

Cigar Insider

INTERNET ONLY

FEBRUARY 12, 2013 ■ VOL. 18, NO. 3 ■ FROM THE PUBLISHER OF CIGAR AFICIONADO MAGAZINE

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FEATURED CIGAR

VEGAS ROBAINA

PETIT UNICO EXCLUSIVO SUIZA

CUBA ■ PRICE: 19.00 Sw. Fr. ■ BODY: MED. TO FULL

For a full tasting, see page three.

93
POINTS

BEST CIGARS THIS ISSUE

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COHIBA EDICIÓN DIAMANTE

AN AGED CAMEROON WRAPPER covers the new Cohiba Edición Diamante (which was released at last year's IPCPR trade show in Orlando) and General Cigar says that it's from a 1980 harvest. The new Cohiba comes in only two sizes and *Cigar Insider* has rated them both. For the full tasting of Diamante, see page three.



PROCIGAR WELCOMES ITS NEWEST MEMBERS

ERNESTO PEREZ-CARRILLO AND LITTO GOMEZ have joined ProCigar. Gomez (right) the maker of La Flor Dominicana cigars, and Perez-Carrillo (left), the man behind the E.P. Carrillo brand and the former producer of La Gloria Cubana cigars, are now part of the industry's most prominent manufacturer's association. This addition means that every major cigar personality in the Dominican Republic is a member of ProCigar, an organization of Dominican cigar manufacturers dedicated to maintaining the high quality standards of the Dominican Republic's cigar industry. "It's time for unity, for being together as a cigar-producing country," said Gomez. For coverage of the ProCigar Festival, see the next *Cigar Insider*.



TASTING REPORT

DANIEL MARSHALL DM2 RED LABEL

VERTICAL BRAND TASTING

Country: Nicaragua

Maker: MATASA

Distributor: SAG Imports Inc.

Filler: Nicaragua

Binder: Nicaragua

Wrapper: Nicaragua

Purchase Date: January 2012

TORPEDO

89 POINTS ■ 6 1/4" x 54 ■ \$8.90

Hints of chocolate, nougat, and roasted nuts come through this veiny smoke, though the draw was notably firm. The herbal finish lingers on the palate.

Body: Medium to Full

CHURCHILL

88 POINTS ■ 7" x 48 ■ \$8.70

The woody flavors of this richly colored Churchill take on a bit of sweetness with notes of cocoa powder. It smokes evenly throughout.

Body: Medium

ROBUSTO

87 POINTS ■ 5 1/2" x 52 ■ \$8.20

Faint chocolate and cocoa bean notes are underscored by earthy flavors. Hints of vanilla come through as well, though the finish isn't very long.

Body: Medium

BRAND SUMMARY: Daniel Marshall has a long history in the cigar business, beginning as a humidor maker in 1982. Since then Marshall has expanded to produce cigars under three labels, Red, White and Black. The Red Label line—the newest in Marshall's portfolio, and rolled by Manuel Quesada at the MATASA factory—performed well in this tasting, garnering an average score of 88 points with the best score coming from the Torpedo.

Average Rating: 88.0 points

GURKHA 125TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

NEW RELEASE—VERTICAL BRAND TASTING

Country: Dominican Republic

Maker: PDR Cigars

Distributor: Gurkha Cigar Group

Filler: Nicaragua, Brazil, Dom. Rep.

Binder: Ecuador

Wrapper: Brazil

Release Date: November 2012

XO

92 POINTS ■ 6" x 60 ■ \$10.99 ■ HUMIDOR SELECTION

Flavorful notes of dried orange peel, leather and cedar make for an enjoyable smoking experience with this well-balanced cigar. The finish is long and resonant.

Body: Medium to Full

ROTHCHILD

91 POINTS ■ 6" x 54 ■ \$8.89 ■ HUMIDOR SELECTION

This delicious cigar starts with flavors of hickory and nuts and becomes more complex with coffee and spice notes. The draw and burn are even throughout.

Body: Medium to Full

ROBUSTO

90 POINTS ■ 5" x 52 ■ \$8.39

Nearly perfect in appearance, this aromatic robusto produces a solid ash. It starts out with red and black pepper notes that take on a graham cracker sweetness.

Body: Medium to Full

TORPEDO

90 POINTS ■ 6 1/2" x 54 ■ \$9.99

A milk chocolate-colored torpedo that is very well balanced with rich tea and toast flavors. Leathery notes are predominant on the finish.

Body: Medium to Full

BRAND SUMMARY: According to company lore, the term Gurkha was used by British soldiers 125 years ago as a nickname for Nepalese cigars. Gurkha celebrates this legacy with its anniversary brand, which features a Brazilian Habano-seed wrapper. The cigars did well, but the thick XO was the standout at 92 points.

Average Rating: 90.8 points

100 POINT SCALE

95-100: Classic ■ 90-94: Outstanding ■ 80-89: Very good to excellent ■ 70-79: Average to good commercial quality
Below 70: Don't waste your money ■ N/A: Not Available *Note: Prices are manufacturers' suggested retail, before taxes.*

COHIBA EDICIÓN DIAMANTE

NEW RELEASE

Country: Dominican Republic

Maker: General Cigar Dominicana

Distributor: General Cigar Co.

Filler: Dom. Rep.

Binder: Indonesia

Wrapper: Cameroon

Release Date: November 2012

ROBUSTO

88 POINTS ■ 5" x 50 ■ \$22.00

This cigar smokes evenly, offering medium-bodied, woody flavors, light floral notes and a pleasant, almond-like finish.

Body: Medium

TORO

88 POINTS ■ 6" x 54 ■ \$25.00

There is healthy color to this robusto, which draws and burns evenly. Its mostly woody flavors take on some white pepper notes before leaving a cedary aftertaste.

Body: Medium to Full

HOYO DE MONTERREY

NEW SIZE

Country: Cuba

Maker: N/A

Distributor: Habanos S.A.

Filler: Cuba

Binder: Cuba

Wrapper: Cuba

Box Date: July 2012

EPICURE DE LUXE

90 POINTS ■ 4 1/2" x 52 ■ £16.10

This toasty smoke reveals notes of orange peel and a touch of cappuccino as it burns. It is balanced, tasty and well made.

Body: Medium

QUESADA Q D'ETAT

NEW SIZE

Country: Dominican Republic

Maker: MATASA

Distributor: SAG Imports Inc.

Filler: Dom. Rep.

Binder: Dom. Rep.

Wrapper: Dom. Rep.

Release Date: December 2012

DAGA

89 POINTS ■ 7 1/2" x 54 ■ \$9.75

A long, impressively rolled double-tapered Salomon. Sweet notes of raisin punctuate the cigar's salty and nutty undertones.

Body: Medium to Full

VEGAS ROBAINA

NEW SIZE

Country: Cuba

Maker: N/A

Distributor: Habanos S.A. (via Intertabak AG)

Filler: Cuba

Binder: Cuba

Wrapper: Cuba

Box Date: July 2012

PETIT UNICO EXCLUSIVO SUIZA

93 POINTS ■ 5" x 52 ■ 19.00 Sw. Fr. ■ HUMIDOR SELECTION

A beautifully rolled torpedo with an excellent draw. Rich wood and leather flavors become creamy and spicy with hints of red pepper and a floral finish.

Body: Medium to Full

For the latest from *Cigar Aficionado*, follow us on Twitter:
twitter.com/CigarAfcMag



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Below 70: Don't waste your money ■ N/A: Not Available *Note: Prices are manufacturers' suggested retail, before taxes.*

CIGAR NEWS

SWISHER EYES PREMIUM CIGAR MARKET

BY DAVID SAVONA

The company behind America's best-selling cigar brand has taken a new interest in handmade, premium cigars.

Swisher International Inc., the dominant force in the mass-market cigar business, sells more cigars in a day than some cigar companies sell in an entire year. The Jacksonville, Florida, giant has formed Royal Gold Cigars, a premium cigar division that is being headed by cigar-industry veteran Alex Goldman. Royal Gold is going to focus on selling cigars made by hand, from mixed-fill cigars selling for a couple of dollars each up to true premium handmades with suggested retail prices approaching \$10 a cigar.

"Royal Gold cigars is a fresh start in the premium business for Swisher International," Goldman told *Cigar Insider*. "Royal Gold will produce and market great handmade cigars at reasonable prices for the premium cigar connoisseur."

Goldman, a fourth-generation tobacconist who once ran the distributor House of Oxford and retailer Mom's Cigars, said Royal Gold's inaugural product would be a handmade cigar made from a mixture of long and short-filler tobacco, a type of smoke known as a Cuban sandwich. The brand, called **Gold Strike**, will retail for about \$2 a cigar, and it's being rolled at the Nicaraguan American Cigars S.A. (NACSA) factory in Nicaragua utilizing tobaccos grown by Tampa, Florida's Oliva Tobacco Co.

Goldman hopes to have Gold Strike on sale by the spring.

Royal Gold's higher-end products will make their debut over the summer at the International Premium Cigar & Pipe Retailers trade show in Las Vegas. "Our first three handmade long-filler premium lines will all launch at IPCPR—one each from the Dominican, Honduras and Nicaragua," said Goldman. "The plan is to have a variety of strengths and flavor profiles across the different brands and a suggested retail between \$4.50 and \$8.50. One of the brands will be a rejuvenated version of **Casino Gold**, which is a premium cigar brand that the old Swisher premium cigar division marketed for many years. The other two brands are completely new names and concepts."

Royal Gold will be headquartered in Marlboro, New Jersey, but the company's products will ship from humidified storage areas in Jacksonville.

Today Swisher International sells more than 1 billion cigars a year to more than 60 different countries. (Some boutique cigar producers, by comparison, make fewer

than 1 million cigars a year, and the entire premium import market is less than 300 million cigars.) Swisher has been making cigars since its founding in 1861 by David Swisher, and in 1958 the company introduced **Swisher Sweets**, a cigar made by machine with a sweetened tip. Today Swisher

Sweets are, by volume, the best-selling cigar in the U.S.

In 1966, Swisher was acquired by American Maize-Products Co., a public company controlled by the Ziegler family. In 1995, the Zieglers sold American Maize, but immediately bought back Swisher.

In 1996, with the company experiencing strong sales in the midst of the cigar boom, Swisher went public as Swisher International Group Inc. The company invested heavily in the premium cigar segment.

In 1998, Swisher formed a joint venture with Manuel Quesada of MATASA and Central Industrial de Tabaqueros Asociados Tabacos de Canarios S.A. (CITA) to form Compañía Tabacos de Exportación S.A. (COTABEX), which began rolling cigars in October 1998 in the Dominican Republic. The first brand was **Optimo Classico**, a premium bundle cigar.

Swisher's biggest foray into premiums was with **Bering**, a brand it acquired in 1985 when it bought Corral Wodiska y Cia. of Tampa, Florida. Berings were a hallmark cigar brand in the days before the Cuban embargo, but had fallen from its onetime glory as blends had to change and U.S. cigar labor moved from handmade to machine-made. When Swisher made the acquisition, Berings were mostly machine-made, and in 1990, the company moved production of Bering to Honduras, where it was made under contract. As premium cigar sales soared in the 1990s, Swisher wanted more control of its handmade business, and built a massive 78,000-square-foot factory in El Paraiso, Honduras, to make Bering cigars. It was run by Nestor Plasencia.

The timing of the deal didn't work out. U.S. cigar sales dropped beginning in 1997 as cigarmaker supply caught up to, and then exceeded, consumer demand. In 2002, Swisher sold the Bering brand and the massive factory to Plasencia for undisclosed terms that included taking over the inventory of more than 1 million unsold cigars.

Goldman said that Swisher is not pursuing the same strategy in the premium market this time around.

"Swisher does not currently and has no plans to own a premium cigar factory," said Goldman. "Royal Gold cigars will be working with various factories and cigar personalities in Honduras, Nicaragua and the DR that I have had relationships with for years through my experience as a wholesaler, retailer, brand owner and distributor."

Swisher never fully left the handmade business, and for the past 15 years it sold cigars made by hand under such brand names as **Macbeth**, **Clasico**, **Vieja Tradicion**, **Tiburón**, and **Casino Gold**. Goldman said that part of the new structure involves divesting the old handmade cigar inventory "in order to focus on the new launches." ■



CRA BRINGS INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT AGAINST FDA REGULATIONS

BY G. CLAY WHITTAKER

Cigar Rights of America has taken its fight against FDA regulations of the premium cigar market international with support from three major cigar producing countries. Ambassadors from Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic have signed a letter to the Obama Administration warning of the damage such regulations would do both inside and outside the United States.

The letter states that, "If history is any precedent, some of the regulations that could be imposed by the agency would prove disastrous to the centuries old cigar industry that provides more than 350,000 jobs among our three nations, and represents millions of dollars in export revenue. No regulatory measure should threaten such jobs, and hence raise the specter of political and economic consequences within our region."

CRA Executive Director Glynn Loope commended the three ambassadors (Jorge Ramon Hernandez-Alcerro of Honduras, Anibal de Castro of the Dominican Republic and Francisco Campbell of Nicaragua) for their assistance in the ongoing fight. "Their message to the State Department, FDA and channels at The White House proclaim, as only they can, that this industry is built upon generations of art, history and skill," said Loope, "and no act of this government should threaten such a foundation to each of their respective national economies."

The joint letter was delivered to high-ranking officials at the FDA, White House and State Department. The FDA was given control of the entire U.S. tobacco industry in 2009 when President Barack Obama signed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act into law.

Cigarmakers fear that the FDA will impose limits on their business, threatening their workers' jobs and the right for connoisseurs to enjoy a fine cigar.

The joint statement also conveys the role of cigars with American jobs. The ambassadors state, "FDA regulation of premium cigars would harm many of the small business owners in the United States that derive their livelihoods from these prestigious products."

Loope stated on behalf of the CRA that, "We sincerely thank the embassies and their staff for the joint letter and statement on this issue. Each of their embassies in Washington, DC have welcomed us, hosted meetings, coordinated discussions, remained attuned to this issue both at the legislative and administrative levels, and worked collaboratively for the good of their regional economy, as well as for the passion for cigars shared by millions of American consumers, thousands of small businesses, and the manufacturers of these amazing cigars." ■

DAVIDOFF'S PURO D'ORO COMES IN SHORT, FAT GORDITO

BY GREGORY MOTTOLA



Fans of the Davidoff Puro d'Oro brand can expect to see the cigar in a new short, thick format called the Gordito next month. At 3 3/4 inches long by 58 ring, Davidoff claims that the compact cigar will ensure at least 30 minutes of smoking.

"This format suits the needs of the urban aficionados who lead hectic business lifestyles, allowing them to kick back and relax or enjoy short breaks with intensely pleasurable draws in a relatively short time," said Davidoff in an official press release.

The Puro d'Oro consists of only Dominican tobacco and features a dark, oily wrapper that's cultivated on a small farm in Yamasá, north of Santo Domingo, the country's capital city. When the brand debuted in the spring of 2010, it was billed by Davidoff as the most full-bodied cigar that the company makes.

The stout, pigtailed Gordito comes in handy four-packs or boxes of 25, and retails for \$14.00 each. It's the eighth cigar in the line and sports a gold foot band, as well as the gilded Davidoff signature ring. When Puro d'Oros were first released to the market, they only came dressed with a foot band. Last year, Davidoff introduced its first fully gilded, embossed "Davidoff" signature band with the release of the Puro d'Oro Gigantes size. The large Gigante was the first in the Puro d'Oro line to wear both the foot band and the signature golden band. Now, the entire Puro d'Oro line wears the gold "Davidoff" ring (shown on the Gordito above) and is the only brand in the company's portfolio to don these shimmering gilded bands.

All the cigars are produced in the Dominican Republic at the Cigars Davidoff factory, run by master blender Hendrik "Henke" Kelner.

For a rating of the new Davidoff Puro d'Oro Gordito, see an upcoming issue of *Cigar Insider*. ■

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INSIDER Q&A: A.J. FERNANDEZ

Born Abdel Joseph Fernandez in Cuba, A.J. Fernandez came to the U.S. with a family history in the tobacco business. After working in obscurity producing catalog brands, Fernandez finally broke out with his own **San Lotano** line, eventually winning critical and commercial success with the **San Lotano Oval**, which earned a spot on *Cigar Aficionado's* most recent Top 25 Cigars of the Year. *Cigar Insider's* Gregory Mottola interviewed the 32-year-old Fernandez on the eve of the cigarmaker's opening of a grand new factory in Nicaragua to discuss the balance between high-volume catalog contracts and his own private brands.



A.J. FERNANDEZ

MOTTOLA: When did you first get into the industry?

FERNANDEZ: My family has been in the tobacco business for generations. I remember being in the fields in Cuba from a very young age. I started my own tabacalera [Tabacalera Fernandez] nine years ago or so.

Q: How old were you when you left Cuba?

A: 23.

Q: Do you own Tabacalera Fernandez?

AJ: Yes. I started the business in a 500-square-foot space. It was very rustic. I am proud to be opening my new factory this month, which will be one of the largest in the Americas. I am blessed.

Q: How many rollers work at Tabacalera Fernandez?

A: 280, and they work in pairs, but this will double with the opening of the new factory.

Q: You started by making some catalog brands under contract. Could you talk about those?

A: It is hard starting your own business. The unique opportunity presented itself to produce quite a large amount of cigars almost at the beginning of my solo career. Those cigars—**Diesel**, **Man of War**, **Ave Maria**—are now some of the most well known catalog brands.

Q: What was your first A.J. Fernandez line and when did you release it?

A: San Lotano. This line was introduced at the IPCPR tradeshow two years ago.

Q: What were the production numbers of the very first run?

A: Around 300,000 sticks. 100,000 each of San Lotano Habano, San Lotano Maduro and San Lotano Connecticut.

Q: What was your second line and when did you release it?

A: San Lotano Oval at the 2012 IPCPR in Orlando.

Q: How many lines do you have in total?

A: Five under the A.J. Fernandez banner. Of course, beyond that there is the catalog product and many corporate and private label customers.

Q: What is your best-selling brand?

A: The San Lotano Oval. It has been a tremendous success.

Q: Oval has been a critical success as well, and it even got a spot on *Cigar Aficionado's* 2012 Top 25 list. How did you come up with that idea?

A: The Oval contains a very complex blend of tobaccos. During the blending process, I realized that this blend smoked perfectly in a box-style shape. But I wanted that shape to be more comfortable for smokers to hold and enjoy. So I took the traditional box press shape and improved it.

Q: How many Ovals would you say you make in a year?

A: We made 1.2 million last year. It's very popular around the world. I am very proud of the Oval.

Q: When did you release Oval Maduro?

A: Six months ago.

Q: How is it different from the original Oval?

A: I am lucky to have some of the most quality Maduro wrappers in the business. I enhanced the Habano Oval blend with more body for those who love Maduro cigars.

Q: Do you grow any tobacco yourself?

A: Yes! My own tobacco makes up about 78 percent of what we use.

Q: Where do you grow most of your tobacco?

A: Several different regions of Nicaragua.

Q: Is there any particular type of tobacco that you really enjoy working with?

A: I love working with Habano.

Q: Do you do all the blending, or do you have other people who assist you in the blending process?

A: In the beginning I had some mentoring. But the last few years my customers are very happy to let me blend on my own.

Q: Do you still make catalog brands, or are you now dedicated exclusively to your own brands?

A: I do both. There is a large demand from both sides. I am blessed to be able to provide my product to everyone who wants it.

Q: What makes your **Pinolero** brand different than your San Lotano lines?

A: This is a farmer's cigar. You could imagine a worker in the tobacco fields smoking this. It's very "Cubanesque" in style and structure.

Q: Has going from a contract producer to a brand owner changed your outlook on the industry?

A: Sure! A lot! One of the best examples is being on this year's *Cigar Aficionado* top 25 list.

Q: How many cigars do you produce in total each year?

A: Just over ten million cigars.

Q: Have you ever been in any other business other than cigars?

A: No. This is in my blood.

Q: If you could change something about the industry, what would it be?

A: Definitely more cooperation and unity.

Q: You talk about having "been given many of Cuba's most coveted cigar making secrets." Can you give me an example and tell me how you incorporate this into your operation?

A: I was taught by some of the best in the Cuban cigar making community. The old school I guess is what you call it. I incorporate this training in the day-to-day operations, and with lots of passion, discipline and creativity. ■



ROMEO Y JULIETA RESERVE CHURCHILL COMING TO GLOBAL MARKET

BY GREGORY MOTTOLA

The **Romeo y Julieta Reserva Churchill**, the first time that the Romeo y Julieta brand has been chosen for Cuba's Reserva program, is about to ship around the world. This Reserva is a limited-edition, 5,000-box run made with specially aged tobacco. According to worldwide Cuban cigar distributor Habanos S.A., the **Romeo y Julieta Reserva Churchill** contains tobacco leaves harvested in 2008.

The Churchill, which measures 7 inches by 47 ring, is considered to be the most emblematic size of the Romeo y Julieta line and will be adorned with two bands—the older, discontinued gold band resurrected for this release, and the standard black-and-silver Reserva band.

The cigars come packaged in black lacquered, piano-finish boxes of 20—typical for Cuba's Reserva and Gran Reserva cigars. Only 5,000 numbered boxes were produced. Although the cigar was first introduced and sampled at last year's Habanos Festival nearly a year ago, it has only recently begun shipping to retail.

With the older tobacco comes an increased price tag. In Italy, the **Romeo y Julieta Reserva Churchill** is set to retail for 26.00 Euros (about \$34.85) while the regular-production **Romeo Churchill** goes for 18.00 Euros (about \$24.13).

Reservas and Gran Reservas are normally chosen to represent Habanos's high-profile brands and their respective flagship sizes. Previous Reservas and Gran Reservas include the **Partagás Serie D No. 4**, **Montecristo No. 2**, **Cohiba Siglo VI** and **Montecristo No. 4**. ■

ARANGO RELEASING EXCLUSIVE PUNCH AND MACANUDO LINES

BY G. CLAY WHITTAKER

Arango Cigar Co. is bringing some exclusives to market under some very familiar names. The Illinois-based distributor is debuting two lines made by General Cigar Co.—the **Punch Clasico** and the **Macanudo Clasico**. And they're only available in brick-and-mortar retailers.

Billed as an Arango exclusive, both lines come in four sizes, each named after a notable aspect of Chicago: Mag Mile at 5 1/2 inches by 40 ring, Windy City at 5 1/2 by 50, Bucktown at 6 by 54 and Gold Coast at 6 by 58. The Punches retail for \$2.60 to \$6.20 while the Macanudos go for between \$6.40 and \$8.50.

“Both Clasico lines are limited to brick-and-mortar tobacconists, and are not available to Internet or mail-order retailers,” said Arango president Michael Gold. “We are presenting the cigars in 15-count boxes, another novel and price-friendly feature of the line.”

Macanudo Clasicos are made in the Dominican Republic and feature the signature Connecticut Shade wrapper found on General's Macanudo Café line. Made in Honduras, the Punch Clasicos have an Ecuadoran wrapper. ■

RAFAEL GONZALEZ PERLA MAKES ITS WAY AROUND THE WORLD

BY GREGORY MOTTOLA

While the rest of the world had to wait, Spain was the first country to receive the Cuban **Rafael Gonzalez Perla** back in late 2011, but now, the little smoke has found its way to other countries throughout the world.

Before the Perla was released, the Rafael Gonzalez brand had not received a new size in decades, but thanks to Spain's initiative, this diminutive size came to fruition, making the 4 inch by 40 ring cigar the third vitola in the small brand.

Though Spaniards have been puffing on the Perla for over a year, other countries can now enjoy the diminutive smoke as well, and for a relative bargain. In Spain the Perla only retails for 2.30 Euros (about \$3.00). In Rome, it's still a inexpensive at 3.20 Euros (about \$4.37). In the U.K. and Canada, however, the small smoke will set you back a bit more, as it retails for £7.50 (about \$11.78) and 9.86 Canadian dollars (about \$9.80), respectively.

The Rafael Gonzalez Perla scored 91 points in a *Cigar Insider* tasting and was also named the only Best Bargain Cigar from Cuba for 2012 in *Cigar Aficionado*. Though it's the same size as other popular Perlas like the **Montecristo No. 5** and **Cohiba Siglo I**, it's a fraction of the cost. ■

CIGAR AFICIONADO'S BIG SMOKE 2013 SCHEDULE

November 8-10

LAS VEGAS • THE MIRAGE

Big Smoke evenings scheduled on Friday and Saturday, as well as cigar and lifestyle educational seminars on Saturday and Sunday, respectively.

TICKETS ON SALE MAY 1

December 5

NEW YORK CITY • PIER 92

TICKETS ON SALE JUNE 1

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IN THE NEXT CIGAR INSIDER

Coverage of the ProCigar Festival, breaking news from around the cigar world and ratings on hot new cigars. Read about it first in *Cigar Insider*.

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