



“Nursery shade-grown cigar wrappers”

Cigars: Spotlight on Honduras

By Eric Piras

One of the top cigar countries, Honduras is often in the limelight, and for good reason. During a recent trip in March, it was obvious that the future of the country is very close to the future of its cigars, and vice-versa. Along with Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, Honduras is in the top four cigar countries, far ahead of Mexico, Philippines, Indonesia, Ecuador, or Brazil.

Indeed, Honduras has been a tobacco and cigar region since at least 1765, when the Spanish crown established a royal tobacco trading post in Copan. In Honduras and neighboring Nicaragua, the major players arrived as Cuban exiles in the 1960s during the nationalization of the Cuban cigar industry, and the Honduran government started sponsoring the growth of the cigar companies. Some of Cuba’s finest cigar producers came to Honduras in search for new land where they would use their tobacco and cigar expertise. The US trade embargo with Cuba also benefited Honduran cigars and by the 1960s and 1970s, this industry was thriving.

In 1979, the country benefited again when the Sandinistas took over Nicaragua, and the tobacco farmers and cigar rollers emigrated from Nicaragua to Honduras, though parts of Honduras were used as a base by the Contras, the Nicaraguan resistance.

In the mid-1980s, the Honduran’s tobacco crop was severely decimated by diseases and blue mold, but in the early 1990s the Honduran cigar industry began to thrive again and became the second country of origin for the US market, after the Dominican Republic, until 1998 when Hurricane Mitch lashed out on the region, wiping out most of the tobacco crop and crippling the country’s infrastructure. Reconstruction took place and the Honduran tobacco industry has now grown steadily over the years until becoming again a major country of origin.

The tobaccos grown in Honduras are mostly Cuban seed, and both Cuban Criollo and shade-grown Corojo are cultivated for their strong flavors, along with Connecticut shade for wrapper, sometimes called ‘Honduran shade’. There are three main growing regions in Honduras. In the

southeast near the Nicaraguan border is the aptly named province of El Paraiso (translating into “Paradise”). This is where the Jamastrán Valley is located, and just next to it is the Danlí area, hosting several factories and cigar-rolling facilities in addition to plantations. The Jamastrán Valley is to Honduras what the Jalapa Valley is to Nicaragua, and for good reason: they’re geographically very close, just the border between these countries keep them apart. El Paraiso’s soil is rich and fertile and produces a very high quality tobacco; it is home to different types of tobacco including Connecticut shade-grown wrappers and Corojo shade-grown wrappers, as well as sun-grown filler leaves which are often used in premium cigars.

In the center of the country, about two hours drive from Jamastrán Valley is the Talanga Valley. It is mountainous and windy, and the tobacco is grown using the “encallado” method, with huge tents erected around the crops to protect the sun-grown tobacco from the wind.

In the west of the country, near the border with Guatemala, is the Copán area, famous for its stunning Mayan archaeological site. The Spanish had established a tobacco trading post near Santa Rosa in Copán in 1765 and this is now one of the major producing areas.

As part of the prominent families arriving from Cuba was Nestor Plasencia Sr., setting up first in Nicaragua and then in Honduras when he lost his



Photo © Luc Monnet

Nicaraguan farms because of the Sandinista revolution (the Plasencia family now operates facilities in both Nicaragua and Honduras).

Eric Piras and Maya Selva in shade-grown wrapper fields

Photo © Luc Monnet

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One of Nestor Plasencia's Casas de Tabaco



Working on new blends and savoring coffee in Maya Selva factory



Maya Selva factory in Danlí

They have been growing tobacco for a long time and started their first cigar factory in 1985 in Danlí with 5 cigar makers. They now have 700 rollers in Honduras and Nicaragua, with about 60% of their cigar production in Honduras (and more than 6,000 employees in Nicaragua and Honduras).

Today, Nestor Sr. spends a lot of his time in the fields and from 2013 figures, the family were growing more than 3,000 acres of tobacco in Nicaragua and Honduras, both under their control and as a contract with small growers, though in Honduras the 900 acres they manage are entirely their own. The other numbers are as impressive: Plasencia Cigars S.A., is a company that rolls more than 35 million cigars by hand per year for about 170 brands.

Nestor Plasencia Sr. is regarded as one of the foremost tobacco experts in the world though he once said very modestly “Anyone who tells you they know everything there is to know about tobacco is either a liar or a fool. There are so many variables, so much is left to nature, that we can’t know or control everything. But we must control what we can to the best of our abilities.”

And he does know what he’s talking about: they do have the biggest tobacco inventories of the industry and command a very high level of respect all around the cigar world. It is a true honor knowing him, and visiting his fields and factories is an unforgettable experience.

Maya Selva, Franco-Honduran and the only woman producing cigars, proudly claims her Honduran origins and is doing a lot for the country’s resonance; she organized the first Humo Jaguar Cigar Festival in 2011, and is preparing a new edition.

It all started with a dream, she says. “I wanted to manufacture a product that could be 100% produced in Honduras and came up with the cigar.” A dream followed by a decisive encounter with Nestor Plasencia Sr. in 1994 and her first brand *Flor de Selva* was launched in 1995, giving Europe its first taste of Honduras.

Maya then went to open her own farm in Danlí in 1998 and launched her second Honduras brand Villa Zamorano, manufactured in her San Judas Tadeo factory in

Danlí. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

On a March visit in Honduras with Maya Selva, working on a private label cigar for world-acclaimed butcher Alexandre Polmard, the tobacco fields were beautiful and the growers’ decision of advancing the tobacco season by one month seemed to have been a good one. Weather has been perfect and the volumes are there, especially for wrappers.

With Plasencia Group willing to become mostly a wrapper grower, the area devoted to Connecticut wrapper has doubled but Habano seed is still prominent. They are now developing their own seeds and the farms are becoming technically more advanced.

During this visit, it was very impressive to see the beautiful 2017 crop and



Nestor Plasencia



Nestor Plasencia and Eric Piras in one of Nestor Plasencia's fincas



Nestor Plasencia in one of his fincas

the technical improvements in the tobacco growing. In the casas de tabaco, each lot is numbered, with temperature and humidity recorded daily. Even though this is supposed to be the norm in all tobacco growing countries, very few growers are following it to the letter, as they do in Honduras. In addition, their organization is flawless and very sharp; all is super clean and systematized.

Between this organization, the technological improvements and a strong research and experimentation on seeds and tobacco fermentation, the tobacco quality is improving exponentially and we can now enjoy Puros 100% Honduran of very high standards, such as Flor de Selva, Villa Zamorano, Alec Bradley, Camacho, or La Aroma de Cuba.

During our long and various tastings in Maya Selva's cigar factory, we were privileged to try an important number of various 100% Puros Honduran blends of extremely high quality, and even to taste a Ligerero on its own, a superb discovery for future blends.

During our numerous hard-working tasting sessions (oh yes, it is hard work indeed, don't smile), some delicious coffee aromas would penetrate the tasting room and we went to enquire: turns out that coffee is one of Maya Selva's new adventures. The production will only be available in 2018 (it takes five years for plants to grow proper coffee) so this was only the first crop, roasted in a saucepan in the factory by the tea lady.

Definitely an experience out of this world, savoring freshly-harvested and freshly-roasted coffee while tasting a Puro made of a single Ligerero leaf. Moreover, this incredible tasting was followed by the most delicious cut of beef we've ever had, also from Honduras.

Cigar, coffee, beef... what else does Honduras have to offer? Well, lots more actually. There are a few postcard-perfect islands along the coast and it's a beach paradise, with Roatán voted one of the 10 best beaches in the world by TripAdvisor. Of course diving sites are aplenty and still preserved; and inland are several interesting colonial and archaeological sites (fortresses and the Copán ruins among others).

Years of hard work from the tobacco producers and cigar makers are paying off: international recognition is pouring in for Honduran cigars and in October 2016 cigar has been de-

clared "Intangible Cultural Heritage" of Honduras, considering the role that this industry plays in strengthening the identity of Honduras' export products and their contribution to social and economic development by increasing economic activity and creating jobs in the country.

It seems that the spotlight is firmly turned onto Honduras and will remain there for a long time... ➡

Sources: Author's own & cigarfan.net, cigarinspector.com, cigaraficionado.com

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Tel +66 2 660 3789. Fax +66 2 660 3881
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