Garcia cigars while surrounded by friends and family at their wedding party in Farmingdale, New Jersey.

Nothing tops off a round of golf quite like a cocktail and a fine cigar. Larry Bolby, John Burtoft and Bill Peck relax at the 19th hole of the Arnold Palmer Country Club in The Villages, Florida.

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Congratulations to groom Steven Mayes, who commemorates his wedding to Ibis Feria-Mayes by enjoying a premium cigar and libation alongside his friends and family in Winter Park, Florida.

Marcus Pollard (left), Bob Volpert (middle) and Larry Johnson (right) get ready to light up a few cigars while on a six-day rafting trip on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in central Idaho.

Andrew Holtz, Matthew Holtz, Jared Rok, Bryan Morjain and Jason Morjain culminate a great round of golf at Old Head Links Golf Club in Cork, Ireland, with a few fine Alec Bradley cigars.

Best friends Frankie Arcuri and Billy Harper bond over fine premium cigars and great music at the Central Market House in Historic York, Pennsylvania.

Brothers and fellow aficionados Randy and Jeff Pierce share a premium smoke during their annual reunion on the Rock River Bayou in Hustisford, Wisconsin.

Nothing complements a fine round of golf like a premium cigar. Jim Feeley and Brian Halloran puff and play at Island's End Golf in Greenport, New York.

Mark and Blake Curtis enjoy father-son time sipping Old Fashioneds and savoring Drew Estate cigars at the Lanesborough Hotel in London, England.

Father and son Rich and Pete Pollinger spending some quality time together while savoring a couple of fine cigars in Marathon Key, Florida.

Dan Kurka pairs a premium cigar with the house Cabernet at Cordeiro's Steakhouse in Napa, California, alongside the restaurant's owner Matt Cordeiro.

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1 GROOVY TUNES—PRO-JECT AUDIO

Fifty years ago, the Beatles released their legendary *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album. To commemorate the psychedelic achievement, Pro-Ject Audio Systems has created two groovy turntables. The Essential III Sgt. Pepper's Drum ($555) is an entry-level unit and its platter is decked out to look like the iconic Sgt. Pepper's logo as it appears on the drum on the album cover. Meanwhile the higher-end 2Xperience SB Sgt. Pepper Limited Edition version ($1,558), which sports a natural wood look with the Sgt. Pepper logo burned into it, will also hit retail this year, albeit only 1,000 units. *project-audio.com*

2 RETRO SMOKING—VINTAGE ASHTRAYS

Looking for a way to make your man cave or smoking room stand out from the crowd? Adorn it with a vintage ashtray from a famous smoking or drinking haunt of long ago. Perhaps an ashtray from the legendary Hotel Ritz in Paris or the infamous Hotel Watergate in Washington is to your style. Or a jet-black ashtray from the storied Stork Club in New York, which saw use when smoking indoors happened everywhere. *newyorkfirst.com* and *historycompany.com*

3 IN YOUR OWN TIME—CUSTOM WATCHES

An elusive limited edition may be a holy grail for watch collectors, but the most exclusive timepiece is a limited edition of only one. Vacheron Constantin's Les Cabinotiers bespoke service builds your watch from scratch or you can customize with a hand-painted enamel dial or an engraved case. If made-to-measure is more your budget, Armin Strom's digital customization platform offers various cases, dials, movement finishes and more, while TAG Heuer's latest Connected has a modular system that also lets you mix and match elements. *vacheron-constantin.com*, *arminstrom.com* and *tagheuer.com*

4 EBIKE EXCITEMENT— RIESE & MÜLLER AND STROMER

Around in some form for a century, ebikes mightn't be the latest thing, but their blend of eco-friendliness and exercise is catching up with contemporary technology. Riese & Müller's Load (pictured) offers massive payload and protection for kids along for the ride. Other models are built for touring and gravel-grinding. Stromer's ST1 X boasts a 70-mile touring radius and digital connectivity with an integrated touch-screen interface that reads out speed and battery usage. *r-m.de/en-gb/* and *stromerbike.com*

5 THE LEVITATING LIGHT BULB—FLYTE

If you were the type to deck out your den with lava lamps in the '70s and plasma balls in the '80s, then the floating Flyte light is the natural novelty of choice for the post millennium. Surreal yet stylish, Flyte's Edison bulb ($349) actually hovers over its wooden base via electromagnetic levitation. Bases and bulbs come in various finishes and accents. It's guaranteed to burn for 50,000 hours—that's 12 hours a day for 11 years. Even Tesla would be titilated. *flyte.se*

6 NATTY PATTY—ARTISANAL BURGER

Hamburgers on the grill may be the quintessential American summertime meal, but that doesn't mean it couldn't use a little foreign accent. That's the premise behind *Artisanal Burger: 50 Italian Twists on an All-American Favorite* (Mondadori, $29.95). Author/chefs Enzo De Angelis and Antonio Sorrentino start with quality ingredients and put together creative burgers with names like cultburger, holyxmasburger and wiseburger, using additives such as cucumbers, zucchini, fennel, prosciutto and buche de chevre. And they don't stop at beef, building patties from lobster, seitan, shrimp, chicken and pork. Throw in specialty fries and you've got yourself a cookout. *rizzoliusa.com*

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BEFORE THE TRADEMARK TRIAL AND APPEAL BOARD

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<u>EXHIBIT 17</u>

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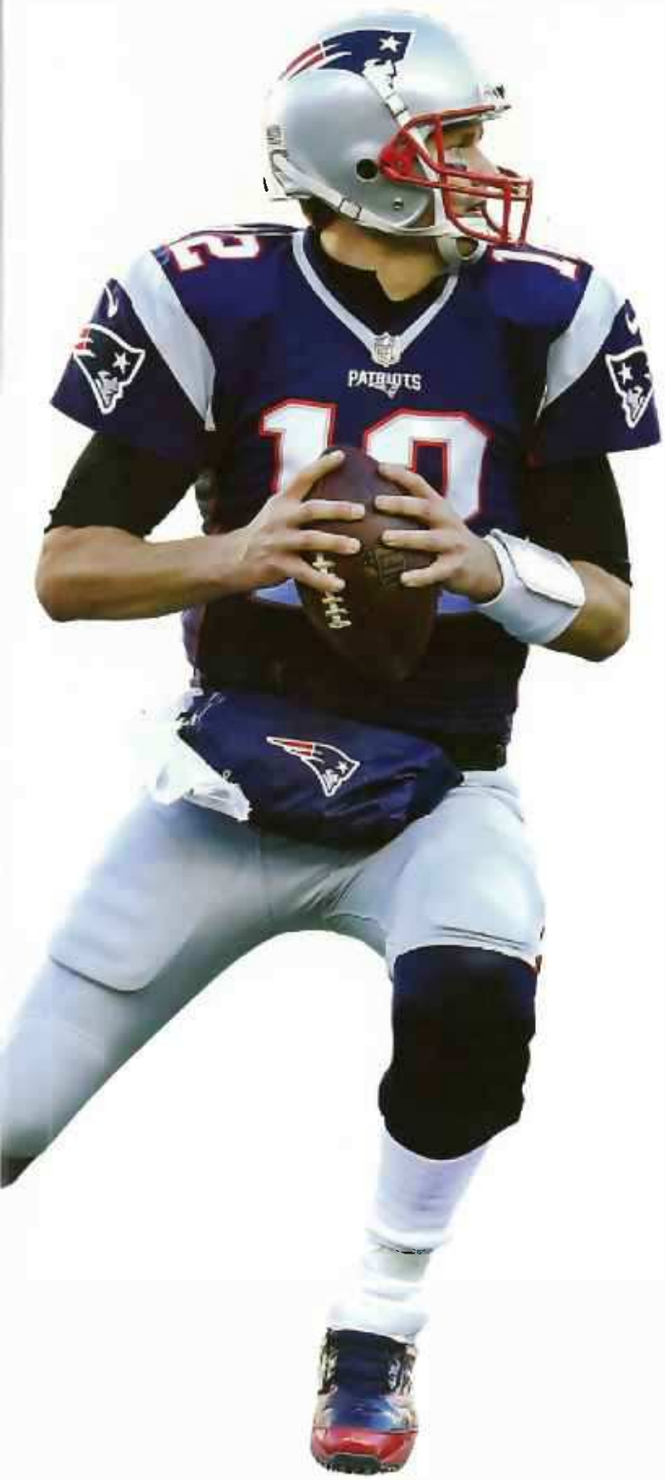

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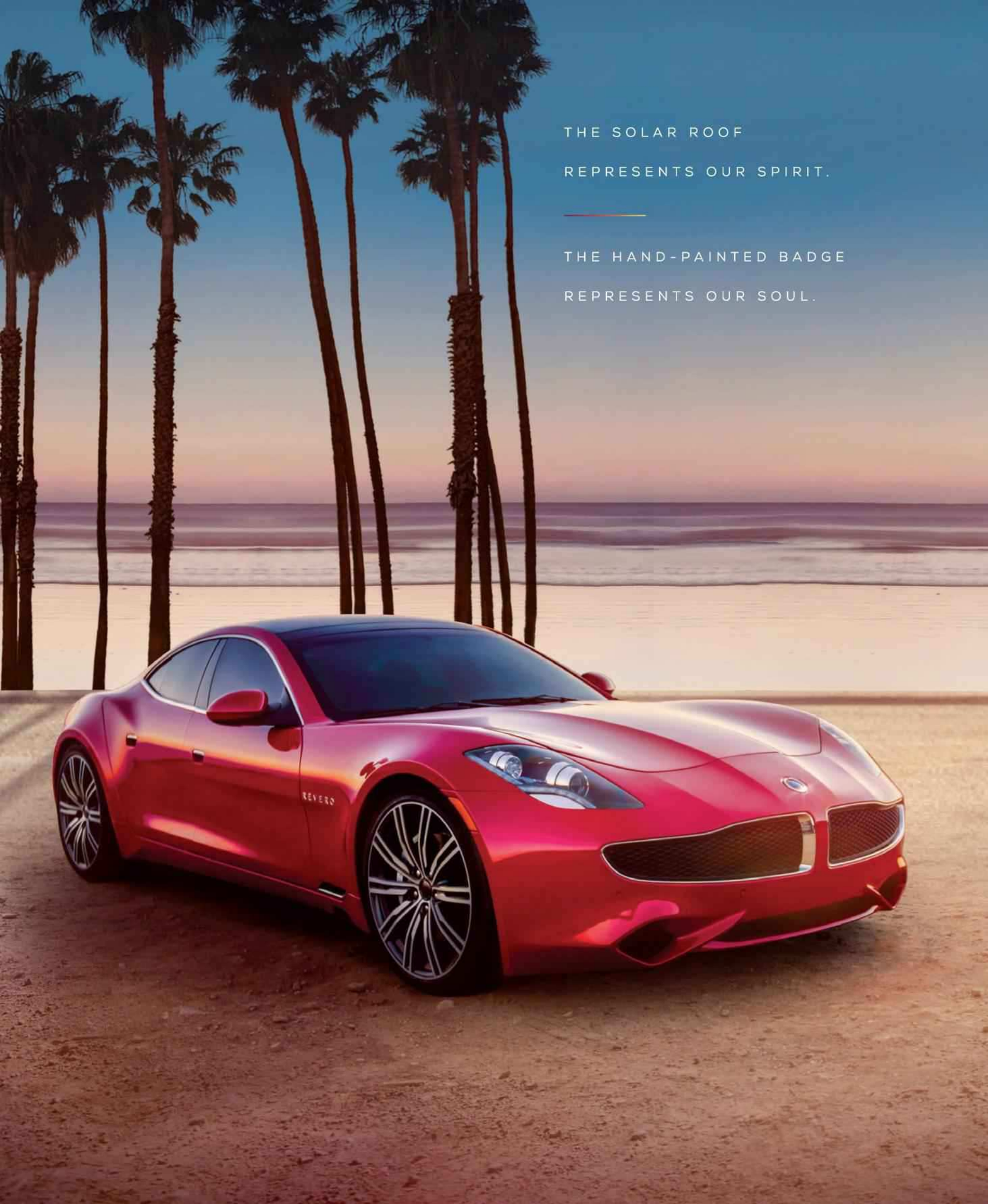
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The yearly battle for the Super Bowl starts now.

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TOP: TOMAS MUSCIONICO; CENTER: GEORGE RINHART/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: COREY GAFFER

highlights

Twenty-five cigars scored 90 points or more this impressive tasting, so it was inevitable that there were a few ties near the top. Cuba's Romeo y Julieta Short Churchill, a robusto with a big name, stood out from the rest with a score of 94 points, the highest of the issue. Tatuajue's La Vérité scored 92 points, outpacing all Churchills while Cuba's Montecristo No. 3 (92 points) took home top honors in the corona category. With a 92-point rating, Rocky Patel's Platinum Limited Edition Habano edged out the rest of the corona gordas, while three cigars—the Oliva Serie V Belicoso, 601 Red Label Habano Torpedo and Diplomaticos No. 2—scored 92 points each to top the figurados section. Another three-way tie occurred in the Lonsdale category, as the Illusione F9, Maestro del Tiempo 5205, and the Rocky Patel Decade Lonsdale all scored 91 points.

TOP ROBUSTO
ROMEO Y JULIETA SHORT CHURCHILL — CUBA — 94
Covered in an attractive, near-claro wrapper, this smoke first debuted in 2006 at Cuba's annual Habanos Festival and has grown in popularity ever since.

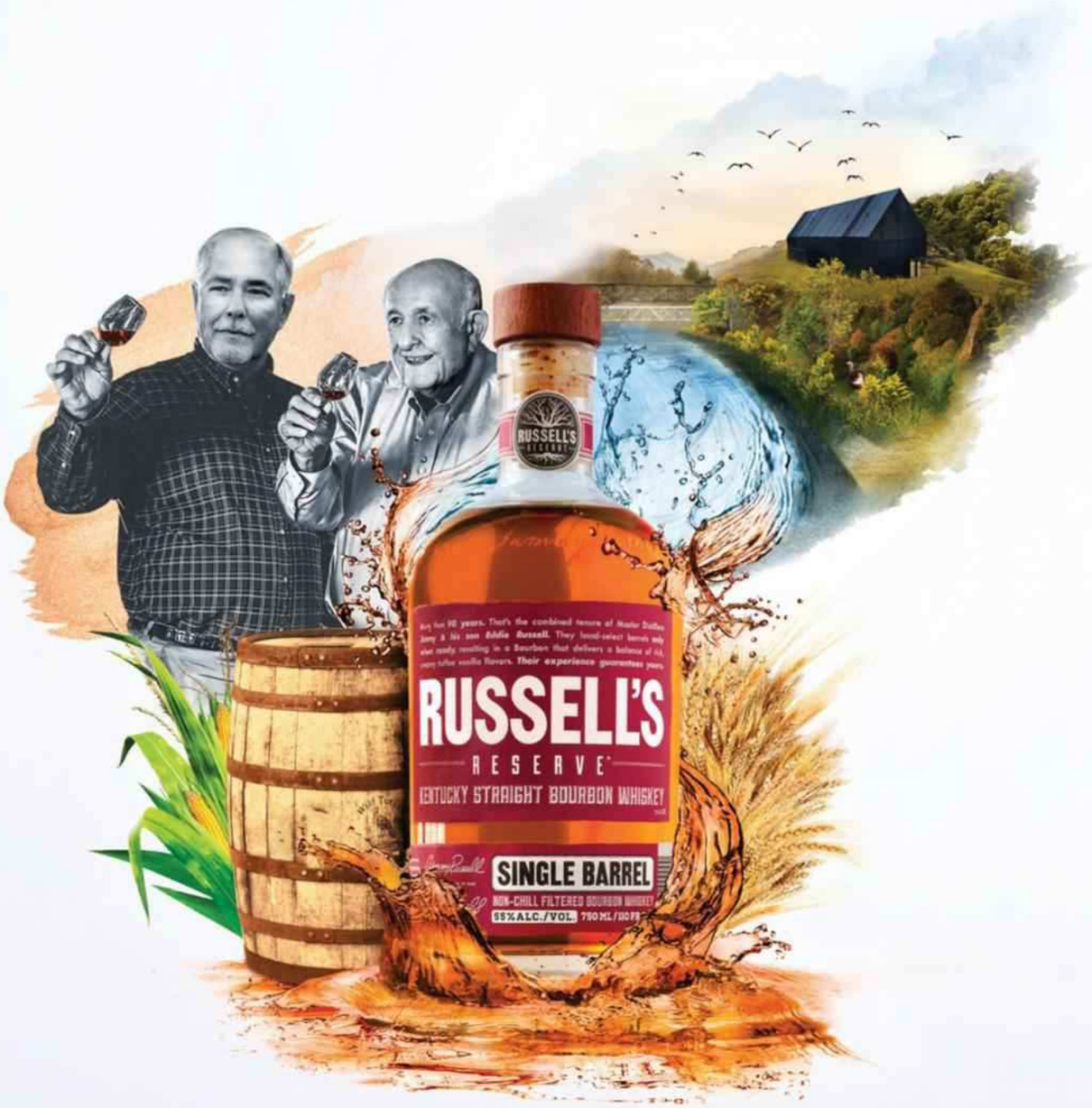
TOP CHURCHILL
TATUAJE LA VÉRITÉ LA VÉRITÉ 2013 — NICARAGUA — 92
All the tobacco in this cigar is not only from a 2013 crop, but it all comes from the Garcia family's La Estrella farm in Nicaragua.

TOP CORONA
MONTECRISTO NO. 3 — CUBA — 92
This impeccably crafted smoke may not be as popular as other Montecristos, but it still packs plenty of flavor along with a tantalizing, golden-brown wrapper.

TOP CORONA GORDA
ROCKY PATEL PLATINUM LIMITED EDITION HABANO TORO — NICARAGUA — 92
An offshoot of the Rocky Patel Platinum line, which uses Connecticut broadleaf wrapper, this limited smoke is covered in Ecuadoran Habano leaf.

TOP FIGURADO
OLIVA SERIE V BELICOSO — NICARAGUA — 92
This strikingly well-made cigar tied with a Cuban Diplomaticos and a 601 from Nicaragua as the top-rated figurado of the issue.

TOP LONSDALE
ILLUSIONE F9 — NICARAGUA — 91
This all-Nicaraguan smoke tied with a Rocky Patel Decade as well as a Maestro del Tiempo for the highest-scoring lonsdale in this tasting.



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editors' note

Are You Ready For Some Football?

No sport looms larger in America than pro football.

When the weather cools and the leaves threaten to fall from the trees, we look to the new season with unbridled excitement. While we may play plenty of golf, it's football that we watch with a passion.

There's nothing like sitting down for the big game, firing up a fat cigar and watching your favorite team take on its archrival. In the NFL, there are few unimportant games—each team plays only 16 games in the season, so most games count.

As we inched closer to the first game of the new season on September 7, we began putting together our largest-ever football package for your enjoyment. It begins with star handicapper Danny Sheridan making his predictions for the 2017 NFL season. Pay attention to what this man foretells. Last year he boldly—and correctly—chose the New England Patriots to go all the way and win the Super Bowl, despite knowing that star quarterback Tom Brady would be missing the first four games of the season. Sheridan not only calls the winner of the big game, but he predicts the way each team will finish in their respective divisions.

We also get up close and personal with Jay Glazer and Dean Blandino, two NFL analysts who know the game inside and out. Glazer has long worked the sidelines for Fox, getting the inside scoop on players. Blandino, an 18-year veteran of the NFL, joins Glazer this year on the Fox network. Writer Marshall Fine sat down with the two men over cigars and wine to talk about issues facing the NFL and what we should look for this year.

And what's a great football game without a little money riding on the outcome? Our bettors' guide to the NFL will enlighten you—and maybe even lead you to a profit.

Our story on the extensive history of the NFL takes you from the early, leatherhead days of the game to the current era of high-flying offense and Patriot dominance. We bring you interviews with three men who have great perspective on the game, cigar smokers all: the formidable Dolphins' defensive end Jason Taylor, who nearly lost a leg to injury on the football field; owner Robert Kraft of the Patriots, who built a paragon among elite sports franchises; and linebacker Dick Butkus, one of the toughest men ever to don cleats.

We also introduce you to a new age in NFL stadiums. The latest venues provide previously unimaginable access to the game as spectators bask in the seats of luxury.

So sit back, light up your favorite smoke and enjoy the issue.

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Dear Marvin,
I just read your letter to new FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb in the August issue of Cigar Aficionado and was moved to contact the commissioner myself. This potential act by our government must not be allowed to happen. Let's hope that together we can all pull this thing through for the industry.
Wayne McCollum
Rancho Mirage, California

Editors' Response: The response from our readers to contact the new FDA commissioner has been overwhelming and impressive. Thank you for joining with so many of your fellow readers who answered the call. But more can be done, and it's not too late to enlist others to the cause. Spread the word with your fellow cigar smokers and make sure they join the fight. Go to www.cigaraficionado.com and follow our links to let the government know the FDA needs to leave handmade cigars alone.

Dear Marvin,
In reference to the Daymond John article ["A Shark With Style," June 2017] it was not only an outstanding write up but very inspirational. I live in Northern Virginia and work in I.T. project management and truly believe what he has done with his life is fabulous.

I also watch the show "Shark Tank" and find all their journeys very interesting and give them credit on what they have done with their lives and how it has affected others.
Sal Molé
Herndon, Virginia

Dear Marvin,
One Sunday morning long ago, sitting by the fire with my friend having bagels and coffee, she said, "This is so romantic," and I hummed in agreement. She asked what I was thinking of.

Years ago, at 16 years old, I must have done something stupid and my dad grounded me for the weekend. Rather than mope around, I built a bench. My dad was so pleased he let me go out on Sunday.

So I put that bench out on the land that got cleared for the cherry trees planted in my dad's memory, and

"I just read your letter to FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb. This potential act by the government must not be allowed to happen."
—Wayne McCollum, Rancho Mirage, California

40 years later that bench is still solid. Of course, the girl's long gone, but it seems rather romantic to me just to sit out there with a sunset and a cigar.
David Brinning
Naples, Florida

Dear Marvin,
In the June 2014 edition I commented on the absence of nationally syndicated sports talk icon Jim Rome in Kenneth Shouler's piece entitled "Sports Squawk." The feeling was mutual based on other reader letters that you printed, along with an Editors' Response stating "Romey" should have been included.

Much to my satisfaction—as well as other "jungle dwellers"—I read your piece on Jim ["Rome is Burning"] in the August 2017 issue.

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E-MAIL letters@cigaraficionado.com • **LETTERS** 825 8th Ave., 33rd floor, New York, NY 10019 • **EDITORS' BLOGS** Find out what the editors of Cigar Aficionado are thinking—and smoking—in our editors' blogs. David Savona, Gordon Mott, Jack Bettridge, Gregory Mottola and Andrew Nagy want to hear from you. The conversation is taking place on cigaraficionado.com.

cigar aficionado

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Like the legendary Howard Cosell, Jim Rome did not play the game—but he certainly has his hand on the pulse of what today's sports fan really wants to talk about.
Nicholas J. Antonicello
Venice Beach, California

Dear Marvin,
A few months back I had my first cigar at the ripe old age of 40. It was fantastic. A few weeks later I purchased my first issue of CIGAR AFICIONADO and was blown away at how amazing your magazine was laid out and the vivid colors of all the pictures. I have not missed an issue since.

As a newbie I would love to see a beginner's section to further my knowledge of the cigar world.
Tyler Foxcroft
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Editors' Response: You're in luck. This issue has a story that covers some of the basics for those who are new to cigar smoking, as well as diving into details for seasoned veterans. Turn to page 140 to read "Ten Things Every Cigar Smoker Should Know." And our website, www.cigaraficionado.com, has an entire section dedicated to cigar education called Cigar 101. We also have a video gallery that will show you how to cut, light and select a cigar that's right for you. Welcome to the wonderful world of cigar smoking.

Dear Marvin,
It's rather ironic that, in spite of many public health concerns, marijuana dispensaries are popping up like dandelions while the cigar industry is under fire. Here in Oregon there are 418 registered medical marijuana dispensaries with 167 dispensaries in Portland alone. (You could probably count the cigar lounges on one hand.) What this demonstrates is that the real issues are ideological. Legalized pot—and the move to legalize it—enjoys the favor of the "new establishment," which sees itself as progressive, tolerant and open. The cigar industry, however, is perceived as a vestige of the "old guard," and, unlike the pot juggernaut, may be squeezed into oblivion with little political fallout.

The cigar industry might learn a lesson from the cannabis industry, which eroded resistance to full legalization through the clever appeal to marijuana's medical use. Perhaps the cigar industry should argue that smokers of premium cigars are more likely to be responsible citizens with good jobs and that they also enjoy greater mental health through the stress relief a premium stick provides. Maybe we should call our retail humidors "medical cigar dispensaries" and see what happens.
Fred Allen
Via cigaraficionado.com's Facebook Page ❖

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good life guide

Living well demands that we indulge in things that are of superior quality and excellent origin. This guide aspires to find and recommend the best of everything to aficionados of the good life.

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The facade, Hemingway Bar, and a suite.

The Ritz Paris

Caesar Ritz managed and bought hotels in Nice, Monaco, Lugano and Lucerne before deciding to create one himself from the ground up with the help of the culinary legend chef Auguste Escoffier, his business partner. Opening in 1898, the Ritz Paris changed the hospitality industry forever. It earned Ritz the nicknames "king of hoteliers" and "hotelier to kings," and spawned the expressions "ritzy" and "putting on the Ritz."

For more than a century, the Ritz Paris, in the 1st Arrondissement, was the original "palace hotel," the standard against which other luxury lodging worldwide was judged. It was the frequent abode of not only royalty, but billionaires, celebrities and VIPs of every stripe. Coco Chanel stayed for 30 years, while Gary Cooper and F. Scott Fitzgerald were regulars. Ernest Hemingway drank there so frequently that they named the hotel bar after him. It is now decorated with his personal memorabilia.

Yet the world's most famous hotel was ready for more than a facelift, and the current owners undertook a $450 million, four-plus year renovation under the watchful eye of renowned designer architect, Thierry Despont. In mid-2016 it reopened.

The Ritz is still very much the Ritz—only better. The goal was to completely but invisibly update the property without losing an ounce of its classic charm. The number of rooms was reduced to 142, while increasing their size (half are now suites). The bathrooms are fantastically upgraded, sporting vast walk-in showers, separate sunken tubs and heated floors. Flat-screens are framed like museum canvases, and behind the walls, the hotel's guts have been rebuilt for superior water pressure and high-speed Internet. Beloved general manager Christian Boyens and bartending legend Colin Field both stayed. Field used the down time to perfect his new masterpiece, the "Clean & Dirty Martini," a version of Hemingway's Dirty Martini, using frozen olive juice to tidy it up.

The two-story spa and health club was completely rebuilt and now includes the world's first Chanel-branded beauty facility. The lobby houses five new luxury retail boutiques. The former Ritz Club nightclub became an elegant bar and brasserie serving classic French comfort foods. A retractable glass atrium allows patio dining all year round. Elaborate gardens create an escape in the beating heart of the city. A refined salon was added to serve afternoon tea. The Michelin-starred gastronomic eatery, L'Espadon, was redone, and the Ritz got a new executive chef, Nicolas Sale, who previously earned two stars at both of his Courchevel restaurants.

The many improvements here each seem subtle but quickly add up to real substance, and while the ambience of a bygone time has been preserved, the Ritz Paris has caught up to its newer ultra-luxury competitors, physically as well as in price, with the least expensive room starting at 1,000 euros ($1,170). As Hemingway, the hotel's biggest fan, famously remarked, "When in Paris the only reason not to stay at the Ritz is if you can't afford it."

Visit ritzparis.com

—Larry Olmsted

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Naim Audio Mu-so Wireless Speakers

You no longer need to buy a Bentley Mulsanne to enjoy the sound of Naim Audio. The English hi-fi manufacturer that produces the luxury sedan's optional sound system, "Naim for Bentley," now offers wireless speakers for the home. In addition to delivering the mellifluous sound you would expect from a high-end audio manufacturer, the Naim Mu-so and Mu-so Qb lend a modernist elegance to a living room, study, bedroom or all three.

The Mu-so is less a wireless speaker than a piece of modern art. A long, low aluminum slab, the unit gradually reveals competing shapes and textures. A softly undulating fabric grille collides with angular, brushed metal casing that gives way to a vertiginous silver heat sink that spans the back of the unit. Perched on a semi-transparent acrylic base, the slab appears to float.

Peel away the black fabric grill—also available in bold burnt orange, vibrant red and deep blue—and you'll discover six 75-watt amplifiers, 450-watts of total power channeled through the same high-performance digital processor Naim developed for Bentley. It will fill a palatial living room with crisp, full-bodied sound.

Perhaps the most ingenious and eye-catching feature is the unit's control dial. You can use the circular, illuminated touch surface circumscribed in a volume-adjustment ring to pause and play audio, toggle between its inputs (3.5 mm, optical and USB) or select Internet radio stations that you customize using the Naim mobile app. In addition to physical inputs, Mu-so will connect to all of your devices using Bluetooth and Wi-Fi. About the only feature that's missing is connected home compatibility with Amazon Echo. Then again, Alexa is no substitute for that control dial.

You can tether multiple Mu-sos to stream music to up to five rooms simultaneously, in which case Mu-so Qb (pictured) offers a graceful addition to any bedroom. Despite its inelegant name, the Qb compresses all the aesthetic grace and wireless capability of its larger sibling, and nearly as much power—300 watts dispersed across four 50-watt amplifiers and a 100-watt woofer—into an 8.5-inch polymer cube that fits comfortably on a bookshelf. It's a gorgeous device that's arguably preferable for urban dwellers.

At $1,399 (Mu-so) and $899 (Mu-so Qb), they're two of the most expensive wireless speakers on the market. But Bose and Bowers & Wilkins cannot rival Naim's surgical attention to detail. And you can remind your reluctant spouse that a Mu-so is considerably more affordable than a Bentley.

Visit naimaudio.com

—Will Fenton

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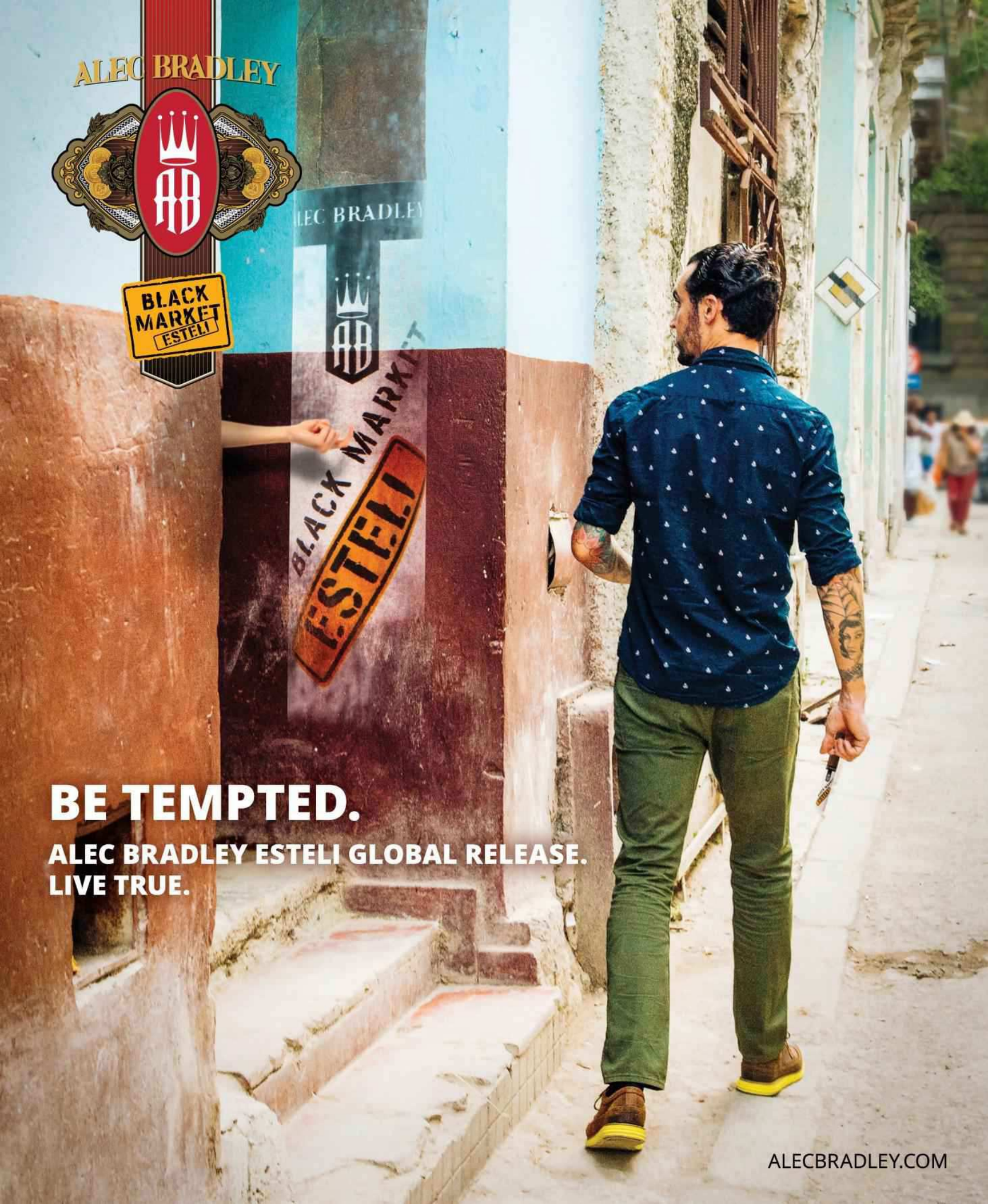
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The Perfect Paella

There isn't an exact consensus as to what makes for a truly authentic dish of paella, but there is certainly no shortage of strong opinions. Ask a Spaniard from Valencia—the purported birthplace of paella—and you might get a completely different answer than someone from Catalonia. Trace the history and you'll find that this Spanish medley with crunchy rice has included everything from eels and snails to rabbits and rodents (specifically, water vole meat).

Now that the dish has gone global, it's not at all unusual to find spicy chorizo sausage in the mix, something that rigid hardliners find exceedingly irritating. And while some things are open to interpretation, the basic tenets of paella are not.

"I am not a purist of the paella, for I believe that it is fine to have some flexibility in the components, so long as you're in keeping with some basic rules" says Javier Estades. At work he is CEO of Tabacalaera USA, but Estades doubles as a competitive paella maestro who has been perfecting the dish for most of his life.

To keep it real, you'll need a paella pan. That's not negotiable. This might be the most important part, as the word *paella* derives from the Latin for pan. If you don't have a gas stovetop large enough to support the pan, Estades recommends a self-contained burner and tripod kit from Garcima made especially for paella. This allows even heat coverage with better temperature control.

Secondly, you'll need to use Bomba or Senia rice. Also, cook in patient, flavorful layers. Don't make a lazy-man's paella by cutting corners. The secret, Estades says, is "adding and removing ingredients in the right sequence and then mixing them all at the end before you add the rice and broth."

For a meat-centric Valencia-style paella, most of the steps are fairly straightforward. First, heat your paella pan with olive oil. Then brown your pieces of chicken (and rabbit if you have it). Remove the meat to make way for garlic and seasonal vegetables. Runner beans are often used, artichokes too. Sauté until soft.

After that, add tomato puree and cook a bit before adding smoked paprika, saffron and then water. Cook it down in order to reduce your liquid. Then salt to taste. This is what turns the sum of your ingredients into a cohesive broth. That's when you add the rice. Simmer until cooked. The final, magical step is caramelizing the bottom layer. You're essentially burning the bottom of the rice to form what's called the *soccarat*. What's left should be a masterful mosaic of rice and proteins.

Seafood versions are also acceptable, but don't get too creative. Estades warns against blasphemous additions like tofu or corn on the cob: "If you try that in Spain and call it paella, you are sent to jail."

Visit paellapans.com

—Gregory Mottola

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Take a Shave

As he follows up a treatment of conditioning cream with a carefully applied hot towel to a stubbly face, Joe Bruno admits that the main point of a barber shave may not be to get the closest, smoothest trim possible. This intimate service, which used to be a regular part of a man's grooming, is now a nice luxury, a bit of occasional pampering. "It's a time to relax, it's time to zone out. We don't do a lot of things on their own nowadays. It's six or eight things going on at once. When you're getting a shave you can't answer your phone, you're forced to exhale."

Whatever the reason, the proprietor of Bruno's Chop Shop in Beverly Hills, California, is seeing an upsurge in request for shaves. Long after safety razors made home shaving a viable option and in an era when beards are in vogue, men are increasingly choosing an old-school service even if not on a daily basis.

As Bruno starts the next phase he explains that the traditional service has some new twists. "This is a clear gel that makes the blade slide smoothly. People expect hot lather, but I've never encountered one that doesn't dry the face." And if you're expecting a shave with a long straight razor, you won't get one—at least not in California, where state sanitation laws forbid reusing blades. Instead he inserts a single-sided blade into a holder that's shaped and handles like a straight razor.

For health reasons, some barbers don vinyl gloves, but Bruno applies sanitizer to his bare hands as he prefers the sensitivity it affords. His strokes are a combination of the expected grand sweeps and short swipes. The reason: to adjust to the fact that men's beards grow in different directions on one face. Some even have cowlicks. The neck area is particularly erratic on many men. For optimum smoothness, his longer, deluxe shave includes two passes in each area: one with the grain and another across it.

When Bruno is satisfied with his tonsorial work, another towel comes out—this one is cold to shut the pores and reduce irritation. Two aftershave treatments include a skin astringent, applied as a disinfectant, and then a soothing balm.

The by-now-groggy client opens his eyes, strokes his face to check for smoothness and wonders if anyone falls asleep during the barber's ministrations.

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—Jack Bettridge

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Karma Revero

Instant Karma it definitely wasn't. When the Danish designer Henrik Fisker brought his plug-in hybrid sports car to market five years ago he must have been paying for the sins of a past-life, because seemingly everything went wrong. The company went broke barely a year later, and its assets were sold off to China's Wanxiang Group. But while Fisker Automotive may be gone, the Karma is coming back to life.

Here it gets confusing, what was known as the Karma hybrid-electric vehicle is now the Revero. The reborn automaker is now known as Karma. What matters is the fact that it's an iconic design, as fresh and handsome as the day it first rolled out. Maybe even more so, as the now Chinese-owned, California-based carmaker has made a handful of welcome tweaks and refinements, most notably to the original car's "moustache" grille and diamond air intakes. Oh, and that distinctive new Karma badge—each one hand-painted, the company brags, by an artist in Hawaii.

The cabin has also been updated, giving it both a more refined look as well as the sort of cutting-edge technology you'd expect of a vehicle like this. That includes a much-improved infotainment system with such niceties as Apple CarPlay. Absent, however, are active cruise control and automatic emergency braking.

What's more likely to matter to potential buyers is what's under the Revero's hood. Karma has refined the original plug-in hybrid package pairing a General Motors–derived 2.0-liter inline four with an electric motor drawing power from a 21.4 kilowatt-hour lithium-ion battery. That's slightly larger than the original version and boosts range to 50 miles in EV mode before the gasoline "range-extender" kicks in. There are now three distinct operating modes, including Sport, which uses both battery and gas power to deliver more satisfying, if not benchmark, performance. You'll hit 60 in 5.4 seconds, a full second faster than the original version's launch time. One downside: when operating in gas-only mode, the Karma Revero manages only 20 mpg city, 21 highway.

The $130,000 price tag is a bit daunting, all the more so compared with the original car's $103,000 base MSRP. But the new model comes loaded, with even a solar roof that can generate several additional miles worth of current a day in places like sunny California. Just pick your exterior and interior colors. Ironically, the original Fisker Karma was imported from Finland, of all places.

Is it worth it? While it doesn't offer the performance of the similarly priced Tesla Model S P100d, the Karma Revero is about as visually striking—and as rare—as anything on the road. For those who want something green, or at least green-ish, to add to their personal car fleet, it's worth checking out.

Visit karmaautomotive.com

—Paul A. Eisenstein

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Hublot Classic Fusion Fuente 20th Anniversary

Carlos Fuente Jr., the charismatic self-professed "humble cigarmaker" at the helm of Arturo Fuente cigars, is passionate about family and symbolism. The sweeping lawn at Chateau de la Fuente, the Dominican farm where he grows wrapper for his Fuente Fuente OpusX cigars, is decorated with colorful pictures composed of painted rocks that pay tribute to his parents and his grandparents.

So, it's only fitting that the third Arturo Fuente watch produced with Hublot got personal. "Every little symbol on the back and front has an emotional, strong meaning to the family," Fuente says during the unveiling of three Hublot Classic Fusion 45mm Fuente 20th Anniversary Special Edition watches at the Chateau, where a new cigar club decorated with family photos has opened. "It is about people, it's not about cigars."

Fuente created the Fuente Fuente OpusX cigar brand more than 20 years ago to show the world that great wrapper could be grown in the Dominican Republic. The anniversary is referenced on the watch with two prominent Xs (20 in Roman numerals) on the dial at 4 o'clock and marking the 12 o'clock hour. The blue dial (the favorite color of Carlos Jr.'s grandfather Arturo Fuente, the company founder) is also embossed with a pattern of interlocking Xs that repeats on the engraved bezel.

The watch's designer Manny Iriarte, a family friend and native of Cuba, boldly references Arturo Fuente's birth in Cuba, as well as his descendants' Cuban spirit. The elaborately engraved watch's case depicts Old Havana's wrought iron railings, Cuban tile patterns and tobacco leaves. On the case back is an image of Fuente Jr. and his father, Carlos Fuente Sr., who died last year. The engraved versions are available in Hublot's Magic Gold ($30,400), an alloy of gold and ceramic, and brushed titanium ($14,600). A third model in satin-finished black ceramic ($13,600), which cannot be engraved, offers a less ornate option. Each 45-mm watch is limited to 20 pieces, though Hublot CEO Ricardo Guadalupe promises a more accessible design soon.

Sales of the watches will benefit Fuente's Cigar Family Charitable Foundation, which sponsors school development, medical facilities and other local projects. "Hublot understood our responsibility to give back," says Fuente, who notes that a nursing school is currently being built with funds from watch sales. "The mentality is not only about the most sought-after luxury products, it's being able to give back and build relationships, because that's what brings a smile to our hearts."

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—Laurie Kahle

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The Highball

If you judge by volume consumed in a lifetime, the Highball is easily my favorite mixed drink. So I find its recent elevation by the Japanese bar culture, with its reverent ceremony, gratifying. However, their slow build approach—chiseling ice, layering components and stirring exactly 13½ times, puts a damper on the consumption angle. Therefore, herewith is a primer on the drink without the ritual.

Spirit content: A Highball is technically almost any spirit and mixer served in a Highball glass, but we'll ignore Gin & Tonics and Rum & Cokes and narrow the focus to brown liquor with sparkling water. Traditionally this meant blended Scotch, but any whiskey can improve the taste of seltzer—and vice-versa. Japan has developed its own whiskies—such as Suntory Toki—specifically for that purpose. The Canadian whisky drinkers of the Mad-Men era understood that bubbles added burst to that smooth alcohol. Almost any straight rye or Bourbon has the stamina for this drink. And don't feel that it's a waste of precious single malts, especially peaty ones that give up their marine notes in a spray of club soda. And lest we forget, Jeeves regularly served B&S (Brandy & Soda) to rescue the hapless Bertie Wooster from a funk.

The proportion: This is totally subjective. The Japanese lean to lower-proof ratios, but if you're using a high-quality spirit you might want to start at one-to-one and fine-tune in stronger or weaker proportions from there.

The glass: As the name implies this is key. A Highball should come in a tall, thin vessel—the better to distribute ice throughout the liquid and keep the surface area (where it loses fizz) to a minimum. Taller, thinner Tom Collins glasses are just as good. Tubby Old-Fashioned glasses are unacceptable and should be sent back to the bartender with a stern talking to. Twelve ounces is maximum capacity. If you're feeling underserved, order a second.

The additive: The Seven & Seven notwithstanding, we're talking carbon dioxide and pure water, not soda pop. The choice is seltzer water or club soda (the latter contains salt). If your barman is gunning down your drink with soda from a hose, dismiss him. Bottled soda is fine in small (circa eight-ounce) formats. Vessels defined in liters lose fizz on the way down. Or you can make your own—with your choice of water. The old-school soda syphon is fun for its Three Stooges theatrics, but more convenient are gadgets like SodaStream and Drinkmate (see page 160), which let you customize the amount of CO_2 with fewer or more blasts.

Ice: Speedy melting makes crushed and chipped ice the enemy. Large square cubes stack nicely in a highball glass and offer consistent cooling throughout the drink. If you don't want to spend precious drinking time prepping ice with a chisel, get a classic ice tray. Some home icemakers even dispense ice that stands up to dilution. A universal Highball rule of thumb: If you find clear liquid and no ice in the last inch of the glass, something has gone terribly wrong.

—Jack Bettridge

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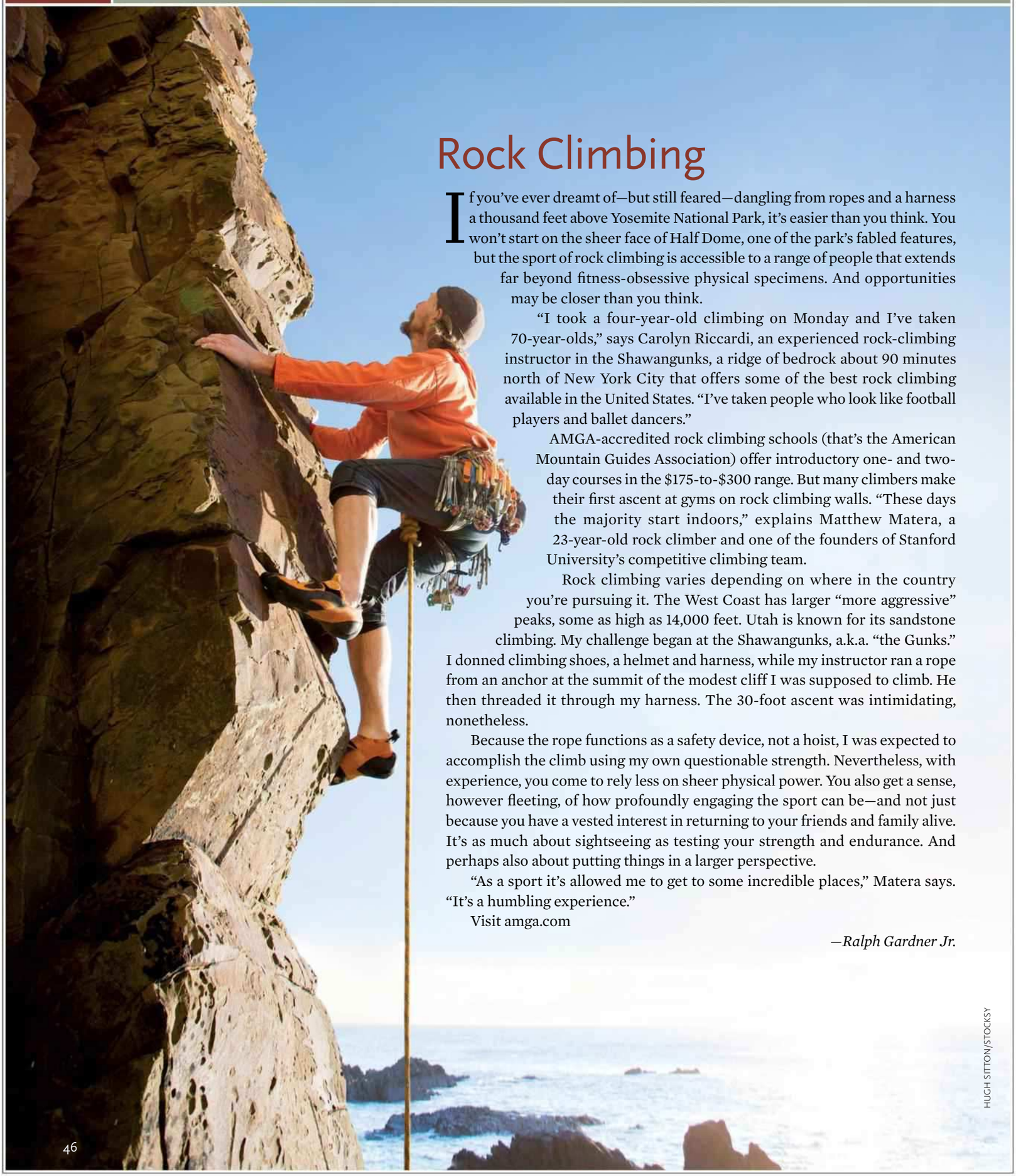

Rock Climbing

If you've ever dreamt of—but still feared—dangling from ropes and a harness a thousand feet above Yosemite National Park, it's easier than you think. You won't start on the sheer face of Half Dome, one of the park's fabled features, but the sport of rock climbing is accessible to a range of people that extends far beyond fitness-obsessive physical specimens. And opportunities may be closer than you think.

"I took a four-year-old climbing on Monday and I've taken 70-year-olds," says Carolyn Riccardi, an experienced rock-climbing instructor in the Shawangunks, a ridge of bedrock about 90 minutes north of New York City that offers some of the best rock climbing available in the United States. "I've taken people who look like football players and ballet dancers."

AMGA-accredited rock climbing schools (that's the American Mountain Guides Association) offer introductory one- and two-day courses in the $175-to-$300 range. But many climbers make their first ascent at gyms on rock climbing walls. "These days the majority start indoors," explains Matthew Matera, a 23-year-old rock climber and one of the founders of Stanford University's competitive climbing team.

Rock climbing varies depending on where in the country you're pursuing it. The West Coast has larger "more aggressive" peaks, some as high as 14,000 feet. Utah is known for its sandstone climbing. My challenge began at the Shawangunks, a.k.a. "the Gunks." I donned climbing shoes, a helmet and harness, while my instructor ran a rope from an anchor at the summit of the modest cliff I was supposed to climb. He then threaded it through my harness. The 30-foot ascent was intimidating, nonetheless.

Because the rope functions as a safety device, not a hoist, I was expected to accomplish the climb using my own questionable strength. Nevertheless, with experience, you come to rely less on sheer physical power. You also get a sense, however fleeting, of how profoundly engaging the sport can be—and not just because you have a vested interest in returning to your friends and family alive. It's as much about sightseeing as testing your strength and endurance. And perhaps also about putting things in a larger perspective.

"As a sport it's allowed me to get to some incredible places," Matera says. "It's a humbling experience."

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—Ralph Gardner Jr.

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JEFF HARRIS

Black Cigar Accessories

For cigar accessories, black is the new black. With the color's understated sophistication and ability to accessorize with almost anything, black has never gone out of style. Moreover, any cigar aficionado looking to deck out his den in dark tools will find an array of choices available now.

Start with a proper black ashtray. The Colibri Quasar ($150) is an eye-catching receptacle constructed from metal alloy. It boasts a modernist, multifaceted body with space for six cigars. The melamine base has nonscratching rubber footpads.

The Xikar 009 Pull-Out Punch ($44.99) is a sleek, bullet-shaped cigar cutter with a retractable, circular blade. Tug on the body of the punch, applying force in opposite directions, and a razor sharp 9-mm blade jumps out. After punching a hole in the cap of your cigar, gently push the Pull-Out Punch back together and the circular blade withdraws into the cutter.

Brizard & Co.'s Venezia Fountain Lighter ($220) has a powerful jet flame that overcomes windy, outdoor conditions (e.g. on a golf course or boat). But with its leather wrapping, the lighter is just as at home in a smoking lounge. Pictured in black caiman, the Venezia also comes in stingray and ostrich leathers.

A reliable humidor will anchor your collection. The Daniel Marshall Ambiente 125 Cigar Humidor comes in a black matte finish ($445). Marshall's humidors are known for their quality, construction and spot-on humidity control. This model has a gold-plated lock and key, a solid Spanish-cedar interior, a preinstalled humidification system and digital hygrometer.

Now that you've laid the foundation for a respectable set of black cigar accessories, you can expand on the premise, because black matches with everything and you'll only enhance the decor.

Visit brizardandco.com, colibri.com, danielmarshall.com, and xikar.com

—David Clough

Cirrus SF50 Vision Jet

You may recall a John Sebastian song from the '60s called "Younger Generation." It describes a future in which three-year-olds test their parents' patience by asking permission to ride their "zooms." That's a vehicle that "goes 200 miles an hour suspended on balloons."

Well, the future has arrived in the form of Vision Jet, the world's first single-engine personal jet. And while the flying machine may be slightly beyond the capacity of a toddler, the pilot/owner has very little responsibility beyond locating his favorite Sirius XM radio station.

"It's remarkably simple to fly," explains Ben Kowalski, Cirrus's vice president for marketing and communications, as we head down the Hudson River past the Manhattan skyline. "You reach a point where there's not much more to do than sit back and enjoy the view."

The jet, which costs just under $2 million and boasts a waiting list of 600, has a range of 1,150 miles and flies at 345 mph. Five of the aircraft have been delivered thus far.

The target demographic isn't corporate CEO's or rock stars that need to cross continents in a single bound. Rather it's being marketed as a "regional mobility" device that allows lawyers or real estate developers—very successful ones—to meet with multiple, far-flung clients in a single day. It also doubles as a useful way for them to drop in on their kids at college or visit their vacation homes on holiday weekends while soaring above traffic.

But let's dispense with details such as the most advanced avionics in the general aviation industry (pretty much everything is touch screen) and the muscular single-piece carbon-fiber fuselage, and get to the fun stuff. As useful as Vision Jet may be as a mode of transportation, it's basically a toy. The windows are huge, the interior, premium leather; cup holders abound and a USB charging port is at every seat. It carries up to five adults and two children. One of the seats can be replaced by a bathroom with a curtain.

But integral to its allure is that it's designed to be flown by a single pilot, which I did over Long Island, turning north over the Hamptons, and heading home.

Matt Bergwall, Vision Jet's product manager and our pilot, was by my side in case I tapped the wrong screen. But with the plane's stability augmentation system it was hard to screw up. Even better, it comes with a colorful parachute that, in case of emergency, will float the aircraft gently to Earth.

Hopefully you'll never have to use it. While the plane can't quite land itself, "it can bring us down right to the runway," says Bergwall.

And it did.

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—Ralph Gardner Jr.

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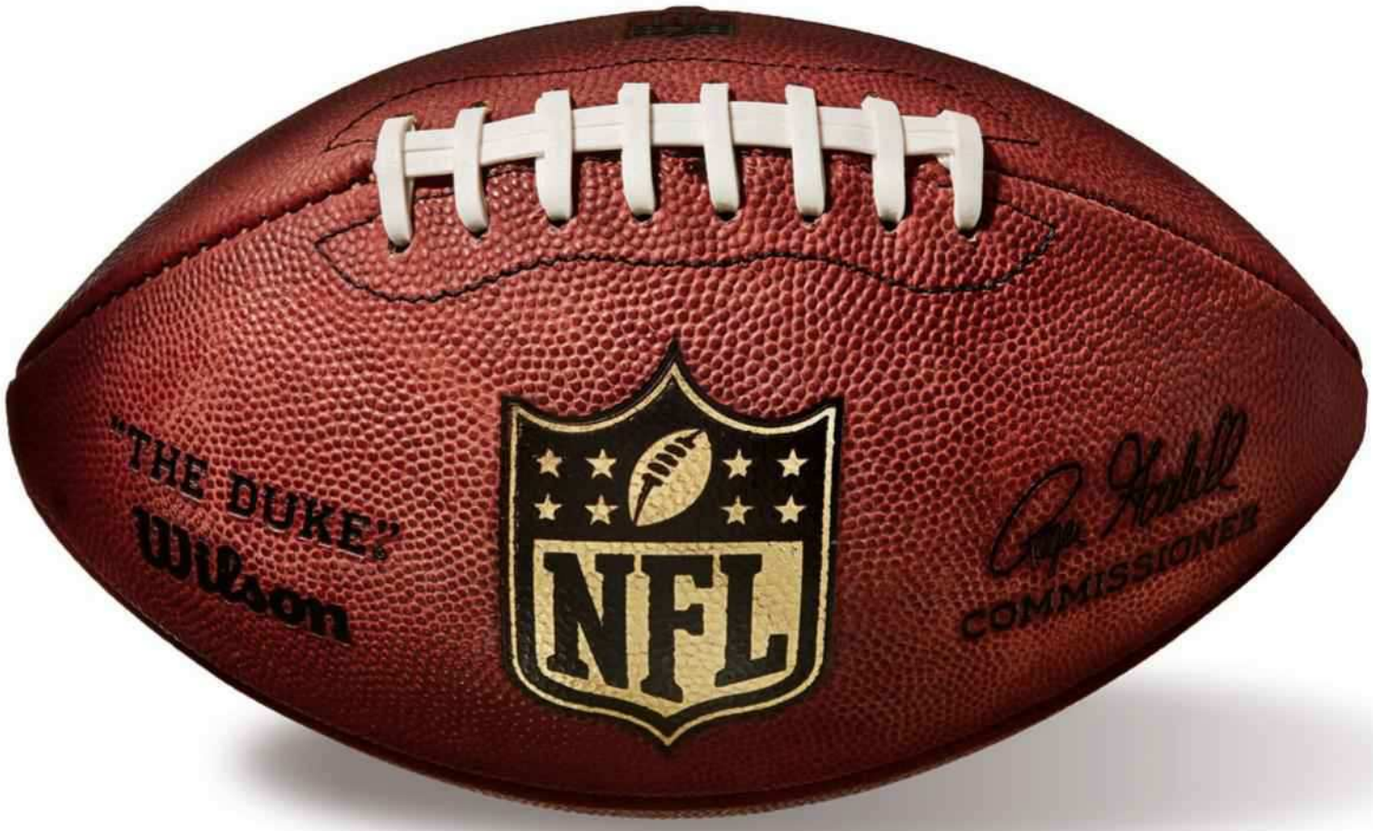

JEFF HARRIS

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2017 NFL PREVIEW

Who will rise and who will fall in the upcoming NFL season? Our gridiron guru gives his predictions, all the way to the Super Bowl

BY DANNY SHERIDAN

Superstar quarterback Tom Brady led his New England Patriots to the greatest comeback in Super Bowl history against the Falcons. Can he do it again?

AFC EAST

Miami receiver Jarvis Landry helped the Dolphins to their first playoff appearance in eight years last season, but don't crown them kings of the AFC East just yet. Matt Forte and the New York Jets don't have an answer for their woes, and are expected to struggle in 2017.

1 ► NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

The Russians couldn't hack this administration. In 23 years under the Kraft family, the Dynastriots have appeared in the playoffs 18 times, won a dozen division titles and five Super Bowl crowns. Returning from a four-game suspension, Tom Brady had arguably his greatest season (28 TDs, 2 INTs) with a league-best record of 14-2 and zero concussions (according to everyone except Gisele) despite the loss of TE Rob Gronkowski for eight games and the playoffs. The masterpiece was an overtime 34-28 Super Bowl win, overcoming a 25-point deficit (.04 % chance to win). Can they get better? The Pats have a new deep threat with WR Brandin Cooks, and the overlooked defense has been upgraded with DE Kony Ealy, CB Stephon Gilmore and ex-Jet David Harris. Are the Krafts the Belichick of owners? Or is Belichick the Kraft of coaches?

2 ► MIAMI DOLPHINS

The 10-6 Fish made the playoffs for the first time in eight years thanks to rookie coach Adam Gase, but this isn't the Joe's Stone Crab of franchises just yet. Miami faced only two top-five QBs, went 1-5 against teams .500 or better and the defense ranked 30th against the run. QB Ryan Tannehill (2,995 yards, 19 TDs, 12 INTs in 13 games) still hasn't had a breakout season. WR Jarvis Landry is the top playmaker, and RB Jay Ajayi surprised with 1,272 yards. More is needed from underachievers WR DeVante Parker and TE Julius Thomas. New defensive coordinator Matt Burke welcomes Lawrence Timmons and No. 1 pick edge rusher Charles Harris.

3 ► BUFFALO BILLS

Rex Ryan and Doug Whaley are out, but the Bills' 17-year playoff drought—the longest in the four major sports leagues—remains. New coach Sean McDermott steps in. It's snow job for a novice. Ryan was driven out with a week left in the season, leaving such a toxic waste that McDermott and new GM Brandon Beane cleaned house by dumping 14 coaches over Niagara Falls. LeSean McCoy remains the lone remaining star. QB Tyrod Taylor is back after surviving months of trade rumors (it would have been a $9.7 million cap hit), and needs WR Sammy Watkins to stay healthy. No. 1 draft CB Tre'Davious White replaces Stephon Gilmore.

4 ► NEW YORK JETS

The Jets (5-11) remain in freefall. They've gone six seasons with no playoffs after back-to-back AFC championship appearances. It can only get worse if they get lost on their way to Del Frisco's or Elio's. The offense is morbid, and the latest bridge quarterback is 38-year-old journeyman Josh McCown, a 59% career passer who has lost 20 of his last 22 starts. Veterans Brandon Marshall, Nick Mangold, Darrelle Revis, Eric Decker and David Harris were swept away by GM Mike Maccagnan's rebuilding. No. 1 pick S Jamal Adams is a stud, but Leonard Williams and Muhammad Wilkerson better pressure quarterbacks to help the secondary. Sundays will be as painful for Jets fans as watching an old Sean Spicer press briefing. Coach Todd Bowles (15-17) better rent.

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AFC NORTH

Injuries and a slow start couldn't stop hulking quarterback Ben Roethlisberger and his Pittsburgh Steelers. Expect them to have another winning year, unlike the suddenly struggling Cincinnati Bengals, despite talented playmaker Andy Dalton.

1 ► PITTSBURGH STEELERS

The Steelers overcame a 4-5 start and rolled off an nine-game winning streak that took them to the AFC Championship game. QB Ben Roethlisberger shook off injuries to lead the way (3,819 yards, 29 TDs, 14 games). The studs were Le'Veon Bell, the NFL's top all-purpose back in only 12 games (1,268 yards rushing, 616 yards receiving) and WR Antonio Brown (106 grabs, 1,284 yards, 12 TDs and one foolish video in the locker room the week before getting routed by the Patriots). Getting back WR Martavis Bryant and drafting USC WR JuJu Smith-Schuster should make the offense more explosive. Fans are hungry for someone to help James Harrison and Bud Dupree bring the Steel Curtain down on opposing quarterbacks. No. 1 draft pick T.J. Watt, J.J.'s baby brother, will make the fashionable crowd at Meat and Potatoes quite happy.

2 ► BALTIMORE RAVENS

The Birds have gone 31-33 since Super Bowl XLVII, failing to make the playoffs in three of the last four years. QB Joe Flacco had somewhat of an off year with a career-low 20 TDs and 15 INTs, but Coach John Harbaugh isn't concerned. "Our quarterback is a championship QB and he's proven that," he said. Dennis Pitta led all TEs with 86 catches, but was released, leaving a big void, and Flacco will also miss retired WR Steve Smith. Ex-Chief Jeremy Maclin was a shrewd signing. RB Danny Woodhead is a nice safety valve, but 2015 No. 1 draft WR Breshad Perriman needs to emerge. GM Ozzie Newsome upgraded an ailing pass rush with rookie OLBs Tyus Bowser and Tim Williams, and adding Tony Jefferson and Brandon Carr give the team an elite secondary.

3 ► CINCINNATI BENGALS

The 6-9-1 Bengals grossly regressed from their winning 2015 season and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2010. Coach Marvin Lewis has never won a playoff game. The Bengals have talent on offense: QB Andy Dalton (4,206 yards); WR A.J. Green (964 yards); WR Brandon LaFell (862 yards) and added John Ross, the fastest receiver on the board (4.22 speed). They drew criticism for taking RB Joe Mixon, who has domestic violence baggage. They would take a long look at Hannibal Lecter if he could play.

4 ► CLEVELAND BROWNS

It was another boneless year for The Dawg Pound, as the Browns went 1-15 (complete with a 14-game losing streak) for their ninth straight losing season, continuing the endless Remake On The Lake. The hope around town is that the analytic decision makers used their draft picks judiciously: first-round picks DE Myles Garrett (Texas A&M), DB Jabrill Peppers (Michigan) and TE David Njoku (Miami) could all start. The Browns, who have auditioned 26 quarterbacks since 1999, now look to rookie DeShone Kizer to end their merciless curse. The NFL has relaxed its touchdown celebration rules. Now all the Browns have to do is find the end zone. Hey, at least they had a better off-season than Tiger Woods!

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AFC SOUTH

Lamar Miller's (No. 26 at right) rushing is a big reason the Houston Texans will repeat as winners of the AFC South this season. Division rival Tennessee comes to 2017 with a tougher pass defense, but will struggle by comparison.

1 ► HOUSTON TEXANS

In three years, coach Bill O'Brien turned a 2-14 team into strong playoff contenders, using eight different quarterbacks and winning the South the last two seasons. The Texans could have challenged for the Super Bowl, but QB Brock Osweiler turned out to be an $18 million bust. They reached the divisional round against New England on the strength of a No. 1 defense, despite not having J.J. Watt. The defensive end returns to join Jadeveon Clowney and Whitney Mercilus, but O'Brien is hoping that No. 1 draft Clemson QB Deshaun Watson can supplant Tom Savage sooner rather than later and ignite RB Lamar Miller (1,073 yards) and WR DeAndre Hopkins (954 yards). Too bad they couldn't sign Tony Romo.

2 ► INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Owner Jim Irsay, who likes Twitter as much as the man in the Oval Office, fired GM Ryan Grigson after five years of bad drafts and free-agent busts and hired talented Chris Ballard from Kansas City. Injured QB Andrew Luck somehow did his part with 4,240 passing yards and 31 TDs. A young, growing offensive line offers hope that Luck will last longer than Kardashian reruns. He needs more playmakers than T.Y. Hilton and Frank Gore. Upgrading the defense was critical. No. 1 pick Malik Hooker, Johnathan Hankins and Jabaal Sheard will help. These are certain: death, taxes, Adam Vinatieri and the tear-duct shrimp cocktail at St. Elmo's.

3 ► TENNESSEE TITANS

The Titans (9-7) enjoyed their first winning season since 2011 behind QB Marcus Mariota. The second-year QB upped his passing yardage to 3,426 with a rating of 95.6, but he needs more go-to guys like RB DeMarco Murray (1,287 yards), WR Rishard Matthews (945 yards), and TE Delanie Walker (800 yards). Joining them is No. 1 draft Western Michigan WR Corey Davis and ex-Jet Eric Decker. The Titans improved their pass defense by signing CB Logan Ryan and S Johnathan Cyprien and using their other first-round pick on USC CB-KR Adoree' Jackson. Nissan Stadium has a chance to be more popular than the Johnny Cash Museum.

4 ► JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

The Jags haven't had a winning season in a decade, which is why they brought back revered coach Tom Coughlin as executive VP of football operations. "It's a tough game," he announced. "You have to play through some things." Remember, he's a fan of Gen. Patton. QB Blake Bortles (51 INTs over three years) has grossly underachieved. The absent running game improved overnight for new coach Doug Marrone with No. 1 draft pick Leonard Fournette from LSU, the Andalusian Bull of the collegiate ranks. The defense was strengthened by signing Calais Campbell, A.J. Bouye and Barry Church. The Jags have played in London every year since 2013. They need to start giving their American fans a better show.

AFC WEST

Quarterback Derek Carr of the Oakland Raiders drops back to pass against the Kansas City Chiefs in one of the nastiest rivalries in the entire NFL. Kansas City came out ahead last season, but Oakland will finish first in 2017 before moving to Las Vegas in 2020.

1 ► OAKLAND RAIDERS

If $25 million QB Derek Carr didn't break his fibula in Week 16, the Raiders might have challenged for the Super Bowl. Carr (3,937 yards, 28 TDs) took a dysfunctional team that had gone 13 seasons without winning and won a dozen games. Amari Cooper (83 catches, 1,153 yards) and Michael Crabtree (89 receptions, 1,003 yards) form a dynamic duo, and new TE Jared Cook is a threat. RB Marshawn Lynch comes out of retirement to replace Latavius Murray (788 yards, 12 TDs). Cordarrelle Patterson is a dynamic kick returner. Defensive Player of the Year Khalil Mack is the catalyst on a defense fortified by No. 1 pick Gareon Conley. The Raiders are built for another playoff run before Wayne Newton welcomes them in 2020 to their new Vegas home. Just Sin Baby!

2 ► KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

For the first time in six years, the playoff-hardened Chiefs (12-4) won the Wild Wild West. QB Alex Smith is a classic game manager (3,502 yards, 15 passing TDs, 5 rushing TDs), but he hasn't taken the Chiefs to the next level. Dynamo RB Tyreek Hill scored 12 TDs and RB Spencer Ware, who will be pushed by rookie RB Kareem Hunt, produced most of the ground yardage. Coach Andy Reid traded up in the draft to grab Texas Tech QB Patrick Mahomes, a raw gunslinger who has a big arm.

3 ► DENVER BRONCOS

Vance Joseph gets his first head coaching gig in a strange hire—his Miami defense finished 29th in the league. Thanks to sackmaster Von Miller and a No Fly Zone secondary, the Broncs have a tough defense, but their 29th-ranked offense is led by Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, two questionable quarterbacks who need tutoring. Denver's last pick in the draft, Mr. Irrelevant Chad Kelly, is a talented-but-troubled QB who could turn out to be a sleeper. Most of the offense came from WRs Demaryius Thomas (90 grabs, 1,083 yards) and Emmanuel Sanders (79 catches, 1,032 yards). The Broncos have to find a running attack, and No. 1 pick LT Garett Bolles and G Ronald Leary should help. They gambled on ex-Chief Jamaal Charles, who has missed 24 games in two years.

4 ► LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

After 55 years in San Diego, the Chargers fled to L.A. with new coach Anthony Lynn, who inherited a 5-11 mess. The Bolts had an NFL-high 21 players on IR and 35 different offensive line combinations. QB Philip Rivers (4,386 yards, 33 TDs) deserves better. Drafting Clemson WR Mike Williams with the seventh overall pick was smart, and if WR Keenan Allen can stay on the field, look out. With a league-record ticket price ($192) the Chargers won't have to worry about a rabid fan base in a 27,000-seat-stadium.

TOP: BOB LEVEY/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: PETER G. AIKEN/GETTY IMAGES

NFC EAST

Dynamic wideout Odell Beckham Jr. will have more help this season with the addition of receiver Brandon Marshall and tight end Evan Engram, powering the New York Giants past the powerful Dallas Cowboys. Philadelphia and Washington will bring up the NFC East rear.

1 ► NEW YORK GIANTS

A dominant defense rescued an underachieving offense (36 TDs, down from 47) and got the Giants into their first playoffs in five years. "We were lucky to get 11 wins," said coach Ben McAdoo. And lucky that DT Snacks Harrison was intent on devouring running backs instead of the pastrami at Katz's Deli. Eli Manning, enough on the back nine of his career that GM Jerry Reese drafted Cal QB Davis Webb in the third round, was just a bit above average despite his 4,027 yards and 26 TDs. He threw 16 picks and lost four fumbles behind a weak offensive line. Manning will have more firepower with the additions of WR Brandon Marshall, who joins wondrous powder keg Drake pal Odell Beckham Jr. (101 catches, 1,367 yards) and dynamic No. 1 draft Ole Miss TE Evan Engram.

2 ► DALLAS COWBOYS

Now that the Tony Romo soap opera is over, QB Dak Prescott will take full charge in Dallas. Prescott and RB Ezekiel Elliott exceeded expectations as rookies behind the best offensive line in the game. Prescott had a banner debut (3,667 yards, 23 TDs, 4 INTs, 104.9 rating) and Elliott led the NFL with 1,631 yards as Dallas (13-3) won the East after a 4-12 2015 nightmare. WR Cole Beasley had a breakout year as WR Dez Bryant was slowed by injuries. TE Jason Witten (69 catches) doesn't realize he's 35. Jerry Jones' search for a war daddy pass rusher could be solved by LB Jaylon Smith, who missed his rookie season, or No. 1 draft DE Taco Charlton. The 'Boys Will Be Boys' have had seven players suspended and/or arrested over the last two seasons. Jerruh has apparently mistaken pleamakers for playmakers.

3 ► PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

The Eagles flew to a 3-0 start as Pat's and Geno's were selling more cheesesteaks than anyone can remember. Rookie QB Carson Wentz created a buzz until midseason when LT Lane Johnson was slapped with a 10-game ban. Six of the nine losses were by eight points or less. Wentz was in sync with TE Zach Ertz (78 catches, 816 yards), but no one else. Power back LeGarrette Blount (1,161 yards, NFL leading 18 rushing TDs) provides balance alongside new receivers Torrey Smith, who has deep speed, and big target Alshon Jeffery. No. 1 draft pick Derek Barnett is the pass rusher Jim Schwartz craved to work alongside Fletcher Cox.

4 ► WASHINGTON REDSKINS

After going through 19 quarterbacks since 1999, Washington finally found a franchise QB in Kirk Cousins. Will he stay longer than *Sharknado* did in theaters? He faces 2017 without his top two receivers, Pierre Garçon and DeSean Jackson. Jay Gruden filled one void by signing towering Terrelle Pryor, who snagged 1,007 yards with the Browns. The Redskins upgraded their defense with three DBs from the draft plus Alabama DE Jonathan Allen. "We might not win a game," defensive coordinator Greg Manusky crowed, "but we'll sure beat the crap out of a lot of people!"

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NFC NORTH

Green Bay has one of the top players in the game in Aaron Rodgers, who brought the Pack all the way to the NFC title game despite little help from the ground game. Expect the Packers to beat out the Vikings, whose stadium will host this season's Super Bowl.

1 ► GREEN BAY PACKERS

Aaron Rodgers confirmed his status as a top-three QB when he took the Pack on a blistering run to the NFC title game after a lackluster 4-6 start. Faced with a tepid running attack (Rodgers led the team in rushing TDs with four) he willed his team to a six-game winning streak in crunch time. WR Jordy Nelson returned from a season-ending 2015 knee injury with 97 catches, 1,257 yards and 14 TDs while WR Davante Adams chimed in with 75 grabs, 997 yards, and 12 TDs. With the addition of TEs Martellus Bennett and Lance Kendricks, Rodgers has two more weapons in his arsenal. It will be Air Aaron more than ever with RB Eddie Lacy taking his prodigious appetite to Seattle, even if coach Mike McCarthy improved his 31st-ranked pass defense with draft picks Kevin King and Josh Jones, and the return of CB Davon House.

2 ► MINNESOTA VIKINGS

The Vikings were the only team in NFL history to open 5-0 and miss the playoffs. With Adrian Peterson shelved after three games, the Vikings fell to the bottom of the NFL in rushing. Replacements Latavius Murray and Dalvin Cook should be a nice 1-2 punch. Sam Bradford (3,877 yards, 20 TDs) and a fearsome defensive line reminiscent of the Purple People Eaters were among the few bright spots. Stefon Diggs and Adam Thielen need huge seasons for the Vikes to have a shot at hosting Super Bowl LII at home.

3 ► DETROIT LIONS

Matthew Stafford did all he could to get the Lions their first division crown in 23 years with a record eight fourth-quarter comebacks. Stafford, conjuring memories of the great Bobby Layne, threw for 4,327 yards and 24 TDs, and Golden Tate was his favorite target. Theo Riddick rushed for a paltry 357 yards and more is needed from Ameer Abdullah and a defense that wallowed. GM Bob Quinn upgraded the offensive line with RG T. J. Lang and RT Rick Wagner. Drafting jaw-breaking Florida LB Jarrad Davis in the first round was a necessity—getting Florida CB Teez Tabor in the second round was a steal.

4 ► CHICAGO BEARS

The winters are getting colder after the worst season (3-13) in Chicago since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger. The offense led the NFL with 31 turnovers, the defense had a league-low 11 takeaways and Da Bears went winless on the road for the first time ever. Jay Cutler is gone, and the new QB is Mike Glennon. Chicago panicked with its No. 1 draft pick, trading up to nab QB Mitchell Trubisky, who started only 13 games for North Carolina last year. RB Jordan Howard (1,313 yards) and WR Cameron Meredith (888 yards) are what's left of the offense unless Kevin White can fulfill his promise and replace Alshon Jeffery. "We're in striking distance to win," rhapsodized Coach John Fox. What? When? How?

NFC SOUTH

Atlanta boasted an impressive offensive game last season, with playmakers like wide receiver Julio Jones, shown breaking a tackle from Carolina Panthers cornerback Daryl Worley. The Falcons will shake off their Super Bowl loss to finish first in the NFC South.

1 ► ATLANTA FALCONS

The Falcons reached the Super Bowl and came *thisclose* to victory with the NFL's highest-scoring offense led by QB Matt Ryan (4,944 yards, 38 TDs, 7 INTs). Ryan is back, but offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan is gone. WR Julio Jones was amazing with his third straight 1,000-yard season (1,409) and RB Devonta Freeman led the rushing attack with 1,079 yards. DE Vic Beasley registered an NFL-high 15.5 sacks and welcomes partners in crime in UCLA DE Takkarist McKinley, the 2017 No. 1 draft, and mountainous DT Dontari Poe. The Falcons will move into their new billion-dollar stadium with the ability to repeat, so long as they can overcome a nagging Super Bowl hangover.

2 ► CAROLINA PANTHERS

The 6-10 Panthers were the first team in history to win 15 games then miss the playoffs the next year. QB Cam Newton regressed from MVP-worthy to mediocre: 3,509 yards, 52.9 completion percentage, 19 TDs and 14 INTs, with a lowly 75.8 rating. "Cam has to regain his confidence," moaned Coach Ron Rivera. RB Jonathan Stewart had only one 100-yard rushing game, so Carolina made multitalented RB Christian McCaffrey its top pick out of Stanford. McCaffrey can also catch passes and return kicks and help take the pressure off Newton and Luke Kuechly's defense.

3 ► NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

As long as QB Drew Brees is around, the Saints' offense will be as heavenly as the shrimp étouffée at Galatoire's. Brees turned in his fifth 5,000-yard season (5,208) with 37 TDs, 15 INTs and a 101.7 rating. He has WRs Michael Thomas (1,137 yards) and Willie Snead (895 yards) but lost 1,000-yard receiver Brandin Cooks in a trade to the Patriots. RB Mark Ingram had his best year (1,043 yards) but coach Sean Payton gambled on 32-year-old Adrian Peterson, who was sidelined for 13 games following knee surgery, and used a third-round pick on dangerous RB Alvin Kamara, who is as explosive as the firecracker shrimp at the Beau Rivage's Jia. The defense (31st in points allowed) welcomes No. 1 pick CB Marshon Lattimore to help pass rusher Cameron Jordan.

4 ► TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

Jameis Winston showed he's ready to break out, throwing for 4,090 yards and 28 TDs, which got the Bucs their first winning year since 2010. At 9-7, they lost a playoff spot in a tiebreaker with Detroit. RB Doug Martin will miss the first three games, but the Bucs are banking on him to return and team with Jacquizz Rodgers. Winston's aerial game becomes more explosive with the signing of ex-Redskin WR DeSean Jackson and the drafting of Alabama TE O.J. Howard to join elite WR Mike Evans.

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NFC WEST

Wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald is the reliable veteran of the Arizona Cardinals, but the rival Seattle Seahawks have the edge this season and should repeat as NFC West champions. Expect the Rams to struggle in their second season back in Los Angeles.

1 ► SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

Seattle went 10-5-1 last season and won the NFC West despite a sub-par offensive line. QB Russell Wilson was constantly under pressure and the running game was practically nonexistent. Wilson's 4,219 yards look gaudy on paper, but he threw only 21 TD passes. Christine Michael was released after galloping for a pedestrian 469 yards. Ex-Packer Eddie Lacy (360 yards) replaces him, but Lacy gets a little chubby at times and is coming off ankle surgery, so he may not be capable of resisting the oatmeal-crusted French toast at Portage Bay Café. Seattle does have two quality receivers in Doug Baldwin (94 catches, 1,128 yards) and TE Jimmy Graham (65 receptions, 923 yards). The Legion of Boom welcomes back elite safety Earl Thomas (broken tibia), who looks good enough to intercept any of Kim Jong-un's missiles.

2 ► ARIZONA CARDINALS

The Cardinals were the only team other than the Patriots who fielded a top-10 offense and defense. Injuries contributed to a 7-8-1 campaign. QB Carson Palmer played well over the second half of the year (4,233 yards, 26 TDs, 14 INTs) but needs more playmakers like RB David Johnson, who rushed for 1,239 yards, caught 80 passes for 879 yards and scored 16 TDs. Veteran Larry Fitzgerald had another big year (107 catches, 1,023 yards) but his 9.6 average was a career low. No. 1 draft pick Temple LB Haason Reddick, who can contribute immediately both inside and outside and give a healthy S Honey Badger Mathieu some help, was a smart choice.

3 ► LOS ANGELES RAMS

With no first-round draft choice, rookie Sean McVay, the youngest coach in the league at 31, is already swimming upstream. Jared Goff, who struggled (1,089 yards, 5 TDs, 7 INTs, 54% accuracy) and was benched, needs to start proving he's a franchise quarterback. RB Todd Gurley, the 10th pick in 2015, needs to regain his rookie form after sagging to 3.2 yards per carry. Kenny Britt (68 receptions, 1,002 yards) bolted to Cleveland. Rookie TE Gerald Everett could be Goff's Jordan Reed. Elite defensive coordinator Wade Phillips will love unleashing DE Aaron Donald for his hybrid 3-4 defense, but after four winning seasons in 21 years, the Rams won't be found on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

4 ► SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

Kyle Shanahan and John Lynch were given six years to clean up the mess in San Fran, a once-proud franchise that deteriorated to 15-33 over three years with four coaching changes. Shanahan, an offensive coach, is burdened by player defections and a 32nd-ranked defense. He has a dependable playmaker in RB Carlos Hyde (988 yards), and brought in journeyman QB Brian Hoyer and WR Pierre Garçon. Then he made ex-Raven Kyle Juszczyk, who touched the ball only 104 times in four-years, the highest-paid FB in history with a $21 million contract. Huh? Draft picks Solomon Thomas and Reuben Foster should help the defense, but 91-year-old Tony Bennett is in better shape than the 49ers.

TOP: CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: MICHAEL B. THOMAS/GETTY IMAGES

SUPER BOWL LII PREDICTION

JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES

Patriots Defeat Giants 31-28

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell will hear it from unforgiving post-Deflategate Patriots fans in September when he finally shows his face in Foxborough when the defending champions unveil the Super Bowl LI banner before the Thursday Night season opener. And now only Eli Manning, the only quarterback who has ever beaten Tom Brady twice in a Super Bowl (XLII and XLVI), could save Goodell from handing the Lombardi Trophy yet again to Brady and Bill Belichick and Robert and Jonathan Kraft as the New York Giants meet the Patriots in Super Bowl LII in Minneapolis on February 4, 2018.

Manning, this time armed with better weapons than David Tyree or Mario Manningham, electrifies the blue army of Giants fans with touchdown passes to Odell Beckham Jr. and Brandon Marshall, and for the second straight Super Sunday, Brady will find himself in a 28-3 hole. And then, without warning, a fatigued Jason Pierre-Paul and Olivier Vernon will stop hounding Brady, who will hit Rob Gronkowski for one touchdown, Dwayne Allen for another, and Brandin Cooks for a third. The Pats defense will emerge strong as Stephon Gilmore intercepts Manning late to set up a touchdown pass to Julian Edelman with 12 seconds left that gives the Patriots a dramatic 31-28 victory.

For Gisele and Tom, it will be the Joy of Six—six Super Bowl championships.

—Danny Sheridan

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America's GAME

Pro football, with its long and storied history, is the most popular sport in the United States

BY KENNETH SHOULER

It was January 1969, with the nation still in the thrall of the Summer of Love. A quarterback with long sideburns, bushy hair and a penchant for wearing white shoes made a brash prediction. Responding to a heckler at a Miami supper club, Joe "Willie" Namath guaranteed victory in Super Bowl III against the Colts, a juggernaut favored by 18 points.

Few gave the Jets a chance, but Namath was more than ready. "We had an advantage because the Colts had this defense that killed the whole NFL that season," says Namath, now 74, remembering that day more than 50 years ago. "Why would they change for an 18-point underdog? I knew they would stick with the same fronts and coverages and the same blitzes. It was like having all the questions for an exam two weeks before you actually take it. By the time we played, I knew those guys inside-out."

Namath's Jets beat the seemingly invincible Colts 16-7 and the football universe would never be the same. "We sent a message to all the underdogs out there," Namath says. "If you want something bad enough and aren't afraid to lay it on the line, you can do it. I can't tell you how many times I have had people tell me they used our win as a motivating force. Teachers, coaches, everyday people. They figured, if the Jets did it, they could do it."

Moments like that one are the reasons that professional football is entrenched, firmly, as America's game. Back in 1961, a Gallup Poll showed that people preferred baseball to football by a margin of 34 percent to 21 percent. By 1972, the numbers had flipped: people now favored rectangular warfare to baseball's subdued charm, and nearly 50 years later, football is more dominant still, more than three times as popular as other sports. "Baseball is what we were," wrote Mary McGrory, a Pulitzer winning columnist. "Football is what we've become."

Our infatuation with football reveals our desire for speed and violence. Football joins the swiftness of a track meet with the brutality of highway crashes. It juxtaposes the grace of ballet with the ungainliness of clashing bodies in a mosh pit. "The contact, the speed, and the hitting—go back to the Colosseum days when people were fighting to stay alive," says Namath.

Executing one of his signature jump passes, Joe Namath shocked the world with his New York Jets in Super Bowl III. Games like this one made NFL football America's favorite sport.

WALTER IOOSS JR./SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/GETTY IMAGES

12

Red Grange, football's Babe Ruth. The popular running back drew 36,000 fans to Wrigley Field in his debut game for the Chicago Bears in 1924.

"Football is not a contact sport," Mike Ditka once said. "It's a collision sport." Ray Lewis, in last October's CIGAR AFICIONADO, described the intensity he put into one tackle. "Everything that I have been through in life," he said, "I gave to that hit." Our love of football holds up a mirror to ourselves and reveals our bellicose nature. The show is too good to ignore.

Football's timeless images are endless. Johnny Unitas straddled over center, inventing the two-minute drill on the fly, leading his team to a title in '58. Lawrence Taylor standing almost completely upright at his right end position in the '80s and '90s, tossing aside blockers to get to the quarterback. Tom Brady ignoring a seemingly insurmountable 28-3 deficit and leading the Patriots on a record-setting comeback in last season's Super Bowl.

The Early Years

Long before Brady, Unitas, Namath and Taylor, pro football was quite a different game. In 1920, the National Football League (then called the American Professional Football Association) was seeking star power to keep pace with the college game. That year a mere 19 passes were thrown in 40 pro games—about one toss every other game. Rules of the day caused this grounded offense. Passes had to be thrown from five yards behind the line of scrimmage, so defenses were better prepared. An incomplete toss in the end zone cost you possession of the ball. The ball itself was fatter, making it easier to kick than throw. Since two-way players worked 60 minutes on offense and defense combined, they didn't want to run extra pass patterns. It wasn't until decade's end that the pass was becoming a weapon.

The search for a face of the league, a star that the game could hitch its wagon to, was ongoing. Baseball had Babe Ruth. Football lacked anyone of that stature. It appeared that the candidate might be Jim Thorpe, but in that inaugural 1920 season Thorpe was 32. He would play only 52 games with six different teams and didn't finish the decade. But another star was born.

An elusive runner at the University of Illinois, Red Grange had averaged 6.6 yards every time he carried the ball in 1924. His final college game, a 14-9 Illinois victory, drew 85,000 fans at Ohio State. Then he announced he would forego the rest of his education and sign a professional contract. Not a week later he debuted for the Chicago Bears before a throng of 36,000 at Wrigley Field, the largest crowd to date ever to see a professional contest. The Bears anticipated his impact and paid him $12,000 for his first game.

The gridiron shook. On December 6, 1925, a crowd of 68,000 fans and 100 reporters squeezed into New York's Polo Grounds to watch Grange and the Bears top the Giants 19-7. The star back pocketed $30,000 in gate receipts. Now the professional game challenged the hegemony of the college game. The fraternity of college coaches were aghast that players such as Grange, who hadn't finished college, would sully their amateur standing by making money off the game. But this was wanton hypocrisy, as they earned generous salaries to coach. In addition, a 400-page study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, entitled *Bulletin Number Twenty-Three*, revealed that 102 of the 130 colleges visited illegally subsidized their athletes in some form. The report, released in October 1929 and based on four years of

ABOVE: GEORGE RINHART/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

TIMELINE: The NFL Through The Decades

1920s

- Pro football traces its roots back to the 1890s, but it lacked uniform regulations before 1920, when teams from four states formed the American Professional Football Association (APFA). Star Jim Thorpe is named president. The $100 per team fee is widely ignored.
- The name National Football League is adopted in 1922.

1930s

- The first national broadcast of an NFL game takes place on Thanksgiving Day, 1934, sparking a tradition of having a side of televised football with your turkey dinner. The Chicago Bears beat the Detroit Lions 19-16.
- The second of many rival leagues named the American Football League is formed.

1940s

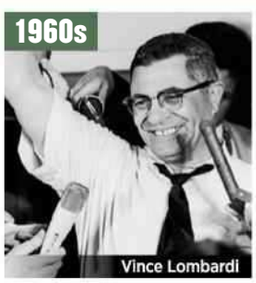
Don Hutson

- Football helmets become mandatory in 1943. It took 12 more years for facebars.

1950s

- NBC pays $100,000 for the rights to broadcast the 1955 NFL Championship Game.
- In 1956, the Colts sign Johnny Unitas. He leads Baltimore to victory in the legendary 1958 NFL Championship.

1960s



Vince Lombardi

- The NFL merges with the AFL in 1966. The Packers win the first two Super Bowls.

"There are many things you can learn on the football field. You can learn how to take a good licking and not cry about it, and learn how to hand one out and not brag about it." —Red Grange

investigations and interviews, revealed that the universities themselves, and booster clubs, gave their athletes cash handouts, tuition waivers and jobs.

So taking money for play was nothing new, and Grange got his. Like Ruth he endorsed, well, anything—candy bars, cigarettes, fountain pens. He was the first football player to appear on a box of Wheaties. Grange was the "Galloping Ghost," a nickname that only added to his stature as a shadowy figure eluding mere mortals seeking to tackle him. In the hyperbolic reporting of the day, Grange was a mythic figure. "Grange does the work of three men and a horse," wrote Damon Runyon.

Grange had mediocre professional statistics. But, like Ruth, Grange had the touch of everyman. "There are many things you can learn on the football field," he once said to children surrounding him, extolling the game's virtues. "You can learn how to take a good licking and not cry about it, and learn how to hand one out and not brag about it." Moreover, Grange brought stability to the league. "When I came into pro football in the 1920s, it was really a nothing game. When I played outside of the franchise towns nobody knew anything about pro ball." But he was wrong in assuming that football lacked a future.

That future would be shorter on mythology but longer on stellar play. Two players would carry the ball—actually and figuratively—into the modern era. They were "The Alabama Antelope" Don Hutson and a sidewinding Washington quarterback, Slingin' Sammy Baugh. Hutson, who played for Green Bay from 1935 to 1945, was also a defensive back (he intercepted 23 passes in his last four years) and a kicker. He helped Green Bay to three titles—and changed the game from run to pass almost overnight.

In his 11 seasons Hutson led the league in receptions eight times and receiving yardage and touchdowns seven times. The two-time Most Valuable Player caught 99 touchdowns, a record that stood up for 44 years. One of his slick moves was to grab the goal line goalpost and then pivot off of it, away from defenders. Grainy films show Hutson, who ran 100 yards in 9.7 seconds, blazing past backs. "Nobody in the league could touch him," said Baugh, claiming that one defender alone couldn't stop Hutson. While skilled ends are commonly double-teamed now, that tactic was untried until Hutson came along.

In 1942 he might have posted the most dominant season ever. In an 11-game schedule he caught 74 passes for 17 touchdowns and 1,211 yards. Hutson orbited in a galaxy all his own: he scored 138 points, the first NFL player to surpass 100. In 1944 he scored 29 points on four touchdowns and five conversions—in one quarter.

Had he teamed with Baugh he might have shattered even more records. Baugh closed out his rookie campaign in the 1937 NFL Championship Game by slinging three long touchdowns to lead Washington to a 28-21 victory over Chicago. Baugh changed the game from low scoring trench warfare to an aerial assault. "They finally realized that people liked to see scoring," Baugh recollected. "You don't want to sit out there in the cold and see a 14-6 game."

A two-way player, Baugh was a safety who logged 31 interceptions, and a booming punter who still owns the mark for the highest average in a season (51.4 yards in 1940), and a career (45.1 yards). He even snatched a rare "triple crown" in 1943, leading the league in passing, punting and interceptions. He led the NFL in punting for four consecutive years. The Skins' quarterback played 16 years and made the pass a staple of the game.

The Stars Multiply

The stars were brighter, and more plentiful, in the 1950s. That decade witnessed Unitas and his other half, receiver Raymond Berry, and the great Cleveland Browns, with Otto Graham and Jim Brown, the player who the Giants' Frank Gifford called "the greatest player of all time."

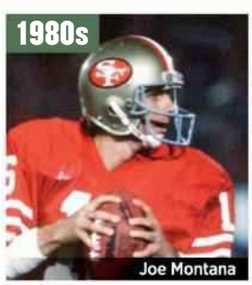
For many, Otto Graham is the very embodiment of transcendent records. From 1946 through 1955—four years in the All-America Football Conference and then six more in the NFL—Graham brought the world championship home to Cleveland seven times. When the Browns joined the NFL in 1950, Graham threw four touchdown passes and led Cleveland to a 30-28 win over Los Angeles in the 1950 title game.

TIMELINE LEFT TO RIGHT: ROBERT WALSH/AP PHOTO; BELOW RIGHT: ROBERT RIGER/GETTY IMAGES; FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

1970s

- On January 14, 1973, the Miami Dolphins become the only NFL team to ever post a perfect season, with 17 wins, including three in postseason. The record still stands.
- In 1977, the league adopts a 16-game regular season. It also outlaws the head slap, an effective but punishing move favored by Deacon Jones.

1980s


Joe Montana

- Joe Montana and his San Francisco 49ers are the stars of the decade.

1990s

- The resurgent Dallas Cowboys, built by coach Jimmy Johnson and powered by Troy Aikman, Emmitt Smith and Michael Irvin, win three Super Bowls, including back-to-back victories.
- NFL Sunday Ticket debuts in 1994, allowing satellite viewers to watch the entire slate of NFL games for a fee.

2000s

- Wide receiver Jerry Rice becomes the all-time leader in yards from scrimmage in 2002. He retires in 2005 with 23,540 yards and 208 touchdowns in his career.
- The Steelers defeat the Cardinals 27-23 in Super Bowl XLIII in 2009. They are the only team in NFL history to win six Super Bowls.

2010s

- Tom Brady leads his Patriots in a stunning comeback over the Atlanta Falcons in February 2016, winning his fifth Super Bowl ring, a record for a quarterback. He ties Charles Haley (who played for the 49ers and Cowboys) with the most rings for any NFL player.

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The Legend—Dick Butkus

The defender is immense, a hulk in a dark blue jersey closing on his prey with unlikely and unnerving speed. He snarls, the number '51' spread across his massive back, and rams his shoulder into his opponent's chest, stopping the man in his tracks and slamming him into the grass. Each and every tackle dished out by legendary linebacker Dick Butkus looked painful as hell.

"My deal was just simply this," says Butkus, his voice deep and gruff. "I was trying to hit them as hard as I could to get them to release the ball."

When you boil pro football down to the basics, it involves big men trying to move other big men out of the way, giants trying to stop other giants using only their bodies as weapons. Few who have played this sport have tackled as well as Butkus. His hits are the stuff of legend, usually high on the body and employed with his arms spread, wrapping up players in a bear hug before driving them into the ground with emphasis, his thick legs pumping all the way.

"Every time he hit you," said his contemporary Deacon Jones, "he tried to put you in the cemetery, not the hospital." Paul Hornung of the Packers called him "the meanest son of a bitch I've ever seen in my life play professional football."

Six foot three and 243 pounds—huge for his time—Butkus played with power and rage for the Chicago Bears from 1965 to 1973 before retiring after his knee was ravaged by injury. The team struggled, never making the Super Bowl during his career, but he played every down like it was the fourth quarter of the biggest game of the year.

Butkus learned how to hit by being hit. When he played in high school, he played some offense as well as defense, taking the field as a fullback. He soon realized he didn't like being on his back. "If they tackled me high I couldn't use my arms to break my fall," he says. "I thought hmmm. I started hitting that way."

Does it feel good to hit a man so hard? "It does feel good," he says. "It is so hard to get a shot like that. When you do nail him it's like—wow—I got one. The crowd gets jacked up."

He's a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and today the 74 year old, who enjoys several cigars a week, spends his time hitting golf balls instead of running backs. He smokes big, strong cigars, and he still loves to watch football. He thinks the game today has too many breaks. "I watched a Bears game last year and I counted 62 stoppages in the first half," he says. "I couldn't believe it." But his love of the game and his hometown Bears remains. "It was just a game that I fell in love with. It's fun playing it, it's fun watching it. I was very fortunate to be able to do it."

—David Savona

Before players were heavily recruited, Graham was "discovered" playing intramural football as a freshman. That gives him something in common with his successor as the greatest quarterback of the 1950s—Johnny Unitas. A ninth-round pick of the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1955, Unitas was cut and played semipro ball for $6 a game while working as a piledriver at a Pittsburgh steel mill. The Colts signed this undrafted underdog as a free agent for $7,000 in 1956. Two years later, "The Lord of Baltimore" orchestrated the most famous drive in football history. The Colts trailed the Giants 17-14 with 1:58 left in the 1958 title game at Yankee Stadium. Starting from his own 14-yard line, Unitas threw an 11-yard completion to Lenny Moore, then strikes of 25, 15 and 22 yards in succession to Berry, his favorite target. Steve Myhra kicked a 23-yard field goal to put the game in overtime. After a Giants' punt, Unitas completed four passes, and audibled to back Alan Ameche for 22 yards up the middle when he saw Giants' linebacker Sam Huff move to help out on Berry. Finally, a one-yard plunge from Ameche won the contest, 23-17. As twilight turned to dusk in the great three-tiered stadium, Unitas essentially drew the curtain on the two-minute drill, as if it was a new Broadway dance production being seen for the first time.

"He was the best play caller I've even seen," recalls Sam Huff, the Giants linebacker. "Unitas to Berry, Unitas to Berry—it drove me crazy. We weren't smart enough to stop that offense." The game was televised and did more than any other to carry the NFL to hitherto unseen heights of popularity. It was the first overtime game in the playoffs and is in the minds of some the greatest game ever played. What cannot be argued is that it was the most important. The legend of the slump shouldered quarterback with the black high tops, and his perfect drive, only grows larger over time.

The 1960s, a decade that unleashed a tsunami of social and political upheaval across the fruited plain, did the same in football. First came a new league, the American Football League, a league built on a try-anything, high-octane style of offense. The AFL (the fourth league to bear that name) was also a doormat for the National Football League, as evidenced by the first two Super Bowls when the new kids were chastised severely by the smirking establishment, as Green Bay dusted Kansas City and then Oakland by a combined score of 68 to 24. Namath and his Jets changed all that with their improbable Super Bowl victory in 1969, which set off a decade-plus in which the AFC new kids—New York, Kansas City, Miami, Pittsburgh and Oakland—wiped the floor with their NFC competitors, winning 11 of 13 Super Bowls, nine of them by a margin of a touchdown or greater. The merger was on, and so was an annual rite of winter: unholy ass kickings. Only the Cowboys—who won in 1972 and 1978—could stop the bloodletting.

The "Me Generation" 1970s saw crew cuts replaced by facial hair, several dynasties and near-dynasties emerge, and witnessed legendary defensive outfits with nicknames like the "No Name Defense," "The Purple People Eaters," "The Doomsday Defense" and "The Steel Curtain." The decade witnessed the advent of cocaine and steroids, the latter even showing up in players' cereal bowls. One thing remained the same: salaries were routinely lousy, as owners held the puppet strings that players danced on. But above all, it was a decade dominated by one of the greatest outfits ever assembled—the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"I'm going to make them a winner," said a young man with straight blond hair. He was Terry Bradshaw, and he was tall and looked clean, scrubbed and unblemished, like John Voight in *Midnight Cowboy*. His "I wanna go deep" style combined with the steady ground game of Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier, and a reckless defense which seemed to compete with the Oakland

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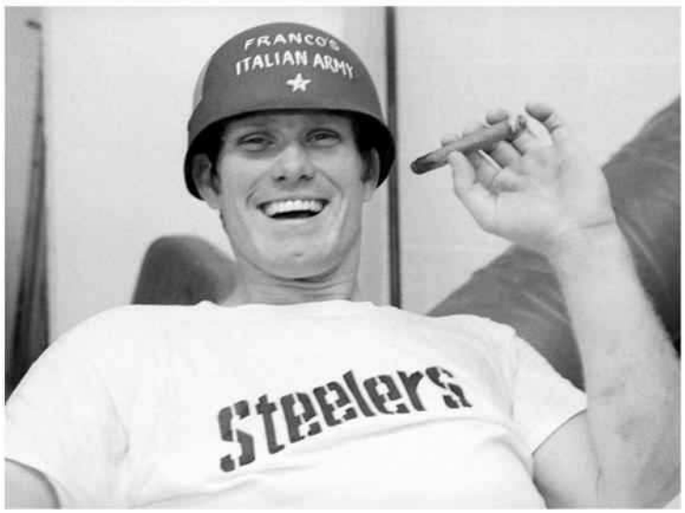

Terry Bradshaw, the golden boy of the Pittsburgh Steelers and one of only two quarterbacks (with Joe Montana) to go a perfect 4-0 in Super Bowls.

Raiders for violent excess and a longing to set ever higher standards for bad taste. The formula for the Steelers isn't hard to grasp. When it was over we knew we had witnessed a decade of football so unlike any other, and the Steelers had four championships.

Football Goes Primetime

"Monday Night Football," which debuted on ABC on September 21, 1970, was a game changer. (It had been turned down by CBS and NBC, which certainly regretted the decision, as the show caught fire instantly.) In the booth were Dandy Don Meredith, the former Dallas quarterback, crooning in his notable twang; Frank Gifford, a Giant on the New York sports scene, literally and figuratively, whose straight delivery and good looks bumped the female audience, which made up 40 percent of Monday night viewers; and Howard Cosell, the acerbic lawyer turned sportscaster. In a poll of people most hated by Americans, Cosell finished below Richard Nixon but above Satan. Still, the haters who loathed his knowledge and nasal delivery tuned in to hear what he would say and to catch his highlights of the weekend games. These he did, unscripted, in about four minutes. Everyone watched.

A rectangular sport framed by a rectangular screen, football was suddenly must-see television. As Kevin Cook relates in his book *The Last Headbangers,* CBS telecasts featured more cheerleaders, especially the Dallas cheerleaders, who, baring more skin than cheerleaders in other cities, drew some 58 million viewers between the first and second quarters of the 1972 Super Bowl. "I like to give the fans a little sex with their violence," said CBS producer Chuck Milton. Commercials for Noxema had Joe Namath "getting creamed" with shaving cream by Farrah Fawcett.

None of this advertising foreplay would have mattered if the product was lousy. But the revolution that brought changes also brought identifiable dynasties, near-dynasties and savage rivalries. The 1972 Miami Dolphins ran off 17 consecutive wins, the only team to go through a regular season, playoffs and Super Bowl without losing. Pittsburgh and Oakland hated each other and faced off in the playoffs five years in a row. Pittsburgh's defense for the ages included Mean Joe Green, Jack Lambert and Jack Ham, all of whom seemed ready to slay ball carriers without thinking twice.

As Pittsburgh dominated the '70s, so did San Francisco rule the '80s. In 1985, the 49ers faced the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl XIX. Their combined record was 29-3, then the best ever for two opponents in the big game, and the contest was promoted as a mano-a-mano duel between football's best quarterbacks:

The Warrior—Jason Taylor

When Jason Taylor recalls his 15 years in the National Football League playing in pain—in particular, nearly having a leg amputated—he morphs into a stoic, bottom-line kind of man. "I would do it again," says the 6-6, 255-pounder, who played defensive end for Miami and was the 2006 Defensive Player of the Year. "I loved the intensity, the fierceness, and aggressiveness of the game."

Call it survival mentality. Mental toughness. Resiliency. "Players call it life," he says. "Every day you play football you play in pain. The normal mentality is we learn to push our bodies to our limits, and beyond, to our own demise."

Taylor is on intimate terms with this strange sort of "normal." His injury, suffered in 2008 while he played for the Redskins, was beyond the pale. "I thought I had a bruise in the foot that would go away," he says. Dr. James Andrews told him that his excruciating pain, resulting from nerve damage, was compartment syndrome. Swelling caused by injury can increase pressure inside a compartment—groups of muscle tissue, blood vessels and nerves—and cut off blood flow. The doctor told him he had two hours to get to the hospital, or he could end up with an amputation.

He was playing three weeks later. "I missed three games," he says.

Pain and football are intimate bedfellows. "It's an immense amount of pounding. Like having two car accidents a week," Taylor says, describing football's collisions. "When you are young you are sore on Monday. Wednesday you are ready to go back to practice. At 35, you are still in pain on Thursday, trying to get pain free and ready to go by game time."

There's no second thought about the path chosen. Taylor's approach to the pain forms no part of his residue of regret. "The years went so fast," he says, now five years removed from the game. "It was long and arduous, but it flew by. I regret not enjoying the process as much as I should have. The process of preparation in March, April, May, the long road trips, the flights back."

At 42, interviewed just a month before he will be inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame, he can look back to a time before he had to worry over the weekly calculus of risk and reward. "I grew up a Dan Marino fan," he says, "and I got to play with him for three years with the Dolphins. It was amazing."

He smokes Padróns, preferring Serie 1926 maduros, and football is still part of his life, with his national radio broadcast for Sunday Night Football with Westwood One. He thinks Tom Brady is the best of all time, and never doubted him, even when he was trailing by 25 in the Super Bowl. "I said to the people around me 'This game is not over.' I watched *The Godfather* enough times to know how the movie ends."

—Kenneth Shouler

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Dan Marino, just finishing his second year as the first ever to pass for 5,000 yards in a season and the youngest quarterback to start a Super Bowl, and Joe Montana. "Montana always threw it right where he was supposed to," says San Francisco running back Roger Craig, the first player to get three touchdowns in a Super Bowl. Coach Bill Walsh drew up a plan to attack Miami's vulnerable inside linebackers, and his six-back-defense held the Dolphins' ground attack to a pathetic 25 yards. Marino appeared flummoxed and was sacked four times in the second half alone. Finally, Craig hauled in a Montana spiral and was untouched across 16 yards for his third score. "He had great touch," Craig marvels of Montana. "Like he was handing it to you." The Niners won in a rout, 38-16. "They called him 'Joe Cool' for a reason. He was pretty much unflappable," says Carl Banks, who won two Super Bowls with the New York Giants and faced off against Montana several times.

The 49ers dynasty was followed by that of the Dallas Cowboys, who ruled the 1990s with their high-powered offense. From a 1-15 record in 1989, they rebuilt into the league's best team, winning Super Bowls in 1993, 1994 and 1996. New England, run by the Kraft family, coached by Bill Belichik and orchestrated by Tom Brady, has been the dominant team of this century, with five Super Bowl wins between the 2001 season and 2016.

For every champion, there was a loser. Marino never returned to the Super Bowl. Fran Tarkenton and Chuck Foreman took the Minnesota Vikings to three Super Bowls, but never won. In their final Super Bowl together, in 1977, they faced the Raiders. The legendary *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jim Murray might have had the best line: "The Vikings play football like a guy laying carpet. The Raiders play like a guy jumping through a skylight with a machine gun." Oakland won 32-14. Years later, the Buffalo Bills would make it to four straight Super Bowls only to lose all four.

Tom Brady has five Super Bowl rings, more than any other quarterback, and his most recent one came in a comeback worthy of a Hollywood film.

Today, fans wonder how long can New England rule? Who will their successor be? And who is the greatest ever to play the game?

"Everybody that is a detractor from what Brady and Belichick have achieved is just jealous," says Dan Hampton, a Hall of Famer who played for the Chicago Bears for 12 years. Hampton thinks that Brady is the greatest quarterback of all-time—better than Montana, better than Unitas, better than them all. His estimate of Belichick is the same. His reasoning? "Brady will not have anyone in the Hall of Fame off of his team," Hampton says. "True, Randy Moss was there for one year and a cup of coffee, but Noll coached about 10 Hall of Famers and Montana had his share."

Let the debates continue. That's football, too. ❖

Ken Shouler is a frequent contributor to CIGAR AFICIONADO *magazine.*

The Winner—Robert Kraft

Robert Kraft is jubilant, wearing a blue suit and red tie. He moves slowly through the Patriots locker room carrying an open box of Padrón Anniversary Series Imperials, offering each of his players a cigar, a handshake and a hug. His Patriots had just staged the greatest comeback in Super Bowl history, beating the Atlanta Falcons despite trailing by 25 points in the third quarter. Kraft was celebrating in style.

Kraft, 76, began smoking cigars in his late 20s. "I always looked up to successful men who were 20 to 30 years older than I was and often smoked cigars at special occasions. It was part of their persona," he says. "Now, I only do it on rare occasions—like after winning the Super Bowl."

Kraft has had a lot of reasons to celebrate. His Patriots have won five Lombardi Trophies since he bought the team in 1994 for $175 million, at the time a record sum. He took a losing team—the Patriots went 1-15 in 1990, 2-14 in 1992 and had won a meager 19 games over five seasons—and turned

it into a winner. He hired coach Bill Belichick away from the rival New York Jets in 2000, gave him near-complete control over the team, and watched former backup quarterback Tom Brady blossom into one of the best quarterbacks ever to play the game. The Patriots have had only two losing seasons under Kraft's reign.

That $175 million investment, once thought too high, has more than paid off. The team is worth more than $3 billion today, according to estimates, and *Forbes* estimates Kraft's net worth at $5.2 billion. A Harvard MBA who bought his first season tickets to the Patriots in the 1970s, Kraft built his empire with paper and packaging products, starting with Rand-Whitney, then International Forest Products. Today his business holdings are under the umbrella of The Kraft Group, and in addition to the Patriots include the New England Revolution soccer team plus a stake in the UFC, the mixed martial arts sporting organization.

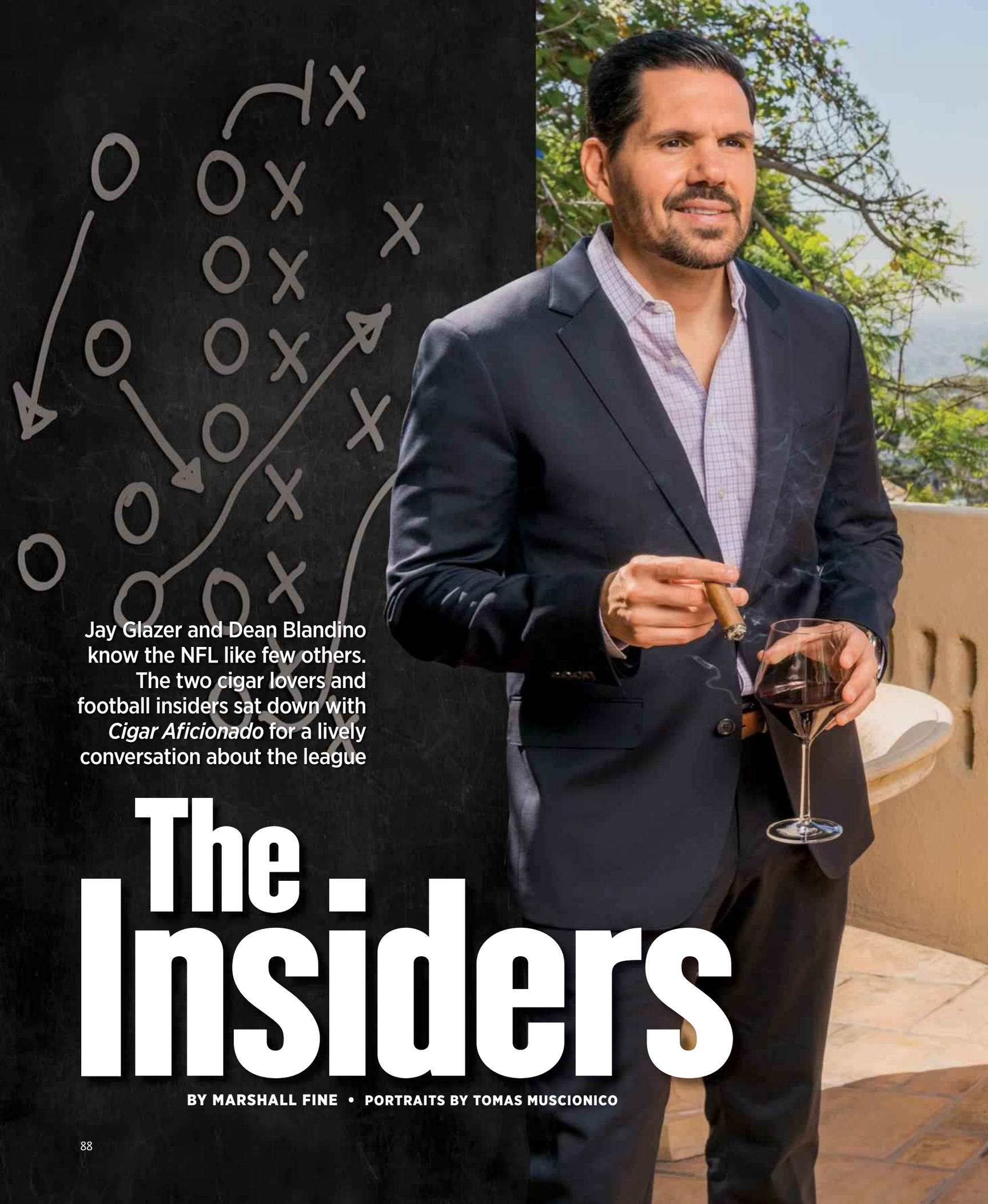
Kraft passes out cigars after each and every Super Bowl win. "We thought it was special to celebrate a victory with very high-quality cigars," he says, "and the players loved it."

This last victory was especially poignant. Not only for the record comeback, but because the deck was stacked against his team, with Brady suspended for the first four games of the season and star tight end Rob Gronkowski lost to injury for half the season, plus the entire postseason.

"Every one of them feels good," says Kraft, "but this one was very special."

—David Savona

TOP: TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES; INSET: KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES



Jay Glazer and Dean Blandino know the NFL like few others. The two cigar lovers and football insiders sat down with *Cigar Aficionado* for a lively conversation about the league

The Insiders

BY MARSHALL FINE • PORTRAITS BY TOMAS MUSCIONICO

Jay Glazer (left) and Dean Blandino, who will dissect NFL games on Fox this season, discussing football trends over cigars and wine at Glazer's home.

"I'll share a little juicy scoop with you here," Jay Glazer says, a devilish glint in his eye. It's 9:30 a.m., and he's already had a cigar. He turns, his shaved dome tilting toward a wary Dean Blandino. "Dean will probably 'no-comment' me here. I understand the NFL's officiating department gave certain officials a virtual-reality camera [for training] on their glasses—and a certain official accidentally left his camera on when he got naked in his hotel room."

Blandino, who spent 18 years with the NFL, isn't biting. "I don't know what you're talking about."

With a satisfied cackle, Glazer says, "That's why I'm the Insider. It's a true story. I'm not going to name the guy. I was dying when I heard this." The powerfully built Glazer won't let this go. "I think it was Dean," he says. "Yes or no? Was it you?"

Blandino, who was once the final word on all instant replays reviewed by the NFL, levels his dark eyes on Glazer before rendering judgment. "No," he says. Then he breaks into a laugh.

The exchange is par for the friendship between Glazer, 47, the scoop-hunting "NFL Insider" for "Fox NFL Sunday," and Blandino, 45, who resigned earlier this year as the National Football League's senior vice president for officiating to become an on-air analyst for Fox's NFL broadcasts. The pair met a few years ago when Glazer did a story about Blandino's officiating department. As a practical joke, Glazer showed them a fake version in which he quoted Blandino and colleagues bragging about making officiating calls based on what would most benefit their own fantasy-football teams.

"Everyone else believed it," Glazer says, still laughing. "Dean was the only one who didn't fall for it." [For the record, Blandino notes, the NFL officiating staff is forbidden from participating in the ubiquitous fantasy game.]

Glazer, once a sportswriter for the *New York Post*, parlayed his hustle into both a broadcasting career and as a trainer for pro athletes. Blandino started at the NFL as an intern out of college in 1994 and worked his way up over the next 20 years, developing today's modern officiating techniques as well as launching the highly successful instant-replay review program. The two are sitting in a back room at Unbreakable Performance Center, which Glazer owns. Outside in the mixed-martial-arts gym, elite clientele (including rapper Wiz Khalifa and Denver Nuggets center Roy Hibbert) are working out in the facility, which sits just above a Pink Taco restaurant on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood.

But in this back room, the voluble Glazer and the more strait-laced Blandino are focused on the future—of the NFL.

Q: What is it that sets professional football apart from other sports for you, personally and professionally?
GLAZER: I think the NFL has become the greatest reality show in America. If you try to script this stuff, you couldn't. Sports, for me, is supposed to be escapism. We're not doctors, we're not saving children. We're in sports: nothing more, nothing less.
BLANDINO: I love the game itself. You have the athleticism, the physicality, the sophistication and some of the intricacies of the strategy. It's a simple game when you break it down: catching, blocking, running, passing. But then there's all this strategy that goes into it, these intricate play calls and everything else. I think it's the best game in the world.
GLAZER: One time, Tiki Barber was showing me his playbook and he said, "Let's see how smart you are, Glaze. I'm just going to have you study these formations." I think there were eight formations to a page and I did three pages. I studied them for an hour and came back the next day. Of the 24 formations, I remembered five. That wasn't the play, that wasn't run or pass—just how they lined up to block. And there's 1,000 formations. He only showed me 24 and I could only remember five. Football is not a game for dummies.

Q: The first Super Bowl was a curiosity. Now it's the biggest sporting event in the United States. What changed in the 50 years that turned it into the annual two-week extravaganza it's become?
BLANDINO: I think the NFL took such big strides in America and became so popular. I always go back to some officiating thing: In the late '70s, the illegal contact rule was put in and it changed the passing game. And the game became more popular in the '80s. Everybody fell in love with it. It's become this brand that the NFL is today. Which is why the Super Bowl is the most-watched TV program every year in the history of American television.
GLAZER: I don't know why we don't have the Monday after the Super Bowl as a national holiday. We should. It's such a nonproductive workday for everyone.
BLANDINO: Except for the league office. It's a very productive day there.
GLAZER: I think dynasties obviously help. The Steelers' dynasty, the 49ers' dynasty, Cowboys, Patriots. People like dynasties. Those really helped the popularity of the league and the Super Bowl.

Q: So the NFL's popularity has grown beyond hometown loyalties?
BLANDINO: When I was growing up in New York, you had Jets and Giants fans. But then you had these large groups of Cowboy fans and Raider fans and Steeler fans. They didn't have a geographical connection to their team. But because in the '70s, the Steelers were so good—with Bradshaw, Stallworth and Lynn Swann and the defenses—and the Cowboys and the Raiders—people identified with that. It became a national obsession, where before it was just regional, where you followed the team in your area.

Q: How does fantasy football affect that?
GLAZER: Fantasy football has really opened things up; people don't just root for their team anymore. They root for players.
BLANDINO: At the officiating level, fantasy football is seen as a conflict of interest. But my brother plays fantasy football and there were people in his league that accused him of colluding with me on calls to help his fantasy team. That's the level of passion and intensity that the fans have.
GLAZER: One time I emceed a fantasy football draft-order party—just to set their draft order. In order to be in this league, you had to have a net worth of over $1 billion. I asked what they got if they won and they said, "We get a trophy."
BLANDINO: It's gone from a team affiliation to individual players, which is good and bad. For overall popularity, it's good.
GLAZER: My mother and her 78-year-old Jewish friends will call me up and say, "Is Odell Beckham going to play this week?"

"Mom, are you kidding me?"

"Can you call your friend and ask how many carries—?"

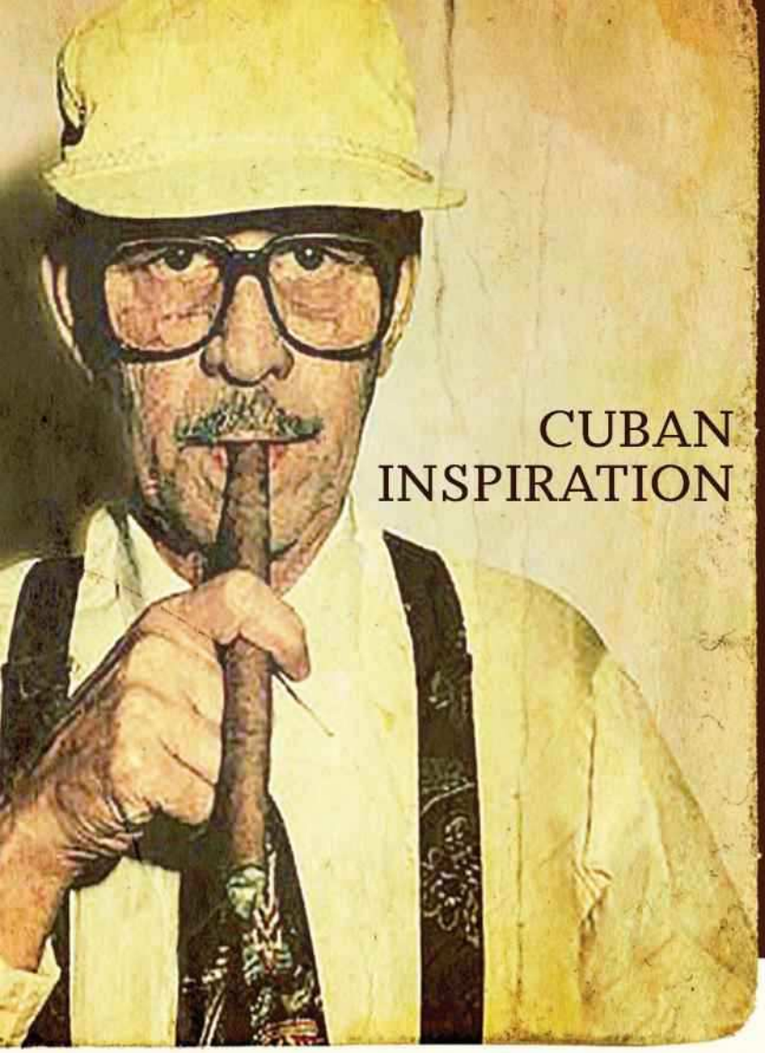
"No, I'm not going to call and ask how many carries just so you and your mah-jong friends can have an edge."

"Pace and violence beat skill an awful lot in this game. That's the bottom line. And analytics doesn't equate to it."
—Jay Glazer

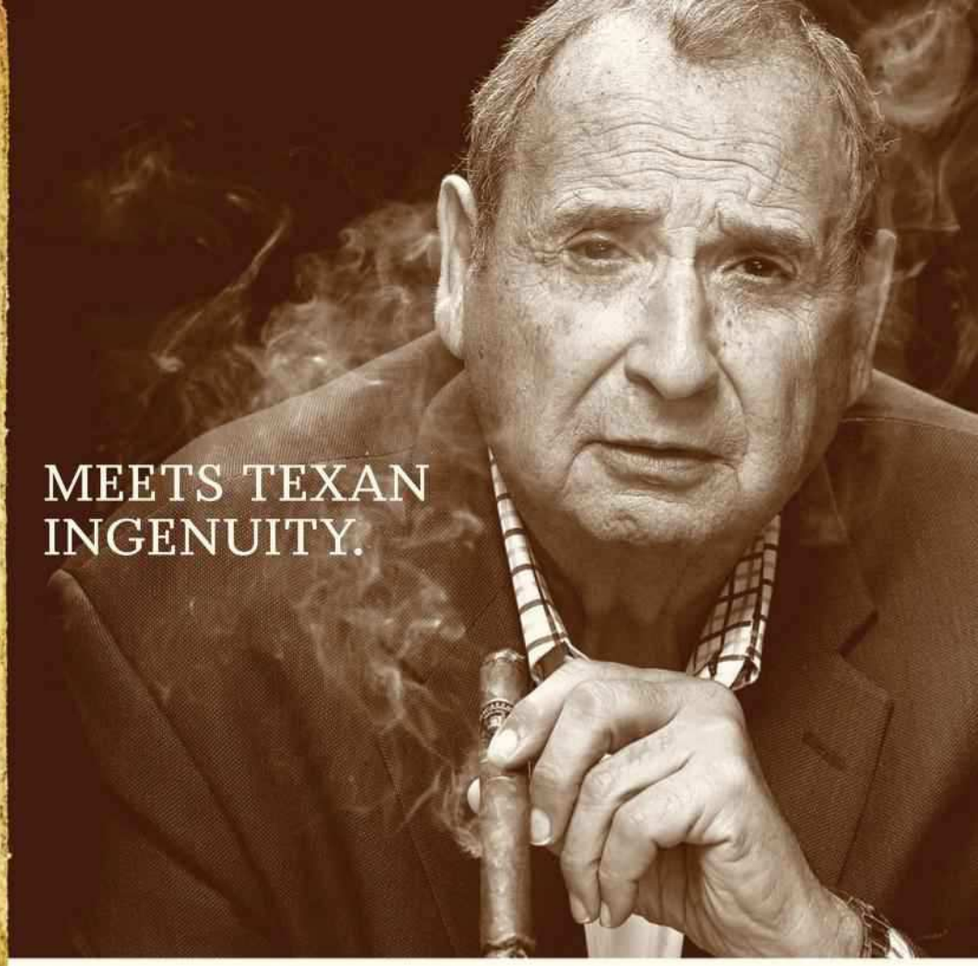
Q: Let's talk about the pace of the game. What can be done about the TV timeouts and everything else that seems to lengthen the games for people watching on TV and in person?
BLANDINO: It's a little unreasonable to think you can get a whole football game with all the TV timeouts and everything else into three hours. Last year we were at 3:07.25. I was part of a group that looked at in-game downtime and how we can streamline some of that. You'll see there'll be fewer TV breaks per quarter next year; there were five per quarter and I think they're going to four. They're also speeding up some of the time between the touchdown and the extra point, the time between the extra point and the kickoff. They want to make a better in-stadium experience and for the fans at home.

Q: It's probably heresy asking this of two guys in television, but are there too many commercials?
GLAZER: No, no, fuck that. That's how we get paid.
BLANDINO: There's the financial reality that the networks pay a lot of money. But the league is going to look at ways, like a box-in-box thing, where you have the coach talking about the quarterback but you have the ad in another box. They're going to look at more ways to keep fans engaged but also keep the advertisers happy.

Q: Why is the NFL the lowest-paying sport among the major sports—baseball, basketball, even hockey?
GLAZER: Because they have 53 players on a team.
BLANDINO: There's the salary cap and having more players to pay. You look at basketball and there's 12, maybe 15 guys on the roster—versus 53 [for NFL teams] with the practice squad. There's just more people to pay.



CUBAN INSPIRATION MEETS TEXAN INGENUITY.



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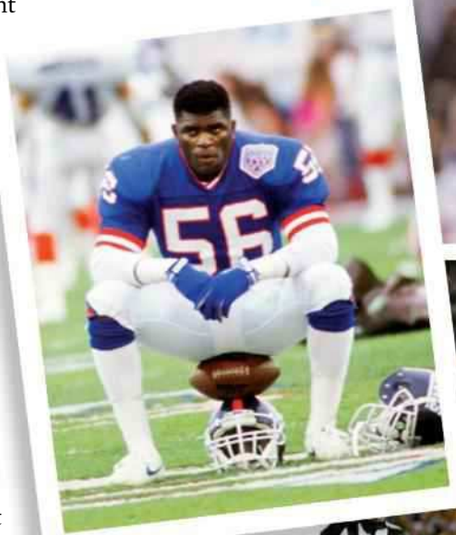
Q: The last collective-bargaining agreement meant there would be less practice time. What's the impact of that?
BLANDINO: That's something I've talked to a lot of coaches about. It's definitely a point of contention with them; it's supposed to be about protecting these guys and keeping them healthy.
GLAZER: I disagree that less practice time is healthier. I come from a fight background and mentality, where I think you need to spar and drill and drill and drill. The way they have it now, it's like you're maybe sparring once before you go to fight on Sunday. When you're getting ready for a fight, that first week you spar, you want to throw up everyday. You feel horrible. You get the shakes. It's awful. And then the second week, you feel less nauseous, your joints don't hurt as much, your back doesn't hurt as much. Third week, you're ok. Fourth week, you could hit me in the head with a crowbar, I'm good to go. The rest of my body is, too. By not preparing your body for that, I think it leads to more injuries. A lot of people disagree, thinking that, no, we're preventing wear-and-tear during practice. There's got to be a happy medium; you don't just shadowbox for a month and then go fight.



Q: There's been a significant drop in the past 10 years in the number of kids and high school students playing football. Why do you think that is?
GLAZER: Obviously, head trauma. You know, concussions. People are getting scared off by it. A lot more attention and money are going into head trauma with the NFL. They've got to do stuff to make it safer—a million percent. You definitely should have the information going in: You're going to have head trauma and this is what happens. I'm probably the worst guy to ask because I've got a fight background. The job in that sport is to remove you from your consciousness. But no one's complaining about that. In fact, parents are more apt to put their kids in mixed martial arts than football right now. Think about that.

Q: When you have Mike Ditka and Joe Montana saying that they wouldn't let their kids play football, where are the football players of the future going to come from?
BLANDINO: Going back seven or eight years, there was this concern among parents about kids, playing at a young age and potential for head injuries. I think the league's approach was feeding into that a little bit, talking about the amount of concussions and that we had to make the game a little safer. It's shifted to: The science is better; we know more about head injuries. We understand that this is a collision sport, that there are going to be these opportunities for these injuries. The more we know, the more we can diagnose these head injuries and treat them. That will trickle down to the lower levels. I think it will be better for everyone. As for kids playing, you look at Texas, you look at Pennsylvania, you look at Florida, there are still places where the participation in high school football is high.

Glazer and Blandino's top plays in the NFL: The David Tyree helmet catch during Super Bowl XLII, during the Giants game-winning drive, and James Harrison's 100-yard interception return for the Steelers in 2009. Both selected defensive great Lawrence Taylor as their favorite player.

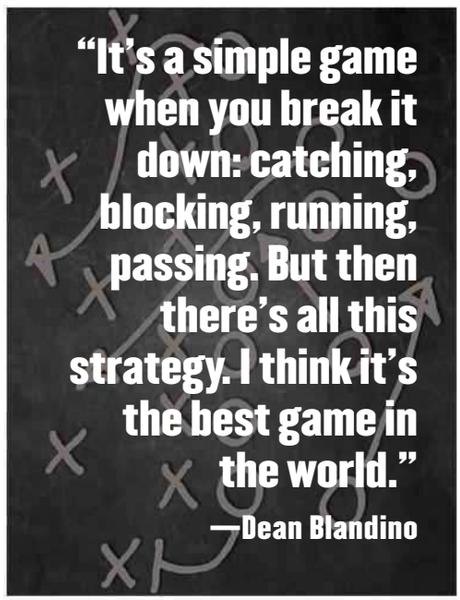
Q: What's the impact of the NFL playing games in London?
BLANDINO: Certainly it impacts teams when they have to go to London. You look at the time difference, the distance they're traveling. Football teams and coaches are creatures of habit and that does take them out of their routine. But teams are going over once a year, twice a year at the most. The biggest challenge to growing the game internationally is that it's hard to grow the game when it's not happening at a grassroots level. It's hard for them to identify with American football because you don't have people in Europe and places outside America who are playing the game from a young age. I've been to the London games; I still feel it's more of a novelty right now versus really making inroads.
GLAZER: Business-wise it's smart because obviously, global expansion, you want to try and do that. With the Raiders going to Las Vegas, it's a great way for them to get more international attention.

TOP TO BOTTOM: DREW HALLOWELL/GETTY IMAGES; FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES; AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES

Think of all the people coming to Vegas from all over the world, high rollers who will get exposed to the NFL. The Raiders' global marketing? Oh my gosh, that's going to go through the ceiling.

Q: That brings up the whole issue of franchise mobility, with the Raiders as Exhibit A. What does it do to the fan base when a team says, 'If you don't cough up for a new stadium, we're going to leave'?
GLAZER: I feel bad every time a city loses a team. No doubt. I feel terrible for them. Fans get caught up in big business and it is still a business. But I feel terrible for those fans.

Q: Technologically, what are you doing now that you couldn't have imagined five years ago, and what's the next step in terms of how we watch football on TV?
BLANDINO: From my perspective, you look at how the game is produced and instant replay and what that's meant to the game. It's become such an integral part of the game. With high-definition and multiple angles and now these 360-degree views, where you can see a play from one perspective and they can rotate it around so you can see what's happening on every side of the play, that's been a tremendous benefit, not only to us in officiating but it's made it more entertaining for the fans. Technology never ceases. The quality is going to get better.



Q: What's the next big technological advance in the way TV presents football?
BLANDINO: I think VR.
GLAZER: Oh yeah, virtual reality. Oh my God, we did one at Fox. They put the virtual-reality goggles on us and we were inside the Pro Bowl locker room. Guys were walking past you and you were getting out of the way so you didn't bump into Russell Wilson. It's unbelievable.
BLANDINO: That's technology that will take people where they've never been before.
GLAZER: Right in the middle of the field. It's crazy. I know Fox is working on it.

Q: Will we be able to watch a game at home in real-time VR?
BLANDINO: I don't know if they're there yet. What teams are doing is, you stand in an official position or the quarterback's place and put on the goggles. You can read the defense or you can see what the receivers are doing. It's like you're there. That's the next step in how we immerse our fans in this game. We're already doing it.

Q: What about the kind of analytics they use in baseball, like in *Moneyball*?
GLAZER: I don't think that works at this level, because *Moneyball* is just stats. It doesn't equate for violence. It doesn't equate for pace. Pace and violence, in my opinion, beat skill an awful lot in this game. The league doesn't like the word 'violence,' but it's still a violent game. You're still fighting someone out there. That's the bottom line. And analytics doesn't equate to it. You can't just interchange people because this shortstop has more walks. It doesn't work.
BLANDINO: The league has these tracking devices on the players and it tracks distance, speed, all of these things. They have all of this data but the teams are trying to figure out: What can we do with it? Information is great, but is this really going to make us better?
GLAZER: That's exactly what I'm saying about this being an inexact science. Certain teams will use those trackers and say, "OK, they can only take X amount of steps. And then they max out on their 100 percent." And another team will say, "We want to see what their max is so we can push the breaking point past that, so they can go further." That's two different ends of the spectrum. Information is power, but it's how you use that information.

Q: At this point, there is a year-round news cycle about the NFL. The Combine and the Draft are now huge media and public events. How did that happen?
BLANDINO: The NFL has smart marketing people. They basically said, "Let's take each month in the off-season and create an event and let's make that the NFL event." You have the Combine in February and then you have free agency in March and then you have the Draft in April. Then there are minicamps and other things as you build up to training camp. So it isn't that the Super Bowl ends and we don't start talking football again until August or September.

Q: How did Deflategate hurt the league?
GLAZER: I hate that word. Not everything needs to be a congressional hearing. It needs to go back to, Hey, they did it—knock it off. It just added to the reality show. But oh my God, I hate that word so much.
BLANDINO: It was definitely an interesting exercise. The league won some battles, and the Patriots won some battles—
GLAZER: The Patriots won the ultimate battle.
BLANDINO: Ultimately it wasn't great for that to drag on so long. It just wasn't a positive for the league. But hindsight is 20/20.

Q: What's the best play you've ever seen?
GLAZER: Probably the David Tyree play with Eli Manning in the Super Bowl against the Patriots in 2011. Nothing of that made sense—it just shouldn't have happened.
BLANDINO: James Harrison's interception return against the Cardinals in the Super Bowl when he went 100 yards. And Larry Fitzgerald—with James Harrison, it was unbelievable for a guy that big to go 100 yards. But watching Larry Fitzgerald not give up on that play and actually have to run in the bench area, around people to tackle him at the goal line and make it so close that we in replay couldn't tell if he broke the plane of the goal line or not—that one stands out for me.

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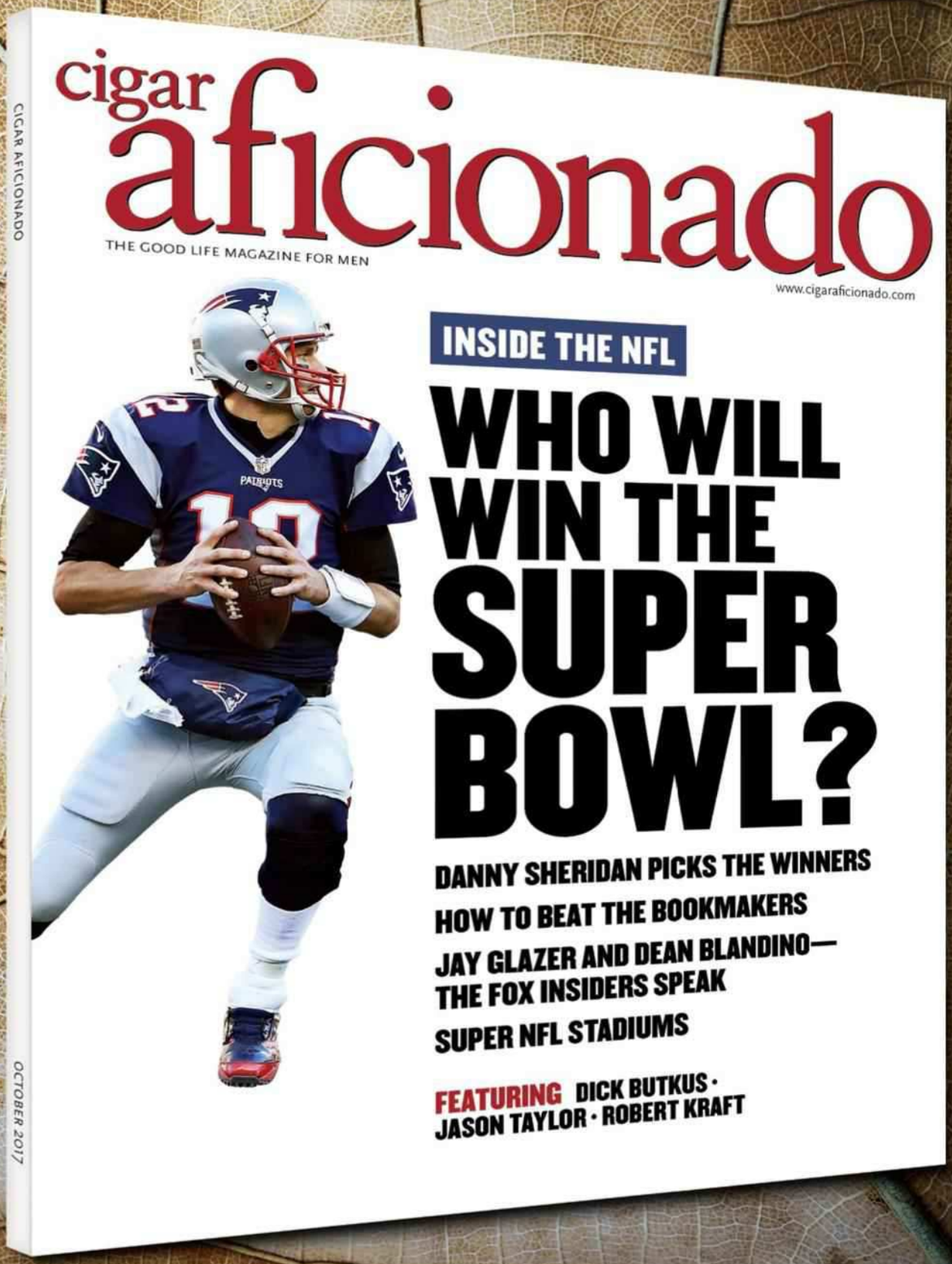

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Q: Who's your favorite all-time player?
GLAZER: For me, it's Lawrence Taylor. Lawrence is different. If a Martian walked in the room and there were a million people here and Lawrence was in that room, he would know something's different about Lawrence.
BLANDINO: For me, it was Lawrence Taylor, too. He was the guy who changed the game. He changed the way offenses blocked.
GLAZER: They would have four different game plans to stop him and he would beat all four. And there was a good chance he was out at a club two hours earlier.

Q: Which team will surprise everybody this season?
GLAZER: The Patriots won't surprise anybody.
BLANDINO: I like the Titans.
GLAZER: I think the Rams have a shot at going above .500.
BLANDINO: You take the Rams. I'll take the Titans.

Q: And who's going to be in the Super Bowl?
GLAZER: Patriots and Packers. The Patriots went through the off-season as if they went 0-16 last year. They attacked this off-season like they'd never won a thing. That's part of their brilliance. The Packers were really banged up last year at every skill position. They have a healthy Aaron Rogers and they're going to get healthier.
BLANDINO: I can't pick the same ones. But it's tough to pick against the Patriots. The dream scenario would be the Cowboys and the Patriots.

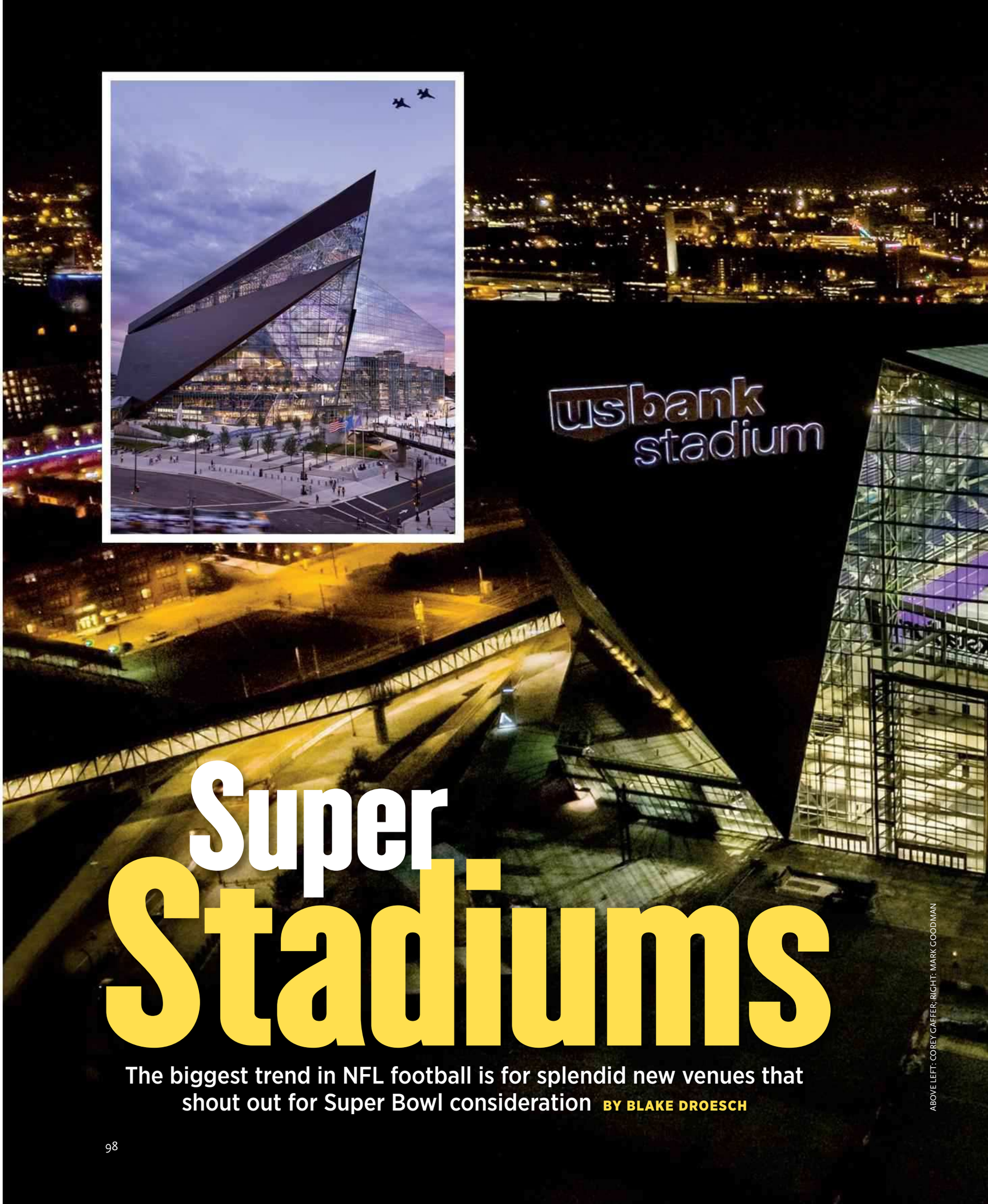
Q: Are the Cowboys still America's team?
GLAZER: Yes. Ratings-wise, when we have them on, it's ridiculous.
BLANDINO: The Cowboys, whether they are 10-2 or 2-10, they draw the most audience.

Q: You both enjoy cigars. What are your favorites?
GLAZER: Montecristo No. 2s and Cohibas.
BLANDINO: Cuban Cohibas.

Glazer and Blandino got to know one another when Blandino was working for the NFL as the league's senior vice president of officiating, and Glazer played a practical joke. The two have been friends ever since, and share an appreciation of handmade cigars.

Q: Describe your personal favorite football moment.
GLAZER: Our show, "Fox NFL Sunday," we're family. That's how close we all are. Howie Long—that's my brother. To sit there with him the moment he realized his son [Chris, a Patriots' defensive end] just won a Super Bowl—I feel like I'm going to start crying right now. He started going, "Oh my God! Oh my God!" It wasn't tough-guy Howie Long anymore or Hall-of-Famer Howie Long anymore. It was a father. It was one of the most special things I've ever seen in my life. You can hear how choked up I'm getting talking about it. That's what football does. I'm so blessed to be around that.
BLANDINO: For me, the power of the NFL and the power of football is when my dad was dying from cancer. He didn't have long to go and he was in the hospital, on a lot of pain medication. We grew up Giants fans in New York and it was the Patriots-Giants Super Bowl at the end of the 2011 season. He stopped the nurse: "I don't want to take any medication. I just want to be able to watch the game and not be in this hazy state." That was so meaningful to him. And the last sporting event he watched was the Giants winning the Super Bowl in this amazing game. He passed away a month later. Just thinking about what it meant to him, that's what football and the NFL is all about. ❖

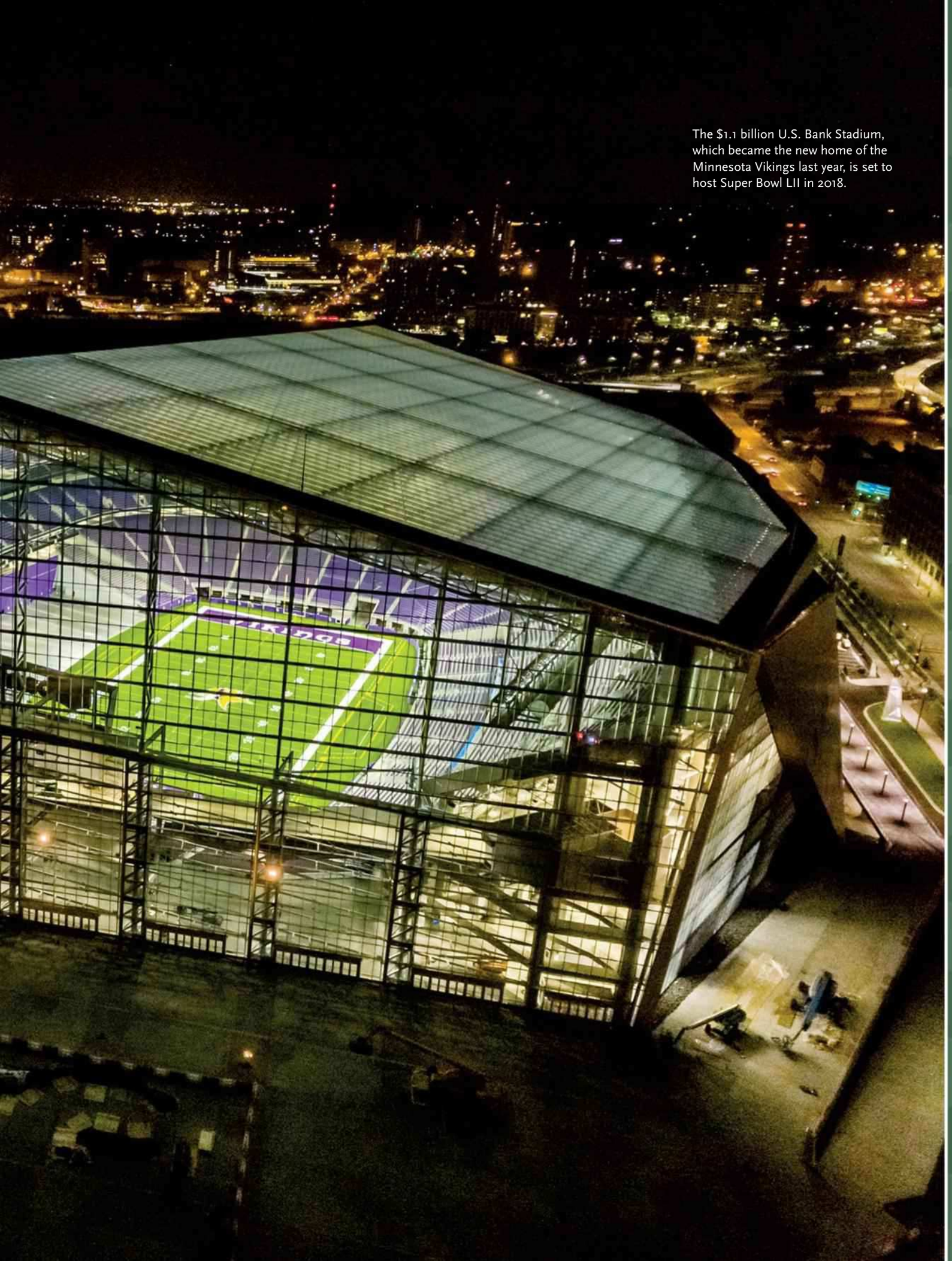
Contributing editor Marshall Fine is critic-in-residence at The Picture House Regional Film Center in Pelham, NY.



Super Stadiums

The biggest trend in NFL football is for splendid new venues that shout out for Super Bowl consideration **BY BLAKE DROESCH**

ABOVE LEFT: COREY GAFFER; RIGHT: MARK GOODMAN



The $1.1 billion U.S. Bank Stadium, which became the new home of the Minnesota Vikings last year, is set to host Super Bowl LII in 2018.

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Kickoff is looming. The Minnesota Vikings prepare to take the field at U.S. Bank Stadium, the $1 billion palatial wonder that opened last year in downtown Minneapolis. With its colossal transparent ceiling and 95-foot swinging glass doors, the luminous stadium is a testament to both the storied franchise and the grandiosity of America's most beloved game.

The Vikings exit the locker room, pacing the walkway of the Delta Sky360 Club through a sea of screaming purple-clad fans, who are so close they can feel the intensity—the pregame tension brimming to the surface. Some fans reach out to fist-bump the players, but most simply look on in awe, reveling in their proximity to the Nordic warriors at such a crucial moment.

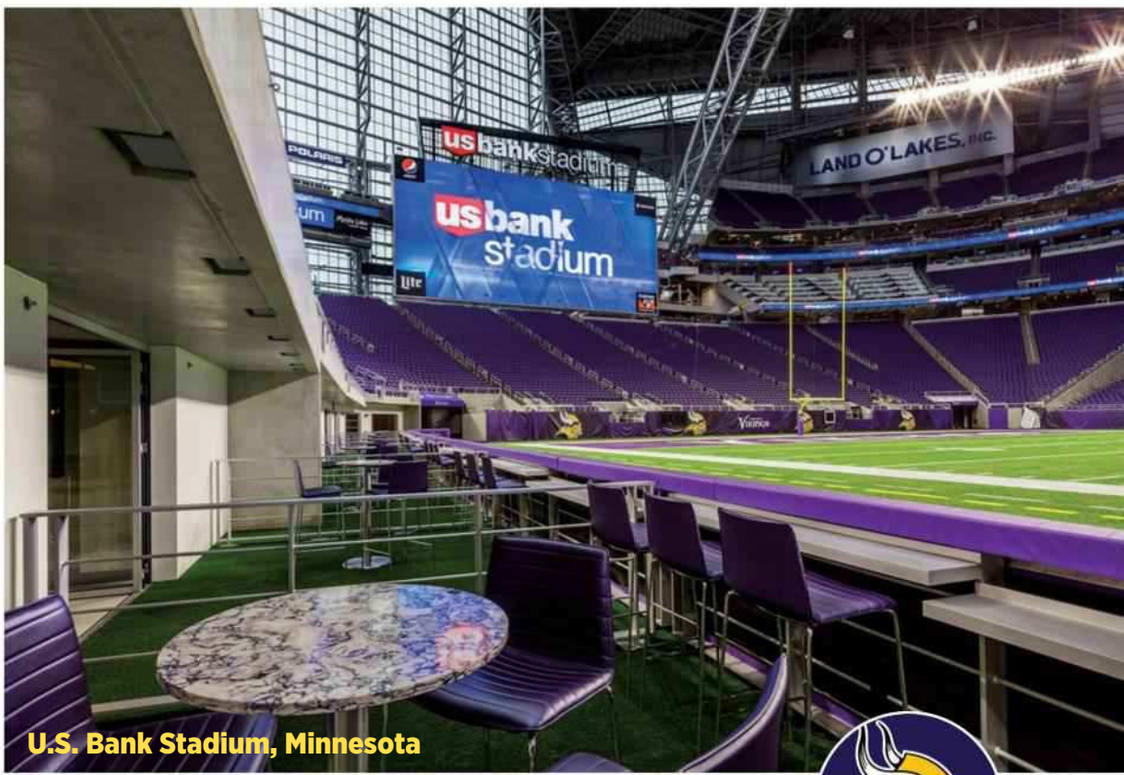
The Vikings take the field—and so do you. Your Turf Club Suite sits 25 feet from the playing field, among the closest seats in all of the NFL. The opulent club suite, located adjacent to the home team bench, offers all the luxuries a football fan could ask for: an inclusive food and beverage menu, three large HD televisions and the conveniences of a full-service concierge staff. After the game, you will receive unprecedented access to postgame interviews with the players and coaching staff through a glass partition in the Sky360 Club.

U.S. Bank is only the most recent example in the proliferation of the NFL's super stadiums—billion-dollar architectural marvels constructed to serve as the grandest stages in sports and entertainment. Innovative in both design and function, these futuristic coliseums are using advanced technologies and progressive business strategies to recreate the 21st-century fan experience.

Most would trace the phenomenon back to Arlington, Texas, where, in 2009, Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones built his behemoth AT&T Stadium. The first NFL stadium to exceed $1 billion in construction costs, the home of the Cowboys wowed spectators with its sheer size and a 60-yard television monitor that at the time was the largest HDTV in the world. In 2011, just two years after AT&T opened, the stadium hosted Super Bowl XLV. Cities and franchises across the country are now keen on adopting the Jones doctrine: If you build it, the Super Bowl will come.

From 1995 to 2005, 16 NFL stadiums opened, but only three—Tampa Bay's Raymond James Stadium, Detroit's Ford Field and Houston's NRG Stadium—hosted the Super Bowl within four years of their inaugural seasons. Just six NFL stadiums opened between 2006 to 2017, yet all of them won bids to host Super Bowls within the same amount of time. Minnesota will host Super Bowl LII this season with Atlanta, Miami and Los Angeles following in 2019, 2020 and 2022, respectively.

"We think we've created some staggeringly beautiful buildings, but the real selling point is fan experience and revenue," says Bryan Trubey, executive VP and director of sports and entertainment for HKS Architects, the design firm behind the AT&T and U.S. Bank stadiums as well as a venue currently in development in Los Angeles. "The sports business is one of the last frontiers as architects, and we've learned to approach buildings as a consumer design business, which has led to spending significantly more time developing every aspect of the building's interior and exterior."



U.S. Bank Stadium, Minnesota

U.S. Bank Stadium's premium offerings include the luxurious Turf Club Suites, which put fans 25 feet from the playing field, among the closest seats in all of the NFL.

U.S. Bank's Turf Suites and the Delta Sky360 experience were the brainchildren of HKS. In designing AT&T Stadium and the Indianapolis Colts' Lucas Oil Stadium, the company became the first architects to place premium seats going down to the front row. HKS has a proven track record for avant-garde design, but it's the value proposition that brings in business. Its design proposals are supported with market research and place a high stake on premium seating and sponsorship placements, ensuring long-term value.

Revenue-focused proposals allow previously unheard of investments by franchises and municipalities, which in turn gives the architects more freedom to innovate, making NFL stadiums some of the most prestigious large-scale designs in the nation today.

JOE AKER

U.S. Bank Stadium

Minnesota Vikings
Opened: 2016
Hosting Super Bowl LII in 2018
Estimated Cost: $1.1 billion

Call it fate or a message from the Norse gods, but when the roof of Minnesota's Metrodome collapsed beneath 17 inches of snow pack in December of 2010, causing $22 million in damages, it was an affirmation of two things: downtown Minneapolis was in desperate need of a new football stadium—and a dome wasn't the way to go.

Given Minnesota's frigid climate, an expensive retractable roof wouldn't have made a worthwhile investment. That forced the franchise to find an innovative (but hard to pronounce) solution: ethylene tetrafluoroethylene.

ETFE, as it is more commonly known, is a lightweight, but durable, clear plastic. Developed for aeronautics, it became popular as a roofing material. It now covers Germany's Alianz soccer arena and the "water cube" at the Olympics facility in Beijing. The U.S. Bank Stadium marked the debut of an ETFE roof as part of a sports complex in the United States, and its extensive use (248,000 square feet) makes it the largest of its kind in the world. The material's transparency provides ample light inside the stadium, while layers of foil in each panel reduce the greenhouse effect on warm afternoons.

But it was snow, not heat, that brought the previous stadium down. To prevent accumulation the roof was constructed at an angle, which gives the stadium exterior a unique esthetic. Some have even speculated that the slanted ceiling serves a strategic purpose, as the acute angle of the roof lies above the visiting sideline and directs much of the noise from the stadium at the Viking's opponents.

Transparent ETFE lets in so much natural light that the Vikings recommend bringing sunglasses to afternoon games. Complement that with five of the largest glass doors in the world to open during warm-weather games, and the indoor stadium suddenly has an outdoor vibe.

Premium seating is a hot commodity nowadays and U.S. Bank's offerings are comprehensive, with options at virtually any angle. Want red zone action? Go for the Touchdown Suites by the east end zone. Prefer the all-encompassing view at midfield? The Norseman and Norseman Lounge Suites run between the 20-yard lines on the first level of the stadium. And if you simply want to get as close to the action as possible, the Turf Suites put you right on the field, mere feet from the Viking's bench.

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Atlanta Falcons
Opening: 2017
Hosting Super Bowl LIII in 2019
Estimated Cost: $1.6 billion

Just as football players are commonly described as modern gladiators, stadiums are often compared to ancient coliseums. But in designing the new Mercedes-Benz Stadium in downtown Atlanta, HOK architects drew inspiration from a different Roman relic: the oculus, or circular opening, in the dome of the Pantheon.

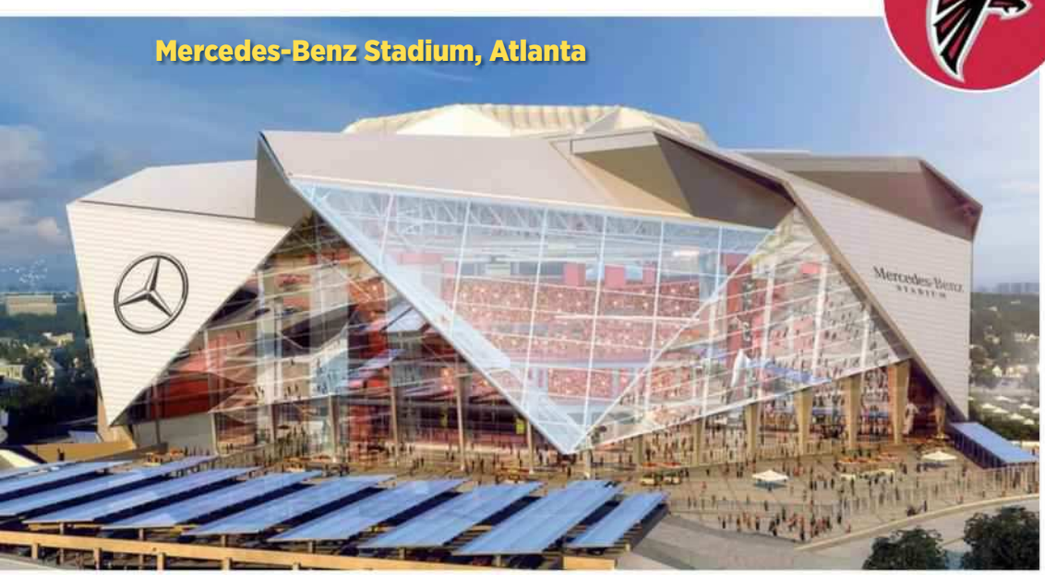
Eight ETFE panels in the shape of falcon wings expand and retract inside of the oculus like a camera's aperture in less than 12 minutes.

The oculus as the centerpiece of the design creates a novel appearance for both the interior and exterior—a design requirement for the Falcons. "We were not in the business of building a better Georgia Dome," says Falcons CEO and president Rich McKay, alluding to the former home of Atlanta football. "We wanted to change the game in design and fan experience."

Beneath the oculus lies a circular LED screen that the Falcons are calling a "halo display." It stands 58 feet tall and measures 1,075 feet around, three times larger than any display in professional football. "If you laid the screen flat and stood it up, it would be taller than any skyscraper in downtown Atlanta," says McKay.

But the franchise wanted more than a majestic edifice that would look good on TV. The interior design had to be focused on optimizing the stadium experience. "Anything we do starts with talking to our fans and conducting research based on their suggestions," says Mike Gomes, the Falcons' senior VP of fan experience.

A council of 1,000 fans provide feedback on all aspects of the stadium, from food, to the lines at the bathroom and gate giveaways. "We made the seats bigger, made it possible to circumnavigate the building no matter what type of ticket you had," says McKay. But, as any experienced spectator may have guessed, one overwhelming concern dominated fan suggestions: the price of concessions. In a move that has drawn just as much attention as the building itself, Mercedes-Benz Stadium has announced it will be offering the lowest food and drink prices in all of sports: $2 hot dogs, $3 peanuts, $5 beers, and $2 soft drinks with free, self-service refills that will add



Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium drew inspiration from Rome's Pantheon with its oculus roof, but fan comments were just as important to the process.

value and shorten concession lines. A "whole-dollar" pricing policy will make transactions easier and more efficient.

Atlanta is also making it a priority to get fans as close to the action as possible. Premium seats at the 40-yard line on the first level have access to nearly 60 yards of the sideline behind each bench. Those fans can walk directly onto the sidelines and into a special club area beneath their seats.

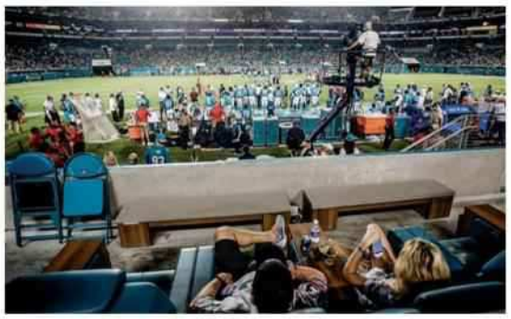
The franchise has made a conscious effort to reduce the number of media and team affiliates standing behind the goal posts in order to reduce obstructed views for the 16 end-zone suites. Loge Suites are located in each corner of the field where the end zone meets the sideline, as well as traditional boxes on the 200 and 300 levels.

The fans weren't the only consultants for the Falcons' new stadium. Atlanta sought advice from the NFL several times throughout the design process to ensure Mercedes-Benz Stadium could accommodate the biggest game in sports. "The stadium was constructed entirely for mega events like the Super Bowl," says Gomes, citing field and seating flexibility and broadcast capabilities that have been "tricked out to the nines." But if you were to ask of the Atlanta Falcons what was the one key to building a Super Bowl–location-caliber stadium, they would offer a simple answer:

"The most basic but important factor was the placement of the stadium in the heart of Atlanta," says Gomes, remarking that more space for far less money was available on the outskirts of town. But the Falcons' owner Arthur Blank remained adamant on keeping the stadium close to the city's tourism areas, including its 10,000 hotel rooms and Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport, which is the busiest airport in the world. Atlanta's population rose to nearly 5.8 million last year—among the fastest-growing cities in the country—and the franchise is already looking to the future.

"We don't want to host a Super Bowl," says Rich McKay. "We want to host Super Bowls."

Hard Rock Stadium, Miami



Miami's Hard Rock Stadium maximizes seating in the shade. The 72 Club (lower left) provides cushy comfort and gourmet dining options (lower right).

Hard Rock Stadium

Miami Dolphins
Renovation: 2015-2018
Hosting Super Bowl LIV in 2020
Estimated Cost of Renovation: $500 million

Joe Robbie Stadium was the dated home of the Miami Dolphins since the late 1980s. But thanks to a half-a-billion-dollar, multiyear renovation, Hard Rock Stadium—as it is now known—bears no resemblance to its past iterations.

At the center of it all is a massive 626,000-square-foot canopy that was installed before the start of the 2016 season. The covering, composed of ETFE and 17,000 tons of steel, puts more than 90 percent of Hard Rock Stadium's seats in the shade—and away from the relentless south Florida sun. The covered areas can enjoy temperatures that are reduced by an incredible 20 to 30 degrees.

In 2020, the Miami area will host the Super Bowl for a record-breaking 11th time. But without the vision of Dolphins owner Stephen Ross, who has privately funded the modernization of Hard Rock Stadium, such a feat would have never been possible.

"The league said Miami won't get another Super Bowl without the redesign," says Ross, a real-estate developer responsible for such major projects as New York City's Time Warner Center and the ongoing Hudson Yards Redevelopment Project. He was determined to not only make a new home for the Miami Dolphins and University of Miami Hurricanes, but to bring a world-renowned entertainment center to south Florida.

In July, Hard Rock Stadium hosted the internationally recognized El Clasico rivalry soccer game between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. Ross has also made public his desire to bring the Miami Open tennis tournament to the stadium. The venue also has the flexibility to host festivals, premier music tours and—of course—the big game itself.

"They don't pay us anything to host a Super Bowl," says Ross, speaking on the importance of having an event space like this in Miami. "But it's an economic boost for the area and it benefits the city as a whole, so you do it as a citizen."

This season, renovations to suites and premium seating doubled Hard Rock's unique offerings from eight to 16. The number of seats overall for regular season games fell from 76,000 to 65,000, but now the stands are as close as 56 feet from the field in a stadium that once had some of the most distant vantages in the NFL.

TOP: ROB FOLDY

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L.A. Stadium, opening in 2021 with a performance center, retail space and residences, will be like a city within a city.

The landscaping on the stadium grounds has also been thoroughly redesigned. "When you approach the stadium it's going to feel like you're walking into a five-star resort," says Ross.

The new 72 Club contains nearly 600 double-padded lounge seats that would fit into a living room decor. Fans with access to the 72 Club can walk on the sideline at any time to reach private club access that comes with the ticket. Seating experiences are similar for fans with tickets in the field clubs (Ford Field Club and Atos Field Club Presented by EMC²), which offer an incredible perspective in the front row behind the end zone.

"It used to be you had a lower deck, club seats and an upper deck. Today people are more sophisticated, so we're appealing to them with a more diversified offering," says Ross, adding that there's now more space for standing areas, concessions concourses and clubs. "People aren't just looking to go to a game anymore. They're looking to go to an experience that includes a game."

L.A. Stadium

Los Angeles Rams & Chargers
Opening: 2021
Hosting Super Bowl LVI in 2022
Estimated Cost Upon Completion: $2.6 billion

After decades without an NFL team, Los Angeles now has two. In 2016 the Rams returned after 21 years in St. Louis. This year, the former San Diego Chargers headed back to the city that spawned them. And the stadium that will soon serve them may be the largest spectacle in all of pro sports.

A 70,000-seat football stadium, a 6,000-seat performance center, 1.5 million square feet of office and retail space, 300 hotel rooms and 2,500 residences means L.A. isn't just building a football arena, it's building a city within a city.

"The pattern you've seen with our venues will be progressive—from Lucas Oil, AT&T and U.S. Bank to L.A.," says HKS Architects executive Bryan Trubey. Many of the details of the stadium are still unknown, but something big is happening.

HKS is again tapping ETFE, this time for an 18-acre, wave-like canopy over the stadium. The sides of the building will be open, creating a feeling very similar to what HKS has done in Minnesota, while taking advantage of the climate in Southern California.

The new stadium was originally intended to open in 2019 and host the Super Bowl in 2021. But record rainfall in the southern California area this year forced a construction delay.

Many predict the city's bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics to be a sure thing, making a multiuse venue more crucial than ever. And from the looks of it, there isn't an event in the world too large for this future crown jewel of Los Angeles.

Las Vegas Stadium

Las Vegas Raiders
Opening: 2020
Estimated Cost Upon Completion: $1.9 billion

When the Oakland Raiders move to Sin City for the 2020 season they will set up shop in Paradise, Nevada, closely neighboring the Las Vegas Strip. Little is known about the stadium, but renderings released by MANICA Architecture show a transparent roof covering a horseshoe-shaped venue that opens to views of the Strip. The "glass-domed roof," as they are calling it, will be accompanied by large operable walls at the side of the venue, similar to the design of the U.S. Bank Stadium. The Vegas stadium is designed to fit 65,000, and the proposal says it can be expanded to 72,000. Nothing is official yet, but given the city's access to entertainment and hotels, the odds of a Sin City Super Bowl seem pretty good. ❖

Details are scant for Las Vegas Stadium, soon to be the Raiders' home, but expect a glass dome roof.

Danny Sheridan's Secrets for Betting the NFL

Simple strategies from the legendary handicapper to put you on top this season

Betting on NFL games is a national pastime. More than $100 billion is bet every season on pro football (most of it illegally) and the Super Bowl—the most heavily bet single sporting event in history—generates $11 billion in action on one game alone.

More than half of the U.S. adult population will have some type of wager on this year's Super Bowl. The legal Nevada betting handle on last season's big game was an all-time record-setting $138 million, but most bets take place outside of legal channels, whether it's over the phone with a bookie, on some offshore betting site or in a pool with coworkers or friends.

Going with your gut, putting money on the Super Bowl champs or taking your home team to repeat against its conference rival might feel like the right move, but it's also a good way to lose. Betting on the game is a lot more fun when you come out a winner. That's where I come in. For 35 years I've been providing point-spread predictions on who will win on the gridiron. Here are some of my favorite rules and tips to wager successfully on this year's NFL season.

PATRIOTS 4:1

PACKERS 10:1

SEAHAWKS 12:1

STEELERS 12:1

FALCONS 15:1

GIANTS 15:1

The Point Spread And The Vig

The point spread is not a prediction as to who will win a football game, nor a measure of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each team. The prime reason the point spread exists is to attempt to equalize the amount of dollars bet on either side of a game.

A bettor has to lay 10 percent (called the vigorish, or vig) of what one attempts to win. For example, if you want to win $100, you have to lay, or bet, your bookmaker $110. If you're correct on that wager your payout will be $210 (your $110 original bet back, plus $100 profit). If you lose, you lose the entire $110. Unlike the stock market (which I call legalized gambling) where you pay a commission whether you're right or wrong, in football betting a commission is only charged on losing bets.

I know a bookmaker who perfectly balanced his books during last year's Super Bowl. He had $3.3 million to win $3 million on each team, so no matter who won, he was set to win $300,000 on the vigorish, paying out $3 million to Patriots bettors (who were 3-point favorites) and collecting $3.3 million from Falcons backers, who were getting 3 points. Not a bad weekend's work.

Bet Against No. 2

Go against Super Bowl losers in the first six games of the following season. Super Bowl losers tend to struggle and rarely return to the Super Bowl. (Marv Levy's Bills, an exception, lost four consecutive Super Bowls.) In 2016, Carolina went 1-5 vs. the spread and 1-5 straight up in its first six games after its Super Bowl loss to Denver. In 2015, Seattle also went 1-5 against the spread in its first six regular-season games after losing to New England. That's a money-burning 2-10 against the spread. Even Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme couldn't withstand that record. My money will be against the Falcons early in this coming season.

How To Bet The Over/Under

When two offensively potent teams meet, you should bet the under, because they tend to play conservatively, feeling confident they can score anytime. Conversely, if two dominant defensive giants collide, bet the over, because the respective offenses don't fear making a mistake, feeling the defense has its back. That leads to turnovers, which leads to more points.

You can't use this system on the majority of NFL games, as sometimes the two teams are not known for defense or offense, but a mixture of the two, in which case, one should pass on the over/under bet. Three potential under picks this season would be Tom Brady vs. Drew Brees in the Dome on September 17 and Green Bay at Atlanta on September 17, plus Dallas vs. Green Bay in the Jerry Dome October 8. Whereas Baltimore at Minnesota October 22, Houston at Seattle October 29 and Houston at Baltimore November 27 qualify as three over picks. Take the over on Odell Beckham Jr. as far as Page Six mentions in the *New York Post*, whatever the total is, and the under on Rex and Rob Ryan bar fights, as long as the total is no less than five.

Consider The Underdog

I estimate that only one out of 1,000 NFL bettors wins money at season's end, and out of those 1,000 bettors, 80 percent bet favorites. That tells me the best value during the regular season is taking NFL underdogs every week, as the betting line on favorites is inflated. Bookmakers know the public likes to bet on high-profile teams, especially ones that are perceived as good.

Rematches Matter

Division rivals face off twice a year. When a team beats the point spread in the first meeting, bet against that team in the rematch. Last season, division rivals beat the spread 22 times more than they lost in the rematch game against a division rival. My favorite way to use this strategy is taking the road underdog in the rematch. Three out of the four division rival teams in both the AFC and NFC saw their rivals beat the spread in their rematch.

Some games I correctly predicted last season using this rule were the New York Giants, who lost to Washington at home 29-27 (as 3.5-point favorites), then won the rematch at Washington, not only beating the spread as 8-point underdogs but winning the game outright 19-10. Washington, getting three points, lost at home to Dallas 27-23 then beat the spread in the rematch as a 6.5 point dog at Dallas, losing 31-26. New Orleans (-2.5) lost 45-32 to Atlanta, and as a 7.5 road underdog covered the spread in the rematch, losing 38-32. Even lowly Cleveland, who went 1-15 straight up in 2016, lost at home to Pittsburgh 24-9 and covered the 3.5-point spread in a 27-24 overtime loss in the rematch on the road.

Limit Your Bets

One of the biggest keys to winning is to reduce your number of NFL wagers to one to three games per week. Since I started limiting my weekly football point spread predictions (one or two pro games, two to four college games) I have not had a losing season against the spread in the last 17 years. Laying $11 to win $10, you have to be correct 52.4 percent of the time versus the point spread to break even, while your bookmaker only has to be right 47.6 percent of the time, which is a huge percentage to overcome if you're betting a lot of games. If you're not a card counter, you have a better chance of winning at blackjack if you play for 30 minutes versus playing for four or more hours at the same table. The percentages increase that each hand against you will eat you and your bankroll alive. It's the same with betting on the NFL: the more games you play, the less chance you'll have to win.

Parlays Don't Pay

More than one-third of a sports book's profits are from parlays, cumulative series of bets where you have to pick multiple winning teams to get paid. Even in my best handicapping years—two years when I was 70 percent vs. the spread in college football—I could not have beaten parlays. If you bet $100 on a two-team parlay,

ALL ON PREVIOUS SPREAD VIA GETTY IMAGES. MAIN IMAGE ETHAN MILLER; INSETS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FOCUS ON SPORT; STREETER LECKA; AL BELLO; PATRICK SMITH; FOCUS ON SPORT; KEVIN C. COX

VOTED BEST BLENDED SCOTCH 16 YEARS AND OLDER

Buchanan's 18 Year Old Special Reserve took home the Double Gold Medal this year at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition winning Best Blended Scotch 16 years and older.

James Buchanan Hes.

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BUCHANAN'S Special Reserve Blended Scotch Whisky.
40% Alc/Vol. Imported by Diageo, Norwalk, CT.

When Officer Eder Loor responded to a situation in East Harlem everything seemed under control – until a man on the scene lashed out, driving a knife deep into Officer Loor's brain. He was taken immediately to The Mount Sinai Hospital, where a team from the Department of Neurosurgery successfully performed emergency cerebrovascular surgery. Since that day, Officer Loor has had a remarkable recovery. He's grateful to the doctors at Mount Sinai. But he's not the only one. His wife, his two children, and the entire city are grateful as well.

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IT'S

A GOOD THING NEW YORK'S FINEST WAS IN THE HANDS OF NEW YORK'S FINEST.

Sheridan's Super Bowl Odds

The Favorites

New England	4:1
Dallas	8:1
Green Bay	10:1

Strong Bets

Pittsburgh	12:1
Seattle	12:1
Oakland	12:1
Atlanta	15:1
N.Y. Giants	15:1

Worth A $25 Chance

Carolina	25:1
Kansas City	25:1
Arizona	30:1
Denver	30:1
Tampa Bay	50:1
Minnesota	75:1
Baltimore	75:1

Long Shots

Houston	100:1
Indianapolis	100:1
Miami	200:1
Philadelphia	250:1
New Orleans	250:1
Tennessee	300:1
Detroit	1,000:1
Cincinnati	5,000:1
Washington	10,000:1

Don't Even Think Of It

L.A. Chargers	1 Million:1
Jacksonville	5 Million:1
L.A. Rams	1 Billion:1
Buffalo	1 Trillion:1
Chicago	1 Quadrillion:1
San Francisco	1 Quintillion:1
N.Y. Jets	1 Sextillion:1

Are You Kidding?

Cleveland	1 Googolplex: 1

both teams have to beat the spread for you to win, and if one of the two teams fails you've lost $100. If you bet the same two teams straight up (laying $110 to win $100 on each team), and one team loses and one team wins, you've only lost $10. In other words, when going 1-1 versus the spread, you lose the entire $100 on the parlay wager, and only $10 on betting the two teams straight up. Yes you can go 0-2 straight up vs. the spread, which would lose $220, instead of $100 on a two-team parlay, but the odds greatly favor you going 1-1 instead of 0-2. Two team parlays pay 2.6:1 (true odds are 3:1); three team parlays pay 5:1 (true odds are 7:1) and four team parlays pay 10:1 (true odds are 15:1). Hello!

If you wager $100 on a three-team parlay (which is even more insane) and win two of the three games, you still lose $100. If you bet those three games separately and win two out of three games, you win money, a profit of $90.

Stay The Course At Halftime

At halftime, the nation's bookmakers post a new point spread for the second half of the game. If you're going to make a bet at this point, always bet the team at halftime that you think will beat the original line. On the majority of NFL games, this outcome is very hard to predict at halftime. However, when a 7-point underdog is winning 10-0 (or higher), the percentage play is that this underdog will cover the opening line as well as the halftime line. Same thing if a 6-point favorite is winning 28-0 at halftime, go with that team for the second half, regardless of what the half-time line may be.

Revenge Means Covering The Spread

New England shut out Houston 27-0 in Week 3 last season without Tom Brady (who was serving a four-game suspension). With Brady at the helm in the Divisional Playoffs, the Pats (15.5-point favorites) beat Houston 34-16. Underdog Houston plays at New England on September 24 and should be motivated enough to beat the spread. Kansas City, an 18-16 loser at home to Pittsburgh in the Divisional Playoffs, gets its chance at payback on October 15 when it hosts the Steelers.

Know When To Tease

Two-team 6-point teasers are where one can "tease" the line up or down 6 points, but you have to bet on two teams and both have to beat the newly adjusted 6-point line for you to win. In week one, if you tease -7.5 favorite New England down to -1.5 against Kansas City, they have to win by 2 or more, and if you tease Baltimore +2.5 up at Cincinnati, you now receive Baltimore +8.5 for the game.

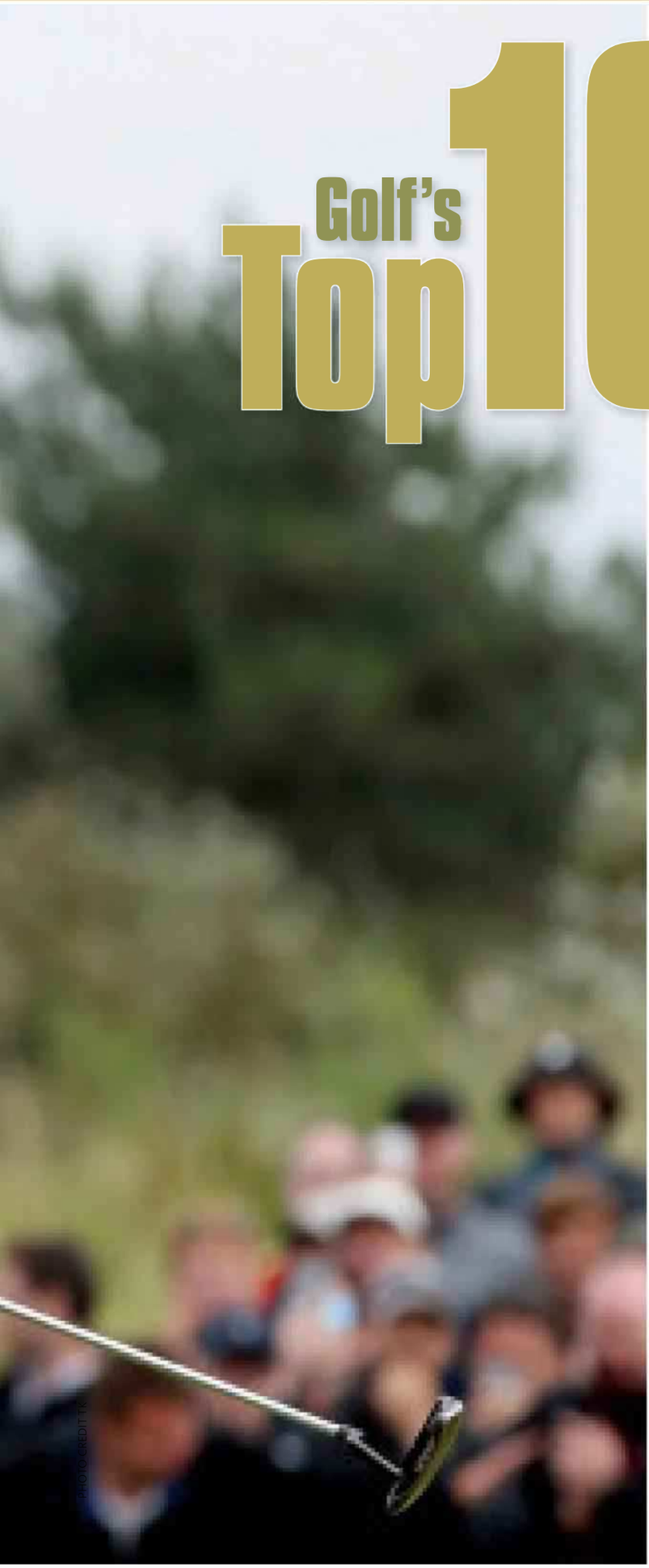
Over the course of a season, most two-team 6-point teasers are not smart wagers. However there are some that do win money. The trick is to use only the key numbers of +1.5, +2 or +2.5 on an underdog, which you'd tease up to +7.5, +8 or 8.5. Conversely you should tease the key favorite point spread numbers of -7.5, -8 or -8.5 down to -1.5, -2 or -2.5. If you use this system (which has been winning for professional gamblers for years) only lay your bookmaker $11 to win $10 on each of these teases and you're a favorite to laugh all the way to the bank this season.

Be Wary Of The Patriots

New England winning its fifth Super Bowl (which I predicted in the NFL preseason preview published in the October 2016 Cigar Aficionado) was impressive, and so was its sensational 16-3 record against the spread. This means New England's line will be inflated every week, especially early in the 2017 season. The public cashed in on the Patriots last season, and bookmakers know people will bet them every game regardless of the line. While I favor New England to win back-to-back Super Bowls, the 2016 Pats played with an us-against-the-world chip on their shoulders, the world being Commissioner Roger Goodell and his Park Avenue organization's unfair Deflategate punishment, suspending Brady for four games and taking away an invaluable first-round pick, both moves aimed at crippling the Patriots. I expect New England to be motivated to defend last year's Super Bowl crown—but I don't expect the Pats to play close to the point-spread level they played at last year. ❖

Danny Sheridan, a frequent contributor to Cigar Aficionado, *has been featured in every major newspaper in the United States.*

Jordan Spieth rallied to reclaim his lead in winning this year's British Open.



CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

Golf's Top 10 Final Rounds

Some of the most epic acts in golf have been played on the grand stage of the final round

BY JEFF WILLIAMS

When Jordan Spieth won the British Open in dramatic fashion this summer at Royal Birkdale, were you thinking of his splendid opening-round-score of 65? Jack Nicklaus won his final major at the 1986 Masters, but do you remember what he shot in his opening round? Or the score for Arnold Palmer on the first day at the 1960 U.S. Open at Cherry Hills in Denver, the only U.S. Open the great Palmer ever won?

Greatness in golf is defined by multiple victories in the game's major championships. The Masters, U.S. Open, British Open and PGA Championship sit as icons atop golf's tournament pyramid, and those players who win multiple titles are adorned with the respect and adulation that comes with extreme achievement. They become icons themselves. But while every shot counts exactly the same, it's the final round that not only determines the winner, but goes down in history as defining that player, that championship. Some of those rounds are so extraordinary, they put a stamp of iconic brilliance on the game's most accomplished players.

Spieth was tied for the lead after the first round—and sat alone in first place after rounds two and three—but it was his comeback from near disaster on the final day of play that made his win so memorable. Nicklaus opened the 1986 Masters with a 74, was far afield, and at age 46, was written off as a contender. Palmer posted 72 in his first round at the Open and wasn't even on the leaderboard until the final round. It was the final 18 holes of those championships that live on in memory well past the trophy ceremonies. Be it the standard Sunday finish, a Monday playoff or, in Palmer's case, a two-round Saturday final in the U.S. Open, the conclusion of some rounds are just plain epic. Here are the 10 best.

1 Nicklaus Wins His Final Major

It was the second Sunday of April 1986, and Jack Nicklaus was four shots off the lead in the Masters. He was 46, and had not won a major tournament in six years. Time was running out on the greatest of careers. That morning his son Steve called him.

"What do you think Pops?" asked Steve.

"I said '66 will tie, 65 will win,'" said Nicklaus.

Guess what?

Greg Norman was the leader that Sunday and a host of the best players in the world crowded the leaderboard—Seve Ballesteros, Nick Price, Tom Watson, Tom Kite and the emerging Payne Stewart. Nicklaus, whose legacy was to never miss a crucial putt in a major, didn't get off to a great start in the final round and 65 seemed no more than a pipe dream after he missed relatively short birdie chances at six, seven and eight. Then, on the ninth, a wedge gave him an 11-footer. His caddie, son Jack Jr., thought the putt was left edge. Jack thought the line was a little farther out to the left. He went with his gut and the putt dropped in on the left side for a birdie.

Another birdie followed on the par-4 10th, where Nicklaus' wayward drive to the right stayed in play when it caromed off a spectator. The Golden Bear carded another birdie at the 11th. A bogey at the 12th was maddening, yet he answered with a bird on the next hole. Standing in the fairway after a huge drive on the par-5 15th, Jack turned to his son and said: "How far would a three go here?"

Nicklaus arrowed a 4-iron to 12 feet and drilled it for an eagle 3.

By the time he stepped up to the 16th tee, the huge crowd following him was at a fever pitch. He nearly holed his tee shot as an explosion of sound from the "patrons" raced up the hill and shook the clubhouse. It was birdie again on 17, and after a two-putt par on 18, he posted his 65 and had the lead.

Both Kite and Norman had putts to tie him on 18. Both missed, giving Nicklaus his sixth Green Jacket and 18th and final major.

Nicklaus, who had not won a tournament since 1982, was caught up in the emotion of it all, and determined to put one last exclamation point on his career.

"I said last week I'm not going to quit playing golf when I'm playing this badly," Nicklaus said to a packed press room. "I've played too well for too long to let a short period of time ruin my golf game. I said that I occasionally want to be as good as I once was."

2 Palmer's U.S. Open Comeback

Arnold Palmer was well on his way to establishing Arnie's Army in 1960, having won his second Masters in April, one of eight victories he would post that year alone. But nothing was quite as spectacular as his first and only victory in the U.S. Open at Cherry Hills in Denver.

Back then the U.S. Open concluded with 36 holes on Saturday, and after the first 18 in the morning Palmer trailed leader Mike Souchak by seven shots. Coming from seven strokes behind in the final round to win had never been done before.

In the locker room before the final round Palmer was having a chat with friend and Pittsburgh sports writer Bob Drum. Palmer ventured that a 280 score for 72 holes was often the winning total for a U.S. Open. He would have to shoot a 65 in the final round to reach that number. He asked Drum what he thought a 65 would do for him.

"For you, nothing," the crusty Drum replied. "280 won't do you one damn bit of good. You are too far back."

Annoyed and fired up by the remark, Palmer went to the first tee determined to play the aggressive style that was rapidly becoming his trademark. The first hole at Cherry Hills was a short, downhill par-4 of about 320 yards, with water defending the green. Palmer had found that water with his opening tee shot of the tournament and made double bogey, but that wasn't going to hold him back this day. With his whiplash swing, he whaled away with his driver and the ball rolled onto the green. He two-putted for a birdie. "There was an explosive cheer from the gallery on the tee and around the green," the late Palmer once said of that opening tee shot. "Marching off the tee, I felt a powerful surge of adrenaline."

Palmer would post a 30 on the front nine despite a bogey on the eighth hole. It was there he spotted Drum in the gallery. "I asked him, 'Well, well, what are you doing here, since I have no chance?'"

Palmer cooled down on the back nine, but his 35 there allowed him to put up the best final round in Open history to date, a 65. Souchak missed a number of putts down the stretch, giving Palmer the win over an amateur who would become his greatest rival—Jack Nicklaus.

3 Watson's British Duel

The 1977 Open Championship at Turnberry will forever be known as The Duel in Sun. Extraordinary weather conditions—warmth, sunshine, little wind—provided the perfect milieu for two of the greatest golfers in history to go at each other tooth and nail for the final two rounds.

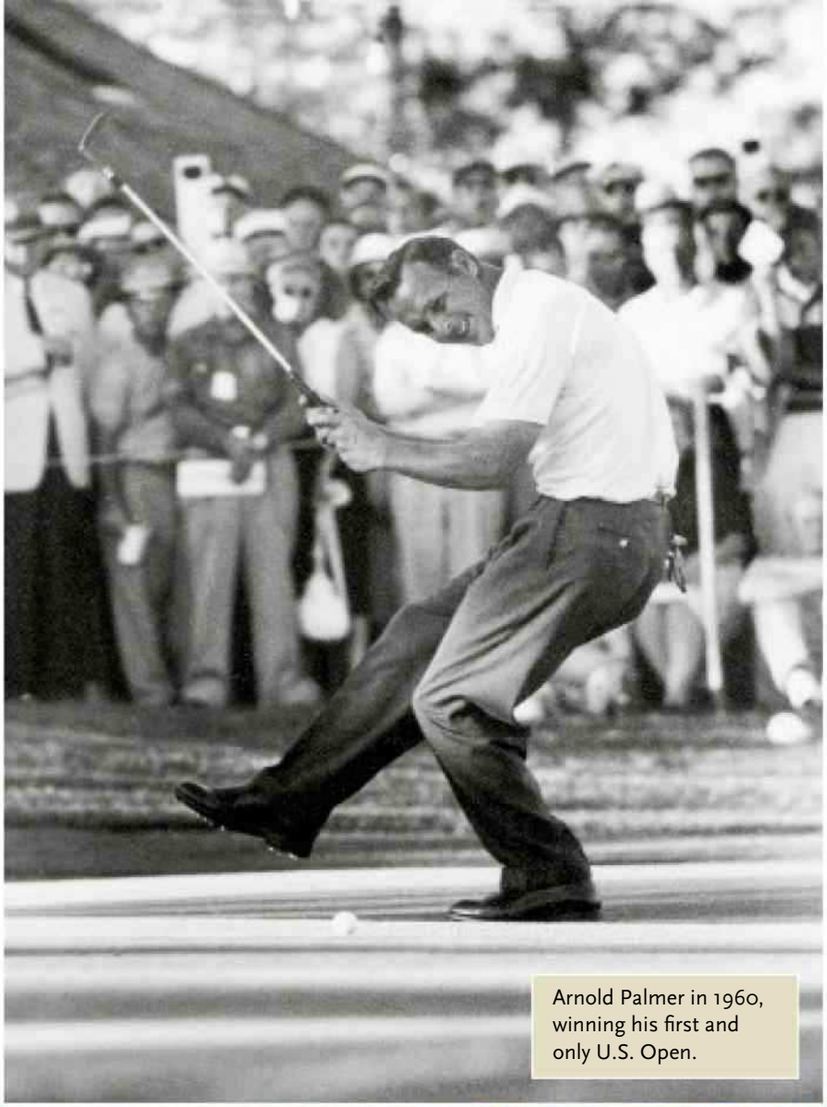
When Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus reached the 16th tee in that final round, having distanced themselves by miles from the field, Watson was moved to say this to Nicklaus: "This is what it's all about, isn't it?" Nicklaus replied, "You bet."

The two golfers each shot 65 in the third round to share the 54-hole lead, three shots ahead of Ben Crenshaw. But they quickly bolted ahead of Crenshaw and everyone else, and Nicklaus took a three-shot lead after four holes with a pair of birdies while Watson played that stretch in one over. But Watson got back to even with a birdie on the eighth, his putt slamming with typical aggressiveness into the back of the cup.

The thousands of fans following the pair, their ardor ramped up by the exhilarating display, broke through the ropes on the ninth fairway to get a better view, leading to a 15-minute delay so that the marshals could regain control. That delay seemed to dampen Watson's charge, and he made bogey, putting him down by a stroke. Nicklaus stretched his lead to two after a birdie on the 12th, then Watson clawed one stroke closer with a birdie on 13.

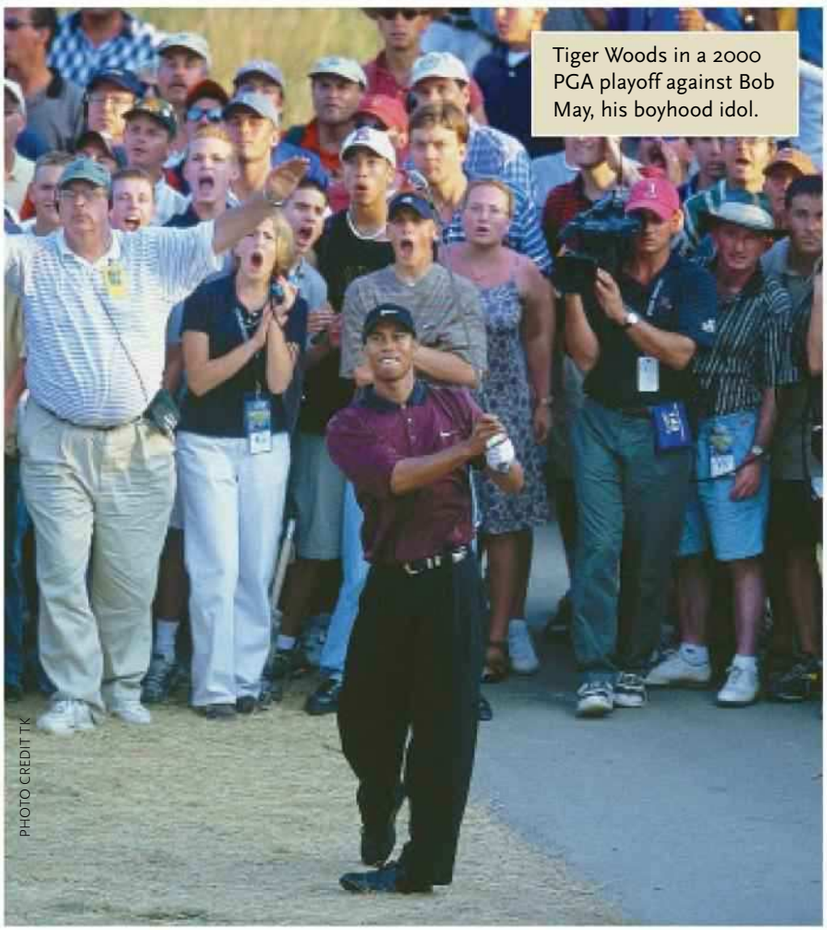
Then came the decisive moment. Watson just missed the green on the par-3 15th, leaving him about 60 feet to the hole. In a typical links play, Watson used his putter, giving the ball a good smack. It took a startling hop into the air before reaching the green, then raced toward the cup at what seemed breakneck speed. The ball clattered into the flagstick square on and fell into

OPPOSITE CLOCKSIE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/GETTY IMAGES; AUGUSTA NATIONAL/GETTY IMAGES; PETER DAZELEY/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN BIEVER/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/GETTY IMAGES



Arnold Palmer in 1960, winning his first and only U.S. Open.

Jack Nicklaus making history in 1986, defying age to win The Masters.



Tiger Woods in a 2000 PGA playoff against Bob May, his boyhood idol.

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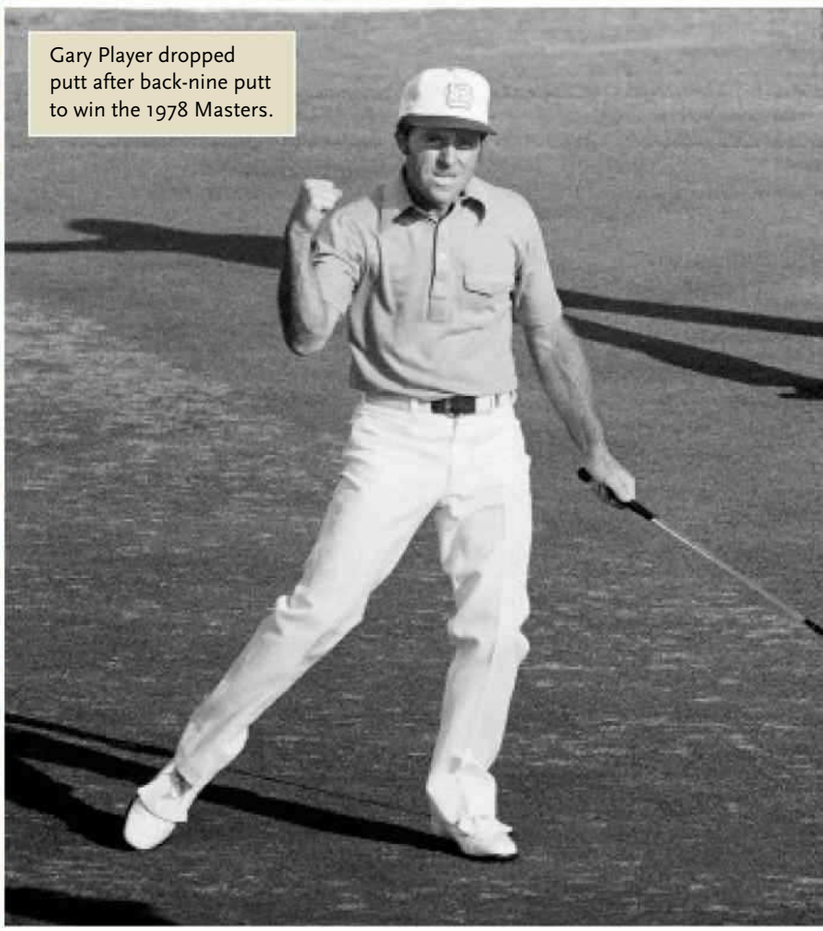

Gary Player dropped putt after back-nine putt to win the 1978 Masters.

the hole for a birdie. Nicklaus missed his far shorter birdie putt, and the two were all square with three to play.

Watson got home in two on the par-5 17th and two-putted for birdie while Nicklaus shockingly missed a three-footer and had to settle for a par. Watson led by a stroke.

The final hole was nothing short of magical. Watson hit a perfect 1-iron off the tee and a 7-iron that came to rest two feet from the pin. Nicklaus had hit a wayward drive into the rough and near a gorse bush. He looked all but doomed. He managed to gouge a shot from there onto the green, 35 feet from the hole. And wouldn't you know it, he canned that putt for birdie and a round of 66. The enormous gallery went ballistic, and Nicklaus, with his characteristic sportsmanship, held up his hands to try to settle them down.

Watson tapped in the most nervous two-footer of his career for a 65 and possession of the Claret Jug. Even more memorably, Nicklaus threw his arm around Watson's shoulders as the two giants of the game strode off the green toward the scorer's tent.

Henrik Stenson bested Phil Mickelson to claim the 2016 British Open.

4 Stenson vs. Mickelson

Sunday at the 2016 Open Championship at Royal Troon was two Triple Crown thoroughbreds against a field of plow horses. Henrik Stenson and Phil Mickelson broke from the gate and left everyone else 20 lengths behind by the first turn. By the middle of the front nine on that final round the pair were seven shots clear of the field. "By the sixth hole, it was pretty obvious it was going to be just us," said Mickelson.

There were six lead changes in the first 11 holes. Stenson led by a shot at the start of the round, but that quickly changed when Mickelson birdied the first hole while Stenson made bogey. Stenson rallied with birdies on the second, the third, the fourth, the sixth and the eighth. Mickelson eagled the fourth and birdied the sixth, but still trailed by a shot, and they were tied going to the 14th hole after Stenson's bogey on the 11th.

Coming down the stretch, the two were neck and neck, bouncing off each other. Stenson birdied 14 to go up by one, and then put down the Hammer of Thor on the 15th when he drained a 51-footer for birdie to lead by two strokes. Stenson birdied the 16th and the 18th to post a 63, the lowest final round by a winner in the history of the Open, 20-under par with a total score of 264. Mickelson's final round of 67 gave him a total of 267, equalling the previous record low at the tournament. He simply couldn't overcome Stenson's astonishing 10 birdies in the final 18 and lost by a staggering three shots. "That is the best I have ever played and not won," Mickelson said. "I threw everything at him that I could."

"I felt that this was going to be my turn," said Stenson in his monotone that betrays his sense of joy and masks his quick wit. "It makes it even more special to beat a competitor like Phil. He's been one of the best to play the game."

5 Spieth Stays On Course

Starting the fourth round of the 2017 British Open at Royal Birkdale in July, Jordan Spieth held a three-shot lead over Matt Kuchar. But he started coming off the rails on the front nine, making three bogies and a birdie through the first six holes.

On the seventh tee, his longtime caddie Michael Greller reminded him of who he is. Greller recalled that Spieth had been vacationing over the Fourth of July in Los Cabos in the company of some of the greatest athletes ever—Michael Jordan, Michael Phelps, Russell Wilson and his buddy Fred Couples, among others. "We walked off 7 tee box, and he made me come back," said Spieth. "He said, 'I've got something to say to you.' He said, 'Do you remember that group you were with? You're that caliber of an athlete. But I need you to believe that right now because you're in a great position in this tournament. This is a new tournament. We're starting over here.' "

It didn't quite start there. Spieth made another bogey on the ninth, and then on the 13th he hit a horrendous drive miles wide right into a sand dune, plugged and dead. From there, he made the most momentous penalty drop of the modern era. Taking relief from an unplayable lie that was so bad that it took 20 minutes to figure out a drop point, Spieth was able to hit a three-iron from the driving range—which was inbounds—back into play on the extremely difficult par-4. From there he hit a decent pitch and sank the most important bogey putt of his career.

That bogey allowed Kuchar, who made par, to take a one-shot lead. But it also fueled Spieth's belief in himself, a seed planted six holes earlier by his caddie.

Spieth nearly made an ace on the 14th and tapped in for birdie. On the next hole, a par-5, he drained a 50-foot putt for eagle. He followed that with a 20-footer for birdie on the par-4 16th, and on the 17th it was another birdie. Five under in four holes. Spieth had left Kuchar and the rest of the field in his dust. After a tap-in par to close the round, Spieth claimed his third major championship at the age of 23, a feat that only Jack Nicklaus had accomplished.

This wasn't so much an epic rally to overtake the field as it was an epic effort to overcome himself. "Michael Jordan and Michael Phelps are the greatest to ever do what they did, and I'm not," Spieth said. "But if you believe you are, then you are almost as good as being that."

His caddie believed, and that's where it started.

WARREN LITTLE/R&A/R&A VIA GETTY IMAGES

Hennessy
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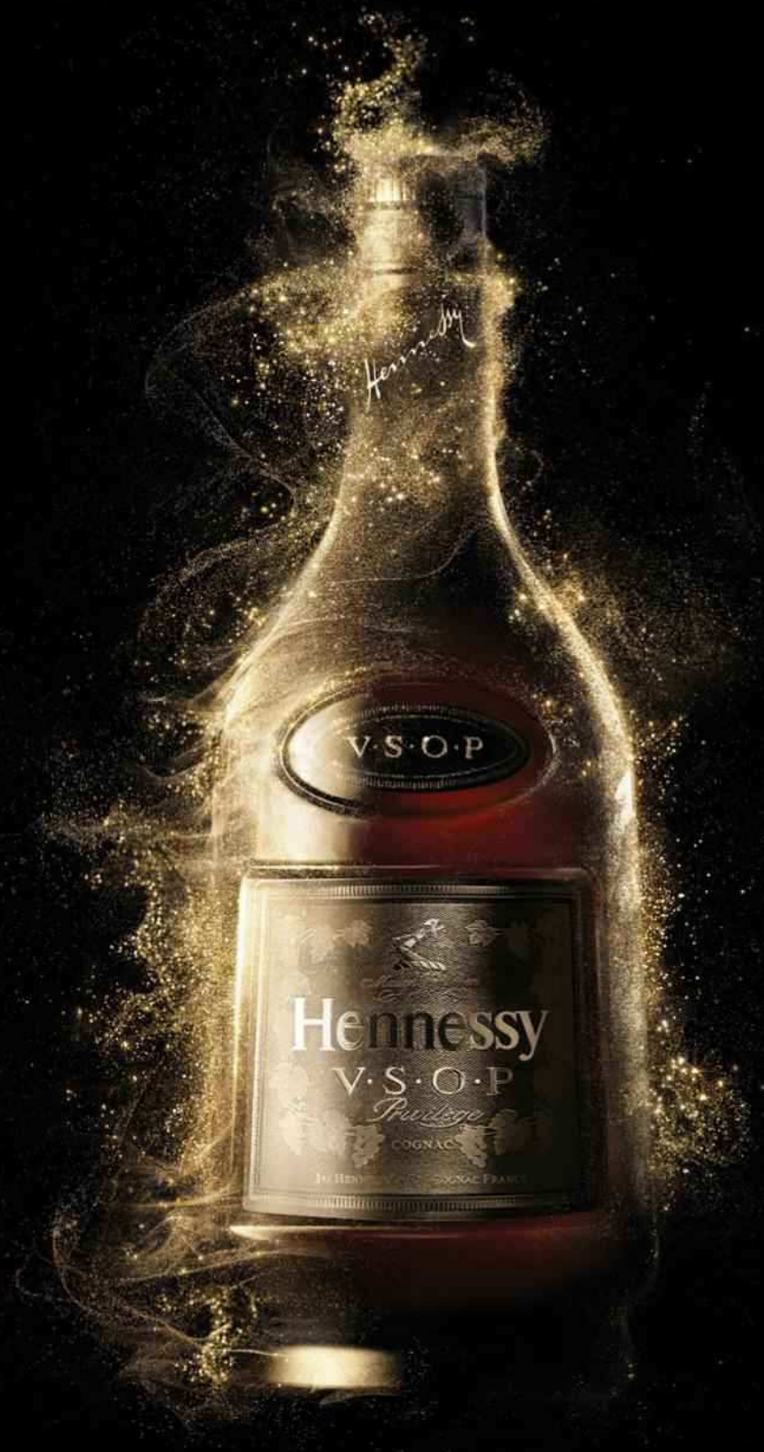

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6 Tiger's PGA Playoff

Tiger Woods was smack dab in the middle of the greatest run of his magnificent career when he came to the 2000 PGA Championship at Valhalla Golf Club outside of Louisville. He had won the U.S. Open and British Open by extraordinary margins and was fast establishing himself as one of the greatest players of all time. He was golf's five-star general. But when he started the final round of the final major of the season, he was up against an enlisted man who would not back down. Bob May was a shot back, and their Sunday duel would go down as one of golf's all-time best.

It was no small irony that Woods and May would find themselves paired. Both had grown up in Southern California and May, seven years older than Woods, had been a dominant junior and amateur player, so much so that he had become Woods' idol. A young Tiger had even pinned newspaper clips of May's exploits on his bedroom wall.

Unexpectedly, May had the lead after the par-5 second hole where he made birdie to Woods' bogey. May was up by two after a birdie on the fourth, but Woods drew back to even with birdies on seven and eight.

The quality of the golf was brilliant and birdies abounded. The 15th would prove pivotal. Woods missed the green and May had maybe 12 feet for birdie. Woods holed a 15-footer for par and May missed. Woods made birdie on the 17th to draw the match even, and they both made birdie on the 18th. The championship would be decided by the first three-hole playoff in PGA Championship history.

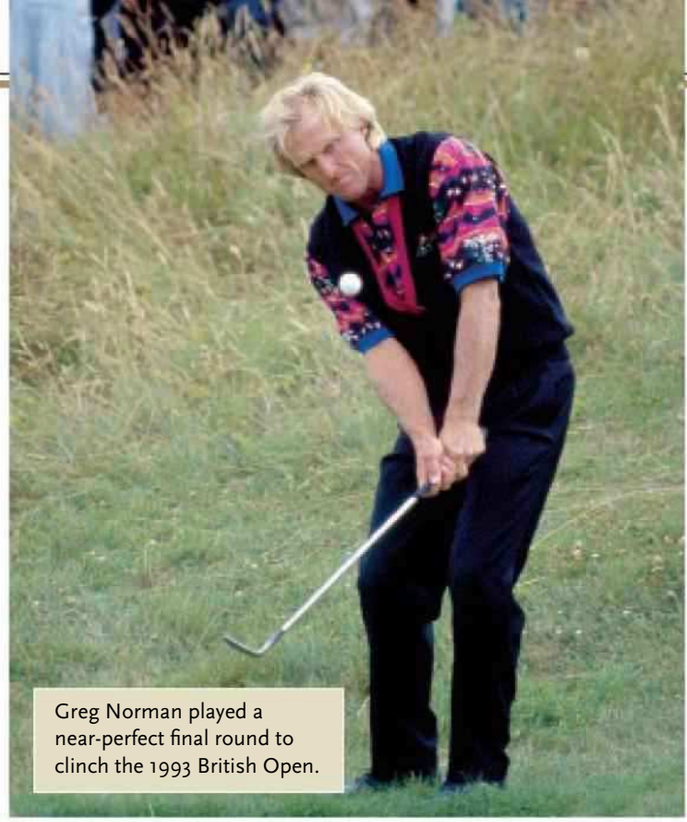
It began on the 16th and produced one of Tiger's supreme moments. He knew his 20-footer for birdie was destined for the hole when it was five feet away. He virtually danced after it, pointing his index finger at the cup. In it dropped. Woods was up by a stroke. Both scrambled to make pars on the last two holes, but Woods had prevailed.

After winning the U.S. Open by 15 strokes and the British Open by eight, Woods saw this victory as the most exhilarating. "This was probably the most exciting from a player's standpoint," he said. "The fact you are playing at a level that is so high, and knowing the fact that par is not going to win a hole."

7 Norman Takes On The World

Greg Norman, he of the epic losses in major championships, put on his own epic performance to win the British Open at Royal St. Georges in the south of England in 1993. He had spent his entire career trying to live up to his own high expectations and live down his own spectacular failures. He had one major to his credit, the 1986 British Open at Turnberry where nary one of the best players in the world was there at the end to challenge him. But at St. Georges they were all there. Nick Faldo, Bernhard Langer, Corey Pavin, Fred Couples, Nick Price and the blossoming Ernie Els, all in the hunt on the final.

The first day of the tournament was nasty, and Norman started the road to the championship with a double bogey, hitting his tee shot into nearly waist-high hay. But after three rounds, Norman had clawed into contention, trailing Faldo and Pavin by a stroke. Then, in the final 18, he went on a tear.



Greg Norman played a near-perfect final round to clinch the 1993 British Open.

PHIL SHELDON/POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

His final round started with a birdie at the first hole. After two more Norman had a two-shot lead after the sixth hole, and it would never be less than a shot for the rest of the day. His iron play was superb, his putting spot on, save for missing a 14-inch par putt on the 17th. In the end, after seven birdies and a solitary bogey, he posted a six-under-par 64 to win by two shots over Faldo.

"I am in awe of myself," Norman said when it was all over, a glint in his eye. "In my entire career I can honestly say that I never have gone around a golf course and not missed a shot. But today I hit every iron perfect, every drive perfect."

And in doing so he earned his second, and final major.

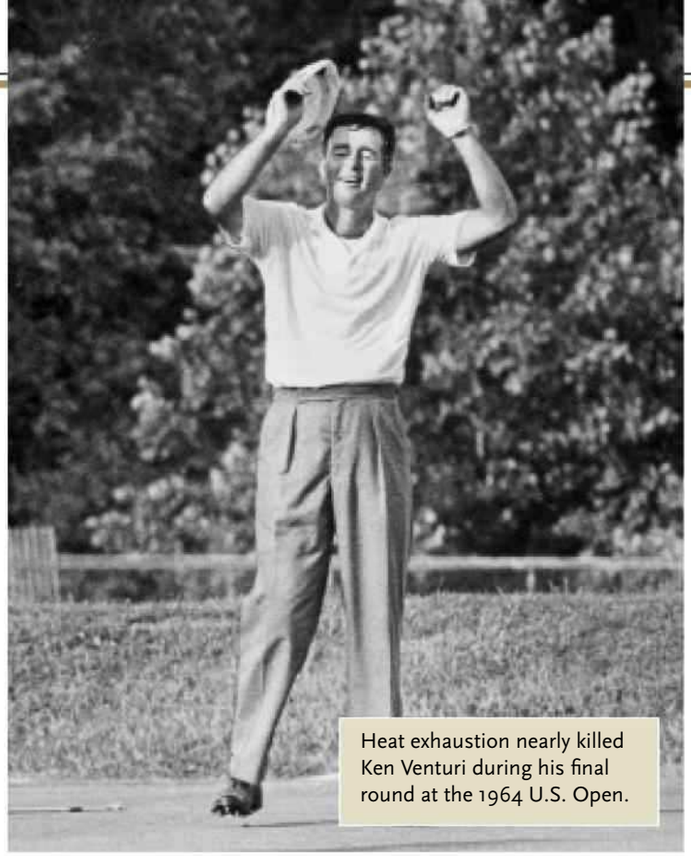
8 Player's Magic Sunday

Almost as old as the magnolia trees that line the entrance to the Augusta National Golf Club is the maxim "the Masters doesn't begin until the back nine on Sunday." And that adage rang true in 1978 when Gary Player, at age 42, charged from behind on the final day.

He started the round seven strokes back, with Tom Watson, Hubert Green and Rod Funseth taking turns at the top of the leaderboard. Player, ever the bubbly enthusiast, still felt he had a chance, even though he was teeing off two hours before the leaders.

He had been playing well through three rounds without making many putts. By his account, they had to start going in. "One of the things I am is an eternal optimist," he said. "I was playing excellent golf and I hadn't made any putts. But you have to keep on aiming at them."

And so he did. Player shot 34 on the front nine, which didn't make a big dent in the lead, but the frontrunners were not pulling away. On the difficult tenth hole, Player posted a rare birdie with a curling 25-footer. On the devilish par-3 12th he holed it from 15 feet. He hit the par-5 13th in two and his eagle putt burned the edge, but it was a gimme birdie. He two-putted the par-5 15th from 75 feet for another birdie. In went another 15-footer on the



Heat exhaustion nearly killed Ken Venturi during his final round at the 1964 U.S. Open.

16th. On the 18th, yet another 15-footer dropped for birdie, giving him a round of 64.

As Player had blitzed forward, the leaders backed up, but they all had putts on the 18th hole to tie him. Funseth missed from 15 feet, Watson from 10. Agonizingly, Green missed a three-footer, one of golf's most memorable yips. Instead of facing a playoff, Player donned his third green jacket, giving him his ninth and final major championship.

"This is a course of great momentum," Player would say later. "That's why there have been so many great comebacks in Masters history. And when you come to the final nine holes on Sunday afternoon, you really never know what will happen."

9 Trevino Takes Down Nicklaus

In 1971, Jack Nicklaus got snakebit at the U.S. Open at Merion, the iconic championship course in suburban Philadelphia. The snake charmer was Lee Trevino.

The two were tied after 72 holes, with Trevino shooting 69-69 the first two rounds. They would go to an 18-hole playoff on Monday, a hot, humid, sticky day. As Trevino took a few warm-up swings, his golf glove was squishy, so he went to his bag for a new one. There he found a fresh glove and a novel idea.

"I reached into my bag to get another one and there was the rubber snake in the bag," Trevino would say. He had been using the snake and a hatchet as props to show the galleries how deep the notorious U.S. Open rough was. "I picked the snake up by its tail and Jack is over on the side of the tee and was kind of laughing. So I throw the snake over to Jack."

Nicklaus, who was sitting on a seat-stick, wasn't sure the snake was real and he laughed nervously. After taking a few seconds to figure out it was rubber, Nicklaus tossed it back.

Trevino thought he might have been punished for his prank when he made bogey on the first hole, but then Nicklaus had difficulty in the bunkers on the next two holes to make bogey and double bogey. "I was very nervous, very nervous," said Trevino. "I bogied No. 1 right off the bat, Jack bogied two by leaving it in the bunker. We went to three and he left it in the bunker again. When we went to the fourth hole I said he might be choking worse than I am."

After the sixth hole, a storm delayed play. And it steeled Trevino's confidence, knowing he had a better chance of holding his approaches on the softened greens. He would make three birdies over the next 12 holes, post a 68 to Nicklaus' 71 and win his second U.S. Open.

"Everyone has someone who drives them," Trevino would say years later. "Jack drove me. I could have pneumonia, but if I was paired with Jack, let's go. He was the best. And Jack brought the best out of me every time we played."

10 Venturi's Near-Death Win

Sports is rarely a matter of life and death. But at the 1964 U.S. Open at the Congressional Country Club, it was for Ken Venturi. The accomplished pro seemed destined for major championship greatness when injuries from an auto accident in 1961 severely impacted his game. By the time 1964 rolled around, he only got into the tournament by going through both the local and sectional qualifiers. After two rounds he was six shots off the lead. The 1964 Open would be the final one with a 36-hole finish on Saturday, and Venturi certainly made it an epic one, heroically staggering home in the final round for the victory.

The temperature that day was about 100 degrees. Ray Floyd, his playing partner, remembers it vividly. "You could leave your hotel room with a fresh shirt and be soaked by the time you got to your car."

Venturi fired a brilliant 66 in the morning round, but in the closing holes his body started to succumb to the trying conditions. He bogied the 17th and 18th, teetering as he walked to the scorer's tent. He was taken to the clubhouse where a doctor had him wrapped in cold towels and gave him salt pills. He laid on the floor in front of his locker. Then the doctor told him he should withdraw. Playing the afternoon round could be fatal.

"It's better than the way I'd been living," Venturi recalled. "I'm going out there."

Was he going to win? Heck, was he going to finish? Was he going to live?

Walking slowly, uncertainly, Venturi played steadily. When he birdied the ninth hole, he had the lead. "He was making shots, you knew it was destiny, that he's going to get through here," said Floyd.

By the time he started down the hill on the 18th, Venturi knew the Open was his. He took off his white tam hat, which had been pulled down tight during the round to keep as much sun off his face as he could.

When his final putt dropped for a round of 70, it was Floyd who bent over to take the ball out of the hole. Floyd had tears in his eyes. When Venturi saw that, he said, "I lost it."

It was a staggering final day of the U.S. Open, and a staggering victory for Venturi. ❖

Jeff Williams is a contributing editor of Cigar Aficionado.

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124 CIGAR REVIEW: 80 BLIND TASTINGS
A blind-tasting of 80 cigars from every major region that produces high-quality, premium tobacco.

138 SUBLIME SMOKES
Put a few decades of age on a Cuban Hoyo de Monterrey and it goes from an everyday favorite to a near-perfect, all-time great. It still has a long life ahead of it, as does a special Cuban cigar made exclusively for Mexico.

140 10 THINGS EVERY CIGAR LOVER SHOULD KNOW
The world of premium cigars can be vast and mysterious, but senior editor Greg Mottola has simplified some of the basic tenets of tobacco in a practical way. As your knowledge of this hobby grows, so will your appreciation.

148 THE NEW RULES OF CUBA
Between President Obama loosening restrictions on Cuban travel and President Trump tightening them again, you may be confused as to what's legal and what isn't. Cuba analyst Peter Kornbluh sheds some light on the new policy.

JEFF HARRIS

churchills

Translating to "The Truth" in French, the Tatuaje La Vérité 2013 scored 92 points. It's a rare cigar, but not for reasons you might think. While the smoke is indeed rare in the sense that few were made, it's also unusual because this is an estate cigar—all the tobacco in (and on) the La Vérité 2013 is not only from a 2013 crop, but it all comes from the La Estrella farm, owned by the Garcia family in Nicaragua. The tobacco types change each year La Vérité is released depending on what the farm grows. This release is a combination of Criollo '98, Corojo '99 and another Cuban seed that brand-owner Pete Johnson simply calls Habano. Two cigars scored 91 points, both from Nicaragua. The Archetype Axis Mundi is made by Drew Estate for California-based Ventura Cigars. The somewhat cerebral name refers to the supposedly recurring symbols and universal tropes found in the dreams and myths of all people and civilizations. Longtime cigar smokers might be surprised to find a Nat Cicco rated within the pages of this magazine. Better known as an inexpensive cigar, Nat Cicco went premium with its Aniversario 1965 Liga No. 4.

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 47 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

TATUAJE LA VÉRITÉ LA VÉRITÉ 2013
This cigar has a lush draw and even burn. Pleasant notes of hickory and vanilla bean become more refined, taking on hints of coconut and piquant red pepper zing.
U.S.: $20.00 U.K.: N/A

92

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: INDONESIA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ARCHETYPE AXIS MUNDI CHURCHILL
A long cigar with a substantial draw that leaves sweet impressions of dark chocolate, hickory and black cherry on the palate. The finish hints of chewy nougat.
U.S.: $13.00 U.K.: N/A

91

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

NAT CICCO ANIVERSARIO 1965 LIGA NO. 4 CHURCHILL
Squarely, symmetrically pressed with an oily wrapper and chopped pigtail cap. Up front acidity disappears for a leathery, meaty smoke sweetened by notes of molasses and toffee.
U.S.: $6.50 U.K.: N/A

91

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 7 1/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A/CONN. BROADLEAF

ARTURO FUENTE CHURCHILL MADURO
Dark and imposing, this large cigar imparts the dark chocolate and licorice notes that a near-black wrapper suggests, however, it's balanced by a medium-bodied base of almonds and wood.
U.S.: $6.45 U.K.: N/A

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 47 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

L'ATELIER CÔTE D'OR 2017
This Churchill wears a dark, nearly flawless cover leaf. It's a bold smoke, redolent of hickory wood, toast and earth. The finish is long and toasty.
U.S.: $16.00 U.K.: N/A

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 47 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2015

ROMEO Y JULIETA CHURCHILL
Sweet and fruity with notes of coconut and cedar. There's an earthy undertone as well, but the smoke is a bit thin from the firm draw.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £25.80

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

EL GALAN HABANO NATURAL CHURCHILL
Toasty and slightly sweet, this Churchill offers an almond-paste nuttiness with a tangy, mineral finish. A mild to medium-bodied smoke.
U.S.: $5.80 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 6 7/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

JOYA DE NICARAGUA ANTAÑO 1970 CHURCHILL
Strikingly oily and dark, this Churchill is solid to the touch yet draws and burns evenly. There are pronounced notes of licorice and anise as well as meaty, leathery notes and a rye bread finish. A full-bodied cigar.
U.S.: $8.30 U.K.: N/A

89

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: HONDURAS, PANAMA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ALEC BRADLEY BLACK MARKET CHURCHILL
A dark, gleaming Churchill that starts strong with earthy, woody and nutty notes but loses intensity. There's a faint hint of brown sugar on the finish.
U.S.: $8.45 U.K.: N/A

88

U.S.A.
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

DON PEPIN GARCIA ORIGINAL DELICIAS
A medium- to full-bodied Churchill that combines generic notes of earth and cola with bitter hints of Fernet-Branca liqueur. The herbal finish leaves a licorice aftertaste.
U.S.: $8.55 U.K.: N/A

88

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

PADILLA ANNIVERSARY CHURCHILL
Besides a few large veins, the reddish-brown wrapper of this Churchill is attractive. The cigar is redolent of hickory-smoked meat and woody mesquite, but loses some intensity.
U.S.: $11.00 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 7"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, HONDURAS
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

SAN LOTANO CONNECTICUT CHURCHILL
A solidly rolled, yellowish cigar with touches of vanilla and wood. The smoke becomes more floral and builds to a mild leather finish.
U.S.: $7.80 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 49 LENGTH: 6 7/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

CASA MAGNA COLORADO CHURCHILL
A tightly packed Churchill with an even burn and substantial draw. Predominant notes of earth and wood also show a sweet chocolate and nut intonation, but the finish is slightly damp.
U.S.: $7.92 U.K.: N/A

87

coronas

The iconic Cuban Montecristo No. 2 tends to overshadow some other great cigars within the Montecristo number series, specifically the Montecristo No. 3, which scored 92 points, placing highest in the corona category. Though a small cigar, each puff possesses all the complexity, body and resonance that one would expect from one of the most famous names in cigars. The MBombay Habano Corona scored 91 points and is a relative newcomer to the world of premium smokes. Made in Costa Rica, MBombay is only three years old and is owned by Mel Shah, an IT-professional-turned-tobacconist-cum-cigar-brand-owner. Cigar enthusiasts don't necessarily need to spend a lot of money to get a satisfying smoking experience. The Padrón Londres scored 91 points and carries a suggested retail price of less than $5. The Londres are part of Padrón's core line of cigars. These examples had a bold, rustic edge to them, but also exhibited some of the elegance and complexity of Padrón's pricier smokes. As is typical to the brand, the Londres are a medium- to full-bodied combination of brawny earth and sophisticated sweetness.

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 5/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: MARCH 2014

MONTECRISTO NO. 3
Crafted with a three-seam cap, this cigar starts with a floral and coconut character that frames a core of graham cracker, wood and coffee bean.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £17.40

92

COSTA RICA
RING GAUGE: 43 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: PERU, NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

MBOMBAY HABANO CORONA
A veiny little cigar with strong, meaty notes of salt and walnut, but possesses the sweetness of caramel and nougat. Brawny and flavorful.
U.S.: $6.49 U.K.: N/A

91

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

PADRÓN LONDRES
Rustic tones of rawhide and earth carry some elegance with a nougat and caramel sweetness. A medium- to full-bodied smoke.
U.S.: $4.70 U.K.: N/A

91

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA, PERU
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

H. UPMANN VINTAGE CAMEROON CORONA
An exceptionally nutty smoke with a rich, luxurious mouthfeel. Notes of honey, oak and dried flowers also unfold with each puff.
U.S.: $5.50 U.K.: N/A

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 43 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA, PERU
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA AURORA 1495 NO. 4
Tasty and bold with a superb draw. Its coffee-like characteristics are balanced by notes of toasted wheat, dried cherries and a peppery finish.
U.S.: $6.99 U.K.: N/A

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: SEPTEMBER 2016

PARTAGÁS CORONA SENIOR (TUBO)
There's an attractive reddish hue to this corona, though the draw is a bit firm. The smoke combines nuanced notes of leather and ginger with floral elements and a bready finish.
U.S.: N/A ITALY: 6.50 EURO

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 40 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: DECEMBER 2014

H. UPMANN MAJESTIC
Squarely pressed with a reddish-brown wrapper, this corona imparts a nutty and woody smoke with hints of leather and licorice, but leaves an ashy aftertaste.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £10.00

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

LA AROMA DE CUBA CORONA
Near black in appearance, this corona draws quite evenly and consistently. Notes of toffee and nuts are met with white pepper and charred oak finish.
U.S.: $5.40 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA FLOR DOMINICANA AIR BENDER PODEROSO
This corona's woody core of oak and hickory is overlaid with sweeter notes of caramel marshmallow. The tobacco becomes increasingly earthy and powerful.
U.S.: $7.50 U.K.: N/A

89

U.S.A.
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

LA PALINA COLLECTION MR. SAM CORONA
Leathery and brassy with a bold earthy core and a creamy finish. A well-made cigar with a fine draw and burn.
U.S.: $11.00 U.K.: N/A

89

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 45 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: HONDURAS, DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

PUNCH ELITE EMS
A slightly pressed corona that delivers a tangy, woody smoke and underlying earthiness. Simple and fairly full bodied for such a small cigar.
U.S.: $3.79 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: INDONESIA
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. SHADE

CHARTER OAK CT SHADE PETIT CORONA
Enveloped in a light wrapper that extends over the uncut foot. The draw is open and full, showing a woody profile of cedar and balsa along with a dry, vermouth-like sweetness and a peppery finish.
U.S.: $4.80 U.K.: N/A

87

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 43 LENGTH: 5 5/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

DAVIDOFF GRAND CRU NO. 2
First puffs of this light, tan corona are musty and soapy, but the mustiness fades to show notes of citrus and ginger before a mild, dry finish.
U.S.: $16.90 U.K.: N/A

87

corona gordas

After Rocky Patel created his Platinum line, he decided to give it a special offshoot—the Limited Edition Habano. The Toro scored 92 points thanks to the combination of dark, Ecuadoran Habano wrapper and blend of Mexican and Nicaraguan tobaccos. It's made in Nicaragua at the Tavicusa factory that Patel co-owns. The Cuban Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No. 1 scored 91 points and is a favorite among smokers of all levels for a simple reason: it's complex enough for discerning palates, yet mild enough for beginners. Made by My Father Cigars in Nicaragua, the Nestor Miranda Collection Corojo Toro also achieved 91 points and is as flavorful as its alluring wrapper suggests.

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROCKY PATEL PLATINUM LIMITED EDITION HABANO TORO
Dark and box-pressed with a reddish-brown wrapper, this bold smoke starts strong with earth and black pepper before taking on a nutty sweetness.
U.S.: $12.20 U.K.: N/A

92

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 46 LENGTH: 5 5/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2016

HOYO DE MONTERREY EPICURE NO. 1
While the veiny wrapper is not the most pristine, the cigar is full of sweet, woody and floral intonations that build to a chocolate-like finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £20.60

91

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

NESTOR MIRANDA COLLECTION COROJO TORO
An attractive cigar covered in an oily Colorado wrapper. Its even draw imparts a meaty, cedary smoke with touches of coffee that lead to a sweet, burnt toffee finish.
U.S.: $8.99 U.K.: N/A

91

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

E.P. CARRILLO DUSK STOUT TORO
Enrobed in a dark cover leaf, this tightly packed cigar is a primarily earthy smoke balanced by hints of raisin and licorice. The finish shows more raisin sweetness.
U.S.: $7.60 U.K.: N/A

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: BRAZIL
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. HABANO

LIGA PRIVADA T52 TORO
Though packed solid with tobacco, the draw is open and lush, imparting an oaky, leathery smoke with notes of malted chocolate and toast.
U.S.: $14.33 U.K.: N/A

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ASHTON HERITAGE PURO SOL ROBUSTO
The initial sweet, fruitiness of the smoke becomes heavier with leather and earth. A meaty undertone also emerges before a graphite finish.
U.S.: $9.80 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 48 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, HONDURAS, BRAZIL
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

BELLAS ARTES SHORT CHURCHILL
First puffs of this box-pressed cigar are slightly sweet with caramel and cedar but pick up heavy, intense notes of peanut that linger on the finish.
U.S.: $8.30 U.K.: N/A

89

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2016

H. UPMANN MAGNUM 50
The draw of this medium-bodied cigar is slightly firm, though offers a consistently woody, nutty smoke. Simple and straightforward.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £25.20

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

LAS MAREAS CICLOPES
An attractive-looking corona gorda with an even draw and burn. Its chewy, nutty smoke imparts hints of cedar before a dusty finish.
U.S.: $10.50 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: MEXICO

PEDRO MARTÍN MADURO TORO
Big, immediate notes of earth and oak are balanced by a brown sugar sweetness, but they dissipate quickly on the short, dry finish.
U.S.: $9.94 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, PERU, BRAZIL, HONDURAS, DOM. REP.
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

AVO SYNCRO SOUTH AMERICA RITMO TORO
With a full draw and even burn, this box-pressed cigar leaves impressions of caramel, toast and sliced almonds on the palate before a slightly sweet, earthy finish.
U.S.: $11.90 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

VILLIGER COLORADO TORO
A nutty, woody cigar with earthy underpinnings and touches of licorice, but the finish is a bit dry. Medium- to full-bodied.
U.S.: $7.35 U.K.: N/A

88

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 56 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, BRAZIL
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROBERTO P. DURAN SIGNATURE TAÍNO
Bitter at first, this thick toro develops a spicy white pepper and cardamom character before an herbal finish.
U.S.: $11.00 U.K.: N/A

87

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

HAMMER + SICKLE MOSCOW CITY ROBUSTO EXTRA
The strong, earthy start of this dark, oily cigar becomes damp and musty-tasting. Intermittent notes of cedar and orange peel are affected by the mustiness.
U.S.: $9.50 U.K.: N/A

86

figurados

The figurados category is normally a section of high achievement, as these cigars require the rollers to have exceptional skill. Whether it be a short belicoso, long torpedo or double-tapered salomon, shapely cigars are the result of the most talented *torcedores*. Three such cigars in our tasting scored 92 points. The 601 Red Label Habano Torpedo has been made in a few different facilities over the years, but is currently produced at the San Lotano factory, which is owned by A.J. Fernandez. Brand owner Erik Espinosa turned the line over to Fernandez after he reached maximum capacity at his own La Zona factory. Both factories are in Nicaragua. The Cuban Diplomaticos No. 2 is the lone cigar left in the line. Many fans consider it to be a less-expensive version of the ever-popular Montecristo No. 2. This has never been confirmed by Habanos S.A. but its performance here indicates that this lesser-known cigar is worthy of any humidor. The Oliva Serie V continues to be the cigar that consistently delivers a lot of flavor and body at a relatively low price. Like the 601, it's loaded with great tobacco and retails for less than $10.

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

601 RED LABEL HABANO TORPEDO
A pointy torpedo whose nutty, woody core of cedar and walnuts is framed by notes of honeyed tea and a mineral finish.
U.S.: $7.95 U.K.: N/A

92

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: MARCH 2017

DIPLOMATICOS NO. 2
Sweet and rich with malted chocolate flavor, caramel notes and coffee bean. The smoke is balanced by a leathery note. A medium- to full-bodied torpedo.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £21.00

92

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

OLIVA SERIE V BELICOSO
Enrobed in a dark, pristine wrapper, this small figurado shows rich notes of earth and spicy leather, interwoven with nutty touches of cashews and molasses.
U.S.: $8.36 U.K.: N/A

92

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 54 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

CAO L'ANNIVERSAIRE CAMEROON BELICOSO
Sweet, chewy notes of almond and vanilla bean are balanced by a rich, pleasant coffee quality that extends to the finish. A tasty, box-pressed belicoso.
U.S.: $8.19 U.K.: N/A

91

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: DOM. REP.

MANUEL QUESADA 70TH BELICOSO
A figurado with an oily wrapper. Its lush draw delivers a sweet-and-savory combination of leather, chocolate-covered almonds, and a hint of red wine acidity.
U.S.: $12.50 U.K.: N/A

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF

FLORES Y RODRIGUEZ CONNECTICUT VALLEY RESERVE AZUL FIGURADO
Well constructed with a tapered head and foot, this figurado has an open draw that delivers a bold, earthy smoke with hints of chocolate and a slight, copper aftertaste.
U.S.: $19.00 U.K.: N/A

89

BAHAMAS
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, HONDURAS, GREECE, COSTA RICA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

GRAYCLIFF CRYSTAL PIRATE
An attractive torpedo that leaves light impressions of cocoa powder and coffee bean on the palate, but the finish is very tangy.
U.S.: $20.75 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 60 LENGTH: 3 15/16"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

UNDERCROWN SHADE FLYING PIG
A chubby little figurado with a tightly wound pigtail cap. The creamy, woody smoke carries touches of citrus and spice leading to a sweet finish.
U.S.: $12.72 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: CAMEROON
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

CROMAGNON AQUITAINE MODE 5
A perfectly constructed perfecto with a dark, oily wrapper. It's a toasty, woody smoke that takes on a licorice sweetness before a heavy charcoal finish.
U.S.: $7.80 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 56 LENGTH: 5 7/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: DOM. REP.

AGING ROOM SMALL BATCH M356II FORTE
Strong and tangy, this oily perfecto has a woody core of oak and cedar that segues into an earthy, mineral-heavy finish.
U.S.: $9.99 U.K.: N/A

87

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/8"
FILLER: HONDURAS, NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

ALEC BRADLEY PRENSADO TORPEDO
A box-pressed torpedo with a slightly airy draw and uneven burn. Initial puffs impart salty, mineral notes to the palate before hints of mushroom and a spicy, black pepper finish.
U.S.: $12.50 U.K.: N/A

87

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 6 3/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

DIAMOND CROWN MAXIMUS PYRAMID NO. 3
The initial charred-earth and heavily roasted coffee notes of this dark torpedo calm down to show a sweeter smoke of vanilla and black cherry.
U.S.: $18.45 U.K.: N/A

87

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

KRISTOFF MADURO TORPEDO
Near-black with an uncut foot. It's an earthy smoke leaving notes of licorice, minerals and a floral quality that borders on soapy.
U.S.: $9.26 U.K.: N/A

87

lonsdales

One would expect an elegant size like the lonsdale to grant an elegant smoke upon first light. This expectation was met by a trio of cigars that all scored 91 points. The Illusione F9 is one of the original sizes of the brand's core line. Originally produced in Honduras, Illusiones were moved to the TABSA factory in Estelí, Nicaragua, which is owned by the same company that grows all of Illusione's tobacco—Aganorsa. But Illusione isn't the only brand benefitting from this operation. The Maestro del Tiempo 5205 by Warped Cigars is made in the same factory and uses tobacco grown from the same agricultural firm. Both cigars are a testament to the distinctive tobacco and fine production coming from both Aganorsa and TABSA. It's easy for the lonsdale to get lost among the better-selling torpedos, toros and robustos of Rocky Patel's Decade line, but Patel pays his respect to this classic size by making it a fantastic smoke. It's rolled in Nestor Plasencia's El Paraiso factory, a facility dedicated almost exclusively to the production of Rocky Patel cigars. It was released in 2008 to commemorate Patel's 10 years in the business, which is now going 20.

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

ILLUSIONE F9
Oils are seeping through the wrapper of this slim cigar, which combines the botanical flavors of juniper, anis and vanilla with heady notes of chocolate-covered almonds.
U.S.: $9.95 U.K.: N/A

91

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 6 3/8"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

MAESTRO DEL TIEMPO 5205
A beautiful lonsdale crafted with four neat seams at the head. The smoke is dense and toasty with notes of nutmeg and clove. Hints of mesquite and fresh fennel resonate on the palate.
U.S.: $9.14 U.K.: N/A

91

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

ROCKY PATEL DECADE LONSDALE
Gleaming with oil, this softly pressed lonsdale smacks of lemon zest and ginger. There's a slight nuttiness that leads to a sweet, licorice finish.
U.S.: $10.55 U.K.: N/A

91

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: MAY 2016

MONTECRISTO NO. 1
The floral smoke of this slim cigar also shows notes of almond paste and earth. There is an elegant touch of vanilla cream on the finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £20.00

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. SHADE

ASHTON 8-9-8
Light in appearance, this lonsdale shows a surprisingly rich, woody character with notes of baking spice that culminate in a graham-cracker finish.
U.S.: $9.35 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

PADRÓN 1964 ANNIVERSARY SERIES
SUPERIOR MADURO
Slender and pressed with a soft head. Initial saltiness sharpens and becomes earthy, especially on the finish, though there's a hint of caramel sweetness.
U.S.: $11.00 U.K.: N/A

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

MY FATHER CEDROS DELUXE CERVANTES
Made with a three-seam cap, this lonsdale has an even draw and flawless burn. It's a nutty, earthy smoke with some hickory notes but the finish is dry.
U.S.: $8.90 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 43 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

NAT SHERMAN STERLING DALIAS
Herbal and woody with floral notes and hints of graham cracker. A bit of cinnamon comes through as well before the dry pecan finish.
U.S.: $14.00 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 43 LENGTH: 6 3/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP., MEXICO
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

PARTAGAS NO. 1
A solidly rolled lonsdale packed tightly with tobacco. Its draw is firm, offering unusual combinations ranging from briny oysters and leather to sweet almond paste and bread dough. The finish is floral.
U.S.: $8.19 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: INDONESIA

ROMEO Y JULIETA 1875
CEDRO DELUXE NO. 1
Gritty and sandy in appearance, this lonsdale burns and draws perfectly. Sweet notes of corn and bread carry a touch of cedar and acidity.
U.S.: $7.09 U.K.: N/A

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 6 5/8"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

MONTECRISTO WHITE ESPECIAL NO. 1
The matte wrapper of this tan, thin cigar isn't particularly oily. Its mild straw-and-hay character delivers some sweet vanilla and citrus notes as well.
U.S.: $10.04 U.K.: N/A

87

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 42 LENGTH: 6 1/2"
FILLER: DOM. REP., MEXICO
BINDER: MEXICO
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. SHADE

MACANUDO CAFÉ
BARON DE ROTHSCHILD
A golden panatela with a slight, oily gleam to the wrapper. Faint cedar notes and sweet earth precede a mineral finish.
U.S.: $7.69 U.K.: N/A

86

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 44 LENGTH: 6 1/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

THE GRIFFIN'S NO. 300
Both the draw and burn of this lonsdale are perfect, however its nutty, woody properties are offset by persistent sourness.
U.S.: $10.00 U.K.: N/A

86

robustos

In the 11 years the Cuban Romeo y Julieta Short Churchill has been made, it's never scored as high as it did in this tasting. The beautiful cigar scored 94 points and was absolutely sublime in its vibrancy, harmony and finessing of rich flavors without being too heavy handed. Cuban Romeo y Julieta Churchills are now somewhat of a brand within a brand—Churchill, Wide Churchill, Petit Churchill, etc. In lieu of the choices, the Short Churchill's near-classic score should make your decision a little easier. Fuente's Don Carlos Personal Reserve scored 91 points. It started as the late Carlos Fuente's personal blend and was finally released commercially in very limited quantities.

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 4 7/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: NOVEMBER 2015

ROMEO Y JULIETA SHORT CHURCHILL
A sublime and complex composition of ripe apple and toasty qualities that develop oaky, red wine notes, rich leather and a sweet toffee finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £19.60

94

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

ARTURO FUENTE DON CARLOS PERSONAL RESERVE
This well-made cigar produces a perfectly solid ash. Rich intonations of baking spices, gingerbread and cinnamon fold into a nougat and tea-like finish. Sweet and spicy.
U.S.: $13.75 U.K.: N/A

91

U.S.A.
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

CASA FERNANDEZ AGANORSA LEAF ROBUSTO
There's a large, deep divot in the head of this cigar after cutting the cap, but the draw remains lush and even. It's earthy and fresh, spiced up with a clove quality and herbal finish.
U.S.: $7.98 U.K.: N/A

90

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 4 7/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: FEBRUARY 2016

COHIBA ROBUSTO
The heavy floral notes of this medium-bodied robusto are balanced by a creamy, white chocolate sweetness, touches of ginger snap and a bready finish.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £29.60

90

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

H. UPMANN BY AJ FERNANDEZ ROBUSTO
This well-made robusto has an even draw and burn that offers notes of black cherry and nuts with a sweet vanilla oakiness.
U.S.: $7.25 U.K.: N/A

90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: ECUADOR
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

LA AURORA 1903 CAMEROON ROBUSTO
An oily, veiny robusto with an excellent draw and burn. The smoke is sweet and woody with hints of peanut and cocoa powder and a slightly dry finish.
U.S.: $5.75 U.K.: N/A

89

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: ECUADOR

MATILDE SERENA ROBUSTO
Draped in an attractive claro wrapper, this cigar meshes floral, cedary notes with touches of fruit and cocoa nibs. The finish is short and tart, smacking of citrus.
U.S.: $7.99 U.K.: N/A

89

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 4 7/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: FEBRUARY 2017

RAMON ALLONES SPECIALLY SELECTED
Initial floral notes and molasses become spicy with a bit of bite, but intermittent intonations of chocolate and white wine throw this cigar a bit out of balance.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £18.30

89

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 52 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP., U.S.A./CONN. BROADLEAF
BINDER: INDONESIA
WRAPPER: U.S.A./CONN. HABANO

ALL OUT KINGS SMASH
A dark, oily robusto that smokes evenly, delivering big notes of earth and charcoal alongside sweeter impressions of cedar and licorice. The finish is toasty.
U.S.: $13.80 U.K.: N/A

88

CUBA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 4 7/8"
FILLER: CUBA
BINDER: CUBA
WRAPPER: CUBA
BOX DATE: DECEMBER 2016

JUAN LOPEZ SELECCIÓN NO. 2
An attractive robusto whose initial tangy and floral character becomes stronger with touches of pepper, dusty charcoal and strong woods.
U.S.: N/A U.K.: £18.53

88

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 55 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: DOM. REP., NICARAGUA, BRAZIL
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: BRAZIL

BALMORAL AÑEJO XO ROTHSCHILD MASIVO
This fat robusto shows notable sharp notes of wood and dried garlic. Traces of sweetness precede the metallic finish.
U.S.: $9.79 U.K.: N/A

86

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5 1/4"
FILLER: NICARAGUA, DOM. REP.
BINDER: DOM. REP.
WRAPPER: NICARAGUA

DEBONAIRE ROBUSTO
Though earthy and oaky with some red wine acidity, an underlying damp, mushroom-like taste hurt the score. The draw and burn are even.
U.S.: $12.96 U.K.: N/A

86

HONDURAS
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 5"
FILLER: HONDURAS
BINDER: HONDURAS
WRAPPER: HONDURAS

EIROA CBT MADURO 50 X 5
Hints of mustiness emerge in between the core notes earth, licorice and pine. It's a dark robusto with an easy draw and strong, full-bodied finish.
U.S.: $11.12 U.K.: N/A

86

NICARAGUA
RING GAUGE: 50 LENGTH: 4 1/2"
FILLER: NICARAGUA
BINDER: NICARAGUA
WRAPPER: CAMEROON

OLIVA SERIE G ROBUSTO
A sweet-and-sour smoke that becomes at times overly tangy and at other times quite gummy. The finish is dry.
U.S.: $5.84 U.K.: N/A

85

tasting summary

RATING SUMMARY BLIND TASTE TEST NO. 140

Cigars are listed first by country and then by score. Please refer to the main tasting pages for notes and prices.

CIGAR AFICIONADO'S 100-POINT SCALE

Classic
95–100

Outstanding
90–94

Very good to excellent
80–89

Average to good commercial quality
70–79

Don't waste your money
0-69

Not available
n/a

Note: all prices are manufacturers' suggested retail, before taxes.

BAHAMAS

89 Graycliff Crystal Pirate

COSTA RICA

91 MBombay Habano Corona

CUBA

94 Romeo y Julieta Short Churchill
92 Diplomaticos No. 2
92 Montecristo No. 3
91 Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No. 1
90 Cohiba Robusto
90 Montecristo No. 1
90 Partagás Corona Senior (Tubo)
90 Romeo y Julieta Churchill
89 H. Upmann Magnum 50
89 H. Upmann Majestic
89 Ramon Allones Specially Selected
88 Juan Lopez Selección No. 2

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

91 Arturo Fuente Don Carlos Personal Reserve
90 Arturo Fuente Churchill Maduro
90 E.P. Carrillo Dusk Stout Toro
90 H. Upmann Vintage Cameroon Corona
90 La Aurora 1495 No. 4
90 Manuel Quesada 70th Belicoso
89 Ashton 8-9-8
89 Ashton Heritage Puro Sol Robusto
89 Flores y Rodriguez Connecticut Valley Reserve Azul Figurado
89 La Aurora 1903 Cameroon Robusto
89 La Flor Dominicana Air Bender Poderoso
89 Matilde Serena Robusto
88 Avo Syncro South America Ritmo Toro
88 Nat Sherman Sterling Dalias
88 Partagas No. 1
88 Romeo y Julieta 1875 Cedro Deluxe No. 1
87 Aging Room Small Batch M356ii Forte
87 Davidoff Grand Cru No. 2
87 Diamond Crown Maximus Pyramid No. 3
87 Kristoff Maduro Torpedo
87 Montecristo White Especial No. 1
86 Balmoral Añejo XO Rothschild Masivo
86 Debonaire Robusto
86 Hammer + Sickle Moscow City Robusto Extra
86 Macanudo Café Baron de Rothschild
86 The Griffin's No. 300

HONDURAS

91 Rocky Patel Decade Lonsdale
89 Punch Elite EMS
88 Alec Bradley Black Market Churchill
88 Padilla Anniversary Churchill
87 Alec Bradley Prensado Torpedo
86 Eiroa CBT Maduro 50 x 5

NICARAGUA

92 601 Red Label Habano Torpedo
92 Oliva Serie V Belicoso
92 Rocky Patel Platinum Limited Edition Habano Toro
92 Tatuaje La Vérité La Vérité 2013
91 Archetype Axis Mundi Churchill
91 CAO L'Anniversaire Cameroon Belicoso
91 Illusione F9
91 Maestro del Tiempo 5205
91 Nat Cicco Aniversario 1965 Liga No. 4 Churchill
91 Nestor Miranda Collection Corojo Toro
91 Padrón Londres
90 H. Upmann by AJ Fernandez Robusto
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85 Oliva Serie G Robusto

U.S.A.

90 Casa Fernandez Aganorsa Leaf Robusto
89 La Palina Collection Mr. Sam Corona
88 Don Pepin Garcia Original Delicias

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connoisseur's corner

Large Cuban cigars made from superb tobaccos tend to be ideal candidates for aging, and it's hard to find a better example than a Hoyo de Monterrey Double Corona. One of our original Cigar Stars of Cuba, a 1996 Hoyo Double showed that it has aged masterfully, scoring a near-perfect 98 points thanks to its delivery of rich, sweet, chocolaty flavor. Close behind was the Edmundo Dantes Conde 109, prized by connoisseurs as one of the best Cuban Regional Edition cigars ever made. A pair of legendary figurados, the Bolivar Belicoso Fino and Montecristo No. 2, scored classic ratings of 96 points, as did the lesser-known Punch Super Selection No. 1, plucked from a cabinet of 50. All of the cigars here showed how a little—or a lot—of patience can be rewarding.

HOYO DE MONTERRERY DOUBLE CORONA (1996)
The wrapper on this big cigar is deep brown and smooth. The cigar opens up to show lovely cinnamon notes with hints of chocolate and touches of nutmeg on the smooth finish. This has aged into a near-perfect smoke. —*Marvin R. Shanken*

98

EDMUNDO DANTES CONDE 109 EXCLUSIVO MEXICO (2007)
If you look quickly you might mistake a Conde 109 for a traditional double corona—but a closer look shows a slight taper to the head. It's an old Cuban size, brought back by Cuban expert Max Gutmann of Mexico. It begins with notes of caramel, coffee bean and slate, then sweetens up to show almond paste and vanilla. Elegant, refined and well balanced, it should get better with longer age. —*David Savona*

97

BOLIVAR BELICOSO FINO (2001)
Dark and nearly dripping with oils, this short figurado is big, bold and robust right from the first puff. Rolled at the end of Cuba's uncertain period of cigars that went from 1997 to 2001, this BBF smokes like Bolivars of old, with plenty of spice, black pepper and leather. It's a powerhouse, with a finish that smacks slightly of honeyed wood. A mustache-burner that's hard to put down, and one that has plenty of years left.—*David Savona*

96

MONTECRISTO NO. 2 (1982)
This pyramid, which has a medium-brown exterior, has an absolutely perfect draw. It's unusually nutty, with plenty of elegance. The cigar has a light to medium body, with plenty of nutmeg as it burns. —*Marvin R. Shanken*

96

PUNCH SUPER SELECTION NO. 1 (1995)
Dark and oily to the eye yet silky to the touch, this long corona comes from a 50-count cabinet and is a perfect example of wrapper varietals that Cuba no longer grows. Its big aroma of roasted coffee and leather recurs on the palate along with sweet touches of candy apple and hazelnut. There's still plenty of strength left in this cigar. —*Gregory Mottola*

96

DAVIDOFF MILLENNIUM ROBUSTO (2000)
A strong cedar note dominates this cigar from the very first pull. The dark, reddish-brown wrapper is smooth and beautiful, and construction is perfect. As the cigar burns evenly through the middle, there are some additional notes of light cocoa, and then a long, slightly dry finish. But the cedar taste never goes away. This cigar is ready to smoke. —*Gordon Mott*

92

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Managing Director
C. Gars Ltd, London

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10 Things Every Cigar Smoker Should Know

BY GREGORY MOTTOLA

The comforting world of premium cigars can sometimes seem bogged down by endless choices, confusing messages and opinions posing as fact. It can be a complicated, confusing hobby, even for a longtime smoker. To help navigate the maze, we've assembled a list of facts and information that aim to give insight and perspective to every level of cigar aficionado, whether novice or inveterate.

This list is by no means a Ten Commandments of cigar smoking. It's more of a basic treatise that addresses pertinent issues and highlights some of the aspects that make the premium cigar industry unique. We've also included a few useful tips that will serve to enhance the smoking experience and elevate the enjoyment of this beloved pastime.

PREVIOUS: ISTOCKPHOTO; RIGHT: JEFF HARRIS

Top: A field of sun-grown tobacco flourishes in a valley in the Dominican Republic. The crops grow from natural fertilizer. Bottom: Skilled rollers at the Partagás Factory in Cuba turn loose tobacco leaves into cigars.

1 Cigars Are a Natural and Artisanal Product

Buzzwords like "natural" and "artisanal" are overused and abused in today's parlance, but premium, handmade cigars have truly earned the right to flaunt these credentials. They are made of one thing and one thing only—tobacco. Pure, unadulterated tobacco. Not a single leaf is chemically treated or artificially altered for taste. Everything from flavor to color is achieved through natural means—and that's part of the cigar's inherent beauty.

In fact, few consumable products are so natural. Perceptible flavors, whether sweet or spicy, are naturally occurring. The various alluring shades of brown are achieved through an organic process free of dyes or ripening accelerants. There are no preservatives to increase shelf life and no sweeteners, artificial or natural. Such additives and chemicals are the domain of cigarettes and machine-made cigars, which are mass-produced in the billions.

On the craft side, rolling the perfect handmade cigar is an artisanal skill, and one that takes many years to fully master. Blending tobacco is as much art as it is science, and because tobacco is subject to the whims of nature, the blender must be able to work effectively with an ingredient that can change from year to year due to crop variations.

Like wine, some vintages are better than others, but cigarmakers will do everything in their power to ensure that their product is consistent, even though crop quality is highly dependent on the weather. Consistency, however, isn't the same thing as cloning, and there will always be minute variations from cigar to cigar. As with any handmade product, no two premium cigars will be exactly alike. The finest, most sincere cigars are natural expressions of both the cigarmaker and the soil from which the tobacco was grown.

2 Two Hundred Pairs of Hands

It's often said that 200 pairs of hands touch your cigar before it makes it to your humidor. Some claim the number is even higher. Suffice to say, every time you light up a cigar, many, many people with many different skills all contributed to bring you the ultimate handmade product.

It starts with seed selection and greenhouse cultivation. Cigar tobacco starts as a tiny seed, most often planted in a tray and grown in a greenhouse. Once the seedlings are a few inches high, they're transplanted to the fields where they can flourish. At full height and maturity, the leaves are removed by hand, harvested and hung in a curing barn to dry and turn brown. That's a few dozen hands before the tobacco has even left the farm.

The cured tobacco is then taken to a facility, unpacked and piled up for fermentation. When fermentation is complete, the tobacco pile is separated and laid on drying racks to air out. Then, it's all repacked and stowed for aging. After a few years, the aged tobacco is unpacked again, rehydrated in a special misting room and categorized for color. That's a few more dozen hands.

The outer wrapper leaves will also undergo destemming or *despalillo*, a process where the thick, central vein is removed from the leaf. Sometimes that step is done completely by hand, other times the tobacco is fed through a stripping machine. For filler, a worker will remove part of the stem by hand, leaving the rest intact. More hands.

TOP: DAVID YELLEN; BOTTOM: JOSÉ GOITIA

Don't forget the rolling process, which requires appointed factory workers to dole out the proper proportions of aged tobacco to the rollers each day. The *torcedor* takes his pile of leaves back to his rolling table and recreates the cigar according to the cigarmaker's blend, bunching and rolling each cigar by hand. The blend is formulated of exacting proportions of very specific tobaccos to impart a very particular smoking experience—a formulation that puts more hands on your cigars.

Finished cigars are sorted for color consistency, then sent to the aging room. Finally, they're banded up, boxed and sent out. This is the basic chronology of how a cigar is made. There are, of course, plenty of other quality-control steps that vary from operation to operation, and nearly all are completed entirely by hand, but the point is this: a single hand-rolled cigar is a massive human effort that requires hands-on expertise on every level.

3 Tobacco Undergoes Fermentation

Fermentation is common to producers of wine and spirits, defined as a process that converts sugars in organic material to alcohol, often with the use of yeast. In the tobacco industry, it's more of a microbial fermentation—one that breaks down the leaf organically through the use of water, pressure and oxygen. No alcohol is produced in tobacco fermentation, but the process releases heat as it changes the chemical composition and physical traits of the leaf through humidity and oxidization.

Tobacco undergoes fermentation for one simple reason: it makes the tobacco taste better. The process affects the flavor and smell of tobacco, making it less astringent and reducing bitterness while bringing out its more floral, nutty and sweeter aspects.

Fermentation is fairly simple. Once tobacco has been cured in a barn, the leaves are arranged in large piles known as *pilónes*. The only thing added is water. The weight of the piles produce pressure while the enzymatic and microbial breakdown produces the heat. The piles are checked daily and the temperature is monitored. When the internal temperature of these pilónes reaches a certain point, the tobacco pile is taken apart, rotated by hand and painstakingly reassembled.

Ideally, tobacco is piled and fermented according to size and type. Different-sized leaves and different tobacco varietals will ferment at different rates, so the pile must be as homogenous as possible. The idea is to naturally alter the taste of the tobacco and transform it from its raw, bitter state to something smokeable and pleasant. Underfermented tobacco will often have a harsh aftertaste and smell like ammonia. It's not a process that can be skipped or rushed and is critical in the world of premium cigars.

Tobacco is arranged in enormous piles (*pilónes*) for fermentation. The combination of pressure, water and naturally occuring heat will rid the tobacco of undesirable properties like bitterness.

DAVID YELLEN

4 Aging is Important

Aging tobacco plays a vital role, both before and after the cigar is made. Not only is the fresh leaf aged before it's rolled into a cigar, but a newly completed cigar in most cases is then sent to an aging room where the tobaccos marry and the humidity levels of the cigar can stabilize.

Tobacco leaves are aged after fermentation. During aging, the leaves are packed up into tight parcels called bales where they undergo a slow, steady breakdown of carotenoids, which helps to bring out the desirable properties in the tobacco. The aging also lends a bit of polish and maturity, helping to rid the tobacco of vegetal or "green" notes. Ever smoke tobacco that tastes like freshly cut grass or raw green beans? That tobacco has not been fully aged. If the cigar smoke is more redolent of almond, raisin and orange blossom, it has been aged properly.

But there's a tertiary aging, and that's done by the consumer. Once the cigar is boxed up and sent to the shops, a consumer may wish to age the cigars even longer. Similar to aging wine, this process helps to further dissipate any acidity in the tobacco and allows its mellower more nuanced personality to come through.

Perfect aging is achieved when you bring a cigar to its absolute peak of flavor. At peak, flavors are not only at their most balanced and cohesive, but all undesirable qualities such as bitterness or harshness are completely absent. A great cigar can age for decades so long as the temperature and humidity are stable throughout.

There are some caveats. Don't over-age the cigar. Over-aging can result in loss of flavor and body, making the cigar taste flat and dusty. Another thing to know: aging a bad, sour cigar won't make it any better. It will just make it bitter and old.

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FEATURED CIGAR

ASHTON SYMMETRY
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For a full tasting, see page two.

93 POINTS

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TOP 25 CIGARS OF 2016

THE BEST CIGARS OF THE YEAR will be showcased in the February issue of *Cigar Aficionado* along with the top-rated Best Buys and most exciting New Releases of 2016. But don't forget the regular tasting section, where we also rated 83 cigars. For a preview of the issue's top-scoring smokes, turn to page two.

FIDEL CASTRO: 1926–2016

THE ASHES OF CUBA'S FORMER PRESIDENT FIDEL CASTRO were interred on Sunday in a tomb that reads "Fidel" on a plaque. He died on November 25 and was cremated before his ashes were brought to Santiago de Cuba, 540 miles southeast of Havana and the birthplace of Castro's Revolution. He ruled Cuba for decades after overthrowing the previous Batista regime in 1959 and has been widely regarded as a controversial figure ever since. Many mourned Castro's death as the passing of a benevolent leader. A few hundred miles away in Miami, others saw him as an oppressive dictator and celebrated his death in the streets. Turn to page five for the obituary.

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CIGAR WATCH

FROM THE EDITORS OF CIGAR AFICIONADO

SEPT. 27, 2016 | SIGN UP

COHIBA MACASSAR | EXPERIENCE LUXURY

FEATURED CIGAR

Punch Gran Puro Santa Rita (91 Points)

The Punch Gran Puro line came onto the scene in 2003 as General Cigar's only Honduran puro, meaning that it uses only tobacco from Honduras. The Santa Rita size (4 1/2 inches by 52 ring gauge, $5.29) recently impressed our tasting panel with notes of cashew, hints of fresh coconut and a toasty finish, earning a score of 91 points in August's *Cigar Aficionado*.

Click For More Punch Gran Puro Ratings

11 Cigars You Should Be Smoking Right Now

Cigar Aficionado's 133rd blind tasting, which appeared in our August 2016 issue, is now live on our website. Of the 82 cigars rated by our panel of editors, 11 non-Cuban cigars scored 91 points or higher. These cigars are considered outstanding on our 100-point scale. So if you're heading to your local brick-and-mortar, here are a few cigars that are sure to please right now.

Read Full Story

La Palina Launches Value-Priced Goldie

La Palina Cigars has shipped a modified version of its popular Goldie blend called Illumination. The cigar features the same component tobaccos as Goldie minus the rare and expensive medio tiempo leaf that's nestled inside the limited-edition line of Goldie cigars.

Read Full Story

La Palina Cigar Ratings

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A CIGAR SO EXQUISITE, IT HAS NO EQUAL

EXPERIENCE LUXURY

cigar aficionado

5 Understand Cigar Anatomy

A cigar is made up of three major parts: wrapper, binder and filler. The three form a smoking system and the single system forms a singular organism called the cigar.

The wrapper is the visible outer cover leaf. It's also the most expensive component per pound, as these tobacco leaves need to be pristine in appearance, as well as flavorful. If the leaf is too veiny, rough in texture or has any blemishes, it's no longer categorized as wrapper.

The binder can be considered a wrapper leaf that didn't make the cut. It's often the same tobacco as the wrapper, only not as smooth in appearance, and it doesn't have to be—you don't see it. Binder is the leaf of tobacco directly underneath the wrapper and holds the filler tobacco in place, hence the name. Combustion of the binder is critical, as a good-burning binder will often help the filler to burn more evenly, especially if the filler contains more oily tobaccos that do not burn easily.

The filler is where the cigarmaker can be most creative, as he can use several different types of tobacco from various countries and several different primings of tobacco for desired flavor, strength and complexity. As with the wrapper and binder, these are long-filler tobaccos that are put into place to burn slowly yet offer a fine gustatory and aromatic experience.

The foot is the end of the cigar where filler is usually visible. The head is the top, or tip and is finished with a cap, which helps to hold the wrapper in place. The neater, more symmetrical the head and cap, the greater the skill of the roller.

Good construction is key and should never be marginalized. A cigar that isn't made properly will not draw or burn properly, drastically affecting the taste and the level of enjoyment, no matter how good the raw materials.

6 Cut and Light Like a Pro

Handmade cigars don't come ready to smoke. You must cut the head, then light. While types of lighters and cutters are open to preference, some basic rules are universal. For example, cutting too much off the top of your cigar is a no-no. What's too much? If the wrapper of your cigar unravels after you lopped off the top, you've cut down too far. Normally, there's a slight taper at the head of the cigar, referred to as the shoulder. We do not recommend cutting below the shoulder line.

In the case of torpedoes and piramides, which taper drastically to a point, you shouldn't cut off so much of the head that you actually lose the taper. It's there for both functional and aesthetic reasons—to fit more comfortably in your mouth and to look nice. They are harder to make and require the work of a highly skilled roller. Also, they take longer to create, which is why they are generally more expensive. Cutting off too much defeats the entire purpose, both practically and artistically. Conversely, not cutting off enough can result in a firm draw and a build-up of tar in the head that will ooze into your mouth, something any sane smoker wishes to avoid. But it's better to cut too little than too much—you can always cut more.

Lighting should be done delicately, similar to the way you might toast a marshmallow—with minimal direct contact. Too much direct contact of flame to tobacco and your cigar might end up tasting like pure char. It's always better to light in low-wind conditions. On top of the obvious reasons, the breeze might also cause you to compensate by using too much flame just to get a burn going. Again, this will result in an unpleasantly charry aftertaste.

Anatomy of a Cigar

The risk is even greater with powerful torch lighters, which burn at a much higher temperature than soft, natural flames. While we certainly appreciate the wind resistance and surgical control of a torch flame, you're goal is lighting a cigar, not welding pipes.

7 Smoke Cool & Slow

Some cigar smokers puff too often. This is a mistake for a few reasons. Philosophically, a cigar is about enjoyment and savoring the moment. Smoking fast runs counterintuitive to this sentiment. Take your time and slow down.

But there's a more concrete reason as well. Hyper-frequent puffing will inevitably overheat your cigar and cause it to become bitter. Often, that bitterness is irreversible.

A perfectly constructed cigar is made to burn slow and cool in order to impart flavor in a steady progression. While there are no set laws as to how long a cigar should last, we believe that a five-inch cigar should last you at least 45 minutes. If you're sucking down a five-inch robusto in 10 minutes, you're treating the cigar like a cigarette, and that's a big mistake. Puffing every 30 seconds to a minute should be an appropriate interval.

Keep in mind that smoking too slowly could have a negative consequence as well. Puff too infrequently, and your cigar will go out, meaning you'll have to relight it over and over again. Constantly lighting an extinguished cigar could introduce unpleasant flavors of char, carbon, sulfuric fumes and bitterness. But don't sweat a relight now and then.

Leave the ash on for as long as you can. The ash serves as a temperature regulator and minimizes contact between the air and

JEFF HARRIS

the lit tobacco, thus keeping it cooler. Great cigars are made of whole leaves, not chopped up tobacco. Those leaves have structure, and will hold an ash of a size that's surprising to a novice.

8 Choose Your Cigar Wisely

It's important to know something about the blend before choosing a cigar. This helps to ensure you don't choose a smoke that's too strong or too mild. You don't have to know every last tobacco component of the cigar to make an informed choice, but you should always have a basic idea of the cigar's strength level before you buy it.

Most smokers know if they want a strong, medium or mild cigar. Strength and body refer to the cigar's inherent intensity. One could smoke a cigar that is full of flavor, yet not particularly strong or full-bodied, meaning there's still plenty of finessed flavor that won't impact the palate too heavily.

The cigar choices in a well-stocked retail humidor can be overwhelming. A little bit of knowledge about the blend and strength can go a long way.

Sometimes, smokers want full, intense palate stimulation along with heavy flavors, much the way a coffee drinker wants a strong shot of espresso or a wine drinker wants a high-alcohol cabernet. That requires powerful tobaccos. Typically, a full-bodied, powerful cigar will contain ligero tobacco. These are the darkest, thickest leaves of the tobacco plant as well as the most oily and rich on account of their direct exposure to the sun.

Leaves tend to get less powerful as they grow lower down the stalk of the plant. Categorized as visos and secos, these lower-priming tobaccos are more nuanced in flavor and have better combustion. A full-bodied blend will contain more ligeros, a medium-bodied blend, more secos and visos.

You can't always tell, however just by looking at the cigar. Dark, oily wrappers often indicate a strong smoke the way light wrappers often indicate a mild or medium-bodied smoke, however looks can sometimes be deceiving. Our ratings will point you in the right direction.

Also, beware the "sangria effect." That happens when the cigar's strength sneaks up on you. You think it's a mild or medium-bodied cigar based on the easygoing flavors, but then when you try to stand up, you realize you can't.

9 Cubans Aren't Always the Best

As long as people smoke premium cigars, there will always be the proud debate as to which cigars are the best, and the argument usually boils down to Cuban cigars vs. non-Cuban cigars.

Lifelong Habanophiles will always preach "inimitable Cuban taste" while more universal cigar fans retort "Cubans are overrated." It is this magazine's opinion that Cuban cigars are great, but they are not alone in their greatness. The best Nicaraguan, Dominican and Honduran cigars can compete on the quality level with the finest Cubans.

The top-tier smokes of the major cigar-producing nations are all outstanding in their own way. They are true agricultural and artisanal expressions of their respective countries. This is evident in our tasting sections and in our Top 25 Cigar of the Year awards. Sometimes a Cuban cigar wins, sometimes it doesn't, as in our most recent Top 25, which was won by a Dominican cigar.

10 Price v. Quality

Price isn't always an indicator of quality. A cigar that costs $30 won't always be more enjoyable than a cigar that costs $10. Inexpensive cigars sometimes score better than pricey ones in our blind tastings. At the same time, it's important to understand that the best materials, finest construction and most acute quality control will cost money. As is true with all raw materials, not all tobacco is of equal quality. Some crops are better than others.

You might have heard (or read) a few rather ignorant maxims like "tobacco's tobacco" or "all tobacco is basically the same." Statements like that are uninformed, and they presuppose that different levels of quality do not exist. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Standards of quality are determined by appearance, combustion, aroma and flavor. A highly aromatic, flavorful tobacco that is pristine in appearance and elastic to the touch is going to be more expensive than a coarse leaf that doesn't have much smell or taste.

Some tobaccos also take longer time to age and ferment for maximum performance. That process will also end up raising the cost of your cigar—the longer the cycles, the longer the tobacco has to be stored in a warehouse, and that costs money.

The tobacco could be a low-yielding varietal, meaning that the crop was not large in the field, yet the small amounts produced were outstanding. This could also make your puros a little pricier. Sometimes it's merely a question of supply and demand.

Occasionally, a cigar is expensive for arbitrary or gimmicky reasons that have nothing to do with quality or availability. Those unfortunate exceptions are not normal in the premium cigar industry. If a cigar is expensive, the cost is usually justified.

That being said, there's no guarantee you're going to love the expensive cigar. The flavor profile and strength level (either high or low) of a high-end smoke might not be to your taste. The best way to know is to try it. If you spend the extra money and find that the experience doesn't justify the cost, then stay within your comfortable price range. If you find extraordinary levels of flavor, refinement and complexity, you'll know the cigar was worth the splurge. ❖

JONATHAN SMITH

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The New Cuba Plan

President Trump is ending the short-lived Obama-era détente with Cuba BY PETER KORNBLUH

President Trump in June in Miami, announcing his sweeping changes to America's Cuba policy. "I am canceling the last administration's completely one-sided deal with Cuba," he said.

When President Donald Trump traveled to Miami on June 16th to announce he was "canceling" Obama's historic opening with Cuba, he made no mention of one of the most popular elements of his predecessor's policy: the ability of U.S. travelers to purchase and repatriate as many Cuban cigars as they can carry. But, in both tone and substance, the president halted the progress toward normalized relations between Washington and Havana, signaling that the brief era of détente with Cuba will not continue while Trump occupies the Oval Office.

Trump made his announcement at a rally held at the Manuel Artime Theater in Miami's Little Havana—the stronghold of hardline opposition to engagement with Cuba—and a venue symbolic of the violent history of U.S.-Cuban relations; Artime was a leader of the ill-fated, CIA-led, Bay of Pigs paramilitary invasion in April 1961. Using this historical backdrop, Trump denounced the dramatic breakthrough in relations during the Obama administration and issued a series of demands that the Cuban government end human rights violations and democratize. "With God's help," he promised the cheering audience of Cuban-Americans that included dissidents and veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion, "a free Cuba is what we will soon achieve."

With Rep. Mario Diaz Balart and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio—reportedly the chief architects of the new, hard-line policy—at his side, Trump signed a new Presidential Directive, which will curtail travel to, and commerce with, the island in the future.

"Effective immediately I am canceling the last administration's completely one-sided deal with Cuba," Trump declared. "I am announcing a new policy, just as I promised during the campaign. Our policy will seek a much better deal for the Cuban people and for the United States of America."

New Sanctions

In fact, the new policy directive leaves intact much of the structure of Obama's rapprochement, initiated on December 17, 2014. The reopened U.S. and Cuban embassies will remain open; collaboration on counter-narcotics, counterterrorism and migration, among other bilateral accords, will continue as will the direct air flights and cruise ship travel authorized by Obama last year. The ability of travelers to bring home multiple boxes of cigars, remains unchanged—at least for now. (It could be modified, however, when Treasury Department regulations to implement the directive are published in the fall.)

But the eight-page directive, titled "National Security Memorandum on Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba," rolls back other key areas of Obama's open-door policy on travel and trade with Cuba, and abandons the civility of positive engagement that defined U.S.-Cuban relations over the last two years. The document outlines "initial actions" that will "end economic practices that disproportionately benefit

RAUL E. DIEGO/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

the Cuban government or its military," and "ensure adherence to the statutory ban on tourism to Cuba."

The new directive will most immediately affect the latitude of U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba. Under Obama's relaxation of regulations, U.S. citizens could designate the purpose of their travel under any one of 12 specific categories, which included the broadly defined "educational" travel and "people-to-people" travel. This "self-designation" mechanism has contributed to a surge in travel over the last two years, with more than 600,000 U.S. citizens visiting the island in 2016. However, Trump's new restrictions eliminate the self-designation process, and according to the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, "will end individual people-to-people travel." Unless U.S. travelers qualify for one of the specialized categories of travel—journalism, religious work or academic research, for example—they will have to travel with licensed tour groups and prove they spent all their time in Cuba doing people-to-people activities. The new directive also empowers the Treasury Department to "audit" U.S. travelers; and immigration officials will be able to demand records and journals from returning travelers to demonstrate they are in compliance with the new restrictions. Those who are not could face hefty government fines. Under the new Trump regulations, those restrictions have been expanded to prohibit U.S. citizens from staying in, eating at, or spending any money at numerous state-owned hotels and other businesses that fall under the umbrella of Cuba's business enterprise group (GAESA), a conglomerate of economic entities controlled by the Cuban military that oversees key sectors of economic and touristic activity in Cuba. Besides hotels, GAESA controls restaurants, tourism buses and other economic and tourism-related activities.

Trump's directive means that U.S. visitors will no longer be able to stay at some of Havana's most popular hotels, among them the elegant Saratoga favored by U.S. senators, governors and Congressional representatives who have visited Cuba over the last several years, and the Santa Isabel, where former President Jimmy Carter stayed during his two trips to the island. The five-star Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski la Havana that opened in May also falls under the GAESA umbrella and will be off-limits to U.S. citizens. As a guide for future travelers, the State Department plans to publish a list of prohibited hotels and businesses they will have to avoid. The Trump directive also takes aim at any future U.S. financial and business transactions with GAESA-controlled entities—which will substantially limit U.S. commercial interests in doing business in Cuba. The new restrictions will not affect U.S. airlines and cruise ships, but could dramatically reduce future business engagement for U.S. manufacturers and hospitality industry suppliers who are seeking export and investment opportunities on the island. Those business interests, along with Cuban entrepreneurs whose new private sector businesses depend on U.S. tourist traffic, have forcefully lobbied the Trump administration to further open travel and trade, rather than restrict it. In early June, Google released a statement highlighting the gains in connectivity on the island; AirbnB published a revenue report showing $40 million going to some 22,000 Cuban hosts over the last several years.

Policy Backlash

White House officials cast the new policy as a way of channeling support away from the Cuban state enterprises and into the hands of Cuban entrepreneurs. "We must channel funds toward the Cuban people and away from a regime that has failed to meet the most basic requirements of a free and just society," reads the White House directive.

But critics of the policy point out that the new restrictions are likely to have the opposite result—hurting the emerging Cuban private sector, with fewer individual travelers staying in private Airbnb homes, and helping the state-sector with larger tour delegations forced to stay at state-owned hotels and using state-owned buses for transportation instead of privately owned taxis. (Not all state-owned operations are run by GAESA.) Numerous analysts in the travel industry warn that the higher expense of the tours, and the ominous threat of Treasury Department traveler audits would have a chilling effect on future visitation to the island, reducing the number of U.S. travelers and, along with the new restrictions on U.S. business investments, resulting in significantly less U.S. dollars spent to support private Cuban businesses that have dramatically multiplied to meet the demands of expanding U.S. tourism.

"If the goal is to help Cuban entrepreneurs, adding job-killing regulations on U.S. businesses and increasing government resources to investigate everyday Americans traveling to our island neighbor is not the answer," according to EngageCuba, an association of U.S. businesses that supports open travel and lifting the trade embargo. "Any policy change that diminishes the ability of Americans to travel freely to Cuba is not in the best interests of the United States or the Cuban people," says Arizona's Republican Senator Jeff Flake, who, along with 54 other co-sponsors in the Senate, has introduced "The Freedom for Americans to Travel to Cuba Act."

From the perspective of the Cuban government, Trump's new policy approach, and the harsh, bullying rhetoric accompanying it, threatens a return to the decades of U.S. "regime change" efforts. Trump was resorting to "coercive methods from the past," Cuban leaders declared in a statement published in the Communist Party newspaper, *Granma*. The statement reiterated Cuba's willingness to engage in a respectful dialogue with Washington but warned that "any strategy aimed at changing the political, economic and social system in Cuba—whether by pressure or imposition or through more subtle means—is destined to fail."

But the most rousing rebuttal came from the architect of President Obama's normalization policy, former deputy national security advisor, Ben Rhodes. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Rhodes also predicted the Trump approach would fail to achieve its goals. "Trump's announcement should be seen for what it is," he concluded, "not as a step forward for democracy, but as the last illogical gasp of a strain of American politics with a 50-year track record of failure; one that wrongly presumes we can control what happens in Cuba." ❖

Peter Kornbluh writes frequently for Cigar Aficionado *on Cuba.*

The new regulations on Cuba are expected to become official policy this fall. Look for more information on the Cuba channel at cigaraficionado.com as further details emerge on how they will affect travel to Cuba, and the purchase of Cuban cigars.

moments to remember

Please send all submissions to: Cigar Aficionado/Moments to Remember, Worldwide Plaza, 825 Eighth Avenue, 33rd Floor, New York, NY 10019. Or email them to: momentstoremember@mshanken.com. To order additional copies of Cigar Aficionado, call 1-800-344-0763.

Marvin R. Shanken, editor and publisher of Cigar Aficionado, puffs a cigar with good friends Bill Terlato (left) and Michael Gelband (right) on the Ailsa Course at Trump Turnberry in Scotland.

Jay Reid, center, smoking Fuente cigars on his wedding day at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, in Pocantico Hills, New York with, from left, Michael Laninga, Kerry Kenny, Joe Nizhnikov, Sam Renaut, Jonathan Cochran and Ben Riddick.

Hal Wilkes celebrates his birthday in North Beach, San Francisco, with Steve Beal, Joe Suggs, Dennis Wilkes, Mark Chai, John Caselli, Richard Bennett, Simon Gee and Gordon Manings.

What do you do when your boat breaks down and the axel snaps on your boat's trailer? If you are Doug Murrell, Dahl Clark and Jack Crimmins, you'll turn lemons into lemonade by lighting up a few premium cigars roadside.

After the Golden State Warriors won their second NBA championship in three years, there was only one thing left for Stephen Curry to do: light up a cigar.

Brother and sister Kevin and Kristin Mitzel share some sibling bonding time while puffing on excellent cigars at a beach wedding in Traverse City, Michigan.

BOTTOM LEFT: EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

Doctor Ralph G. Cipriano and his father Ralph G. Cipriano celebrate his graduation from medical school with Hoyo de Monterrey cigars in Grenada.

Khaki and Elliott Jessup light up their wedding day with Padrón 1964 Anniversary cigars and Pappy Van Winkle whiskey in Knoxville, Tennessee.

John and Peter Blevins spend some quality father and son time while puffing on premium cigars by the water on Monkey Island in Grand Lake, Oklahoma.

Pat Gallagher, Erin Fitzgerald and Ed Curley indulge in premium cigars and libations at the 143rd running of the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs.

Jon Swope and his father-in-law Jim Coleman enjoy Cuban cigars while golfing at the Els For Autism tournament at Troon North in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Del Arrington of Arizona celebrates his 50th birthday with good friend Darnell Robinson of Chicago, Illinois, at the Bond Lounge in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Art Klein and Tim Ferranti puff on a couple of La Flor Dominicana Andalusian Bulls, Cigar Aficionado's 2016 Cigar of the Year, in Washington, New Jersey.

Rob Talley introduces his son Darius to the good life on his 21st birthday by pairing Cohiba Siglo II cigars alongside fine libations in Temecula, California.

There's no better way to spend a Sunday than watching football while smoking premium cigars with friends. The Minnesota Herf Connection gathers at Churchill's Quality Cigars and Gifts in Victoria, Minnesota, to watch the Minnesota Vikings defeat the Houston Texans to remain undefeated at 5-0.

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Celebrating graduation at Greenwich High School: (top) Jake Cohen, Truman Imbo, Paul Williams, (middle) Dylan Ruebenstahl, Conor Harkins, Kevin Lobbi, Christian Novakowski, Cole Hartley, Wesley Keelan, Akira Dunham, Blake Guerrieri, Connor Weigold, (bottom) Ewan Trogni, Luis Carrillo.

Clay Young (center) enjoys fine cigars at his fundraiser for military veterans and first responders in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He's joined by Lawrence Steele, Justine Stewart, Taya Kyle with the Chris Kyle Frog Foundation and Robert Martin, who all partake in puffing.

Mike Raphtis rings in his 50th birthday with cigars and libations alongside Nick Alexopoulos, Frank Corrigan, Bruce Garretson, Mark Crawford, Jim Holevas, Bob Alati and Thom Kubeshesky.

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Victor Espinoza and Juan Jesus Gomez Pliego savor the moment with premium smokes at a joyous gathering to celebrate the 70th birthday of Juan's mother-in-law in Toluca, Mexico.

Lieutenant Colonel Mark R. Owens celebrates 32 years of service in the United States Army by enjoying a cigar after his retirement ceremony aboard the *USS Alabama* in Mobile, Alabama.

Cigar lovers and regulars at The Town Tavern in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, bid farewell to hostess Alexa before she leaves her job to attend graduate school at Appalachian State.

Newlyweds Nick and Jordan Barbera from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, fire up a couple of fine Rocky Patel cigars before watching the sunset while on their honeymoon in Maui, Hawaii.

Groomsmen enjoy fine Montecristo No. 2 cigars and premium glasses of Bourbon before the wedding of Brett and Ally Wells in the lounge of the Ritz-Carlton on Grand Cayman.

Helen Hernandez, Jerry Hernandez, Marian Koh, Carr Villabroza, Edwin Koh and Sedge Villabroza take a moment to fire up a few Montecristo No. 4s while on vacation in Iceland.

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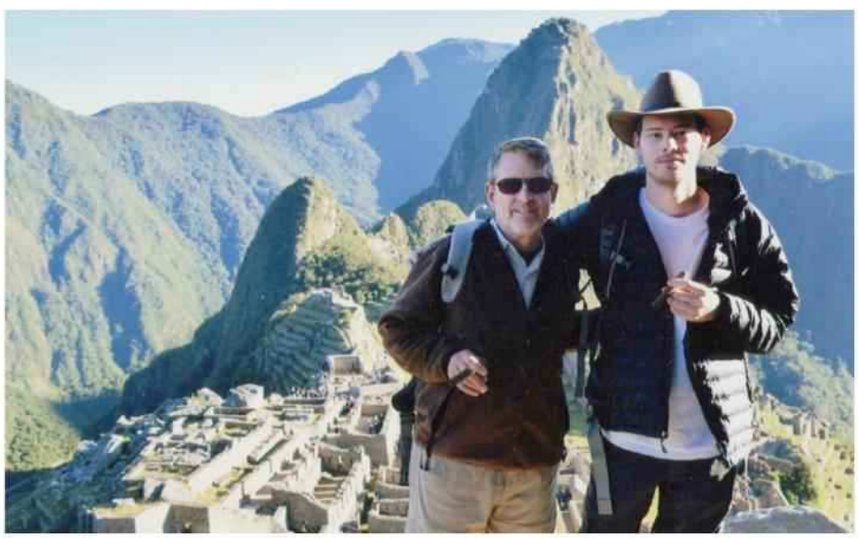
Father of the bride Michael Botto sneaks away for a mid-reception cigar at Nazareth's Fine Cigars in Beverly Hills, California. Bride Allison Botto Johnson knew just where to find him.

A group of cigar lovers meet at Carmack's Cigar Shop in Noblesville, Illinois, to light up handrolled cigars and enjoy conversation with Nestor Miranda of Nestor Miranda Cigars.

Firefighters from the city of Markham, Ontario, Canada, have a smoke at The Cigar Bodega in Unionville, Ontario, Canada. From left: Barry Vesh, Andrew Tamburo, Matt Lum and Howie Tse.

Theresa Salerno, Will Fogg, Tyler Kupper and Stekki and Brian Millman tailgate with cigars and libations before the New York Giants game at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

Richard Meschke, Cliff Wright, Michael Meschke and Robert Meschke enjoy cigars while sipping on Johnny Walker Scotch to celebrate Cliff's daughter's wedding in Atlanta, Georgia.



Michael Kastner crosses No. 1 off his bucket list, as he and his son Kevin light up a couple of fine Padrón Serie 1926 cigars after completing the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu in Peru.

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Axis Mundi

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venturacigar.com VENTURA CIGAR #archetypecigars

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Friends Pincho Negron, Joe Kuchler and Irving Ocher head outside to start off the summer by enjoying a couple of premium handrolled cigars on a beautiful day in Voorhees, New Jersey.

Marylyn Harrell, her father Robb and uncles Ben and John Harris celebrate Thanksgiving and Marylyn's acceptance to Georgetown Law School with premium cigars in Annapolis, Maryland.

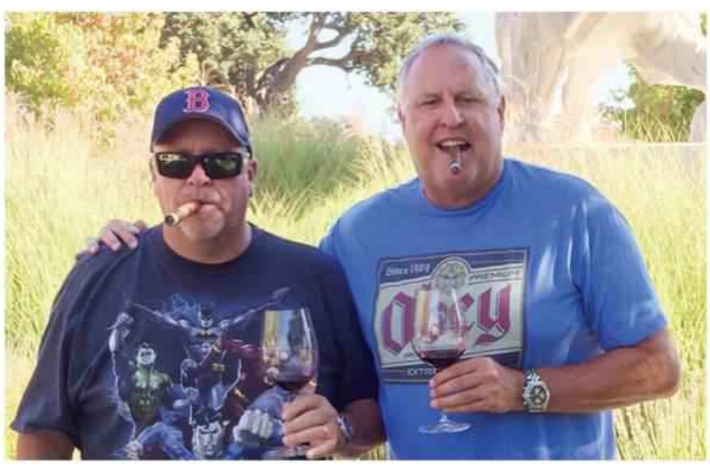
Jeff Dykes, Danette Scudder, Bill Carroll and Jody Wigginton smoke a few cigars while playing a round and sporting colorful outfits at Gaylord Springs Golf Links in Nashville, Tennessee.

Ted Henry and Gregory M. Kane from Springfield, Illinois, light up atop a mountain range while digging for fish fossils in Green River, Wyoming.

Bubba Hosley, Mike Macomson and Brian Harris get ready to light up their victory cigars at the Nascar Golf Tournament in Norwood, North Carolina.

Julian Cunha of the JJS Cigar Shop in Aruba helps Danny Moffett choose a Cohiba. Julian has since passed and his wife Angelique runs the shop in his honor.

Chris Coome celebrates his graduation from McMaster University with his father John Coome at Pebble Beach Golf Links in Pebble Beach, California.



Bill and Eric Caudle celebrate Bill's 50th birthday by spending the afternoon with fine wine and cigars at Sculpterra Winery in Paso Robles, California.

Friends of 52 years, Lawrence Hewes and Harry Sober share a couple of fine cigars while sipping aged rum at a mountain hunting cabin in western Virginia.

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1 PORTABLE FIZZ—DRINKMATE

Fans of Highballs (see page 43) have long enjoyed at-home seltzer-making devices that save time and space. Drinkmate takes that concept a few steps further with its beverage carbonator and new portable edition, the Spritzer. Each easily adds bubbles to the water you supply from the tap or a bottle. But its clever innovation is the ability to carbonate any beverage from fruit juice to tea to wine and cocktails. With the Spritzer you can carry your bubbles to the party. Is there a carbonator in the house? *idrinkproducts.com*

2 TAILOR AT THE DOOR—BOOKATAILOR

Every self-respecting man deserves a bespoke suit, but the act of visiting a tailor and getting measured can feel a bit dated and tedious. BookATailor streamlines the process. First, you book an appointment online with a "SmartTailor" who will visit at the time and place of your convenience. The SmartTailor builds your profile through a series of detailed measurements and saves it in a database for future alterations (or additional suits). Finally, you get to choose from a large catalog of fabrics from such luxury houses as Ermenegildo Zegna, Dormeuil, Loro Piana and Carlo Barbera. The information is sent directly to the company's factory, and after four weeks, you'll receive your suit. *bookatailor.com*

3 BOURBON BUBBLES—ARCHER HOME

Problem: How to make a man do the dishes? Solution: Soap that smells like whiskey...or rum...or tequila. Surprisingly, it wasn't a woman who came up with this. The founders of the Archer line are three dudes who first felt the world needed masculine alternatives to floral air fresheners, and so they made European Sports Car (leather), Distillery (barrel char and sour mash) and Hunting Lodge (gun powder and damp timber) scents. *archermen.com*

4 MAJESTIC MINIBAR—BDI

Keeping booze for guests who wish to partake is a good idea, but hiding your stash of top-shelf spirits for you to enjoy later is an even better one. The Corridor Bar from BDI ($2,199), a "soft minimalist" styled bar made of solid stained wood, features two slotted doors that not only hold your bottles, but also swing open to reveal a space large enough for all your beverage needs. Inside is a stemware rack to hold Martini and wine glasses, storage drawer for any cocktail tools and plenty of slots for wine and spirits bottles. The attractive, satin-etched glass top is also durable enough to resist scratches and fingerprints. *bdiusa.com*

5 GONE WITH THE CIGAR CASE—JULIEN'S AUCTIONS

If you watch *Gone With the Wind* not for the melodrama and flowing gowns, but the cigar-smoking scenes, Julien's Auctions has a sale for you. The Los Angeles–based auction house for the stars is putting Rhett Butler's equestrian-themed gold cigar case on the block during a two-day auction beginning November 17. Other movie props made by Joseff of Hollywood for sale include Scarlett O'Hara necklaces, earrings worn by Marilyn Monroe and a serpent cuff and belt donned by Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. *juliensauctions.com*

6 FIT TO BE TIED—STERLING ASCOTS

The desire to sport something unusual on a trip to Miami revealed to entrepreneur J. Sterling a general lack of ascots on the clothing market and inspired his quest to create a line of colorful cravats. Sterling tapped into his grandmother's sewing skills to make patterns. He and his sister Ayanna Soleil then combed the world for suitable fabric designs in both silk and microfiber. The short, stylish scarves are perfect at conferring flair on an otherwise casual outfit or for use at elegant events. *sterlingascots.com*

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