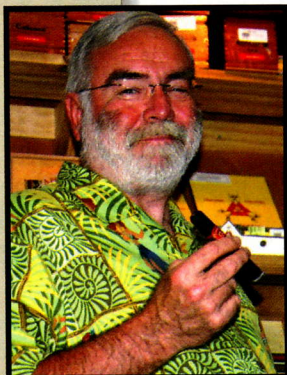


# Cigars—with a grain of salt



**H**i, my name is Mike Smith and I'm starting a new cigar review column with this issue of *Tobacco Retailer*. I have smoked many cigars and a wide variety of them, both in this country and outside of it. I also have sold quite a few from my beach shop, Cigarista, in Redington Shores, Fla., in the Tampa Bay area.

I do a fair amount of writing, including a regular cigar column for the *Tampa Bay Sun* newspaper and I'm about to add an Orlando newspaper. I'm an ex-techie from the computer and telecommunications industries who got tired of that and decided to take some time off. Later on, I decided to open a new cigar shop at the beach. My partner, Lynn, accuses me of opening the shop strictly so I can buy wholesale, but of course that's entirely untrue. (Right.)

The plan for the column is for me to review three or more different cigars in every issue. Each cigar will have different price points ranging from low to medium to "you won the lottery." I'm only doing the "lottery" cigar for this issue so I have room to do a bit of introduction.

I want this information to help you decide what cigars to add to your shop or to assist your customers in finding a good smoke. So what you won't get here is a lot of esoteric stuff like my identification of "a touch of anise," "hint of leather" or "taste of nuts." You will get an honest opinion of the cigars I review. I'm not required to review any advertiser's cigars, but I'm allowed to if I choose. I'm not required to give only good reviews to any cigar. I'll typically tell you what is good and bad about anything I review. As an example, the cigar rated below is outstanding but you can't get them just anywhere and they cost 20 bucks or more a pop. I consider that somewhat of a down side.

Typical prices in my store run from \$1 to \$30 for particularly rare varieties, with most of my sales around the \$5 area. A lot of great cigars are in the \$5 to \$7 range. Some pretty good ones exist in the \$2 to \$3 price points.

Please note that opinions vary. If everyone liked the exact same cigar, my inventory planning would be much simpler. There are more than 1,200 brands of cigars out now. Most stores come no where near carrying any significant percentage of that, much less all the available sizes. I find that smokers' opinions of a cigar also vary consid-

erably depending upon what they have smoked previously that day, if they have just eaten or if they are drinking something, alcoholic or not. You can rarely judge a cigar accurately by only smoking it once.

So take it with a grain of salt. The cigars I don't care for could be your customers' manna from heaven. A Padron Anniversary or Ashton VSG cigar could be my favorites, but someone who only likes mild cigars will hate them. (Save them for me, please.) What I would encourage you and your customers to do is to explore a big variety of choices.

I decided to smoke something special to get in the mood to write my first column for you. My friend Dwight recently returned from a cruise that stopped in Nassau in the Bahamas, where he went on a tour of the Graycliff Cigar factory and bought a Château Grand Cru Pirate for me.

The Grand Cru comes in a purple box and is double-banded with purple and gold, adding to its regal image. The Pirate version is a pyramid shape six inches long with a ring gauge of 52. It has a deeper flavor than your typical Graycliff. Most of their products are known for being mild. All of them are recognized for being incredibly well made. With tobaccos from Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua, the taste is rich and unique, reminiscent of a fine Cuban cigar. The smoke is smooth without "bite," a long ash and consistency all the way to the end. They are beautiful to behold.

The cigar hit the market in August of 2005 and sells for about \$20, so it's not on my daily list, but it's a great celebration choice. Enrico Garzaroli, the owner of Graycliff, uses the services of Avelino Lara, creator of the original Cohiba and previously Fidel's personal roller, to develop his cigars. The man knows what he's doing.

Call (800) 476-0446 for information on free tours of Graycliff's Nassau factory.

I look forward to reviewing smokes for you. If you have any suggestions or questions, send an email to [mike@cigarista.com](mailto:mike@cigarista.com). You can visit my Web site at [www.cigarista.com](http://www.cigarista.com). And if you're in the Tampa Bay area, be sure to stop in and visit.

Long ashes, dear readers.

*Mike*