HAVANA CIGARS

An enthusiast's guide to Havana cigars

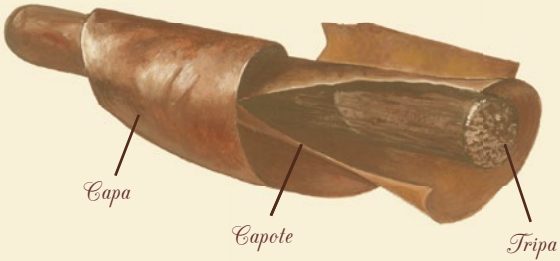

Fig.1 Tabaco tripa larga totalmente a mano

English Market Selection

THE STAMP OF QUALITY FOR HAVANA CIGARS IN THE UK

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The booklet has been produced by Hunters & Frankau, Habanos S.A.'s Exclusive Distributor, for people who work with Havana cigars in Great Britain.

It introduces the reader to a variety of topics including tobacco cultivation and cigar production in Cuba as well as the storage and service of cigars.

We trust that you will find it interesting, informative and helpful. Perhaps most importantly, we hope that its contents will encourage you to share our enthusiasm for a product that is considered to be the best of its kind in the world – the Havana cigar.

We wish you every success with your career in cigars.

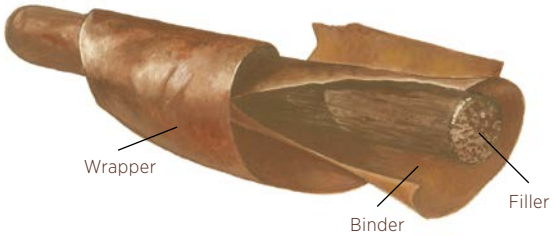
Hunters & Frankau

EST. 1790

IMPORTERS & DISTRIBUTORS OF THE FINEST CIGARS

What is a cigar?

Cigars come in a huge variety of shapes, sizes, colours, flavours, strengths, packs and prices. Also there are many countries that produce cigar tobaccos with distinct characteristics, and there are a number of different production methods that can be used to make them. For a newcomer the array of products can be bewildering.



However, in order to be classified as a “cigar” each and every one must have three component parts. These are:

Wrapper: Thin leaf that dresses the outside of the cigar and is used more for appearance than for taste.

Binder: Just beneath the wrapper are the binder leaves. They are used for construction, to hold the cigar together.

Filler: The filler leaves form the main body of the cigar. It is here that most of the cigar’s strength, flavour, aroma and character are found.

The two principal methods of cigar production are machine-made and hand-made.

Machine-made cigars

For reasons of cost the majority of cigars smoked in the world are mass-produced on machines in relatively small sizes. The smallest (weighing less than 3 grams) and most numerous of these are sometimes called cigarillos.

Although the wrapper leaves used for machine-made cigars are often of high quality and attractive appearance, the binder is commonly made from Homogenised Tobacco Leaf (HTL). This is a man-made material similar in appearance to brown paper that is manufactured from pulped tobacco. It can be laced with additives, is easy to use on fast operating machines and is cheap to produce. Where natural leaves are used for the binder, the product is called a “100% tobacco cigar”.

The filler in machine-made cigars is formed from leaves chopped up into small pieces and blended in large drums before use. This is known as “short-filler” tobacco.

The majority of machine-made cigars use tobaccos from many different countries to create a uniform blend and to prevent over reliance on supplies from one particular source.

Hand-made cigars

Hand-made cigars occupy a small sector at the top of the global cigar market.

They are most often made using full-length leaves for their filler. These are known as long-filler, hand-made cigars. A small number of hand-made cigars use chopped up leaves as their filler and are known as short-filler, hand-made cigars.

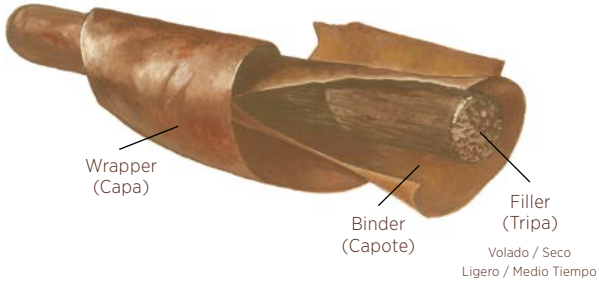
Although both types are often referred to as Premium Cigars, it is generally considered that the long-filler, hand-made method of construction produces the finest cigars.

Long-filler, hand-made cigars are made in several countries, the most predominant being Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Nicaragua. However, just because a cigar is manufactured in one particular country it does not necessarily follow that all the tobaccos it contains were grown in the same country. For example a cigar made in the Dominican Republic might use wrappers, binders and/or fillers imported from one or more other countries. Nevertheless its country of origin would still be stated as the Dominican Republic.

One country insists that all its hand-made cigars are made exclusively using tobaccos grown within its territory. It is the country that founded the hand-made cigar industry nearly two centuries ago and towers above all others for the prestige of its products. The country is Cuba and its products are known throughout the world as Habanos (Havana cigars in the UK).

What is a Havana cigar?

To earn the title of a Habano (Havana cigar), the cigar must be made by hand in Cuba using only leaves that have been grown in one of the four main tobacco regions on the island. It must also be produced to the exacting standards laid down by the Cuban cigar industry.



Up to six different types of leaf are used to make a Havana cigar. These are:

Wrapper (Capa): Wrappers are by far the most expensive leaves to produce. They add little to the taste, but ensure that the cigar has an impeccable appearance.

Binder (Capote): Binder leaves wrap around the filler leaves and help define the shape of the cigar. They also help it to burn evenly.

Filler (Tripa): There are up to four different classifications of leaves that must be blended together to produce the filler. They are:

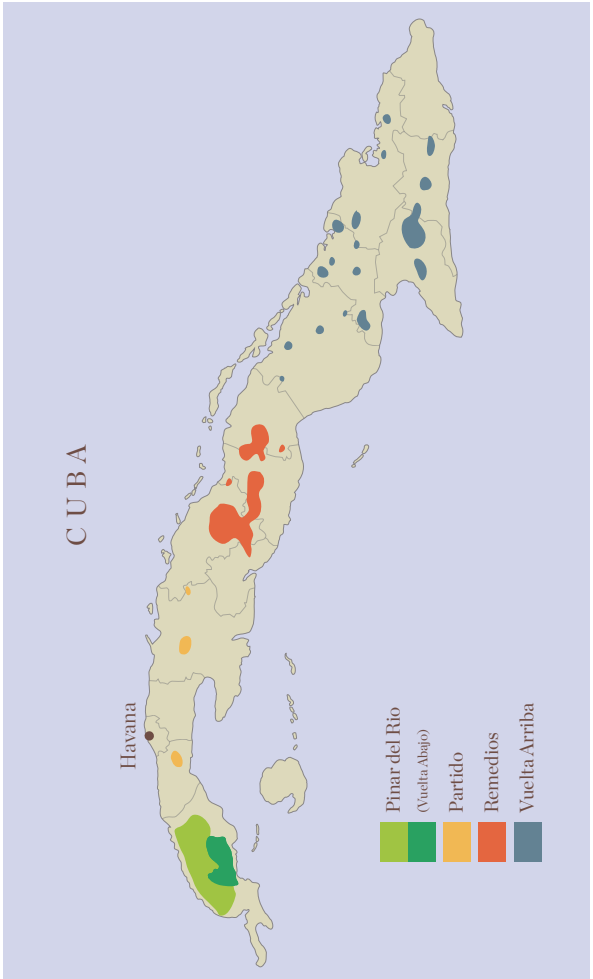
- **Volado (Fortaleza 1)**: Light-flavoured leaves that are valued for their combustibility.
- **Seco (Fortaleza 2)**: Medium-flavoured leaves that are most important for aroma.
- **Ligero (Fortaleza 3):** Full-flavoured, slow burning leaves that bring strength to the blend.
- **Medio Tiempo (Fortaleza 4):** Rare, very full-flavoured leaves used only occasionally to bring an extra intensity to the taste of certain cigars.

Tobacco farming

Tobacco growing regions

To make a great cigar you need great tobacco and nowhere in the world grows tobacco better than Cuba. However, only a small percentage of the island's tobacco producing land is capable of providing leaves of the quality required to make Havana cigars.

Cuba has four main tobacco growing regions and within just two of these, Pinar del Rio and Partido, there are a select number of zones that house districts prized above all others for the quality of their harvest. Within these districts each field is classified according to the quality of the tobacco it can grow. The finest are known as first class fields (vegas de primera) and it is only on these precious acres that tobacco worthy of making Havana cigars can be found.



Cuban seed

All tobacco grown for Havana cigars comes from a seed known as Tabaco Negro Cubano (Cuban Black Tobacco) that has been perfected over the centuries.

Cultivation

Two distinct forms of cultivation are needed to produce the different leaves required to make a Havana cigar. They are known as shade-grown and sun-grown.

The leaves from shade-grown plants are used exclusively for wrappers whereas the leaves on sun-grown plants produce the tobacco required for the binders and fillers.

Shade-grown plants

Shade-grown plants are grown in covered (tapado) fields to protect them from the fierce intensity of the Cuban sunshine. Cheesecloth is stretched across the entire field, filtering out the sunlight while also trapping in the heat and humidity. This causes the plants to grow quicker and taller. Only the largest and entirely unblemished leaves will be selected to be used to make Havana cigars.

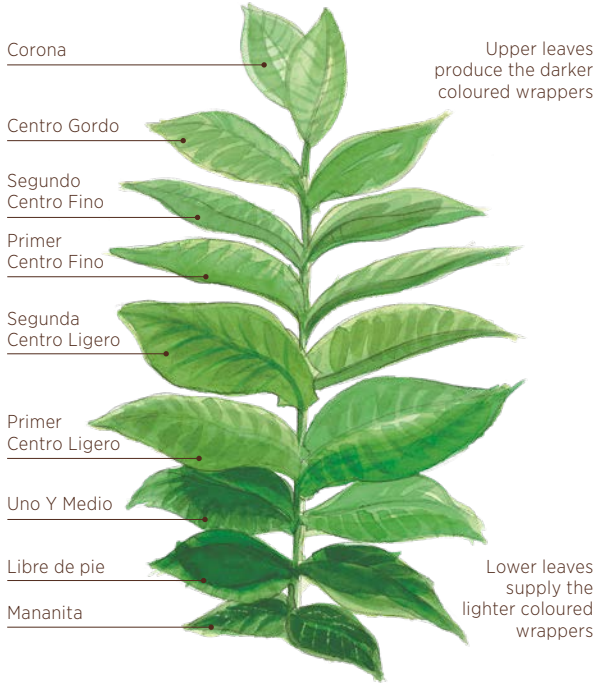
- Shade-grown plants solely provide the wrapper leaves (capas) that dress the cigar.
- Because they are grown in shade the leaves are larger thinner, smoother and more delicate. Ideal to add elegance to the appearance of the cigar.
- Darker wrappers come from the leaves at the top of the plant and lighter wrappers from the leaves lower down.
- The wrapper leaves are by far the most expensive to produce.

Cheesecloth canopy

Shade-grown

For the wrapper leaves

Leaf Classifications



Sun-grown plants

The full force of the Cuban sunshine helps develop the wide variety of flavours found in the leaves of sun-grown plants. Once processed they will be blended together to form the rich and complex tastes that are the hallmark of Havana cigars.

- The sun-grown plant provides the binder leaf (capote) as well as all four of the filler leaves – volado, seco, ligero and medio tiempo.
- The flavour intensity of the leaves increases the further up the plant they are grown.
- The combustibility of the leaves decreases the further up the plant they are grown.

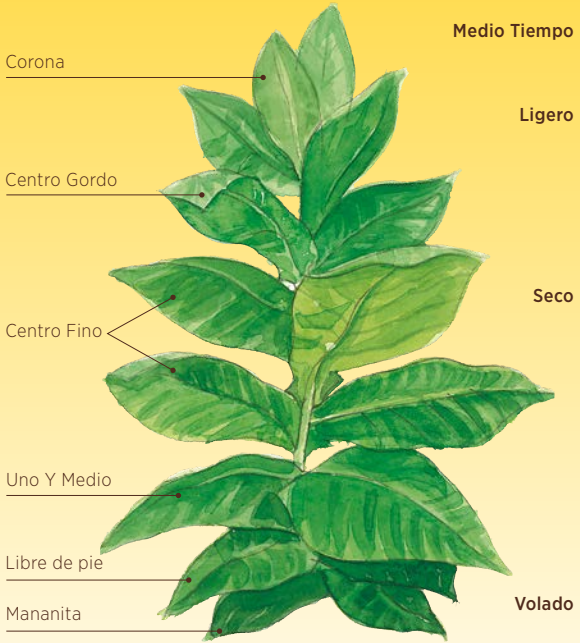
It is the blend of the filler leaves taken from the sun-grown plant that will eventually determine the individual characteristics of the different brands and sizes of Havana cigars.

Cuban sunlight develops the rich variety of flavours in sun-grown plants

Sun-grown

For the filler leaves and binders

Leaf Classifications

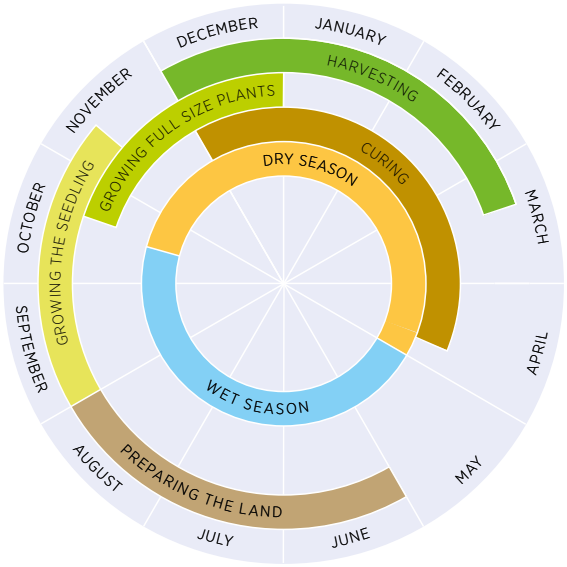


Shade-grown plants are entirely enclosed under canopies of cheesecloth

Each shade-grown plant is individually strung to the frame

A sun-grown tobacco plantation and curing barn

The farmer's year



Work on the plantations is painstaking and intense.

A farmer (or veguero) may have charge of half a million plants during the season and, to insure a successful harvest, each one must be visited over 150 times.

First the farmer must prepare the land. The roots of tobacco plants thrive in the loosest possible soil, so fields must be ploughed several times before they are ready. Animal traction is used to this day to avoid compacting the soil with the heavy tread of tractors.

Animal traction ensures looser soil

Floating seed beds

Removing the top bud

Removing the side shoots

This task is conducted in the burning heat of June and July in readiness for the period of intense activity in the coming months.

To ensure the best chance of success seedlings are first grown in floating seedbeds and only planted out after about 45 days, when they reach the height of 13-15cm.

To concentrate the growth into the leaves, the top buds of each plant, once it has reached the correct height, must be picked off. This causes side shoots to appear, which must also be removed.

With so many plants to tend, the planting out is phased from October onward to spread the supreme effort demanded by the crop and, above all, the harvest.

The harvest

Around 40 days after the seedlings have been planted out the harvest can begin. Harvesting Cuban tobacco is labour intensive. Every leaf must be picked by hand and only two or three leaves can be taken at a time, starting from the bottom of the plant and working up.

Days must be left in between each picking. This method of harvesting accentuates the natural differences between the older, less flavoursome leaves at the bottom of the plant and the younger, more potent leaves at the top. It takes around 30 days to complete the harvest of a single plant.

From planting the seed to the completion of the harvest takes around 17 weeks for the taller shade-grown (tapado) plants used for wrappers, and around 16 weeks for the sun-grown plants used for filler and binder leaves.

Growing and harvesting the leaves is just the start of the story, there is still a long way to go.

A sun-grown plant is illustrated here

Tobacco preparation

Curing

Immediately after harvesting the leaves are taken to a curing barn (casa de tabaco).

Inside the curing barn leaves are sewn into pairs and hung across poles where they lose moisture. The fresh, green leaves of the field are transformed, over several weeks, into the golden brown colour of Havana cigars.

The majority of leaves are still cured in traditional curing barns, with slats and windows used to regulate the barn's humidity and temperature. However, since 1990 most wrapper leaves have been processed using a controlled air curing system, which guarantees the optimum conditions throughout the barn, and reduces the amount of time required.

Traditional air curing takes around 50 days and controlled air curing takes around 25 days.

Inside one of Cuba's curing barns

Fermenting and ageing

Once the curing is finished and the first fermentation has taken place in the curing barn, the farmers work is complete. The leaves then pass into the hands of the Empresa de Acopio y Beneficio del Tabaco (the Organisation for the Gathering and Improvement of Tobacco).

The process of fermentation for tobacco is conducted by creating piles of leaves. Moisture is added, which acts as a catalyst and the leaves start to heat up just like grass cuttings in a compost heap. Constant supervision is required to ensure things do not go too far whilst the impurities are bled out and acidity, tar and nicotine levels are reduced. It also helps to even out the colour of the delicate wrapper leaves.

All leaves must be fermented but the number of fermentations and the length of time they take depends on the classification of leaf. For example, the thin wrapper leaves only require one short fermentation (lasting around 20 days) before they are baled and aged for a minimum of six months. In contrast the thicker, more oil-rich and fuller-flavoured ligero will need to be fermented three times, the longest of which lasts 90 days, before it is baled and aged for at least two years.

During this period of preparation the filler and binder leaves are stripped of the lower section of the central vein. The chart overleaf shows the journey that the different types of leaves go on - from the curing barn, via the sorting house and, where relevant, the stripping house until arriving at the warehouse for ageing.

Pure water is used to moisten the leaves in a process known as “moja”.

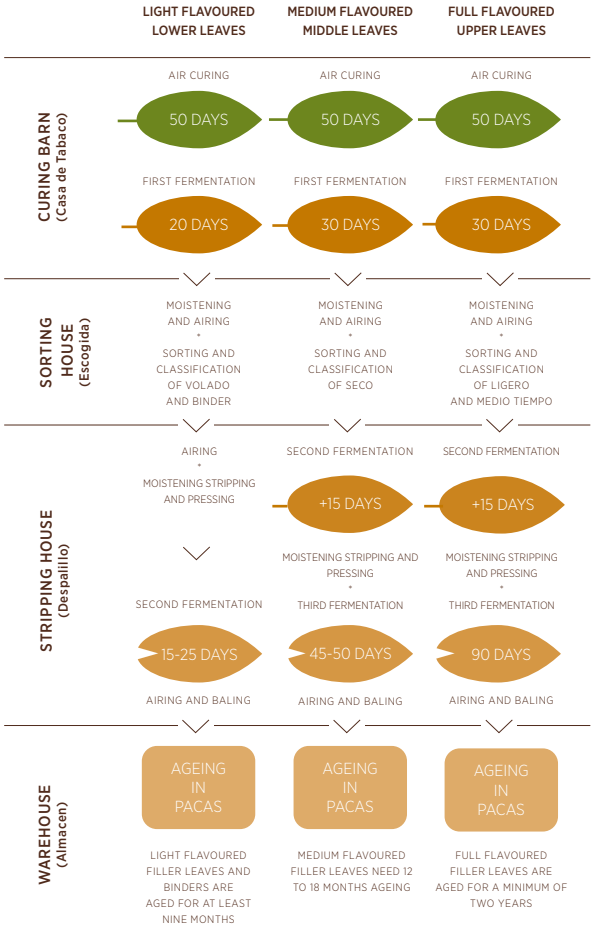
The temperature must be closely monitored at all times during the fermentation of filler and binder leaves

Wrappers baled in Tercios and ready to be shipped to the warehouse for ageing

Shade-grown leaf (wrappers)

The variation in time taken to ferment and age the different types of leaves means that crops from several harvests are needed to make a single Havana cigar.

Sun-grown leaf (fillers and binders)



The world famous El Laguito factory

Removing wrappers from bales and separating them, a process called zafado

Stripping the central vein and grading the wrapper leaves

Cigar production

After the leaves have matured and they are ready for use, the bales are sent from the warehouses to the cigar factories.

Preparing the leaves

Upon arrival at the factory the filler leaves are removed from the bales and inspected. If necessary they are treated to acquire the correct moisture. They are then placed into wooden containers for between one and three days, until they are judged to be ready for use.

As with all stages of preparation, wrapper leaves demand special attention when they arrive at the factory.

Once unpacked from their bales and carefully separated they are sprayed with a very fine mist of pure water in a process known as moja. They are then hung on racks so the moisture will be evenly absorbed.

When they are moist enough to be handled without risking damage, the wrappers are taken to the highly skilled men and women to perform the stripping (despalillo) and the grading (rezagado). The central vein is entirely removed, leaving its two halves ready to be graded into some 20 different sizes and shades. These are then stored in batches, ready for use.

Composing the blend

It is a remarkable feature of Cuban tobacco that a relatively small acreage (the vegas de primera) can produce such a wide range of flavours from area to area, plantation to plantation and field to field. Literally the tobacco grown on one side of the road in Pinar del Rio can taste completely different from the tobacco grown on the other side.

So, despite a cigar having a limited number of basic components – wrapper, binder, volado, seco, ligero and medio tiempo – there are a wide variety of flavours available within each component depending on which district the tobacco comes from.

In the factories the responsibility for ensuring that the correct blend is used falls to the Master Blenders (Maestros Ligadores). They pass the blend to the blending department which weighs out the various classifications of tobacco into batches, ready for the cigar rollers at the start of each day. The quantities and classifications will vary depending on what cigars are being made.

Finally, more than three years after the oldest leaves were picked, they are ready to be transformed into a Havana cigar.

The blending department is called La Barajita – literally 'the pack of cards' – because the process of assembling the leaves for a blend is similar to shuffling cards.

The craft of the torcedor

There are a number of steps that must be taken by the cigar roller (torcedor) to ensure the cigar looks appealing, burns evenly, has the correct blend and is well constructed.

First the cigar roller lays out two or three half-leaves that form the binder. Next the filler leaves (volado, seco, ligero and medio tiempo) are gathered together, with each leaf folded and aligned to ensure an even burn as well as satisfactory draw in the finished cigar.

The attention to detail is such that not only are the stronger-flavoured, slow burning ligero and medio tiempo always positioned in the middle, but all of the filler leaves are placed pointing in the same direction, as they grew on the plant. The lighter-flavoured tips are at the foot of the cigar and the more robust stem-end of the leaf at the head. This means that the flavour of the cigar will intensify as it is smoked.

The collection of filler leaves is then rolled into the binder and the 'bunch' is formed. The finished 'bunch' is then placed into a press for around 30 minutes to set the cigar's shape. At this stage the bunches are taken to be draw-tested to ensure that the cigar will smoke properly.

The cigar is then returned to the roller to apply the wrapper. The final act for the cigar roller is to add the cap to the head of the cigar and trim it to length with the guillotine.

In a single day a cigar roller can make between 60 and 150 cigars, depending on the size and complexity of the shape.

1. Preparing the blend of filler leaves.

2. Rolling the binder leaf around the filler leaves.

3. Dressing the cigar with its wrapper.

4. Applying the cap to finish the cigar.

Quality control

Finished cigars are taken to the quality control department where they are checked for weight, length, girth, consistency, construction and appearance. Samples of each cigar roller's work are regularly taken apart to check their internal construction. There are also tasters (catadores) who conduct daily sampling, scoring cigars on their draw, burn, aroma, flavour, strength and overall quality.

Conditioning room

The next stop is the Escaparate, a conditioning room with a controlled temperature (16-18°c) and relative humidity (65-70%). They rest here for at least a week to shed any excess moisture gained during the rolling process.

Colour grading

There are five main classifications of colours for Havana cigars, from claro, the lightest, to maduro, the darkest. However, because wrapper leaves used to dress Havana cigars are entirely natural, with no artificial processes used to influence their colour, they come in a far wider variety of different shades and tones.

The task of the colour grader (escogedor) is to ensure that all the cigars within any box are colour matched. This is considered to be one of the most skilled jobs in the factory. Working in pairs, the first colour grader divides the cigars into groups of over 60 different of shades. Then the cigars from each group are passed to the second colour grader whose job it is to sort the near identical cigars, one box at a time, ordering them so that any slight variations in tone runs dark to light, left to right. They also choose which face of the cigar will be presented upward in the box.

Cigar bands

The cigar bands are all placed on by hand. The bander (anilladora) carefully affixes each cigar with its band before returning it to its box in the exact order chosen by the escogedor.

Colour grading

Cigar banding

The main colour classifications

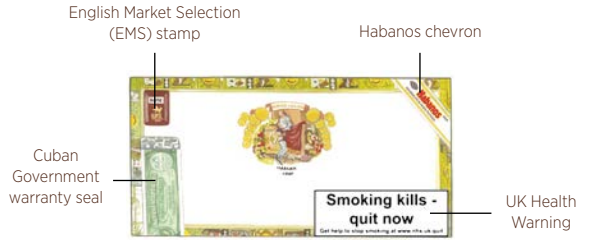
Packaging and presentation

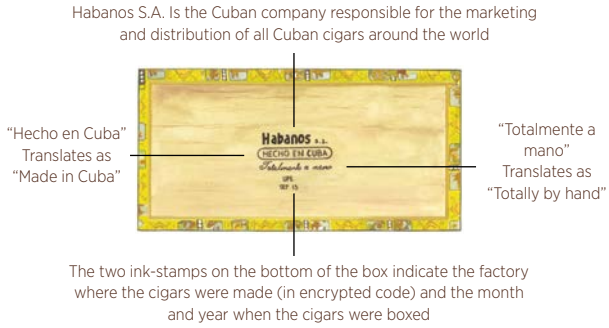
The banded and boxed cigars are now sent from the factory to Habanos S.A to receive a final quality check. It is also here that the boxes are adorned with the Cuban Government warranty seal before being shipped to distributors, such as Hunters & Frankau, around the world.

There are several different styles of packaging in which Havana cigars are presented. This can be anything from a large cabinet box of 50 cigars to a small aluminium tube designed for a single cigar. However, it is important to note that the cigars in tubes or small packs of 3 or 5 are of exactly the same quality as those found in boxes of 25 or 50.

Havana cigar packaging

Given the unparalleled reputation of the Havana cigar, it is not surprising that counterfeit products can be found. Below are the different markings to look for on a box to ensure their authenticity.





English Market Selection (EMS)

One mark you will only find on Havana cigars sold in the UK (duty paid market) is the EMS stamp.

EMS stands for English Market Selection, a description used in Cuba for over a century to identify the quality of cigars designated for the British market. It is the cornerstone of the UK's long established reputation as the world centre for the finest Havana cigars.

The colour of the EMS stamp changes every year

The EMS stamp guarantees that:

- Every box has come directly from Habanos S.A in Cuba through its appointed UK importer.
- The cigars have passed the UK quality check.
- Every box has been shipped and stored by experts.
- All UK duties have been paid.
- Every box carries the correct UK health warnings.

Export & Duty Free stamp

A different stamp is applied for cigars destined for Travel Retail or one of the various export markets served by Hunters & Frankau, which states "H&F directly imported from Cuba".

Havana cigar brands

Brand histories

It is over 200 years since the first cigar trademark was registered in Cuba. In that time countless brands have come and gone, reflecting the rich and colourful history of Havana cigars that is unrivalled anywhere else in the world. Many of the current 27 brands have been in production for well over a century and each has a story to tell.

Hunters & Frankau import all 27 brands including the six global brands: Cohiba, Montecristo, Romeo y Julieta, Partagás, Hoyo de Monterrey and H. Upmann.

COHIBA (1966)

Havana's flagship brand was created for the late President Fidel Castro. Production began in 1966, but the cigars were not released to the public until sixteen years later. Cohiba is an ancient Taino Indian word for the bunches of tobacco leaves that Columbus first saw being smoked by Cuba's original inhabitants. So it was the first name for a cigar – in Cuba at any rate.

MONTECRISTO (1935)

The best selling handmade cigar brand in the world. Named after the Alexander Dumas' novel "The Count of Montecristo", which was a firm favourite when read to the cigar rollers at the factory where it was founded. The brand was launched almost exactly 100 years after the book was first published.

ROMEO Y JULIETA (1875)

Named after Shakespeare's play that had proved popular when read to the rollers. At one point Romeo y Julieta produced up to 20,000 different bands for its cigars. It is also the brand that made the first cigar named after Sir Winston Churchill.

Havana cigar brands

PARTAGÁS (1845)

Don Jaime Partagás is the man widely credited with starting the tradition in 1865 of having rollers read to while they worked. Sadly Don Jaime was fatally wounded on one of his tobacco fields several years later. Today, the Partagás Serie D No.4 is the best selling Havana cigar in the world.

HOYO DE MONTERREY (1865)

Established by a Spaniard named José Gener, Hoyo de Monterrey takes its name from the world famous plantation in Pinar del Rio. “Hoyo” means “hole” and refers to the low lying position of the field next to the San Juan y Martinez river, while “Monterrey” is the name of the first farmer to cultivate tobacco there.

H. UPMANN (1844)

Herman Upmann was a German banker who so loved Cuban cigars that he moved to Havana to set up as both a banker and a cigar producer. Although his bank closed in the early 1920’s his cigars live on.

Hunters & Frankau has distributed this brand in the UK since the 1850’s and even owned the factory between 1925 and 1937.

CUABA (1996)

Although comparatively new, Cuaba produces all of its vitolas in the traditional double figurado format, tapered at each end. Most Havana cigars were made in this shape throughout the 19th century and up to 1930, but today they are quite rare.

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LA HABANA (1999)

This brand draws its inspiration from the original name for Havana when it was founded in 1519. San Cristóbal (St. Cristopher) after Columbus, and La Habana after the name given to the site by the island’s indigenous people.

BOLÍVAR (1902)

Named after the Venezuelan revolutionary Simon Bolívar, the 19th century liberator of much of South America and still a hero to many in that part of the world.

PUNCH (1840)

Created by a German named Stockman, Punch was originally aimed firmly at the booming British market. Mr Punch still adorns most boxes of its cigars.

Havana cigar brands

RAMÓN ALLONES (1837)
Ramón Allones is credited with developing the use of colour lithography on cigar box labels. Hunters & Frankau owned the brand from 1911 to 1927.

TRINIDAD (1969)
Named after the 16th Century city on Cuba's south coast, La Santisima Trinidad, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Launched publicly in 1998 but privately presented to visiting dignitaries and diplomats since 1969.

JOSÉ L. PIEDRA (1880s)
Uniquely among export Havana cigars, José L. Piedra uses tobacco from Remedios. It also uses short-filler tobaccos, making it a noteworthy yet affordable addition to the portfolio.

QUINTERO (1920s)
Established by Agustin Quintero and his four brothers in Cienfuegos, a city known as the "Pearl of the South", the tobacco used in this brand is short-filler and comes from the Vuelta Abajo and Semi Vuelta zones.

VEGUEROS (1996)
Vegueros translates as 'Farmers' and this brand was introduced as a tribute to the countless generations that have cultivated tobacco in Pinar del Rio.

VEGAS ROBAINA (1997)
Named after one of Cuba's most respected farming families that has been growing tobacco on the same farm since 1845. The Cuchillas de Barbacoa plantation is world famous for the quality of its wrapper leaves.

FONSECA (1890s)
Founded by Don Francisco Fonseca, a handsome man who cared deeply for appearances, he passed his sartorial precision onto his cigars, which he dressed in silky tissue paper – a tradition that continues to this day.

DIPLOMÁTICOS (1966)
Originally launched with a series of cigar sizes and names identical to Montecristo.

Havana cigar brands

EL REY DEL MUNDO (1882)
Immodestly named "King of the World", at one time, this brand offered the world's most expensive cigars.

JUAN LÓPEZ (1876)
Founded in Havana by a Spaniard named Juan López Diaz, this brand is now produced in the town of Guira de Melena- 25 miles south of the capital city.

LA FLOR DE CANO (1932)
Current production is made by hand but uses short-filler tobacco leaves. The UK now only import special releases that have been handmade using long-filler.

LA GLORIA CUBANA (1885)
Named 'The Glory of Cuba' this brand is well-known for its elegant presentation and range of slim vitolas. Only special releases of this brand are imported into the UK.

POR LARRAÑAGA (1834)
The oldest Cuban cigar brand still in production.

QUAI D'ORSAY (1973)
Originally made for the French market. Quai d'Orsay is the name of the avenue in Paris where the headquarters of SEITA, the former French tobacco monopoly, was located.

RAFAEL GONZÁLEZ (1930s)
A favourite of the 20th century British sporting figure, the Earl of Lonsdale, whose name became synonymous with his favourite Cervantes size.

SAINT LUIS REY (1940s)
Founded just before the Second World War, only one size still remains in production for this full-flavoured brand - the regally titled 'Regios'.

SANCHO PANZA (1848)
Named after Don Quixote's faithful squire in Miguel de Cervantes' famous 17th century novel.

Brand flavours

Havana cigar brands can be separated into five main flavour classifications, as shown in the chart opposite, which features every Havana brand.

The master blenders of each cigar house ensure that each brand has its own signature flavour, so even brands that share the same flavour ranking will have significant differences in taste. Furthermore, the shape and size of the cigar will affect the smoking experience.

The flavour classification of a cigar is not as precise as, for example, the alcohol content on a bottle of whisky; it is far more subjective and open to debate. These flavour classifications provide a useful guide, but should only be considered as the first step toward making a selection.

Havana cigar brands by flavour

Full	Bolívar Cohiba Behike Montecristo Linea 1935 Partagás Ramón Allones Saint Luis Rey
Medium to full	Cohiba Linea Clasica Cohiba Maduro 5 Cuaba Diplomáticos José L. Piedra Juan López Montecristo Romeo y Julieta Línea de Oro Vegas Robaina Vegueros
Medium	Cohiba Linea 1492 La Flor de Cano La Gloria Cubana Montecristo Open Punch Quintero Romeo y Julieta Sancho Panza Trinidad
Light to Medium	El Rey del Mundo H. Upmann Por Larrañaga San Cristóbal
Light	Fonseca Hoyo de Monterrey Rafael González Quai d'Orsay

Cigar shapes and sizes

The shortest Havana cigar measures just 3 ½" (90mm) while the longest is over 9 inches (230mm) long. In fact, when length, width and all the different brands are taken into account, there are over 300 different Havana cigars to choose from in the UK. The choice can be daunting for a newcomer. However, there are a number of factors that, once understood, can help you find the right cigar.

To start with all Havana cigars fit into one of three categories of shape. These are:

Parejo: A straight or parallel-sided cigar, which is by far the most usual shape in today's market.

Figurado: A cigar that tapers to a point at one end. Often referred to as a torpedo, cigars of this shape are rarer than parejos, but include some iconic sizes such as the Montecristo No.2.

Double Figurado: A cigar that is tapered at both ends. Also sometimes known as a torpedo or as a perfecto. This is the rarest of the three shapes and is unlikely to be found outside of specialist cigar shops.

Havana cigars can also be divided into three groups based on their girth, or ring gauge.

The ring gauge of a cigar is its diameter, expressed in 64ths of an inch. For example, if a cigar has a ring gauge of 32, its diameter will measure ½ an inch, if its ring gauge is 48, its diameter is ¾ of an inch, and so on. The slimmest Havana cigar has a ring gauge of 26, the largest is 60 at present. The groups are slender, medium and heavy.

Slender (26-39 ring guage)

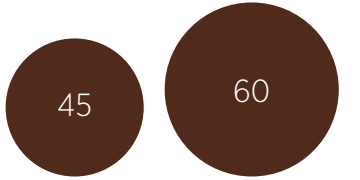
Examples include:

- Montecristo Joyita (26)
- Romeo y Julieta Julieta (33)
- Bolivar Tubos No 3 (34)
- H Upmann Corona J (36)
- Cohiba Corona Especial (38)

Medium (40-44 ring guage)

Examples include:

- Cohiba Siglo I (40)
- Punch Petit Coronation (40)
- Montecristo No 4 or Petit Tubos (42)
- H Upmann Half Corona (44)



Heavy (45-60 ring guage)

Examples include:

- Punch Punch (46)
- Romeo y Julieta Churchill (47)
- Vegas Robaina Famosos (48)
- Hoyo de Monterrey Double Corona (49)
- Partagas Serie D No 4 (50)
- Montecristo No 2 (52)
- Cohiba BHK (56)

Vitolas

In Cuba the different cigar shapes and sizes are known as vitolas. Within the factories each vitola is given a name based exclusively on its shape, length and girth. This is the factory name, or vitola de galera. However, once a cigar is adorned with its band and placed in a box it acquires its commercial name, or vitola de salida. This name recognises not only the shape and size, but also the brand's individual blend. It's not uncommon to find several different brands all making the same sized cigar with the same factory name, but all called something different in the shops, as illustrated below.

FACTORY NAME (*VITOLA DE GALERA*):

ROBUSTO

In the factories of Cuba any cigar with these dimensions is known as a "Robusto". However, the different brands will often have different names for the Robusto in their range, as the list below demonstrates.

Commercial names *(vitola de salida)*

Cohiba Robusto
Hoyo De Monterrey Epicure No.2
Partagás Serie D No.4
Ramón Allones Specially Selected
Juan López Selección No.2
Bolívar Royal Corona
Montecristo Open Master
Romeo y Julieta Short Churchill

You may find it helpful to learn the principal factory and commercial names in order help navigate through this maze, (see The World of the Habano).

Some key points on the different size and shape of cigar are:

- Heavy ring gauge Havana cigars burn more slowly and deliver a large volume of rounder smoke that drenches the palate with the full mixture of flavours.
- Thinner Havana cigars burn more quickly and, due to the narrow aperture, deliver more concentrated flavours on the tongue, giving a sharper taste. The blender compensates for this effect to some extent by omitting the powerful ligero leaf from thinner sizes.
- Long cigars allow the smoke to cool down as it travels to the palate.
- Cigars are tactile products and, for some, the feel of a cigar in their hands or between their lips, will affect the enjoyment. Some smokers are loyal to a particular shape of cigar, almost as much as to a specific brand.
- Double figurados offer a unique taste experience. The start is dominated by wrapper and binder and the true blend is only revealed when the widest part is reached.
- Modern tastes are for heavier ring gauges and many new releases from Cuba reflect this trend.

Cutting, lighting and smoking

All handmade Havana cigars need to be cut and lit before they can be smoked.

Considering the care and attention that these leaves have received and the years they have been allowed to mature, it is fair to ask that the final part of the preparation is unhurried. The key to both tasks is to take your time and do a thorough job.

Cutting a cigar

• The most popular cut for a cigar is known as a "straight cut". This is a cut across the entire head of the cigar and is made by scissors or a guillotine.

• The aim is to create an aperture broad enough to ensure an unobstructed draw while retaining enough of the cap

to prevent the cigar unravelling.

• Make the incision on the "shoulders" of the cigar. This will leave the bottom of the cap intact.

• On figurados the cut should be about 3mm in from the pointed end.

• Once you have the correct positioning, be firm and decisive when making the cut.

• Cut the cigar as straight as possible for the sake of appearance.

• Never pierce the cap with a match, cocktail stick or a toothpick. This compresses the tobacco inside the cigar and impedes the draw. Also, the hole is very small so oil and tar

• Cut the cigar as straight as possible for the sake of appearance.

• Never pierce the cap with a match, cocktail stick or a toothpick. This compresses the tobacco inside the cigar and impedes the draw. Also, the hole is very small so oil and tar may form around the edge. This can be bitter and unpleasant to taste.

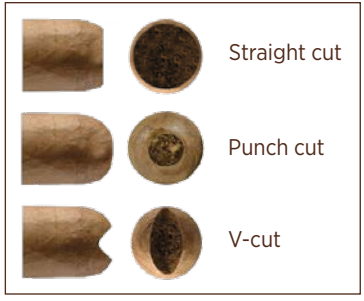
The main types of cigar cutter

• Single or double bladed guillotine – the most popular and also most easily available.

• Cigar scissors – the most formal equipment to use. Ideal for silver service.

• Punch cutter, also known as a plug or bullet cutter – these have a circular blade and cut a round hole out of the top of the cap. They cannot be used to cut figurados or double figurados.

• V-cutters – as long as the blade is sharp, can provide a good cut. Often used on figurados.



Try to make the cut as straight as possible

Ensure the entire face of the cigar is lit evenly

Lighting a cigar

• Never remove the band before lighting a cigar. To do so risks damaging the delicate wrapper leaf.

• Always use an odourless flame such as a butane gas lighter, match or cedar spill.

• Never use a candle or petrol lighter as they will taint the taste of the cigar.

• Always remember to take your time when lighting a cigar.

• Let the tip of the flame play on the face of the cigar.

• Rotate the cigar between thumb and forefinger until it is evenly lit. This may take a minute or two.

• Avoid scorching or blackening the sides of the cigar.

• Torch or jet flame lighters are fine, but powerful, so caution is advisable.

• When using a jet flame hold the cigar still and move the flame slowly toward the foot, ensuring it does not scorch the wrapper.

• When lighting the cigar for yourself place the cigar between your lips and, holding the flame an inch away, draw on it until the flame jumps onto the foot. Continue to rotate the cigar.

Smoking a cigar

Although the guiding principle should be, 'if you are enjoying it, you are doing it correctly', here are some suggestions to obtain the most enjoyment from a Havana cigar.

• The satisfaction taken from a cigar is found in its flavours and aromas. So do not inhale the smoke, it is not a cigarette.

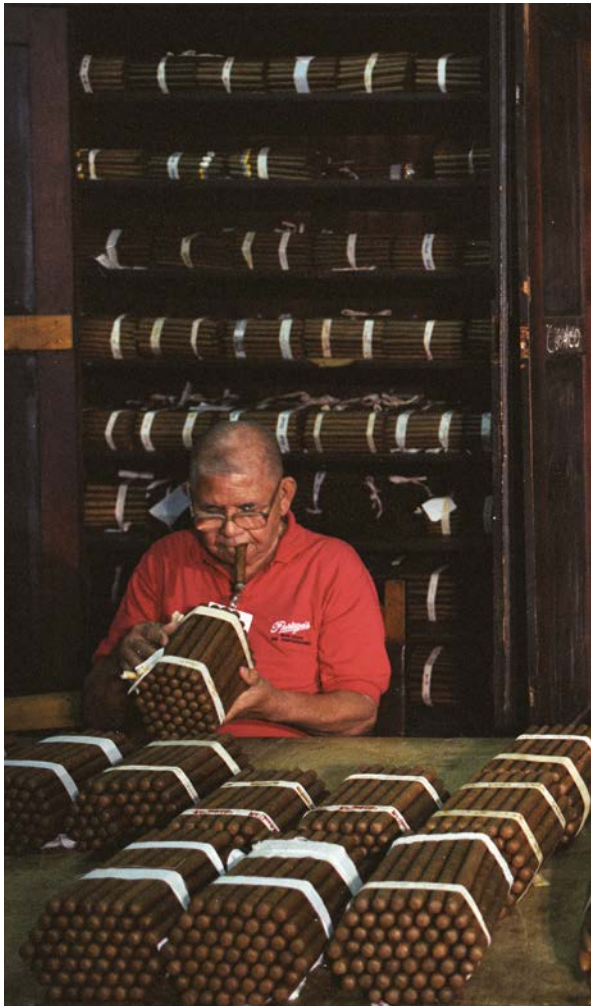
• Gently draw the smoke into your mouth and allow it to play across your palate. Relax and savour the subtle flavours and aromas of the tobaccos in the blend.

• A Havana cigar should be smoked slowly. It should be sipped rather than gulped or it may overheat. This can affect the evenness of the burn and harm the flavour.

• If the cigar goes out it is acceptable to relight it, but remember to clean the end of any excess ash first, otherwise it can be a struggle to reignite. It is best to do this within an hour or so of it going out.

• Allow the ash to build, rather than tapping it constantly. The ash also insulates the ember and allows it to burn at a slightly lower temperature, giving a cooler smoke.

• When finished, do not stub the cigar out. Lay it to rest in an ashtray and let it die with dignity.



You will find walk-in humidors in most Havana Cigar Specialists

Check the condition of your cigars regularly

Storing Havana cigars

Havana cigars can be kept for fifteen years or more and, like exceptional wines, many will develop and improve with age. However, storing them correctly is vital. If a Havana cigar has been allowed to dry out it will burn hot and harsh. If it is too wet it will burn unevenly and be difficult to keep lit.

Below are some rules to follow to ensure the cigars are kept and presented in the best possible way.

• The ideal conditions to store Havana cigars are between 16°c and 18°c and in a relative humidity of 65-70%.

• Check your cigars regularly to ensure they are not too wet or too dry. Let the cigars tell you when to water the humidor by gently squeezing them between your thumb and forefinger.

• Cigars in ideal condition should be firm yet springy.

• Not only will a dry cigar burn hot, it will also become extremely brittle and susceptible to damage.

• When a cigar absorbs too much humidity the filler leaves can swell up splitting the wrapper.

Tobacco display ban

Since 2015 it has been illegal to display tobacco products openly. On the page opposite are some examples of compliant cabinets and humidors, supplied by Hunters & Frankau, which store Havana cigars in humidified conditions at the point of sale.

What to do in the absence of a humidor

There is nothing like a humidor to ensure your cigars are kept properly. However, there are a number of steps that can be taken in order to maintain the condition of cigars temporarily.

• Keep the cigars out of direct sunlight and any other heat source.

• Keep the box of cigars in a resealable (zip-lock) plastic bag. If necessary spray a small amount of water into the bag, taking care that no liquid comes into direct contact with the cigars.

• A Tupperware box can also temporarily help prevent cigars from drying out.

• Do not be tempted to store cigars in the fridge. It is drier than you may think and fine cigars readily absorb smells.

• Tubed cigars will maintain their humidity outside of a humidor for a month or more, provided they are not exposed to direct heat.

Natural blemishes

With a product as natural as a Havana cigar it is not surprising that occasionally blemishes show up on the wrapper. It is important that these blemishes are fully understood as none of them affect anything other than the appearance of the cigar.

White Spots

These can appear if there is a tiny hole in the cheesecloth which covers the shade grown wrapper plants. When the sun passes through the hole onto a dew covered leaf it can bleach a tiny white mark. In Cuba it is said that cigars marked this way are 'lucky' or 'blessed' because they have been 'touched by an angel'.

Green Patches

These can form if the leaf is folded in on itself, or pressed too closely to its neighbouring leaf during the curing process. This prevents oxidation and so stops parts of the leaf from assuming a golden brown colour. However, as they have been cured, fermented and aged their taste will be unaffected.

Bloom

This white powdery substance occasionally forms on the outside of cigars. It occurs naturally and is encouraged by any sudden increase in humidity. Simply brush it off and place the cigar back on sale. Although it can look quite unpleasant to the untrained eye it is, if anything, the sign of a well kept cigar.

Tobacco Weevil

One threat to the condition of cigars stands above all others in its severity – the Lasioderma Serricorne, or the Tobacco Weevil. Weevils eat tobacco and can tunnel through the filler leaves, perforate the wrappers, and render cigars unsmokeable.

Since 2005 Habanos SA has frozen all of their cigars in Havana before exporting them. This process destroys the weevils and they are now an extremely rare problem. However it can still cause a lot of damage unless treated correctly. Below are some guidelines on how to minimise the risk and also what to do if confronted with an infestation:

- Keep the humidor at the correct level of relative humidity (65-70%) and temperature (16-18°C).
- Ensure that the humidor only holds cigars purchased from official importers. Do not store customers' cigars unless they were purchased on site.
- Inspect cigars regularly for signs of weevil. The signs are holes in the wrappers, a fine dust on the hinge or in the bottom of the box and the weevils themselves.
- If suspicious isolate any box of cigars that may be infected from the main stock.
- Place all infected cigars into zip-lock bags and put them into the freezer for 3-4 days.
- Next transfer the cigars to a fridge for 2-3 days before bringing them out and returning them to room temperature.
- Discard any cigars that show weevil damage and place all the undamaged stock back on sale.

Frequently asked questions

Does the colour of the wrapper give an indication to the strength of a cigar?

No – though wrapper colours vary between boxes, from Claro (light brown) to Maduro (nearly black), it is the blend of the filler leaves that dictates the intensity of flavour and aroma. If anything the wrapper leaf provides a 'top-taste'; dark wrappers add a touch of sweetness and light wrappers a hint of dryness.

How can I check if Havana cigars are in good condition?

There are several different types of hygrometers available to buy that will provide you with a reading of the relative humidity within your humidor. However, a simple and reliable way to test the condition of a cigar is to hold it between your thumb and index finger and squeeze gently. If it feels firm yet springy then it is in good condition; hard and brittle means too dry, soft and spongy means too wet. Over-humidified cigars where the wrapper has split are unfortunately ruined.

If cigars dry out can they be revived?

It is important to store cigars correctly at all times. Unprotected cigars can quickly dry out, becoming fragile and running the risk of damage. If kept too dry for too long they will permanently lose their natural oils and taste. If the cigars have lost moisture over a short period of time and feel a bit hard, they are easy enough to revive. Simply place them back into a well maintained humidor and allow them to reacclimatise. This may take a few days to accomplish. Cigars that have dried out over a longer period of time are more problematic. It is always worth trying to revive cigars from this condition, as the alternative is to just throw them away,

but success is far from guaranteed. It is best to consult your Hunters & Frankau account manager in this instance and always try one or two before placing them back on sale.

Should I store Havana cigars in a fridge?

No – fridges are dry environments that will only serve to remove all the natural moisture within a Havana cigar. Also, fine cigars readily absorb smells that are in abundance in refrigerators.

Do tubed Havana cigars need to be stored in a humidor?

Tubed cigars maintain their condition out of a humidor longer than un-tubed cigars. The cedar-lined aluminium tubes help preserve the cigars from damage and drying out. For long term storage it is still advisable to place them in a humidor

What is the best time of day to smoke a cigar?

The best time to enjoy a cigar is when you feel like smoking one. Although the most traditional time is probably as a digestif after dinner, there really is no 'correct' time to smoke and many people prefer afternoon, or even morning cigars, the best. However, the general rule (never forgetting that all rules are made to be broken) is that lighter cigars suit the earlier part of the day, medium flavoured cigars for the afternoon and fuller flavoured cigars are better enjoyed in the evening, perhaps after a dinner.

How do I pair drinks with Havana cigars?

The general rule is that light spirits, champagnes, white wines, some of the lighter reds and beer will go with cigars from the light to the medium categories. Dark spirits (rum, whisky, cognac, etc), fortified wines and full bodied red wines tend to be more often paired with cigars from the medium-to-full and full categories.

When choosing a drink to pair with a cigar remember that, although new combinations can be interesting and a lot of fun, it is unlikely your palate and preferences will alter too much, just because you are smoking a cigar. People seldom change the style of whisky they like or suddenly start enjoying Port, just because they are also smoking a cigar. Try to match up the strength and depth of flavour of the cigar and the drink. It should be a meeting of equals, with neither one overpowering the other- a conversation rather than an argument.

Do cigars pair with food?

After a rich meal with a high fat content or one that is heavily spiced, a fuller flavoured cigar is often preferred in order to deliver a flavour that can compete with the robust tastes already on the palate. A lighter meal tends to lend itself to a lighter style of cigar.

What if I can't recall the name of a cigar that I have enjoyed?

You may have recently enjoyed a particular cigar but trying to remember exactly what it was can be tricky.

Keeping the cigar bands in your wallet, or taking a quick photo on your phone, can be invaluable aide-mémoires. They can also provide shop or terrace staff with extra information when making a selection. Do not be afraid to ask to view the humidor as seeing the cigars can also help jog your memory.

Can you re-light a Havana cigar if it goes out?

Yes – first tap it gently in an ashtray to remove any excess ash, then blow through it to clear out any stale, residual smoke that may linger within the filler. Now reapply a flame to burn away the edge of the wrapper as with a new cigar. This is only recommended if the cigar has been extinguished for less than an hour or so.

Further reading

This booklet is intended as an introduction. To continue to broaden your knowledge the lists below provide several recommended places to start. In particular "The World of the Habano" is highly recommended.

Books

The World of the Habano – Tobacco Research Institute, Cuba
Partagas The Book – Amir Saarony
An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Post-Revolution Havana Cigars – Min Ron NEE
Cigars – Nick Foulkes
Habano The King – Adriano Martinez
The Great Book of the Habano – Adriano Martinez
Cohiba: A Legendary Pleasure – Adargelio Garrido
Alejandro Robaina: Tradition & Magnanimity – J.L. Milan
Celebrating Cigars – Anwar Bati

Websites

www.cigars.co.uk (official Hunters & Frankau site)
www.habanos.com (official Habanos SA site)
www.havanainsider.com
www.cubancigarwebsite.com (A widely respected independent reference site)

Magazines

Cigar Aficionado (www.cigaraficionado.com)
Cigar Journal (www.cigarjournal.com)

DVDs

Cigars: Heart and Soul of Cuba

Produced by:

Hunters & Frankau Limited

Hurlingham Business Park

Sulivan Road

London SW6 3DU

Photography/illustrations/design

Habanos S.A. – Cuba

Hunters & Frankau Limited – UK

Golden Age Limited – Spain

Ramon Fernandez – Cuba

Jon Wyand – UK

C.Gars Limited – UK

Number 10 Manchester Street – UK

Promocigar – Cuba

Format Design – UK

Nash Design - UK

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