

Hong Kong's "Ravi" - Maverick or Mystery?

by *Sung Ho Cheung, Foreign Correspondent*

Recently, I went and had a very interesting chat with Mr Ravi Mahbubani, Director, at his company The International Marketing Exchange Ltd (IMEL) which is tucked away in a good location just above Hong Kong's busy Central business district. "Ravi" - as he is affectionately known to his many customers around town is possibly Hong Kong's favourite *maverick / mysterious* cigar supplier. During our chat we discussed a range of issues concerning the cigar business with special emphasis on the supply of Cuban cigars in general as well as the prevailing retail environment in Hong Kong.

For everyone outside of Hong Kong, what makes "Ravi" so interesting is that he's *da man* who is now (undisputedly) providing a growing range of very high quality Cuban cigars to the general public and (some) local retailers alike at fabulously tempting prices.

And in so doing, he is in direct competition with *Pacific Cigar Company Ltd* - who bill themselves as the '*Exclusive distributor of all Havana Cigar brands for Asia Pacific*'. However, there appear to be a growing number of local retailers' who are less than pleased with the service and treatment meted out by the *exclusive distributor* of late (see previous article), and are voting with their dollars at a more amenable alternative source of supply of Cuban cigars in Hong Kong *i.e.* Ravi. So, just who is "Ravi"?

Cuban Lobsters and Cigars! Ravi is a Director of IMEL - a family business which imports seafood from Cuba to China via Hong Kong, and appears to be swimming along nicely. The Cuba-end of the business is run by Ravi's brother and according to Ravi, this is how they got started in cigars: about 2 years ago, some cigars were purchased from Habanos S.A. in Cuba (the official supplier of Cuban cigars worldwide) and sent to Hong Kong. Some were destined for the family's humidors, the remainder were to be put on a shelf for future (possible) sales opportunities. *Now - fast-forward to...*

Some time later... after running a small advert in a local freebie magazine offering “*Premium Cuban Cigars!!! ... Prices at up to 50% off*” - it all began. Well, who could possibly resist such a temptation? And so the business began to flourish. That was 2 years ago. Now, boldly proclaimed from their latest price list, is the fact(?) that they supply some of “*Hong Kong’s finest clubs, hotels and individuals*”. And just for the record, Ravi refused to give out any clue as to the identities of his growing list of customers - whether private or commercial ... “*Trade Secrets!*” he chortles, and that’s all he’ll say on that subject.

Is dey is or is dey isn’t? Whilst Ravi was quietly establishing the cigar side of the business, many local *sheegar afishionados* were avidly pondering whether the products on offer were the real deal or not? This became a favourite topic of conversation when two or more of the *good buddies* gathered to have a puff. So, I put the question directly to Ravi - “Well, is dey is or is dey isn’t?..” - and he laughed! “*Of course they are the genuine article*” replying in his very cultured BBC-type accent, then he laughed some more.

I suggested that possibly the only real solution to this burning question would be to randomly select a couple of boxes from his substantial pile and submit them to the knife and other intelligent forms of analysis *e.g.* me and a few good buddies enjoying ’em in the noble cause of pure scientific research. Again, amidst his chuckles at such a suggestion, Ravi was most accommodating - “*Sure, take as many as you like - our prices are the best!*” and with that last bit ringing in my ears, he laughed some more!

OK - so, here we have a guy who is absolutely NOT intimidated by the invitation (read - veiled threat) to submit his products to the most stringent tests under any conditions - so long as you pay the going rate for his wares!?! His confidence in this matter is overwhelming and begs the *burning question* no more - at least for the time being. Although, at some future stage, we might just take him up on his offer ... and then we’ll see??

“**Why Pay More???**” is a line from Ravi’s advert. And sure, why pay more when you can get the ‘real’ items at such delicious prices. Here is a brief A-Z extract from Ravi’s latest price list (Dec. ’98)...

Cigar	Ravi’s Price Single	Ravi’s Price Box	HK Retail Price / Box
Bolivar Coronas Gigantes (50)	\$103	\$4,900	\$7,000
Cohiba Exquisitos (25)	\$82	\$1,950	\$2,950
Diplomaticos No. 4 (25)	\$37	\$875	\$1,250
El Rey Del Mundo Choix Supreme (25)	\$75	\$1,780	\$2,750
Fonseca Cosacos (25)	\$37	\$875	\$1,250
Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No.2 (25)	\$88	\$2,100	\$3,000
H. Upmann Connoisseur No.1 (25)	\$75	\$1,780	\$2,750
La Gloria Cubana Medaille D’or No.2 (25)	\$75	\$1,950	\$3,250
Montecristo No.2 (25)	\$99	\$2,360	\$3,375
Partagas Serie D No.4 (25)	\$106	\$2,440	\$3,250
Punch Punch (25)	\$76	\$1,800	\$3,000
Romeo Y Julieta Churchills (25)	\$105	\$2,500	\$3,400
Sancho Panza Sanchos (10)	\$182	\$1,730	\$2,880
Trinidad Fundadores (24)	\$175	\$4,030	\$5,760

Note: All prices are quoted in HK \$’s (US\$1:HK\$7.8)

Quality, Quality, Quality? One of the hazards of purchasing Cuban cigars (in HK, and possibly elsewhere in the world too?) is that overall, the general quality is not what one would expect of such a distinguished premium product. Some enlightened *sheegar afishionados* suggest that France and then the UK get the pick of the bunch, with the second tier going to Switzerland; whilst Canada and Asia get the third tier, and Spain gets the rest! *Viva España!*

As demand for Cuban cigars is insatiable, one can understand why Cuba seeks to earn as much foreign exchange by continuously pumping out ever-increasing quantities. But are they up to standard? In this neck of the woods, apparently - non, niet, nein, nix, nada, mo-la - absolutely NOT!

OK - but then, why do people - at least in Hong Kong - crave to purchase these items, when we’re experiencing cigars of such poor quality in construction, with awful wrappers and obvious usage of underage or improperly cured leaf, can only mean that smoking one of these (readily available) cigars would make one go weak at the knees?

The answer: simply because Cuban cigars have a certain mystique and if you are fortunate enough to get a *properly aged* and *cared-for* cigar - they are without a doubt - absolutely the best! Anyway, that's a general concern that many cigar lovers have for Cuba and Cuban cigars the world over.

Could delete from here ...and Bill, if you're reading this - please help end the (seemingly) futile embargo: it hasn't worked for *n* years, and it 'aint likely to work in the future neither. Imagine, if it wasn't for the crippling embargo, perhaps even the good Dr himself would strive to ensure greater quality control of Cuban cigars because then, they wouldn't need to rely on lower quality ingredients as an excuse to rush to fill a relentless worldwide demand simply to garner foreign currencies to help their floundering economy; and if that were the case - just think, you'd be famous! Follow in the footsteps of HH JP II ... look how famous he is. And if that's not enough to encourage you to enjoy your favourite Cuban in private - or even with a friend or two, simply *come out* and join your many cigar buddies in America (read - potential voters) who could all join hands (and vote for you) and applaud your foresight, leaving everyone to enjoy their favourite Cubans in peace; and leaving the BAFT / Customs etc. to concentrate on this century's real disease: drugs. **To here.** Now, back to Ravi...

What about the fakes? I put it to Ravi that with fake labelling (*see previous article*) recently appearing in Hong Kong, how does he feel about such antics - since indirectly, it will affect his business? In reply, he stated very clearly and "without prejudice" that it is in the best interests of all cigar retailers and cigar smokers that anyone found trading in counterfeit products should enjoy the full attention of the law and any/all subsequent follow-up action.

What about the competition? I also put it to him why did *The Pacific Cigar Company Ltd* not take vigorous action against his operation - especially given their claim to be the *exclusive distributor of all Havana Cigar brands for Asia Pacific*. Ravi was non-perturbed by this question. "I have no problem with them ... why don't you ask them directly?" he chortled, followed by more laughter. And perhaps we might just do that - at some future stage.

Note: Does anyone from *Pacific Cigar* would care to respond to that (challenge)...?

It appears that Ravi is not the only importer of Cuban cigars into Hong Kong. To counter this growing trend, boxes of Cuban cigars obtained from *The Pacific Cigar Company Ltd* now bear red labels for easy *on-shelf* identification. Just as an example: no red labels could be seen on any boxes on the shelves through the window of the Davidoff store in Hong Kong.

Ravi - Saint or Sinner - you be the judge? From the sales figures supplied by Ravi, his cigar business is burgeoning. And with such a classy range of high-quality products available and at prices guaranteed to bring a smile to every true cigar aficionado, it's easy to see why Ravi is not really a maverick, more a bit of a man of mystery?

So, if you ever find yourself in Hong Kong – which, by the way - is a great place to come to, especially now with cool autumnal breezes a-blowin' and lots to see and do – and if you want to try a range of Cuban cigars without breaking the bank, be sure to visit Ravi's store - where you will be warmly welcomed, treated fairly, with courtesy and with thanks! And one thing is for sure, your purchase is bound to bring a smile to Ravi's face and in return, you're bound to be treated to one of his very good-natured and hearty laughs. That in itself is worth a visit!

And if you can't make it this far, be sure to check out his new website <www.imelhk.com> and see for yourself...

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