



A Tale of Two Latakias

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A Tale of Two Latakias, by G.L. Pease

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For many years, Syrian Latakia has been virtually unobtainable. We've heard many lament the passing of this noble leaf, often accompanied by a feeling that if Syrian Latakia were still available, everything would suddenly be right in the world of tobacco. (A similar hysteria exists in the cigar world. The mystique of Habanas is so great, that some will do anything to get them, and extol their virtues, despite the fact that there are superb cigars being made elsewhere, and that many of today's Cuban sticks are, quite frankly, bordering on the bad side of mediocrity.) But, this delusion is certainly not limited to our Lady Nicotine. In our quest for the Arcadia Mixture of olde, we often seem to lose sight of the fact that things of the past often become more precious once they are no longer available to us. (This is one of the tragedies of art; an artist is rarely fully recognized, financially, for his or her talent until their death assures us that no more work will be produced, thus rendering priceless what was once merely acclaimed - or in some cases, just odd.)

In our collective mourning over the absence of the sacred Syrian, it becomes easy to take for granted what we do have. What about the fine leaf from Cyprus? With Syrian Latakia once again finding its way into our pipes, perhaps it is a good time to examine briefly the world of Latakia in general. Taking a little closer look at each type will offer us the opportunity to gain a new perspective on both varieties of this wonderfully smoky, noble weed.

Characteristics of Latakia

Though the original Latakia of Syria, a necessary ingredient of many classic mixtures of yesteryear, and the now more common Cyprian leaf, share a name and a curing technique, these two tobaccos are quite distinct from one another, each having unique qualities, and very different personalities.

Syrian Latakia is produced from the long, narrow leaves of the plant known as "shekk-el-bint." After harvesting, the leaf is sun-dried, then hung in barns to be smoked over smoldering fires of local herbs and woods, imparting the characteristic smoky aroma and distinctive flavor. Shekk-el-bint is a strong tobacco, possessing a hefty dose of nicotine which is partially responsible for the robust "body" of the smoke. After the long curing process, the leaf is a deep mahogany/brown color, with a pungent, earthy, slightly sharp, smoky aroma reminiscent of driftwood campfires on the beach. Its very assertive flavor is spicy and somewhat tangy; perhaps one could even consider it tart, and it can easily dominate a blend if used in large measure, prevailing over all but the most robust Virginias. In small amounts, it mingles delicately with its cohorts; in large quantities, it tends to elect itself to high office. Smoked straight, it becomes downright dictatorial - sensory overload occurs quickly, and the tangy aftertaste lingers on the tongue. It can also create spinning rooms for those not accustomed to or tolerant of large doses of nicotine.

Syrian Latakia's island cousin from across the Mediterranean begins life as a plant of the the small leafed Smyrna, or Izmir variety. This is a Turkish type tobacco, containing little nicotine, and known for its delicately sweet flavor and excellent burning characteristics. The harvested leaf is air-cured in sheds, and then fumigated in a manner similar that used for Syrian Latakia. The finished product is nearly black, with a deeper, darker aroma than the Syrian counterpart. Its flavor, in comparison, presents less piquancy, and a rounder, less focused smokiness. Its notable sweetness is unlike that of a matured Virginia, or a flavored aromatic, but somewhat more sneaky, coming in to camp under cover of darkness. Though more gentle than Syrian in its nature, Cyprian Latakia can nevertheless be opaque, overwhelming more delicate tobaccos if used in very large measure. A similar sensory overload to that of the Syrian variety occurs if Cyprian is smoked straight, sans Hollywood special effects, though the aftertaste is somewhat more ephemeral.

Each of these tobaccos provides a distinct and unique color on the blender's palette, and with Syrian Latakia's long absence, many hues in the spectrum of English style mixtures have been all but missing. That the supply line is once again open is truly exciting news for the lover of these sophisticated tobaccos, as it expands and extends the range of possibilities for creating new blends, while simultaneously affording the opportunity to perhaps revive some of the classic blends of the past.

Blending with Latakia

Blending is a balancing act; though guidelines can be invented, there are no hard rules. The strength and depth of each individual tobacco in a blend must be considered, along with the result the blender is seeking. The percentages indicated in the following paragraphs merely serve as a practical point of reference. Every smoker will have an individual reaction to the various components of a recipe, but, in a well executed blend, each ingredient should combine harmoniously, resulting in a blend which is truly more than the sum of the parts.

If Cyprian Latakia can be compared to a fine Vintage Port, Syrian could be likened to a dry Fino Sherry. For this reason, these two tobaccos must be handled very differently when creating a blend. Latakia of either type can be detected in a mixture in quantities as small as 3%, and by 5%, their presence is unmistakable. Beyond these small portions, they really begin to puff out their feathers.

When the amount of Cyprian leaf in a blend approaches 10%, its deep, uniquely sweet flavors come alive, and its character develops continually up to a level of about 40-45%, at which point the Latakia will overshadow just about any other tobacco in a blend, resulting in a loss of nuance and complexity, and a rather mono dimensional smoking experience. Certainly, there are blends which contain even more Cyprian Latakia than 45%, and these are enjoyed by many smokers, though more for the "Latakia Experience" than for any allusion at subtlety.

Because of its sweetness, Cyprian Latakia blends seamlessly, in moderate measures, with Virginias, enhancing the complexity of the mixture, while adding some body and its distinctive, smoky flavor. The combination of Cyprian leaf with oriental tobaccos is perhaps where the greatest care must be employed. Because of their delicacy, these "Turkish" tobaccos are easily overpowered by the more intense flavors of the Latakia. While a delicate hand is rewarded by a blend of sublime subtlety, a heavy touch is akin putting too many habaneros in the salsa; one doesn't soon forget the experience.

Syrian Latakia's wine-like character begins to fully emerge at about 10% to 12%, increasing the strength of its "voice" until it becomes quite dominant as the quantity approaches 30-35%, where its tanginess can become unpleasant. Care must especially be taken when blending with the more delicate tobaccos to avoid sensory saturation, where the spice and tart flavors of the Latakia consume much of the smoker's attention, leaving little room for nuance. An additional consideration is nicotine content; Syrian Latakia is a strong tobacco, and too much in a blend can create a real "sit-down" smoke.

The flavor of Syrian Latakia, while intense, is somehow more transparent than that of Cyprian. Used sparingly, It can add new dimensions to an oriental mixture with its sharp, direct smokiness. Care must especially be taken when blending it with Virginias, however. In small amounts, it can add a pleasant brightness to a darker, matured Virginia, but if too much is used, the result can be quite discordant. As with any spice, erring on the side of caution is generally the wise approach.

In Summary

Latakia is known in Syria as "Abourihm," the King of Flavor, and it's easy to see how this sobriquet was coined. It's also easy to see that, out of balance, Latakia can become an overbearing despot, imprisoning any flavor who dares to challenge his rule. The blender, acting as advisor to the throne, can bring out the best this reigning monarch has to offer, suggesting that his rule be gentle, fair and just, and that he not place himself too high above his loyal subjects, each of whom contributes something essential to the Kingdom.

It has been rare, in recent times, that the pipe smoking community has gotten any truly great news, especially concerning tobacco. The arrival of Syrian Latakia to our shores should be met with Champagne toasts and a ribbon cutting ceremony, though we must not forget to honor the reigning sovereign from Cyprus. Whether we prefer one to the other, or, better still, enjoy them both, each for its unique qualities, let us raise our pipes to both thrones with a hearty cheer! Long live the Kings!

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