

Cigars – a pipe dream!?

by ***Sung Ho Cheung, Foreign Correspondent***

There was I ... happily chomping my way through about three to four cigars a day and feeling all was well in the world. Then, I decided to take a look at how much I was paying for the privilege. And after carefully studying the books, I came very quickly to one conclusion. “*Yikes!*” says I – that’s way way way way too much. So, having seen the bottom line, I decided a bit of common (fiscal) sense must prevail, so I – like zillions before me, turned to the old dependable, that old favourite – the pipe to satisfy my puffing habit, for a little while at least. The problem being that I only ever puffed a pipe once or twice before, and that was many years ago; and the experience - though not unpleasant, was not high on my list of fondest memories – so some careful research tempered with trepidation was called for. Notwithstanding that, I ventured forth to find a pipe suitable for my own purposes and one, which hopefully, would let me continue to enjoy a puff without constantly draining the bank balance.

So where does one go to buy a pipe in Hong Kong? There aren’t too many places that readily spring to mind where one can purchase a nice pipe or at least see a half-decent selection in Hong Kong. Although one such place is the *Davidoff Store* in The Landmark (a mall) in the Central Business District. Naturally enough, the nice folks there retain their highbrow style of superior service and only offer a limited selection of the best (in their opinion) Davidoff pipes and tobacco (naturally) and the odd meerschaum or two. Still, it was all a bit rich for my blood and the atmosphere was way too refined for me. And very, very expensive.

So, the next stop was the *Tabaqueira Filipina* * in Alexandria House – again, right in the heart of the Central Business District. Tucked away in a little alcove on the first floor, this cosy little store has all the feel of a *proper* tobacconist about it – which is indeed pleasant; and once inside, the spatially-challenged store has a small but interesting selection of pipes from some of the world’s best manufacturers, as well as all the pipe paraphernalia that goes along with it. There’s also a good if limited selection of the more popular brands of pipe tobacco – yet still, there’s enough here to be getting on with. And just for the record, they also stock a good quantity and range of quality Cuban cigars too at comparable prices to those elsewhere around town.

Once I'd finally determined which tobacco I wanted, I set off for my office with a skip in me step, ready to fire-up this little beauty. The pipe tobacco smelt great ... good enough to eat; and maybe that's a problem for neophyte pipe puffers such as meself who are fooled into trying out many mediocre brands of tobacco with little in the way of quality about them other than a strong dose of chemically-construed additives and/or essences - some of which include whiskey (yum!), vanilla (eh?), chocolate (huh?) and fruit (good grief?) etc. That being said, there is a similar problem in choosing a good cigar. With so many brands (the new ones mostly) on the market, many *sheegar afishionados* suffer the same fate. But perhaps this is part of the challenge too.

Time to try it out ... well, filling the pipe was no problem and neither was lighting it and keeping it lit. It did help to have smoked cigars for some time which gave me a feel for the coal, as it were. Puffing required was neither too much nor too little ... very much like puffin away on a nice stogie. In the end, and after doing a quick 'breaking-in' of the new pipe by half-filling the bowl, gently puffin away and then letting it cool and then repeating the procedure all over again – I can only say that in a short space of time it was already getting to be a rather nice smoke and a typically relaxing experience – familiar to all cigar puffers. That part hasn't altered one little jot. The other good thing is that *she who must be obeyed* and other persons with a sensitive appreciation of environmental pollutants are generally far more accepting of a nice aromatic pipefull than one of my more usual industrial strength Bolivars. Oh well, c'est la vie.

What I also quickly discovered is that one pipe is not enough. So, within a day or two I headed back to the same store and purchased another good quality *Peterson* plus several different packs of pipe baccy and began another phaze of breaking-in. Having now puffed almost all of the recently purchased baccy away already, I am searching out other brands to try. This perhaps is another of the great traditions of the pipe – trying out new brands of pipe baccy and the sheer joy of discovery of a new favourite. But even that works out favourably in terms of costs when compared to the giant and ever-expanding stash of Cuban cigars in my several humidors. And yep, if I find a nice pipe whilst on my search, I will probably get one of those too. In fact, I know I will be on the lookout evermore for the perfect pipe and the perfect blend of pipe baccy. What joy!

How much does it all cost when compared to cigars? Well, given that I purchased two very good quality pipes made in Eire, plus several sacks of baccy and other bits and pieces required for cleaning etc. – the whole amount spent is less than 20% of one month's normal expenditure on Cuban cigars. And I can use my pipes again and again and again and again. Good value does not come cheap, but it does work out very nicely – even in the short run when one does a comparison like that.

Would I recommend a pipe for anyone to try? To this there is only one answer: you gotta suck it and see for yourself. But if you're sick of spending so much of your hard-earned on expensive cigars only to store them away in a dark place and worry about humidity, too much or not enough, or whether the beetles will pay your stash a(nother) visit which means you're gonna have to work another eight days a week just to catch up, well – IMHO, try a pipe ... and dream no more!

* *Tabaqueira Filipina* have six stores located throughout Hong Kong, and a store in Macau.