

What to Expect from Cuban Cigars

In spite of recent news that relations with Cuba are once again being restricted by the US government, travelers (who can get there) will still be able to bring back Cuban cigars from the island. Many Americans are salivating at the prospect – but are they worthwhile? What can you expect from them? Read on...

Remember Pavlov's famous test? Try this ping-pong test with your friends. If you say "Car", some will answer German, some American, some British and some Italian, for instance. Say "Wine" and the responses will also be spread, with French and American as the main probable reactions. But say "[Cigar](#)," and I'll bet that most, if not *all* your friends, will react with a "Cuban".

The Cuban Embargo

What is it that makes Cuban cigars almost unanimous in the minds of fine tobacco lovers around the world? Before I try to produce an answer, an anecdote about President Kennedy may help us understand the question.



Fidel Castro with his country's signature product and his Rolex GMT Master

If you remember your 20th-century history, Fidel Castro became the Communist dictator of Cuba in 1959. The Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 was the disastrous Kennedy administration's attempt to overthrow their government, and in retaliation, on February 3, 1962 the President signed the decree that banned Cuban products from the U.S. – including cigars.



JFK smoking a cigar in [black tie](#)

Ironically, though, Kennedy was a fan of Petit Coronas, a small cigar from the traditional H. Upmann Cuban brand, and he wasn't willing to try alternatives from other countries. So the president asked his press secretary, Pierre Salinger (himself a cigar lover) to roam Washington DC's tobacco stores and find as many of those stogies he could find.



H. Upmann Petit Coronas

The next morning, Salinger brought the President 1,200 Upmanns – almost 50 boxes – to Kennedy. “Fantastic!”, he said, pulling a paper from a drawer and signing the embargo.

WHEREAS these essential services are voluntarily rendered to the Government of the United States and the American people by the members and volunteers of the Red Cross:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, JOHN F. KENNEDY, President of the United States of America and Honorary Chairman of the American National Red Cross, do hereby designate March 1962 as Red Cross Month; and I urge all Americans to honor the Red Cross during that month by supporting it as a channel of humanitarian assistance for their neighbors in need.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States of America to be affixed.

DONE at the City of Washington this 24th day of January in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and sixty-two, and [SEAL] of the Independence of the United States of America the one hundred and eighty-sixth.

By the President:

GEORGE BALL,
Acting Secretary of State.

JOHN F. KENNEDY

Proclamation 3447

EMBARGO ON ALL TRADE WITH CUBA

February 3, 1962
By the President of the United States of America
A Proclamation

WHEREAS the Eighth Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Serving as Organ of Consultation in Application of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, in its Final Act resolved that the present Government of Cuba is incompatible with the principles and objectives of the Inter-American system; and, in light of the subversive offensive of Sino-Soviet Communism with which the Government of Cuba is publicly aligned, urged the member states to take those steps that they may consider appropriate for their individual and collective self-defense;

22 USC 2369.

WHEREAS the Congress of the United States, in section 620(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (75 Stat. 445), as amended, has authorized the President to establish and maintain an embargo upon all trade between the United States and Cuba; and

WHEREAS the United States, in accordance with its international obligations, is prepared to take all necessary actions to promote national and hemispheric security by isolating the present Government of Cuba and thereby reducing the threat posed by its alignment with the communist powers:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, JOHN F. KENNEDY, President of the United States of America, acting under the authority of section 620(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (75 Stat. 445), as amended, do

1. Hereby proclaim an embargo upon trade between the United States and Cuba in accordance with paragraphs 2 and 3 of this proclamation.

2. Hereby prohibit, effective 12:01 A.M., Eastern Standard Time, February 7, 1962, the importation into the United States of all goods of Cuban origin and all goods imported from or through Cuba; and I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of the Treasury to carry out such prohibition, to make such exceptions thereto, by license or otherwise, as he determines to be consistent with the effective operation

The same product linked both antagonists in the Cold War: Castro, a keen [cigar](#) smoker, and the champion of American freedom, Kennedy. But they weren't alone in their passion for Cuban cigars.

What Makes Cuban Cigars Exceptional

The answer to the exceptional character of Cuban cigars lies in the same set of circumstances that make a top Burgundy one of the finest wines in the world: *terroir*.



Components of terroir

We may borrow the definition of terroir from the [wine](#) world where it was developed. Simply said, in a given region, it is the climate (temperature, rain regime), soil (rich or poor, water supply, composition), terrain (topography, altitude, inclination), and local flora.

If you cultivate Cuban tobacco seeds in a different terroir, you will not produce the same flavors and aromas as those from a cigar rolled with leaves grown from these same seeds in Cuban soil. Just remember that in 1960, when Castro turned all cigar factories into state-owned businesses, the former owners ran to other Central American countries such as Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Nicaragua to start their productions again, taking expertise, brands, and seeds with them – but the cigars made in those countries, after a modern-day exodus, did not taste the same.



Davidoff Dom Perignon cigars

A more recent example is the Davidoff brand. Produced in Cuba until 1991, they moved their production to the Dominican Republic in the early 1990's claiming problems in quality, but the difference between them is huge. Proof of the quality and splendid characteristics of the Cuban Davidoffs is the price they attain in cigar auctions, especially the cigars with larger *vitolas* – jargon for the girth, length, and format of a

particular cigar.

In a November 2012 sale at C.Gars Ltd, specialized in cigar auctions, a box with 25 Davidoff Dom Perignons made in 1984 – a Churchill *vitola*, considered by some experts as one of the finest Cuban cigars ever made – was sold for £8,000, fifty percent above the highest estimate price. That's a whopping £320 (\$412) per cigar!



Cuba's tobacco regions

But even Cuba has different grades of tobacco. Look at the map above. The green area to the left is in the province of Pinar del Rio. In it you'll find Vuelta Abajo, a region that, simply put, produces the best tobacco in the world. You may say it is equivalent to the Romanée-Conti vineyard in Burgundy. Pinar del Rio and Vuelta Abajo, as well as the two most important districts on it, San Juan y Martínez and San Luis, are DOP – protected by the *Denomination of Origin* legislation. The other regions, shown in color on the map, also produce tobacco but their quality isn't comparable to the elite Vuelta Abajo leaves.

Now, thanks to the government, American cigar lovers may bring home Cuban cigars. Many had already tried them, but now the comparison with cigars from other countries will be inevitable. So, what can you expect from Cuban cigars?

The first thing that you may notice is that they are, as a general rule, stronger than the average non-Cuban cigar. That does not mean *better*, as many would surmise; it means that the nicotine impact of the smoke inside your mouth is stronger. In a wine world analogy, try to imagine the difference in tannins between a light Beaujolais and an intense Australian Shiraz.

While Cuban cigars are considered to be stronger than average, strength is relative. The mildest are typically Jamaican and Panamanian, while the strongest are Cuban. That being said, some Dominican [cigars](#) are stronger than a mild Cuban, and some

Hondurans are milder than some Panamanians. There is also a world of difference between the mildest and the strongest Cuban cigars.

This means that, even in Cuba, not all leaves of tobacco were created equal. In fact, leaves destined to become wrappers (those that involve cigars and that are their main presentation asset) are usually from the Corojo variety and grow under a cheesecloth to prevent spots: after a rainfall, tiny water drops remain over the leaves, and the sun uses the water drop as a crystal lens, thus marking the leaf. To avoid a direct sun and prevent marks, the farmers cover the area of wrapper tobacco with the cloth.



Shade-grown tobacco protects the leaves from spots

Tobacco destined to be used as filler (the central leaves that give a cigar its flavor and combustibility) and binder (the leaf that holds the filler leaves together) is usually from the Criollo variety, as well as from hybrids developed in Cuba that show higher resistance to mold and other diseases.

TYPES OF TOBACCO

SECO:

MILDER FLAVOR HERE;
CONTRIBUTES TO AROMA,
BALANCE AND MILDNESS.



LIGERO:

THE CROWN LEAVES OF
THE TOBACCO PLANT;
THIS IS THE HEAVY STUFF.

VOLADO:

NOT MUCH AROMA OR
FLAVOR; MILD & THIN, THESE
LEAVES ARE WHAT HELP KEEP
YOUR CIGAR BURNING.

Tobacco leaves and their roles

Also, the *position* of the leaf on the tobacco plant determines its usage and relative strength: the lower leaves are *Volado*, and they are used for their combustibility; the middle section leaves are *Seco*, good for aroma; and the top leaves are *Ligero* and *Medio Tiempo*, contributing to the flavor and body.

Now, to understand the construction of a cigar you have to remember that its ash must grow evenly or, at the worst, as a cone; if the cigar foot shows a crater, it is because the roller didn't do the right thing – he placed the faster-burning leaves (*volado*) in the inner part of the filler, and thus the faulty ash format.



A thinner Rafael Gonzalez Lonsdale cigar

The *format* is also a factor to be considered. Thinner cigars – such as a panatela or a Lonsdale – usually burn faster than the thicker ones, thus tasting more bitter. Go slower on your puffs if a Cohiba Lancero or a Rafael Gonzalez Lonsdale is your choice. On the other hand, thicker cigars, like a Partagas D4 (a Robusto) release their full flavors early on, gratifying your senses from the first puff.

That is another key difference between Cuban and non-Cuban cigars is that while the latter develop a milder taste towards the end, Cubans go the other way and get stronger as you smoke.

The official Cuban cigar company website – www.habanos.com/en – shows their full catalog. However, for reasons too stratospheric for my comprehension, occasionally they remove precious gems from it.



Quai D'Orsay Imperiales

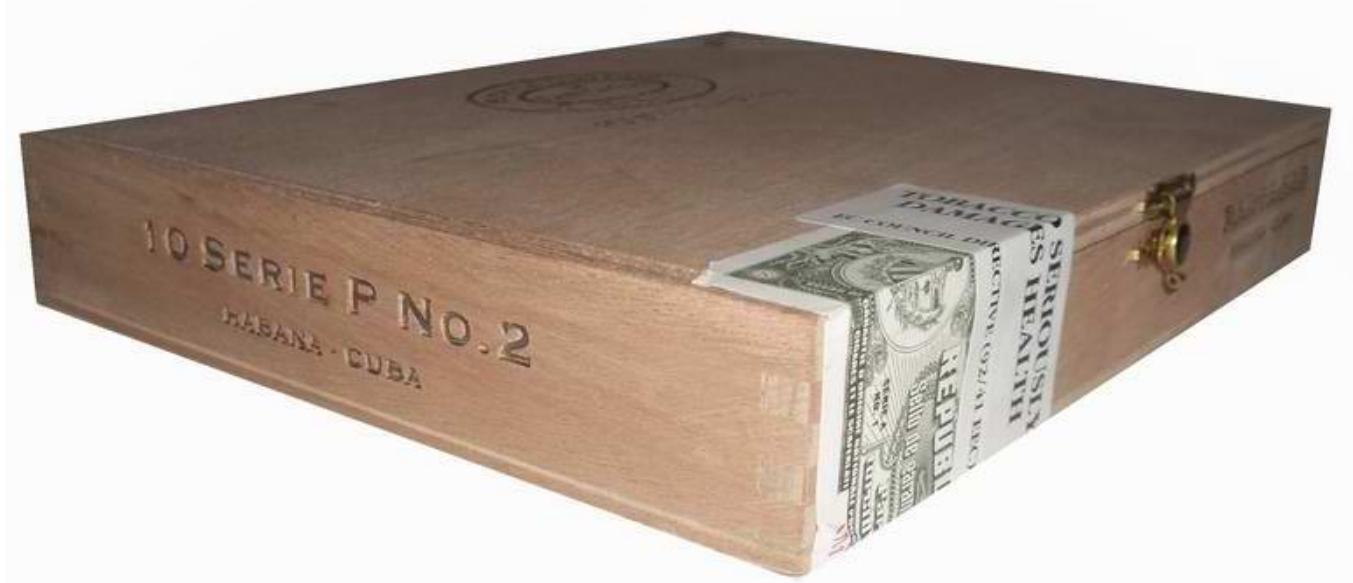
Such is the case for *Quai d'Orsay Imperiales*, a Churchill *vitola* from a brand created in 1973 for the French tobacco company SEITA as a diplomatic gift for the Giscard d'Estaing administration. The beautiful Colorado wrapper is still used on the last cigar made with this brand, the Coronas Claro, but the wonderful aromas and aesthetic elegance of the Imperiales is lost. If you are lucky enough to find a box when traveling to France or Switzerland – where they can still occasionally be found – do not hesitate to buy it. You will not regret it.



Trinidad Robusto Extra

Another discontinued *vitola* is the cigar I'd probably smoke before being shot by a *pelotón* – the *Trinidad Robusto Extra*. This fat dude is 6 in. long with a ring gauge of 50, combining a perfect blend with a silky, dark wrapper and an excellent draw. By the way, Trinidad was the brand Fidel used to give to diplomatic visitors and friends after Cohiba lost the same role and its prestige position in 1982, becoming a regular commercial brand.

Tastes, Flavors, and Strength: A Cigar Selection



Partagas P2 cigars

In terms of strength, look for Partagas and Bolivar. These brands are the powerhouses of Cuban cigars and must be tasted after you try the milder ones. I consider myself an experienced cigar smoker and it is not uncommon for me to get dizzy with a Lusitanias, the Double Corona from Partagas. While Bolivar cigars are more earthy, with hints of toast, cocoa, and wood, Partagas' reveal spices, pepper, animal, and leathery notes. I'd pick the P2 from Partagas, a Torpedo, and the Belicosos Finos from Bolivar, a short Torpedo. But remember, they are fully flavored! Enjoy carefully...



Cohiba Behike 54 cigars

Also close to the fullest-blown tobaccos from Cuba is the Cohiba Behike, the premium line of their premium brand. Behike cigars include the rare *Medio Tiempo* leaves, the strongest leaf of the plant, but these leaves suffer a triple fermentation process to round them up and give out great flavor, but one or two notches in power below Bolivar and Partagas. The Behike 54 is a Robusto Extra, meaning good gauge (in case you are curious, "54" means 54/64 of an inch) and a reasonable length, taking you to Paradise in one hour or so of blue, perfumed smoke. They are not cheap, though; a popular cigar website offers them for \$125 each, or \$999 for a box with 10. They have to be tried at least once, providing you with spices, cedar, and earthy notes, besides a whiff of cream. Just great.



Ramon Allones Specially Selected

Ramon Allones is not a popular brand; you have almost to be an insider to look for these beautifully wrapped cigars, with an oily, silky shine that entices you to cut it and light it up. You'll find pepper, coffee, and peat in one hour of smoke if you try their Specially Selected, a Robusto.



The Montecristo No. 2 cigar

Classified by Cuba as [medium-full strength cigars](#), Montecristos and Vegas Robaina are good choices if you want flavors but not the big kick. The former is, arguably, the most popular Cuban cigar brand in the world. In their No. 2, a Torpedo, you have a wide range of aromas, including coffee and cocoa, making these drinks excellent matching for an hour and a half of good smoking. The suggested smoking times are based on an average of one draw per minute: smoke faster and you'll overheat the cigar, making it bitter and less enjoyable; smoke slower and it may go out. Obviously, you may light them up again, but this may be cumbersome.



Vegas Robaina Famosos cigar

Don Alejandro Robaina was the only tobacco farmer (*veguero*) allowed to have his own name as a cigar brand, and he certainly deserved it. The wrapper leaves from his farm – Cuchillas de Barbacoa – had 80% approval from the agricultural commission, instead of the usual 35% for the other *vegueros*. He died in 2010, but his Famosos (Robustos) are a source of aromas like nuts, cocoa, earth and hints of wood.



Romeo Y Julieta Churchill Cigars

The medium-bodied range includes Trinidad, which I mentioned, as well as Romeo y Julieta. In 1947, after a visit from Winston Churchill, they named the 7 x 47 *vitola* known as Julieta 2 in the factories as Churchill. All the best Cuban brands have a Churchill cigar, which is now the commercial name for that *vitola*. Romeo y Julieta produces the most famous Churchill, which grows stronger as you reach the last third, with pleasant cedar notes.



Hoyo Double Coronas cigars

Some consider the Hoyo de Monterrey as a mild brand, others as a medium-strength cigar. In my opinion, they have one of the crown jewels in the Cuban cigar portfolio, the Double Corona. With a woody beginning and then honey, and cocoa, it is a princely cigar.

What Pairs Well with Cuban Cigars

As a gentleman, [brandy](#) and perhaps a single malt, nothing else, is considered the ideal mate for a cigar. That may be the standard advice, but there are some subtleties to be considered.



Cigar And Cognac – a longstanding pairing

First, not every cognac will go well with a Cuban cigar. The young ones – VO and VSOP – will show too much alcohol and this will harm your cigar. The older ones (XO and up) will be more [interesting spirits](#), with notes of nuts, honey, and wood, enhancing the flavors you will draw from your Cuban cigar. Some say that the best brand to go with cognac is a Cohiba, and I would not disagree.

If you are already familiar with cognac's older cousin, Armagnac, you know that this exquisite drink from Gascogne delivers different aromas. Try a Saint Luis Rey (perhaps a Double Corona from them) or a Quai d'Orsay with a nice Bas-Armagnac, the best of the three producing regions in Armagnac.



Graham's 10 Year Tawny Port

My favorite all-around drink with almost every cigar is a Tawny Port, especially those aged 10 years. They never overwhelm your cigar, and usually blend in seamlessly with the aromas from a good Cuban stogie.



Brut Vintage Champagne Pol Roger

You may be surprised, but a nice Champagne – especially a vintage one, over the NV – may be a great companion to your smoke, for three reasons: (1) they are drunk chilled or cold, reducing the temperature of the cigar [smoke](#); (2) they are bubbly, and those tiny carbon dioxide bubbles help cleanse your palate; and (3) the nutty, toast and

brioche notes you'll find in a good [Champagne](#) will match very well the aromas from your cigar.

Conclusion

Cuban cigars are one of life's rare luxuries. Now, next time you travel abroad – especially to Spain, France, and Switzerland – grab an assortment of Cuban cigars and light one up. Satisfaction guaranteed...

