

Smoke 'Em If You Got 'Em

Cigar smoking enjoys significant rise in popularity among college students

BY SUSAN OVERCASH
The Battalion

From lounge lizards in the '70s to Monica Lewinsky in the '90s, enjoying a fine cigar has become more popular and more troublesome throughout the years. The ins and outs of cigar smoking may be more than a smoker has bargained for.

For a novice smoker, discerning the quality of a cigar may be difficult. Vanessa Hildebrand, co-owner of Little Havana Cigar Company, said the area in which tobacco leaves are grown affects the flavor and quality of the cigar. Most tobacco leaves are grown in South American countries, such as Nicaragua, Honduras and Cuba.

"Basically, tobacco leaves are grown and fermented like fine wine," Hildebrand said. "The quality of a cigar is based upon the environment which it is grown, what the weather is like. For example, Honduras and Nicaragua had heavy rains this year and years of fermented fields and leaves are gone. There'll be a shortage of those, and it could take years for those countries to recuperate."

A premium cigar consists of filler leaves, a binder and a wrapper. The filler leaves can be either intact or in pieces, and are chosen for the aroma and burning quality. The wrapper leaf is a full tobacco leaf tied around the filler leaves to form a "bunch." This bunch is then bound with a binder leaf. The binder leaf dresses the cigar and is chosen based on appearance.

Cigars may be hand-rolled or machine-wrapped, which may also contribute to the quality of the cigar. Hildebrand said the wrapping procedure may create some inconsistencies in cigar quality.

"Sometimes, if they're hand wrapped, they are wrapped too tightly," Hildebrand

said. "If they're wrapped too tightly, [the cigar] can be hard to [inhale]."

Hildebrand said judging the quality of a cigar can be based on the smell, color and texture of the cigar. Cigar color can range from pale green to black. Most cigars are between a pale and dark brown color.

"Look at the color of the tobacco leaf on the outside," Hildebrand said. "Also, the cigar shouldn't be stale or stiff. It should be nice and soft and kept at 71 percent humidity. Also, the smell can be spicy or woody."

Hal Bettis, a senior petroleum engineering major, said he uses a trial-and-error strategy when choosing a cigar.

"I just try them, and if I like them, I smoke [them]," Bettis said. "I have to say I look for a smooth but not harsh flavor — my favorite brand is Monte Cristo."

Cigar smoke is usually not inhaled into the respiratory tract but instead tasted on the smoker's palate and then exhaled. However, Bryan Coldwell, associate professor of Health Education and tobacco researcher, said this does not make smoking cigars a safe alternative to cigarettes or other forms of nicotine.

"Cigar smoking may be trendy, but it still has some serious negative health effects," Coldwell said.

The National Cancer Institute's (NCI) 1998 monograph, "Cigars: Health Effects and Trends," said cigars have been linked to many of the same diseases as cigarettes, including increased risk of coronary heart disease, lung, laryngeal, oral and esophageal cancer.

However, the article also said cigar sales in the United States have increased by 50 percent since 1993. Coldwell and the NCI monograph agree this upward swing is mainly due to new marketing approaches which link cigar smoking to wealth and suc-

cess, including the increasing use of cigars in movies and by celebrities.

"Look at the movies now, like *Independence Day* — which was basically a multi-million dollar cigar advertisement," Coldwell said. "It's saying you can't celebrate without a cigar. Those kind of things have changed the image of the cigar from this lower-class guy chewing on a nasty cigar stub to it being suave."

The NCI monograph shows that cigar use increases in proportion to income among adult males in California — from around 4 percent of males with income less than \$10,000 to over 14 percent of males earning over \$75,000.

According to the NCI, large numbers of adolescents are currently being exposed to cigar smoking. Bettis said his father also smokes cigars.

"My dad smokes one a day," Bettis said. "I just tried one one day and liked it. I smoke probably every two weeks, because they taste good."

Coldwell said cigar smoking is filtering into high schools.

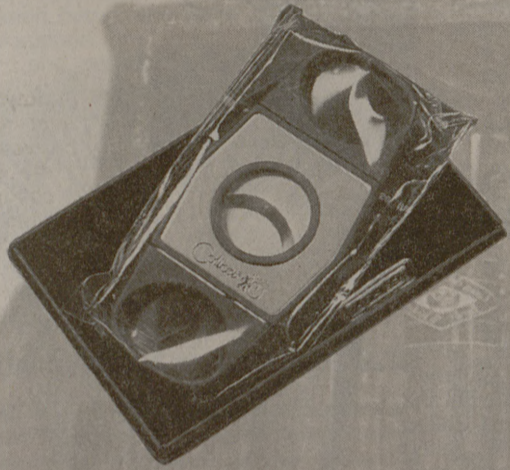
"This is a way for them to look cool and trendy," said Coldwell. "They're grabbing at cigars."

Hildebrand admits there may be negative side effects to smoking cigars at any age.

"Even though the smoke isn't inhaled, the tobacco still goes through the lining of the mouth, and you still get that kick of nicotine," she said.

Bettis said although he knew the effects of smoking cigars, he was unconcerned because he smoked in moderation. Coldwell, however, took a different view.

"It's really frustrating to see people who are supposed to be intelligent picking up such a nasty habit," Coldwell said.



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