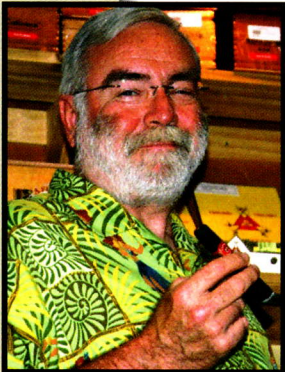


A smoke of celebration



Mike Smith

The *Padron 1964 Anniversary* has the reputation of being one of the finest cigars made and, justifiably so. It's definitely one of my favorites as I prefer it over most Cuban cigars. This series of cigars was introduced in 1994 for the company's 30th anniversary. There are nine sizes, all coming in either a natural or Maduro wrapper, and an assortment sampler can be found on occasion. All the Cuban-seed tobacco for these Nicaraguan puros is aged for four years and production is very limited. All are box pressed to honor an old Cuban tradition. Each cigar has a double band and one is imprinted with an individual serial number.

The version chosen for this review is the *Exclusivo Maduro*. It's a 50 x 5 1/2 size that comes in a box of 25. Retail prices range from approximately \$10 to \$15 or more. It's a beauty to behold. The smell of the cigar, still unlit, lets it be known there is fine tobacco present. Firing it up makes the mouth start to water. One or two puffs and the cigar draws smoothly. It is so complex and rich, like the pleasure of an extremely chocolaty dessert. The entire medium- to full-bodied smoke is consistent and interesting. Tell customers that burnt fingers are a side effect often occurring with these Padron models; they won't want to waste a single puff.

The 8-5-8 *Maduro* is one cigar out of dozens of Fuente Flor Fina's offerings if you count the different wrappers, sizes and shapes. They make several consistently good, and sometimes hard-to-find, cigars. The prices tend to be very reasonable for what you get with this one running about \$5. That can go higher when the supply starts drying up. The 8-5-8 is a 6 x 47, grand robusto size. 8-5-8 is in reality a generic designation, but the popularity of the Flor Fina version has made it the equivalent of the "Kleenex®" to tissues. Most hear "8-5-8" and assume Fuente Flor Fina.

The cigar is a good basic smoke, made with Dominican tobacco, representing a solid value for a relatively moderate premium price. It's a fairly dark cigar but has a medium body that smokes smoothly. The stick's a beauty with flawless construction. All Fuentes are consistent from cigar to cigar, box to box and year to year. It's not unusual for these cigars to be the best-selling brand at a cigar shop.

Fuente is based in Tampa, Fla., and its cigars are marketed by J.C. Newman, which makes Cuesta-

Reys, Montesinos and Diamond Crowns. If you're just starting with these lines, you'll likely end up buying from a distributor as it can take a couple of years—yes, years—to get a direct Fuente account, if you're eligible at all.

Finally is the *Flor de Oliva Gold* torpedo pricing in at about \$2.50. If you're just now getting into cigars or you are looking for your first line of handmade cigars to augment your machine-mades, you couldn't make a better choice. What a deal for a long-filler, bundle cigar that smokes as well as a premium! It helps a lot when you grow your own tobacco and not many do anymore. In fact, Oliva grows not only its tobacco (it's the largest Cuban-seed cigar tobacco grower) but that for many other cigar manufacturers as well. The cigars come in cellophane and are packed 25 to a bundle. The Gold versions are made with a rich-tasting, mild-to medium-bodied blend of Nicaraguan long-filler tobaccos surrounded by a smooth-smoking, aromatic Connecticut wrapper. That wrapper makes it taste a bit milder than the original version. If it had a better band and came in a box, no one would ever know that it isn't considered premium.

Like most bundled cigars, and many premiums, these cigars improve significantly with a little age. Stick a few back in a humidor for a few months and the taste difference is amazing.

Oliva doesn't require minimums on reorders. The company will sell you a stand-alone wooden bundle rack or give it to you if you buy a large enough quantity. Keep in mind that to make this move, you have to have a place you can control the humidity. They won't last long in a typical air-conditioned store without humidity being added. Sometimes a better solution is to get a cabinet-style or countertop display humidor that comes with a humidifier and hygrometer. You won't have a very extensive offering, but you can maintain it that way. You won't sell a lot of dried out, handmade cigars, at least to repeat customers.

I look forward to reviewing more smokes for you. If you have any suggestions or questions, send an email to mike@cigarista.com. You can visit my Web site at www.cigarista.com. If you're in the Tampa Bay, Fla., area, be sure to stop in and visit.

Long ashes, dear readers.