

close but no cigar

WHETHER CUBAN, DOMINICAN, NICARAGUAN OR BRAZILIAN, CIGARS ARE STILL SYMBOLS OF WEALTH AND SUCCESS.

While many cigar aficionados won't admit it, most collectors long for an assembly that is the envy of their peers. Associated with affluence and the world of the wealthy man, countless members of society's elite have been devoted lovers of the leaf. Many celebrities, including Arnie Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis and Sean Combs, have been snapped brandishing a cigar, contributing to the heightened sense of status surrounding the illustrious smoke.

From the skilful onset of making a cigar, to the exclusive exchange of buying one, everything surrounding this pastime stems from fervour. Marvin R. Shanken, Editor and Publisher of *Cigar Aficionado* (which has boasted the likes of Jay-Z on its cover) likens the creation of a Cuban cigar to that of a Beethoven symphony: a craft of great tradition and the result of great labour, passion and dedication. The most invested of collectors have been known to keep personal diaries of cigars they have enjoyed, with entries that include flavour descriptions, brands, sizes and personal ratings.

Norman Stein, proprietor of Bogart's House of Fine Cigars in Sydney, boasts a prolific collection of cigars that are either imported or traded with private collectors. Once witness to the sale of a box of ten Churchill length cigars for \$7000, Stein deems cigar collecting to be an investment and says that, while you may never even smoke them, you need to keep them in good condition. He parallels cigars to red wines in that, "the older they are, the better they get".

Possibly one of the world's greatest cigar collections is in Hong Kong. Over the past ten years, Alex Wong has built his personal cigar empire through both auctions and retailers across Europe and Hong Kong. He has gathered almost 5,000 boxes, all kept in a walk-in humidor that bears more resemblance to a tobaccoist than it does a private storage solution.

Hand-in-hand with an affluent custom such as cigar smoking, comes the onset of designer brands producing items that will satisfy the most devoted collectors. Louis Vuitton recently introduced a mahogany cigar humidor that stores 75 cigars and is finished with a pear wood Monogram inlay. Porsche Design produced a pocket humidifier with a cedar veneer for the luxury lover on the go.



Since Australia's tobacco smoking restrictions began to tighten in 2006, bona fide cigar rooms in this country have become few and far between. Perhaps one of the finest left is Devlin's in Western Australia's Subiaco, which offers clientele the opportunity to be part of an inner circle members club. These members purchase an annual key that entitles them to keep their cigars and humidors on site in a private locker. They are then encouraged to meet up with like-minded cigar lovers to enjoy one from the vault in Devlin's Havana style tropical garden area.

Melbourne also offers a stylish experience for cigar buffs at The Supper Club in the CBD. The selection in its humidor is as widespread as it is impressive. In Sydney, you can enjoy a cigar at The Sigarro Bar in Terrey Hills, one of the few venues with a premium cigar bar and dedicated room. It has four individual humidifiers that run alongside its walls, packed full of the finest worldwide collection.

Celebrated as symbols of wealth and success, there is a distinct pleasure that comes from taking a cigar out of its equally treasured humidor, cutting the cap, sparking it with your most cherished lighter and taking the first draw. For unlike art or automobiles, with cigar collecting there is always the temptation to consume.

BOX BRIEF

BAN ■ Cuban cigars are still illegal in the United States, except for pre-embargo cigars, which are very rare and extremely expensive

BID ■ In June, a Havana cigar owned by the late Winston Churchill dating back to 1963 was sold for £2125 at London auction house, Christie's

BUY ■ The world's most expensive cigar is thought to be Gurkha's His Majesty's Reserve. It's infused with Louis XIII Cognac and sells for \$US750 per stick and US\$14,999 per box

BOY ■ It's not just boys who like cigars. Madonna, Angelina Jolie and Scarlett Johansson have all been papped with a stogie



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