

“Why Are Cuban Cigars Illegal?” by Taylor Bush

The Cuban cigar. A dark brown wrapper, the rich color of chocolate. Firm binding, crafted by the delicate fingers of a Torcedor. A hearty aroma, evocative of the region’s fertile soil. Stamped on the box: *Hecho en Cuba*.

If you’ve managed to get your hands on a Cuban cigar, you’re holding the final product in one of the most revered cigar-making processes in the world. When you think of the best wines, you think France. When you think of the best cigars, you think Cuba. Location is vital to why these cigars are so amazing. The peninsula of Cuba is nestled right near the Tropic of Cancer, which results in a multitude of warm microclimates. In addition to balmy average temperatures, Cuba also has an abundance of rainfall. Tobacco is mostly grown and harvested in the western (and warmest) region of the country, in soil that has optimal pH levels and unique underground streams that irrigate the fields.

Seeds morph into seedlings in seed beds for 40 days before being transplanted to tobacco fields. After 45 to 80 additional days they are harvested and taken to curing barns where they are hung, dried and fermented. From there they are taken to sorting houses where skilled workers known as Torcedors sort, wrap, trim and roll the leaves until they finally have the look of a cigar. These Habano cigars are immunized against plagues and placed in special closets to remove excess humidity before being classified and shipped off.

Habano is the name given to the leaf grown from a Cuban seed and is a reference to Cuba’s capitol, Havana. This type of tobacco is dark and spicy and can be grown in other regions, but it’s impossible to fully replicate its spicy aroma when paired with the microclimate of Cuba. A true Cuban cigar is one constructed entirely of Cuban tobacco (or what is known as a *puro*). This high concentration of Cuban tobacco results in cigars that are full-bodied and smooth to smoke.

Interest in Cuban cigars comes from more than just interest in its construction process. Their important role in the history of tobacco smoking and forbidden fruit status following the Cuban Embargo have also helped them become the treasures of the cigar world. Even if they haven’t always been the easiest to attain, their impact on the world has certainly been felt for a long time. They’ve taken on an almost myth-like status among cyber cigar aficionados on online forums, various brands manufacture their blends with specific Cuban characteristics for more appeal and customers frequently enter cigar shops wondering, “Are Cuban cigars still illegal?”

The answer to that last question is a technical “no”. But before delving into their current status one must answer the question “Why are Cuban cigars illegal in the first place?”, which requires taking a time machine back to Cuba’s independence and retracing their tumultuous relationship with the U.S.

Origins of Tobacco in Cuba

Cigars as a business item can be tracked back to 1462 when Christopher Columbus first arrived in Cuba and discovered aborigines smoking a preliminary version of a cigar—tobacco leaf wrapped in plantain and palm leaves dipped in seawater. Mayan and Incan drawings featuring tobacco-smoking date back further than 1462, but the discovery of cigars in the New World was the impetus for what eventually became the cigar business we know today.

Taíno natives who lived in Cuba used cigars as a medicine, hallucinogen, object in special ceremonies and for many other long traditions. European explorers brought the habit back to The Old Continent where factories began manufacturing cigars and ports started shipping them all across Europe. People immediately embraced the commodity for its calming, narcotic effect on the mind.

The reach of the cigar trade spread across the globe, but Cuba was always the nexus that kept the business running. In 1800, cigar factories first began springing up in Cuba when it was realized that Habano cigars made the trans-Atlantic voyage from Cuba to Spain in better condition than fragile tobacco leaves. It was around this time that big name cigar brands started to bloom as free trade was established and Cuban cigars became a symbol of dignity, wealth and even power.

The Spanish-American War

Spain ruled the colony of Cuba, profiting immensely from the export of tobacco. Towards the end of the 1800s, revolution gripped Cuba as various guerilla fighters fought for independence from Spain. The Ten Years' War, the Little War and the Cuban War of Independence sprung up because of this uprising. In 1898, the United States was forced to get involved in the conflict when their battleship, the USS Maine, inexplicably sunk in Havana harbor while trying to protect U.S. citizens from anti-Spain rioting.

War between the nations lasted for several months, ending in December 1898 when the Treaty of Paris was signed. This granted Cuba independence from Spain, but still allowed U.S. intervention in their affairs if necessary.

Fidel Castro

After Cuba's liberation from Spain, the region found itself enduring a period of unrest as the nation tried to establish itself as its own autonomous state. Coups and revolutions were common, with the U.S. often having to get involved to settle conflicts. During the 1950's, Cuba was ruled by President General Fulgencio Batista, a dictator who had seized power in a military coup during the 1952 elections and often had the backing of the U.S.

Enter Fidel Castro, a young lawyer and activist who became a radical proponent for Cuba's independence. He brought about the Cuban Revolution by overthrowing Batista with his band of guerrillas on New Year's Day 1959. He converted the government into a one-party communist regime and nationalized the Cuban cigar industry by making cigar factories and brands property of the Cuban state.

For a few years Fidel Castro and Cuba had an amicable relationship with the U.S. (Castro even visited Washington at one point), but that changed rather quickly as his growing communist tendencies became an issue of contention for the U.S. during the Cold War. The Bay of Pigs was the CIA's botched attempt at invading Cuba and overtaking Castro, which was followed by a string of harebrained attempts at assassinating Castro that included exploding seashells and even a poisonous cigar.

Meanwhile, Castro began seizing control of private U.S. corporations (including cigar companies) and heavily taxing American products. This incensed President Eisenhower, who began imposing trade restrictions on Cuba. In retaliation, Cuba expanded trade with the Soviet Union. President Kennedy made the restrictions official with the Cuban Embargo in February of 1962 (after ordering 1,200 Petit Upmann Cuban cigars for his private stash before it went into effect).

Tensions continued to escalate after the embargo. In October of 1962 U.S. spy planes learned that Soviets had constructed missile bases in Cuba that were pointed directly at America. The U.S. set up a blockade to prevent Soviets from transferring the necessary materials to complete the missiles. A tense, 12-day standoff ensued, ending with Cuba agreeing to de-arm the missiles in exchange for the U.S. removing missiles from Turkey. But irreparable damage had occurred between the two nations, and henceforth Switzerland has acted as moderator between the U.S. and Cuba.

Post-Embargo Cuba

The decades following the Cuban cigar embargo featured major changes in the cigar world. Cigar company owners fled Cuba to preserve their business. Classic Cuban brands moved operations to Nicaragua and Dominican Republic and began making their blends from the tobacco of those regions. Cuba continued to flourish in the cigar world, with the embargo now amplifying their mystique to non-Cuban regions. They became especially coveted during the Cigar Boom of the 1990s when interest peaked for cigar history and vintage, premium cigar ingredients. Back in Cuba, Fidel Castro, once infamous for appearing in pictures with his olive-green fatigues and a plump stogie in his mouth, quit smoking to appease an anti-smoking policy for Cuba established by the World Health Organization in the 1980s.

The hold of U.S.'s embargo on Cuba has been eased and strengthened throughout the years, depending on the state of the political climate. The U.S. tightened its embargo rules in 1996 with the Helms-Burton Act, which extended the purview of the embargo to apply to foreign countries that traded with Cuba. But in 2001, an agreement was made to sell food to Cuba after Hurricane Michelle devastated the island.

Obama Lifts Sanctions

After undergoing surgery in 2006, Fidel Castro retired, giving over rule to his brother Raul. Ten years later, he passed away from undisclosed reasons.

A major change finally occurred in U.S.-Cuban relations when President Obama lifted restrictions on family travel and remittances to Cuba in 2009, 47 years after the Cuban Embargo was first put into effect. He continued to make diplomatic advancements with Cuba in subsequent years: easing up on certain travel restrictions, removing Cuba from the U.S. State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism and reopening embassies in both the U.S. and Cuba's capitals. In 2016 Barack Obama even visited Cuba, becoming the first sitting president to visit the country in 85 years. In a joint press conference between him and Raul Castro they called for an end to the trade embargo.

In 2014 a major breakthrough came for cigar smokers clamoring for Cuban cigars: President Obama lifted the ban on bringing Cuban cigars into the country, though imposed a limit of \$100 on how much you could bring back in. Two years later the monetary cap was dropped, though there are still restrictions in place. You can consume Cuban cigars and give them as gifts to friends and family, but you still can't buy or sell them in the U.S. (which means you won't see them on the shelves of your favorite cigar shop anytime soon). Still, Cuban cigars are allowed in the country for the first time since the sixties, and that's certainly something to celebrate.

In many ways cigars are the bloodstream of Cuba. From the country's European discovery to its fight for independence and autonomy, Cuban cigars have served as key props in the major events of the nation's history. Many people who migrated to Cuba during colonial times worked in cigar factories and later were the ones on the front lines as the nation struggled for independence. As Fidel Castro hid in the mountains during the Cuban Revolution he would save his last cigar to smoke only when he had very good news or very bad news to tell somebody. Cigars have always been a celebration or a compensation to the people of Cuba. And with the current, optimistic state of Cuba's relations with the U.S. and beyond, this pride in Cuba's native cigars can continue to grow in the outside world, too.