

Many of us passionate Brothers (and Sisters) of the Leaf have probably dreamed of making a cigar with our very own name on it. Choosing the exact body, strength, and flavor profile we personally love would be the ultimate experience, right? Well, until you know what it *really* takes to create the blend for a great premium handrolled smoke, you'd better enlist the help of a *true* master... because snatching the pebble from his hand, Kung Fu style, is a lot harder than you might think.

Read on, grasshopper.

# Masters of the Blend

by Tommy Zarzecki

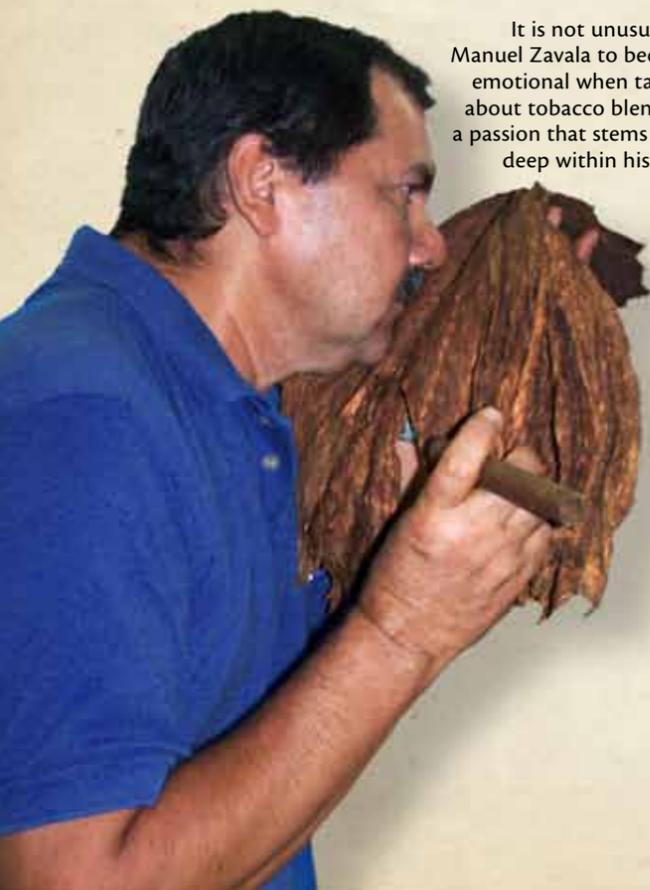
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Sit in the lounge of any cigar shop and you'll listen to the banter of guys who are there to relax and revel in their manly-man camaraderie (and, okay, let's certainly not forget the ladies who love the leaf, as well). But, of course, all of this is centered on the sheer enjoyment of premium handrolled cigars. Sitting and talking (who are we kidding here—sitting and *bullshitting*) for hours is what we do best in the presence of a fine cigar, taking on dozens of subjects about which to wax poetic, with no real intent of solving the world's problems. Those leafy brown happy-sticks create such fellowship and, of all the topics that a man can throw the proverbial bull about—politics, sports, women, food, music, gun control, yada, yada—it is the subject of *cigars* that gets us involved, invigorated, and energized.

If you are a true tobacco enthusiast, you understand the unbridled passion that a cigar brings about—a passion that a nonsmoker will never begin to understand. Perusing the contents of a walk-in humididor, feeling the texture of an oily stick between your fingers, then holding the foot beneath your nose for the obligatory whiff is heaven on earth. To people like us, cigars are something we hold dear in our hearts, and the love (yes, be assured that it is *love*) is as personal and moving as anything we have ever deemed sacred in our lives. Okay, we can admit that it's a little weird to be so enamored of an inanimate object that we set ablaze and then suck the hot smoke from, but we are not alone: millions and millions of people centuries before us have felt the very same way.

It is not unusual for Manuel Zavala to become emotional when talking about tobacco blending, a passion that stems from deep within his soul.



Still, the subject of cigars can be very personal, as can the experience of smoking. But it's not until you really listen to the chatter bandied about by the inhabitants of your local cigar lounge that you'll realize just how intimate the relationship truly is between a man and his premium puro.

"Have you tried the new Nicaraguan No. 7 Sungrown Quadruple Ligero Family Blend by Don So-and-So yet?" asks Joe, owner of a nearby landscaping company. He has a penchant for dark, strong cigars hailing from Central America, and is always happy to give you his take on his favorites. "Man, this thing is a powerhouse!"

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Unfortunately, Brett, a retired phone company exec has different feelings. "Oh, man, I hate that one—the goddamned thing tastes like an old rubber!" (This is a true piece of conversation in the "can't make this stuff up" category.) "I loved the old blend from when the factory was in Santiago. That local Dominican piloto gave those sticks a nice, smooth flavor!"

"I agree," chimes Barry, a graphic designer who's not a big fan of blow-your-head-off nicotine bombs. "Why can't a cigar have seriously good flavor without making you dizzy or forcing you to hurl everything you ate over the last 24 hours?"

"Because you're a wuss, Barry!" says an emphatic Joe, a guy who eats Joya de Nicaragua Antaño 1970s for breakfast. "I know great cigars, and *this* is a great cigar!"

"No, Joe," says Brett. "You know what *you* like, and that's all there is to it. We all dig different blends, flavor profiles, and strengths. It's not like anyone is *wrong* here."

Brett was right. While we're all passionate about the cigars we smoke, we all have different needs when it comes to a cigar's distinct characteristics; that's why, when someone asks for a recommendation, it's almost impossible to answer without knowing what that person generally smokes. When you listen to guys like our cigar-shop buddies throwing around terms like *body*, *strength*, and *flavor*, you have to wonder what all that actually means and whether they are all even talking about the same thing. Are they on the same page when evaluating cigars? Do *full-bodied* and *full-flavored* mean the same thing

to different people? Can a light-to-medium-bodied cigar still be filled with flavor? Why do Joe and Brett have very different opinions on what a *strong* cigar is?

It's fair to say that, while the average cigar smoker certainly knows what he likes, the question posed here is, do we really know the gist of what goes into blending and creating a premium cigar? It's a fair and appropriate question because one has to wonder if indeed we're all on the same page when we're discussing the attributes of our stogies, or exactly what specific qualities make our favorites *our favorites*. If you happen to surf Web sites or blogs for the definitions of a cigar's characteristics, you will undoubtedly find an array of different answers and interpretations. Many a friendly argument has cropped up about this subject matter. But, if you truly love the leaf, it's worth taking a closer look.

Now, when one is fortunate enough to be a hired scribe for a publication dedicated to the cigar world, one gets to go face-to-face with some of the giants of the industry, and the knowledge gained is beyond imagination. Often, encounters with some of the masters will clearly expose their personal beliefs about blending tobacco, which differ a bit depending on who you talk to, as making cigars is definitely not a structured analytical science. While there are, of course, laws and rules to follow, the key elements are *creativity* and *experience*. The melding of the two is what has given us some of the finest cigars we have ever put to our lips.

**Just think about everything and everyone involved in the birth of our leafy compadres, people like these cigarmakers who give of their hearts and souls when creating a premium, handrolled tobacco stick.**

When these great men speak of the cigars they have created, it is if they are talking about their very own children. (With no exaggeration, I watched actual tears well up in the eyes of several noted cigar artisans as they talked about their tobacco offspring.) At the International Premium Cigar and Pipe Retailers industry show in Las Vegas of 2008, General Cigar's then-CEO, Daniel Núñez, introduced several new blends, but it was specifically the Macanudo 1968 that had him walking about like a proud new papa, smiling from ear to ear. His goal was to put a new face on the Macanudo name, and he wanted the '68 to be bold and rich, something people would talk about. In this case, *full-bodied* and *full-flavored* is what "bold and rich" translates to.

Daniel Núñez has seen more than his share of brand-new cigars, but it was the 2008 debut of the Macanudo 1968 that had him beaming like a proud new papa.



At that very same show was the late Frank Llana, a man known for bringing to life many well-known, heavy-bodied "Cubanesque" cigars like Hoyo de Monterrey, Punch, Excalibur, El Rey del Mundo, and Siglo. When he elaborated on the new and exciting projects he was working on, a smile covered the expanse of his face and it was almost as if he too were gushing about a new son or a daughter.

At an in-store Partagas event, Benji Menendez hinted at the release of a cigar with his very own moniker on it—one that reflected his favorite flavor profile, shape, and size. And, as you probably know, the Partagas Master Series Majestuoso was released, complete with Menendez's very own signature on the band.

The pure and proud enthusiasm that radiated from these men was infectious and as real as it gets. In fact, renowned plant manager, Manuel Zavala revealed that his passion for making cigars comes from deep within his soul, and even became overtaken by emotion as he stopped to wipe his eyes, especially when speaking about his mentor, the master Estelo Padrón. Similarly, in interviews, Carlos and Carlito Fuente will speak about their prized Opus X as if each cigar is a living, breathing human. Cigar fans might even recall that the so-called experts told Carlos that a Dominican puro—especially one of superior quality—could simply *not* be done. He proved the world wrong, and notes today that blending this world-class smoke is the proudest moment of his career. He wears his emotions on his sleeve for all to see when the story of the Opus is told.



It takes a special blend to bear the late, great Frank Llana's moniker, and his namesake 1961 lives up to his legend.

Indeed, developing a new cigar is an emotionally charged experience, and these legendary cigarmakers have created magnificent blends with their hearts as much as with their heads and hands. Regarding the creative process, Christian Eiroa, Camacho's president, revealed something incredibly interesting: he blends cigars based on the mood he's in.

"If I'm in a really happy, upbeat mood, and all is going great, I'll make a complex cigar bursting with different flavors," he says. "And when I'm angry or in a pissed-off mood, I'll make a strong, full-bodied cigar that will kick some ass. My overall mood and demeanor have a lot to do with the blend I'm creating at that time."

Camacho has seen an interesting little revelation since Davidoff acquired the company not too long ago. Known for the creation of very full-bodied, stronger cigars like the much lauded Triple Maduro, Christian saw an opportunity to expand Camacho's horizons by placing a light Connecticut shade wrapper around one of his full-flavored blends, and—*voilà!*—a new smoking sensation was born. "Some of our hardcore fans might consider it to be mild, but I like to think it's a medium-bodied smoke," says Eiroa. "That golden wrapper toned things down and mellowed it out just enough where more people are now enjoying our cigars."

The one thing stressed by just about all cigarmakers is that it takes many years of growing, fermenting, and blending tobacco to gain the experience needed to make a great cigar. Blending is truly an art form and one needs to go into it with

a definite flavor profile and strength in mind. And because it's not a perfect science, some cigarmakers say that, while they're often extremely close, they're not always *exactly* where they wanted to be when all is said and done. Still, that is considered a success. Sometimes, though, you *can* get what you want right away, like Eiroa did with the Triple Maduro. He immediately knew that the blend of tobaccos was a winner but, unfortunately, getting the thing to burn properly took months and months of trial and error. It turns out that, because the leaves are so thick, getting air to properly pass through was incredibly painstaking—but worth the effort in the long run. When these masters have a vision, they will do anything to see it through.

Sometimes it's actually a group effort to develop a new and memorable blend. A cigarmaker may know in his head just what he wants, but it might take a special collaboration to make it come to fruition. Frank Llana worked closely with the highly regarded Oliva family out of Tampa when creating his flavorful namesake cigar, the Frank Llana 1961. Not only is it a masterpiece typical of Sir Frank, but its real distinction is its wrapper, one of the most luscious and darkest Ecuadoreans

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anyone has possibly ever seen. Then there's Altadis master blender, José Séijas, who worked with the Turrent family of Mexico to craft the highly praised Romeo y Julieta Edición Limitada. Looking for a wrapper that would set this special cigar apart, the Turrents provided Séijas with an extremely rare, toothy, and oily corajo leaf that they had grown in the fertile soil of Mexico's San Andrés Valley. Sometimes only a team effort will provide the maker with that missing ingredient, and, in these two cases, some of the finest cigars on the market today.

While developing a new blend means concocting its body, strength, and flavor profile, there is a hell of a lot more to consider and factor into the equation. If you look at the big picture, you'll see that when it comes to making a blend and turning it into a cigar that people will like, the variables are astounding. A cigarmaker has myriad components and a vast array of possible combinations of elements to consider, even after he has decided what the end result should be.

The first order of business is deciding from what country of origin the wrapper, filler, and binder leaves should hail—Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, Cameroon, Indonesia, Colombia, Philippines, Costa Rica, or the United States? Because the wrapper determines up to 60 percent of a cigar's flavor, the leaf that's chosen has significant impact on the final product. Will it be a double claro (or candela), claro (Connecticut shade), colorado claro, colorado distinctive (rosado), colorado maduro, maduro, or oscuro? What about the strain or types of tobacco—corajo, criollo, sun-grown, shade-grown, Connecticut broadleaf, Habana 2000, Olor, Piloto Cubano, San Vicente, San Andrés, Sumatra, Brazilian Mata Fina, and a host of Cuban-grown leaf, including the always popular pre-embargo variety.

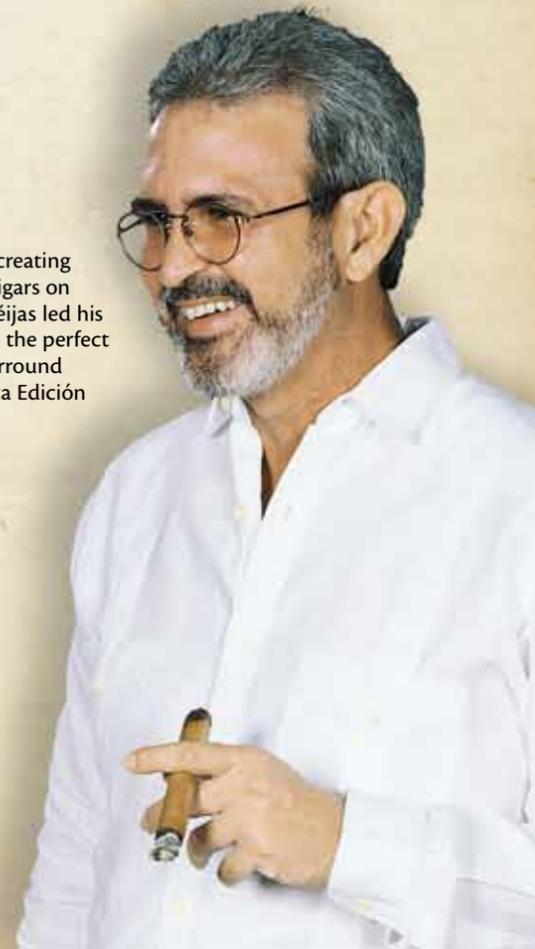
Mind-boggling, you say? *But wait*—there's more! There are three different categories of leaf located on every cigar tobacco plant, and the combination that is chosen will have a direct bearing on the size and strength of your cigar. *Ligero* (the topmost leaves that receive the most direct sunlight) offers a lot of taste and is often used to give a shot of "oomph" to the overall flavor profile. These thick leaves, which make up the majority of a blend, are tricky to work with when aspiring to a proper burn; kudos to some of the popular new blends on the market boasting double- and triple-ligero-filled sticks. *Seco* (the leaves from the middle of the plant) makes a cigar flavorful and aromatic. Lastly, there is *volado*, the leaves from the bottom. While mostly used as filler, volado is the largest leaf and tends to burn quite well. A well-balanced (and certainly well-researched) combination of these tobacco leaves will help to ensure the taste and smokability of your cigar.

But what about aging? The amount of time that each tobacco—wrapper, binder, *and* filler—is aged and fermented plays a huge part in the smoothness, taste, and complexity of a cigar. And don't forget that shapes and sizes (or vitolas) must also be considered; a lonsdale, for example, is going to burn and smoke a lot differently than, say, a 6.00-by-60 double-toro fatty.

As you can plainly see, blending a good cigar from imagination to fruition is a monumental task that takes great amounts of experience, wisdom, creativity, determination, and one hell of a lot of patience. Sometimes the formula comes right away, and other times it can take months of experimentation and hundreds of tastings before the mark is hit. But the real key is that the master blender must have the cigar's character in his mind even before a single leaf is ever touched. Will the cigar be tangy, spicy, or peppery? How

about cedary, nutty, chocolaty, or sweet? Will it have coffee bean or floral notes, or possible hints of fruit on the finish? Yeah, certain blends can extract these types of characteristics in a cigar and it is the master's many years of sophistication and knowledge that allow him to bring his vision to achievement. And while we at this magazine do acknowledge the fact that certain flavor attributes like the aforementioned do exist in handrolled premium cigars, there are some in the industry who feel the need to go that extra mile, alerting you to a supposed cornucopia of gastronomic delicacies derived from cigar tobacco, such as roasted gyro meat, motorcycle leather, Grandma's bread pudding, Ethiopian toffee crunch, nautical mist, and putting green. Along with this level of highbrow puffery, the accompanying aroma that is produced is generally one of pure unadulterated bullshit. So let's get back to the original matter at hand: body, strength, and flavor, and what all that *really* means.

Various cigarmakers explain these attributes in slightly different terms; there really is no definitive answer in stone, but here's what it boils down to. *Body* is generally the strength and intensity of a particular cigar. *Flavor* is the taste that characterizes your smoke. Now, a full-bodied cigar can be strong, but might be one-dimensional and not produce a lot of flavor. On the other hand, a mild-to-medium stick can



With the hope of creating one of the finest cigars on the market, José Séijas led his dedicated team to the perfect wrapper leaf to surround the Romeo y Julieta Edición Limitada.

certainly be flavorful with complex notes throughout. While *full-bodied* and *full-flavored* are not the same thing, they can definitely both exist in the same cigar—one that is certainly tailored more to the well-seasoned palate. And, even though a shade-grown wrapper is of the milder variety, the cigar it accompanies can certainly be sweet, tasty, and aromatic.

*Strength* on its own is a matter of individual preference. A moderate smoker might think a certain cigar is way too strong for his palate, while a connoisseur might consider the very same smoke to be medium or even light. Some manufacturers claim that it is the nicotine content that will make a cigar seem stronger, and it's those heavier, darker leaves that produce this

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natural agent. If you've ever smoked a dark cigar or perhaps a Cuban-made puro that got your head spinning and your stomach doing the Lambada, it is said that the high level of nicotine is the culprit. Christian Eiroa believes that the amount of ammonia in a cigar is what makes a strong smoke, and his Camacho brand certainly has never been one for the novice. Ammonia is another natural by-product of cigar leaf and is released during the fermentation process. Controlling the fermentation obviously adjusts the level of *zing* you get from your favorite stogie.

Now, Cuban-made cigars are a whole other discussion. People are under the false assumption that *all* Habanas are strong—perhaps too strong. Yes, some are straightforward, powerful, and not for the faint of heart, but the better-made Cubanos like the Montecristo No. 2 and the Hoyo de Monterrey Double Corona are complex, with flavor profiles that build and change throughout the duration of the smoke. Many longtime fans of the Havana will tell you about the delicate balance and properties, and will insist that, once your palate is trained, you will only desire the fruits of that island 90 miles south of Key West, Florida. But, there is still an embargo posed against the Castro regime and, like Mr. Gump said, that's all I have to say about that.

While the tobacco industry faces some of the stiffest opposition and greatest taxes ever imposed, cigar masters are nonetheless introducing some of the finest blends we smokers have ever tasted. While Altadis and General continue to

produce world-class smokes, many others are stepping to the forefront, creating cigars that are gathering a huge following—names like John Oliva, Pepin Garcia, Jorge Padrón, Pete Johnson, Sam Leccia, Jesus Fuego, Steve Saka, Nestor Plasencia, Nick Perdomo, Hendrik Kelner, Nestor Miranda, Ernesto Perez-Carrillo, Ernesto Padilla, A.J. Fernandez, and José Blanco, just to name a few. Even in a time that might indicate to the naked eye that cigars are on the way out, those in the industry just keep moving forward.

So, next time you get into an argument, spat, intellectual discussion, or just plain old bull-throwing session about the cigars you love and loathe, just think about everything and everyone involved in the birth of our leafy compadres, people like these cigarmakers who give of their hearts and souls when creating a premium, handrolled tobacco stick. They are the *true masters* and we certainly owe them all a debt of gratitude. Keep on blending your greatness, you guys, because snatching that pebble—not unlike crossing that rice paper without tearing it—is going to take us mere grasshoppers a lot longer than we thought. **CM**

You might be surprised to learn that some of Camacho's most compelling blends are crafted based on the moods of company president Christian Eiroa.

