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Sweet Sensations

Flavored cigars are new, but the trend continues to grow

By Brenda Lange



Tatiana's Groovy Blue is a cognac-, honey- and berry-flavored cigar marketed by Miami Cigar Co.

Flavored cigars may be considered a trend, but if so, they are one of the longest-lasting trends in history. Cigars flavored by adding rum were the first on the scene more than 100 years ago. Made by Wolf Brothers in Pennsylvania, they were known as “crooks” for their unique, crooked shape. The smaller versions were “crookettes,” according to Fred Berger, cigar expert and owner of American Western Cigar Co. of Cincinnati.

“It may have been an advertising scheme, but it surely did catch attention, and they still make them like that,” says Berger. Pressed in a wooden mold, they weren't the only cigars with odd shapes. For a time, the company also made triangular shaped cigars so they wouldn't roll off the boat, he says.

Today, Wolf Brothers continues to produce the crooks in their interesting shape to “allow the smoke to fully encompass the delicate, sweet rum flavoring,” according to the company's Web site. These original rum cigars were advertised as “rum-soaked” although whether the tobacco was actually soaked in the liquor is questionable. “Wine was added sometimes too,” says Berger. “There was mostly a rum flavor, but the wine added subtle undertones.”

Rum with a soft wine flavor seems quaint by comparison to some of today's blends. Mango, cherry, banana, mocha and many others fill shelves everywhere, and have been growing in variety and popularity since the mid-1990s. As the public rediscovered cigar smoking that decade, its popularity was helped along by the addition of different flavors to the tobacco.

If you are someone who enjoys a good cigar after dinner, and want a lighter smoke at that particular time, you may

choose a flavored cigar. But cigars with added flavoring aren't universally accepted by all cigar smokers. “There can be some snobbery until they smoke a good flavored cigar, then they're surprised, even though they may not change over totally and make flavored cigars their everyday cigar,” says Hank Bischoff, vice president of Oliveros Cigars in Miami Lakes, Fla.

Flavoring is generally added to a milder blend of tobaccos, so that the tobacco itself doesn't “fight” with the flavor. Just as various blends of tobacco marry to create the perfect smoking experience, the right flavor married to the right tobacco blend can be just as enjoyable. “Intuitively some people think that

this (flavoring) must appeal only to women smokers,” Bischoff says, “but the customer base is much broader.”

Although cigar manufacturers and distributors saw more women than men among smokers of flavored cigars in the '90s, today they see a nearly even gender split, some saying they're not just for the ladies any more, but for anyone who wants an interesting cigar at a reasonable price. A younger demographic smokers aged 20 to 40—seem more likely to try flavors and to stick with them.

Deciding what flavoring to use and what names to give the specialty cigars is a process. Heather Phillips, founder and owner of Heavenly Cigar Co., Inc. in Naples, Fla., knew from the beginning she was going to produce flavored cigars and that she intended those flavors to be “heavenly,” hence the name.

She began in 1996 with Heavenly Vanilla, based on a flavor she had worked with at another company. Her Ragging Rum uses tropical rum because she didn't like the standard, plain rum flavoring. Cupid's Cherry Cream has a hint



America West displays rum-flavored Rum Runner cigars in this unique pirate's chest.

of vanilla to make a smoother, mellower and softer flavor. These adjustments caught on and interest in the cigars grew.

"We name our flavors around sky and weather-related themes," says Phillips. "The early names were boring and we wanted to be catchy." But the name alone does not make a palatable smoke. "You can come up with all kinds of nifty names," she says, "but if the cigar doesn't taste like what the label says, it's pointless."

Some converts to flavored cigars are cigarette smokers seeking to break that habit. Smoking flavored cigars has become more trendy and fashionable for smokers making a switch. And still others have made the changeover to flavored cigars because of family pressures. Phillips says one of her customers praised flavored cigars for providing him with a smoke he could enjoy, and which his wife could tolerate.

Sometimes the smoke from more robust cigars can be uncomfortably strong to some people. The flavored cigars get raves for their aromas, which are lighter and more pleasing, says Phillips. For example, her Ameretto cigar's hint of flavoring satisfies the smoker, yet leaves smoke that is nearly undetectable.

CAO International in Nashville, Tenn., has a similar philosophy when it comes to naming its cigars. The diversity in taste along with the consistency in excellence is what CAO counts on to attract customers, and the naming process is just another part of the marketing plan.

Brainstorming sessions sometimes produce just the right moniker, but often the name isn't determined until the packaging starts to take shape. "In the case of Gold Honey, the honeycomb design was established, then the color became golden, then we came up with the name," says Jon Huber, CAO's director of marketing.

Earth Nectar's blend of toasted almonds, cocoa, honey and raisins is infused with Chianti, reminiscent of a fine dessert. Other taste-tempting flavors include Moontrance, an exotic mix of vanilla and bourbon; Eileen's Dream, tasting of Irish cream and white chocolate truffles; and Karma Sutra Splash, bursting with mango and chocolate-mint ice cream flavors with touches of orange, anise and green apple.

Loaded with creamy vanilla, chocolate and coffee flavoring, Brazilian Mocha is the newest flavor from Cojimar Cigars in Miami. "When you're smoking these, you are tasting it in your palate as well," says Cojimar's president Rosie Perez. "It's a good after-dinner cigar. After you've just eaten a good meal, you want to top it off with a good flavor."

Perez believes a trend within a trend is emerging among flavored cigars—that of blending flavors. She now produces champagne with raspberry, and tropical fruit with blueberry and a hint of vanilla, and is planning to launch other blends.

The newest flavored cigar offered by Oliveros Cigars is the Kopi Luwak, with the essence of the world's most expensive coffee. "Kopi stands apart from any other flavored cigar," adds Oliveros' Bischoff. "There really are no constraints on the flavors we choose. We are limited only by our imaginations."

Flavored cigars come in almost as many sizes as they do flavors, from relatively tiny cigarillos up to those with a ring gauge of 55. The larger the cigar, the more important it is that

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Stairway to Heaven is the name for a sampler display rack from Heavenly Cigars Company, Inc.

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— HEATHER PHILLIPS, PRESIDENT AND CEO, HEAVENLY CIGAR CO.



The 10 Disciples is a sampler of flavored cigars from Heavenly Cigars Company, Inc.

the flavoring is evenly blended throughout to provide a consistent smoking experience.

All the manufacturers interviewed agree that premium tobacco is vital to obtain the best overall smoking experience with flavored cigars. Equally important is adding the flavoring to all the filler leaves so that the flavor lasts as long as the cigar. Some flavor is often added to the wrapper so the smoker's expectations of a certain flavor are not dashed with the first few draws, just as the tip is often dipped in sugar to provide that initial satisfaction.

Flavoring also can be sprayed onto the filler, but again, it's important to be a "little judicious in its use," says Berger of American Western Cigar, who has a background in chemistry. "You also have to have something that is as good when it is burned."

If added to the wrapper only, flavoring would evaporate and would be inconsistent, says Rene Castaneda, president of the Miami Cigar Co., in Miami, producers of Tatiana flavored cigars.

Flavors can be mixed into a liquid and introduced into the tobacco, either by steeping or soaking the leaves or spraying it on, following a specific formula or recipe to keep the flavoring consistent from one cigar to another.

"There are a lot of similarities between how the flavoring is added," says Phillips of Heavenly Cigar, who declines to give away the company's secret process, as did all of those interviewed. "There's a basic step that everyone knows is key, but there still has to be some exclusivity."

Adding flavoring is a "tricky business," Berger says. While there may be an inclination to assume natural flavors are the best, he says this is not always practical or cost efficient. Artificial flavors have been developed that taste as good as the natural ones but are more economical since there are no harvesting and extracting costs.

Some companies have different lines or brands for their premium non-flavored cigars and those with added flavors. "They are like any cigar we produce that happens to have flavor," Castaneda says for his flavored line. "We fill 100 percent of the tobacco with flavor, but just a touch, so that the tobacco is not overwhelmed."

Flavored cigars are molded and stored separately to prevent their tastes from seeping into their non-flavored cousins. Cellophane wrapping, preserves moisture and helps seal in the flavor, but most tobacconists play it safe by isolating the flavored brands.

This trend, growing for more than a century, seems as if it's here to stay. Although some of the more exotic flavors may be experimental, short-lived one-hit wonders, flavored cigars in general will probably be around for a long time to come.

"This is definitely more than a trend," says Phillips. "We wouldn't see big companies merging to develop more flavored cigars otherwise. They're here to stay." **TR**