

THE ITALIAN JOB

The annual Italian Cigar Festival, held this year in early June, is staged in an ancient villa in the historic Umbrian tobacco-growing region. It's an industry-wide showcase for cigars, cigar importers and related slow-smoking paraphernalia. TJI correspondent, Cindy-Lou Dale, went to experience the atmosphere first-hand.



People greet each other with two-cheek kisses and wreath one another in white aromatic cigar smoke. The official opening of the day's events is overseen by Francesco Minetti, President of Italy's Cigar Club Association. Tables and chairs in the chapel adjoining the historic villa are arranged to face the pulpit. Minetti, a tall, lean man, with tanned, well-chiselled features, emphasised by a white goatee beard and combed back silver-grey hair, is engrossed in an animated conversation. His assistant whispers something in his ear which sees him step up to the microphone and cough, asking for cigar ashtrays to be handed out.

Moments later, Minetti clears his throat and delivers a cigar sermon to a flock of cigar-wielding smokers. He speaks of different cigar types, their measurements, their composition, areas of production, where to buy them and how to keep them.

A PASSION FOR CIGARS

"Cigars are an exceptional product, fashioned from the nutritious earth and careful human handling," he says. "They pass through the hands of expert farmers, onto experienced cigar rollers, to master cigar aficionados with small cigar shops across the country, and finally to the discerning smoker for enjoyment." He pauses for effect

and looks intently around the room, hung low with clouds of white cigar smoke. "So, taking all this into account, you cannot just jump into the art of cigar smoking!"

He spends half an hour explaining the dos and don'ts of smoking a cigar. "You first must find a mild cigar. Some may be too strong for beginners and may ruin the experience. So be sure to tell the cigar sommelier that you're a novice smoker and that you're looking for a mild, affordable cigar. Chances are you'll be given the right stick. Once you've selected your cigar, inspect it for any imperfections – check the wrapper for cracks or discolorations."

Minetti continues to explain the cutting process. "All men who smoke cigars know that cutting a cigar does not involve scissors, a Swiss Army knife, or, God forbid, ►



A member of staff from the Manifatture Sigaro Toscano in Rome rolls cigars

your teeth. Buy a cigar cutter or run the risk of looking like an amateur. You'll want to remove about an eighth of an inch off the head which will create enough of an opening to smoke it comfortably, while not distorting the shape of the cigar."

He takes a swig of something brown in a glass. "It is an iconic visual in so many films when someone fires up a cigar – and their weapon of choice is usually the trusty match. Sure, you can use a long cigar-match or, preferably, a butane torch lighter. Avoid cigarette lighters – the cigar may take on the flavour of the lighter fluid."

He pauses to demonstrate the next step. "While lighting, puff and rotate your cigar whilst holding the flame just below the cigar's foot. Your cigar should not touch the flame, let the heat from the flame do its job. Continue doing this until the tobacco around the outer rim begins to glow from the heat."

Minetti draws on his cigar, a fragrant pillow of white smoke hangs about his head. "You must appreciate that a cigar is much more

than a simple cigarette." He holds up his cigar, everyone leans forward, drawn instinctively toward him. "This is not a nicotine fix. It's a way to enjoy the company of



Francesco Minetti, President of Italy's Cigar Club Association

friends and relax." He takes a puff. "But do not take a drag, like you would a cigarette. And do not inhale! If you inhale, you run the risk of coughing up a lung and getting nicotine poisoning in the other one. Hold the smoke in your mouth, then blow it out. And while smoking, be sure to rotate the cigar every 30 seconds to get an even burn. Now that your cigar is fired up, and you know how to do it, it's time to smoke."

As if on cue, cigars around the room lift in unison. "Pour your favourite drink and put on some relaxing music. You may find that cigar smoking is a tranquil way to pass the time."

THE ART OF COFFEE & A CIGAR

Sitting in a shaded area in near 40°C, Luca Martini, the world's best wine sommelier, talks me through cigar and coffee pairings.

"Most cigar smokers are already set on their favourite cigar brands," says Martini. "It



This year's cigar festival took place in an ancient villa in Umbria, Italy

may be better to ask which coffees go with their cigars. Of course, any coffee goes well with a cigar and vice versa. Tobacco and coffee have tastes that naturally complement one another."

He adjusts his Ray-Ban's. "Firstly, try to match your cigar to your coffee in terms of shade. A mild cigar with a blonde wrapper will pair well with an equally flavoured, sweet, light roast coffee. A medium bodied cigar, slightly peppery in flavour, wrapped with a brown leaf, will complete a medium roast nut-based coffee; and a dark brown wrapper that's spicy and leathery will integrate with a full-bodied roast. The ripe flavour of some of the dark wrapped cigars goes best with espresso."

Martini removes his blue Armani blazer, revealing a crisp white cotton designer shirt. "You can pair a cigar with coffee based on when you're having it. Some people like a strong cigar with their morning coffee, which packs a combined punch and will have you bug-eyed and ready to roll in no time."

He explains that unwinding after dinner calls for a French roast, particularly if you don't like alcohol. "Your cigar will balance out the taste which, together with the coffee, will leave a pleasant mouth feel."

The combinations are limitless, but it all comes down to your palate. "You can amal-

ANOTHER CLASSING PAIRING

In just about every Hollywood movie, there comes a point when the hero holds a cut crystal glass of some amber liquid in one

"When I smoke, I become one with my cigar; I lose myself in its cocoa and coffee perfume, everything fades away as my smoke gives way to spices and wood."

Armando Cappuccio, Amerigo Cigar Company, Rome

gamate virtually any cigar with any coffee. If you have a cheaper cigar, sometimes a cup of coffee will make it taste better because it brings out the coffee's best flavours."

hand, and a smouldering cigar in the other. It is a scene you may wish to repeat yourself but you are never sure which cigars best complement your chosen tipple. Luca ►



Andrea Castellani, organiser of the cigar festival (left), and prize-winning wine sommelier, Luca Martini

Martini continues, this time speaking of pairings with brandy.

“With a French Cognac, which is a strong drink whose flavour profiles include nuts, fruit, caramel and spices, you’ll want a dark

in. “This is a rich drink, the flavours are bold, dark and imposing,” says Martini. “You want to choose a dark wrapped cigar with strong notes of wet earth, dark chocolate and leather.

“Our artisan cigars are produced with care, in the traditional Italian way ... They’re full of personality and, when it comes to flavour and aroma, they’re an explosion for the senses.”

Dr Gabriele Zippilli, Compagnia Toscana Sigari, Tuscany

wrapped cigar with notes of cedar, chocolate and spice.

“Armagnac, often considered a more sophisticated drink than Cognac, carries undertones of dried fruit along with wood, bolder alcohol notes and a longer finish. This calls for a more edgy cigar, something full bodied with a hint of spice and earthy wood notes. Avoid Cubans, light wrappers and delicate flavours.”

We speak about Spanish brandy, which is generally deep, rich and lush with dried fruit, burnt caramel and distinct sherry notes derived from the casks they’re aged

“Italian brandy tends to be on the light and delicate side with a touch of residual sweetness and notes of fresh fruit, vanilla and caramel. Choose a blonde wrapped cigar that’s light in flavour, with notes of milk chocolate, roasted peanuts and florals.”

TOBACCO AND PERFUME

With their chocolate, vanilla, leather, earth, and spicy carnal scents, the notes of an aged tobacco leaf bewitch the nostrils. It conjures

up the sensuality and infinite variety of flavours and aromas of a fine cigar. The pairing conversation with Luca Martini continues. Now we’re talking aftershave.

“The idea is to not overpower but to balance. Cigar smoking is a lifestyle and the aroma from it should be considered. When pairing a cigar with aftershave, it’s a sophisticated game of understanding the strength of each. I love to see and feel when different notes, tones, shades and tastes can coexist and, instead of taking over, help each other to accentuate their own properties, or even to blend them together and create something completely new.

“For me, the aftershave I wear or the cigar I smoke are all about what mood I’m in. Or it may depend on which memories I would like to relive. A good aftershave will take you back to that experience just as a great song does.

“Ferrari Red, for example, with its dried hay notes, lemon rind and orange blossom, pairs well with Hoyo de Monterrey Petit Robustos or a Davidoff Nicaragua Short Robusto. Guerlain’s Arsène Lupin with its complex woody base and strong rose and bergamot top notes works well with Lonsdales or Petite Pyramides.”

Francesco Minetti is still holding court in the chapel; this time he is speaking about technical things that are beyond me. I give him a little wave. He smiles with one side of his face then carries on speaking on his favourite subject.

Cindy-Lou Dale