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## Dark Air-Cured in Asia

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Sorting and buying tobacco

# Dark Air-Cured Tobacco in Asia

By Eric Piras

While minds are often turned to Cuba, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, or Honduras for tobacco growing areas, one tends to forget or ignore that Asia also has a long history of cultivating tobacco, and with very respectable results.

The main Asian areas for tobacco are the Philippines and Indonesia: both countries have a deep tradition of cultivating tobacco and their best-known product is dark air-cured tobacco.

One of the four methods of curing, air-curing, is a natural drying process in which harvested tobacco leaves are hung to dry in an air-curing barn; the fermentation process it undergoes when drying in the natural heat of the barn gives air-cured tobacco its medium to dark brown color and distinct aroma.

This tobacco is mainly used in cigars, dark cigarettes, pipe mixtures, chewing tobacco, and other smokeless product tobaccos.

In the Philippines, where tobacco was introduced during the last quarter of the 16th century by Spanish missionaries coming from Mexico, tobacco assumed the proportions of an industry around 1781.

In 1883, a large commercial concern known as the Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas built a large cigar and cigarette factory named “La Flor de la Isabela”, which is still the largest operator in the tobacco industry of the Philippines.

While tobacco is now grown in almost every province, the valley of the Cagayan River is peculiarly adapted to the production of high-grade tobacco and the best areas are (in ranking order) Isabela, Cagayan, Pangasinan, Cebu, and La Union.

Some of the producers from the best areas are very professional and supply excellent tobacco to major machine-made cigar manufacturers. One of the most remarkable examples is probably Isabe-

la Leaf Tobacco Co., Inc. managed by Jose Pua, which produces first-rate dark air-cured tobacco from the province of Isabela in the Northern region of the Philippines.

They supply Altadis, General Cigar, Imperial Tobacco, SNTA in Algeria, and RNTA in Tunisia, so there is a high chance that most cigar consumers have sampled their tobacco without realising it.

Tobacco from the Philippines is however not always just a part of a nameless blend; it can also stand on their own in cigars enjoyed by aficionados.

In addition to the pleasing bouquet or aroma and its light-colored “claro” wrapper, the Philippine cigars are usually quite light, enjoyable, and affordable, and are earning a growing recognition on international markets.

One of the companies enjoying a rising business is Tabacqueria de Filipinas, founded by Gabriel G. Ripoll Jr. in 1993. It is the largest cigar manufacturing company in the Philippines today, producing three cigar brands: *Flor de Filipinas*, *Independencia 1989*, and *Antonio Gimenez*, all of which are 100% hand-made, premium Philippine cigars using only the best Philippine tobacco. The company also produces many third-party labels for several clients around the world.

Indonesia is a country blessed with humidity, sunshine, and volcanic soil that makes it suitable to grow dark air-cured tobaccos and Indone-



A tobacco field in Indonesia

sian dark-air cured tobaccos are one of the most common raw materials used in cigar production around the world, mainly for machine-made and affordable hand-made cigars.

In Indonesia, there are two traditional types of dark air-cured tobacco: Sumatra is grown in Northern Sumatra island, and Besuki NO is grown in East Java; however some tobacco companies have recently experimented in growing Sumatra



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Curing



## A few definitions...

### Air-curing

One of the four main methods of curing, which involves removing all of the natural sap and moisture from tobacco leaves. Air-curing is a natural drying process in which harvested tobacco leaves are hung to dry in an air-curing barn.

The barn is a wooden structure that can be either closed completely or ventilated, depending on weather conditions. The barn is closed to conserve moisture in dry conditions; in wet conditions, moisture is removed by opening vents in the roof and/or opening side walls that are specially constructed for this purpose.

For the most part, air-cured tobacco is dried with natural heat; however, humid weather conditions may require a limited amount of artificial heat.

Tobacco that has been air-cured is typically brown in color.

### Dark air-cured tobacco

A type of tobacco which is distinguished from other types of tobacco primarily by the fermentation process it undergoes. Fermentation gives dark air-cured tobacco its medium to dark brown color and distinct aroma.



Curing barn

seeds in East Java (later known as the TBN, Tembakau Bawah Naungan or undershade grown), Piloto seeds in East Java (known as the Javano), and Connecticut tobaccos in Central Java.

Besuki is widely employed in machine-made cigars as well as for bobbins used in the manufacturing of machine-made cigars. In general, the Java tobacco is powerful and makes excellent wrappers, binders, and some long fillers.

One of the largest tobacco brokers, G. Harkema B.V, which was founded in 1872, opened a service office in Jember (East Java) in 1991 and has established close relationships with growers and packers of dark air-cured tobacco in the area. It has become a leading player on the Indonesian scene, enabling cigar manufacturers to acquire the best wrappers, binders, and fillers suitable for their products.

Rough estimates for the total production of Indonesian wrapper stand at 1,400 tons, Java Besuki binder at 650 tons, and Java Besuki filler at 5,000 tons; Harkema's share is around half of these volumes.

As per a new European legislation, "eco-cigarillos" now need to be wrapped with a natural wrapper instead of a sheet as before, and the Indonesian dark air-cured tobacco seems to have found a new market with these "eco-cigarillos" sold mainly in Germany and Spain.

Somewhat of a newcomer on the cigar tobacco-growing map is China and its widely publicized plantations on Hainan island, especially for long fillers. Thanks to its cooperation with international



Tobacco packing in the old days



Dried tobacco leaf

players, strong progress is being made and the potential is definitely there, but the road is still long before the Chinese-grown wrappers can be competitive in terms of quality, taste, and specs.

With the development of cigar factories in China, it would be interesting to see the Chinese monopoly look into enlarging authorizations for tobacco importation in China. Indonesian tobacco is already allowed for import into China, but neighboring Philippines also produce widely recognized and excellent tobacco, both for machine-made and hand-made cigars, which would be a valuable addition to the Chinese-made cigar blends.

Bets are open... in a few years time, Asia will also spring to mind when cigar aficionados think about tobacco-producing regions or country of origin. —



Sorting tobacco leaf



DAC Besuki NO



A field of young tobacco plants in the Philippines

