

Casdagli Cigars

*A chat with
Jeremy Casdagli*

by Michel Arlia



Casdagli Cigars (formerly known as Bespoke Cigars) has been a rising star in the cigar community over the past couple of years. While the name may be new to some, Jeremy Casdagli (founder and owner) has over twenty-five years of experience in the world of cigars, and the history of tobacco and the Casdagli family goes much deeper than that.

The Casdagli family has a very complex history and has been in the trade business since the 1800s. Tobacco was among one of their trading goods. Can you share some of your family heritage involving tobacco, and what are your earliest memories with cigars?

The tobacco initially traded by the family in the late 18th & 19th centuries was Turkish pipe tobacco. The Casdaglis became involved with Cuban premium cigars when my great uncle Emmanuel conducted secret negotiations on behalf of the British Board of Trade with the pre-revolutionary Cuban government in 1951. He managed to end the British empire's embargo on Cuban cigars that had been in place since 1941. The story became headline news in the newspapers at the time. Suffice to say that cigars were always widely smoked in the Casdagli family and I managed to inherit beautiful silver and gold cigar holders and accessories from our old family palace Villa Casdagli. My earliest memory of a cigar was when I was at the age of 13 and cigars were handed out at my boarding school's end of winter term dinner. Times have certainly changed since then!

While the Casdagli Cigars brand is relatively young, the history of you producing cigars dates back much longer than one would think, and quite surprisingly, it started in Cuba. Can you tell us a little more?

It started in 1996. I have been a keen scuba diver for over 30 years and planned out an adventure scuba trip taking me in the region around Kingston, Jamaica, and Maria La Gorda, in Cuba. The Morgan Harbour Hotel in Kingston asked me to bring back cigars from Cuba for them, and thus, the adventure began. Whilst in Havana in early 1997, I was introduced to one of the Cuban master blenders Carlos Valdez Mosquera. He then worked out of La Casa De la Amistad in Vedado, Havana. He could perfectly replicate the old Hoyo de Monterrey blends that he used to create in the late 1950s. As Hoyo de Monterrey was and still is my favorite Cuban brand, it became a natural partnership. The president of Cubatabaco, Oscar Basulto, at that time gave me full support, perhaps due to my family's support of Cuba in 1951, who knows. At that time, I was based in London, and the market in Europe in the mid-1990s was heavily Cuban, with perhaps just Davidoff competing. So if you wanted to work with cigars, Cuba was then the place to seek out.

Back then, you were known under Bespoke Cigars and produced "made to order" cigars for mainly the London market. How was business held back then to get a "made to order" cigar? And how does that differ from creating a blend nowadays?





We were dealing with a much smaller production with as little as 50 cigars per month for a client and up to 1,000 cigars per month. As all the cigars were blended by Carlos Valdez Mosquera, our master blender and a legend in Cuba, we stayed with his classic blend on all our cigars and varied the vitola according to our client's preferences. So the "blending" process was very simple as it was settled, and the challenge in Cuba was coming up with interesting vitolas – such as our famous "Flying Pig", now known as the Cotton Tail. Nowadays, it can take up to 6 months to 1 year to settle on the blend for a new line of cigars. Firstly we have a huge range of premium tobaccos to choose from. Usually, I taste up to six differing blends, and these will be shortlisted to three. With these three blends, I will then age and taste over a six to eight-month period to find out which will be chosen. You see, the new world cigars are so much more complex, and hence there is more of a chance of getting it badly wrong. But when it goes well, it is very exciting to create a complex cigar that is something completely new in the marketplace.

In 2013, you switched production to the Dominican Republic, to the Kelner Boutique Factory. How did you meet Hendrik Kelner Jr (son of Hendrik Kelner), and what made you decide to work with him?

I was introduced to Jr by my dear friend Mike Murphy who had been making cigars in both Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic for many years under his Bellaterra Brand. He had befriended Jr and called me in 2012 that Jr had just opened the KBF factory, and I must get involved. So I managed to get there in February 2012. I handed Hendrik some of my original Cuban cigars, and he spun a wonderful piece of magic the first morning I met with him. Without using any Cuban tobacco, of course, but utilizing a blend of tobaccos from Peru, Brazil, Nicaragua, some of his father's Dominican hybrids, he produced a perfectly complex Lancero with almost Cuban notes. This was to become our signature cigar, the Grand Café, and a partnership was born.

You developed the majority of your lines with him: the Traditional Line, the Club Mareva Line, the Basilica Line, and the Cabinet Selection. How did your approach with each line change, and where did you find your inspiration?

The Traditional Line was born from that initial Grand Café Lancero, as described in the previous question. So, the Cotton Tail, Super Belicoso, and Robusto, along with the Lancero, were all vitolas I made in Cuba and all conform to the characteristics of my initial small Cuban bespoke production. The Basilica Line was created, and the blends were agreed upon with my Saudi Arabian distributor. The Middle East has always been an important market for us. We sought for a blend that would pair with the ginger teas and the citrus flavors favored in that region. The Cabinet Selection was inspired by the coffee lovers of Sweden. These were blended to pair particularly with coffee. The Club Mareva Line was put together as a joint project with my dear friend Marko Bilić, the Founder of the Cigar Smoking World Championship. He is based in Split, Croatia, where he found the Cigar Club Mareva. Based in a 1500s Venetian Palace, it is difficult to find a more beautiful location to smoke a cigar. Annually Marko selects the blend for the cigar that will be added to the Club Mareva Line.



In 2018, you launched the Daughters of the Wind Line. Compared to the others, this line is made in Costa Rica at the IGM factory in San Jose. How did you come to work with the IGM factory?

I was introduced to IGM by a close Cuban friend of mine who used to work with Habanos. The owners and managers at IGM are a Cuban family that managed to leave Havana and founded the company 20 years ago. They have the benefit of owning their own Costa Rican plantation 1000 m above sea level in the mountainous region of Puriscal. Here I have a completely free hand in selecting my tobaccos for the blend, and just like the KBF factory, they have access to some truly unique tobaccos, especially some of my favorite Peruvian tobacco. My basic approach though is the same, and that is to seek out rare tobaccos for medium-strength, full-bodied blends with truly unique exotic flavors. The process at both factories to get to the end result is the same: select the tobaccos that will deliver the character I am seeking and then vary the percentages, age, and then taste over a period of up to a year before release.

Costa Rican and Peruvian tobaccos can be found in some of your blends. The use of both of those tobacco origins is not "popular". How did these specific tobaccos influence the blends that you were working on at the time?

Peruvian tobaccos deliver a true sweetness to the palate, but more than that, they are excellent for blending with a tendency to take the edge off the other tobaccos selected

in the blend. I may actually say that these tobaccos provide the "glue" to the blend whilst also adding sweetness and wonderful aromas. I believe they are not widely used as they are rare and thus difficult to get hold of. By being partnered with IGM with the benefit of its own plantation at such a high elevation naturally I was intrigued to try this tobacco. The tobacco has a lovely aroma, but above all, it has a great combustion and makes for a perfect binder, especially when used in conjunction with the slower burning Ecuadorian Habano wrapper leaves. You will find this Puriscal Costa Rican binder embracing the fillers of our Daughters of the Wind Line.

What does the near future hold for you? and what for Casdagli Cigars?

The near future looks very exciting for us in spite of the current world problems. We are currently working with some truly amazing artisans to expand our Villa Casdagli accessories line. We are about to open new markets across the world, including Brazil, Ghana, and Australia, which you might already have read about by the time this article goes to press. Finally, this summer we are launching our new line of cigars: the Villa Casdagli Line. This is in collaboration with master blender Don Olman Guzman from Tobaccos de Costa Rica, a gifted blender that we have worked with before on small projects. So, we are very busy and grateful for all the support and encouragement we daily receive from the worldwide cigar community. Thank you to you all!