

CigarSense



CIGAR TASTING

Beyond the casual,
social experience

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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WHAT IS A CIGAR?

Believe it or not, there is no consistent, widely-accepted definition of a cigar, adopted by both the industry and regulators or antitobacco activists to observe the health effects. There is, however, an effort to differentiate the premium cigar from the rest of cigars that you can find on the market.

We can therefore say that a premium cigar is an agricultural, artisanal, gourmet product. It is entirely made with natural, whole tobacco leaves and rolled by hand according to a centuries long tradition.

In this e-book, we refer to "premium cigar" as "cigar".

An analogy

If you are new to the cigar world, but not new to the wine world, imagine a premium cigar being like a Bordeaux, or a champagne. The use of the term "terroir", the grape or tobacco varietal, the different processing methods and many other factors affect the molecules that deliver flavors to our senses in a way that can be considered as similar.

TASTING CIGARS

Differently from wines, for which a few small sips may be sufficient, in order to try or sample a cigar and give it a fair evaluation, you need to smoke all or most of it.

In the stricter sense of the term, "to taste" means to use our sensory receptors to explore a product.

Today, the more generic term "experience" probably represents more accurately what is proposed in many leisure activities called "tastings".

In fact, being a social catalyst, the cigar lends itself very well for experiential promotional activities.





HOW DO YOU CHOOSE YOUR CIGARS?

There are many ways we choose cigars. At times the choice is made for us, for instance if we attend an organized tasting event, or if a friend offers us a cigar as a gift. Sometimes we are led to a choice, by our tobacconist or by other influences. Sometimes we choose ourselves, based on the moment, the mood, the company, the food or drink we aim to pair with. When the choice is ours, we believe making more rational buying decisions begins with self-awareness.

A TRAP OR TWO

Let's face it: your taste is the best. Nobody else has a better taste than you have. And nobody else should judge you for your taste.

The cigars themselves, our time and our mood are all precious enough to justify some thoughts before buying.

However, there is a vicious circle that is easy to be trapped into.

People love anything that is "new", and producers release many new cigars. Some are good, some are less good. This creates a **gigantic choice**. Marketers tell you that trying as many cigars as possible is the only way you can find the **best** for you.

It's great for the industry growth. After all, as described by Zygmunt Bauman, today "our aim is not the object of our longing but the action of longing itself".

What are the con's of such consumer behavior?

Barry Schwartz - in his work *The Paradox of Choice* - explains the psychological aspects of it. Maximizing choice is the solution to maximize freedom. Giving people more control through more options results in more welfare, so we should be happier when we have more choice.

The problem is: we think that, since choice is good, every choice is equally and only good. We are wired to look for the best, not for managing a wide choice. But the "best" is an ideal, which we use to compare and judge cigars. It's a "liquid" type of appreciation, to cite Bauman again.

In other words, we are vulnerable and uncertain. What we desire is in constant becoming.

For many cigar lovers, influencers are no longer just one source for inspiration, but rather an addiction to models to imitate for cigars to buy that will never be the best.

So, how can we find the best cigars? By having realistic expectations about what is good for us. By considering what we want to gain from a cigar experience and evaluate concrete options and solutions. This is - according to Schwartz - what makes us feel accomplished by what we choose, because that is what we communicate to the world about us, our identity.

Our personal taste is an important component of our identity. We need to believe in our ability to evaluate what is important for us.

Much of the work we do at Cigar Sense is to help consumers gain that trust and define their own requirements for what is a quality cigar for them. This does not just mean "good enough", it often means it delights our senses.

If you are new to the hobby, try anything that appeals. It's sufficient to remember 3 names of cigars you tried and Cigar Sense will guide you from there.

Otherwise, if you have already smoked more cigars, you can define some key parameters:

Ring gauge: the diameter of the cigar, measured in 64ths of an inch or in mm. The thinner the gauge, the more attention is needed to smoke the cigar. If in doubt, go for a robusto, which is 48-50 in ring-gauge.

Price: "cheap" is a subjective concept. Cigar consumers overall tend to accept to pay premium prices, even if they aren't necessarily able to perceive the promoted quality. However, among discerning consumers, an acceptable price is more driven by personal preferences.

Tobacco: do not fall in the trap of choosing a cigar based on a tobacco leaf you liked, but in a different blend. It is very difficult to predict the flavor of a particular tobacco leaf when blended with other leaves. There are scientific reasons for this. You can check a reliable data source, for example the Cigar Sense database, for predictions of the sensory experience of the cigar you consider to buy.

Wrapper type/color: there are light colored wrappers (for example Connecticut shade) that are rolled over leaves containing a high level of nicotine.

In spite of this, there are still people who associate the strength of the cigar to the color of its wrapper. Also, many experienced people may advise Connecticut shade cigars to novices. If you find yourself in such situation, question this. It's good not to judge the book by its cover.

Nicotine strength: depending on what you eat before smoking, and on what you will drink with your cigar, you may want to align the strength of your cigar to the paired products. This applies to experienced and novice smokers alike.

Flavor: this is the most important criterion for over 80% of cigar lovers. In fact, even if we buy by brand, color of packaging or cloning others' tastes, the ultimate judge of a cigar is our own palate. Let's respect it!

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CHAPTER

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CIGAR TASTING?

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WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF TASTINGS?

Depending on the focus, purpose, discipline, training and tools, you can differentiate between subjective and more objective outcomes of tastings.

It's a fact that all individual tastings are **subjective**.

However, except for promotional purposes, there are good reasons to move beyond subjectivity.

In fact, more objective, analytical reviews benefit consumers during their cigar lover career. Data reliability is the basis for such reviews and enables one to predict whether a consumer will like a cigar.

Not only consumers benefit from reliable data, predictive analytics also help cigar companies grow.

The two approaches, subjective and analytical, require investments of very different nature.

Analytical work requires continuous panelists' training, including but not limited to the development of tasters' skills, a relatively high number of tests and the use of statistics. Analytical reviews are rich in data, but not in poetry or storytelling.

Moving past the storytelling, it may be difficult for consumers to differentiate between promotional and analytical cigar reviews. They all involve the use of a rather common language used in evaluations, including flavor descriptors.

In addition, some people call "sensory analysis" the simple act of writing down flavor notes. The ways to know how reliable reviews are is experiment with different reviewers and see if you are happy buying cigars based on a particular reviewer's opinions. Or check more objective sources of information who can explain how their data is substantiated.

ON TASTING TIME AND PHASES

From your purchasing decision at the cigar store to when you leave the ashes in the ashtray, you mainly use sight, touch, smell and taste.

Having passed the marketing aspects such as the box or the label, you enter the tasting sphere.

A cigar's aromas, tastes and other sensations change from the unlit cigar throughout the different phases of combustion.



As a consequence, cigar smokers tend to divide the cigar experience in different phases:

- **raw tasting**, after you cut the cigar and before you light it. Think like you need to get to know who we are dealing with before getting any further in the relationship
- **hypothetical phases after the cigar is lit:**
 - 3 thirds for Caribbean style cigars
 - 2 halves for Tuscan style cigars (also known as cheroots).

SUBJECTIVITY, AGAIN

In addition to time, context is critical.

For a casual, informal tasting, you can taste anywhere, with anybody, doing and drinking or eating anything else while you taste. Often a pairing is an excellent opportunity to get to know the interactions of more gourmet products together.

However, if you have the responsibility of giving advice to others, subjectivity needs to shake hands with objectivity.

Taster	Nose Deviation	Mouth Deviation	Strength Deviation
A	7	5.5	0
B	9	6.5	0
C	8	8.5	0
D	9	9.5	0
E	9	11.5	0
F	14	16.5	1

EXAMPLE OF SUMMARY
MEASUREMENT OF PANELISTS
RELIABILITY

Objectivity is not in the descriptor, in the flavor note, it's in the methods used:

- to arrive to that note quality and quantity
- to share that note with others.

Let's take an example: "body".

In the cigar world, the term "body" may represent at least 9 different descriptors, depending on who you are talking with. In other words, the term "body" is useless for advising other smokers, unless it's explained in detail.

This means that, instead of using a quick 4 characters word, more stories, more telling and hence more subjectivity are added to the equation.

WHY DOES CIGAR TASTING MATTER?

First, the tasting of tobaccos and blends by master blenders is what allows special cigars to be created and their unique sensory experience to be communicated. Tasting is also key for cigar lovers to appreciate cigars and to get to know and better understand them through the senses.

Understanding the unique characteristics of a cigar and how they differ from other cigars help us use our perceptions to our advantage: make more independent and rational purchasing decisions; feel accomplished; grow our passion.

All these factors contribute to improving the quality of our life.



3

CHAPTER

THE KEY SENSORY DESCRIPTORS

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THE FLAVOR ABC

AROMAS

Smells and aromas are the most intriguing elements of cigar tastings.



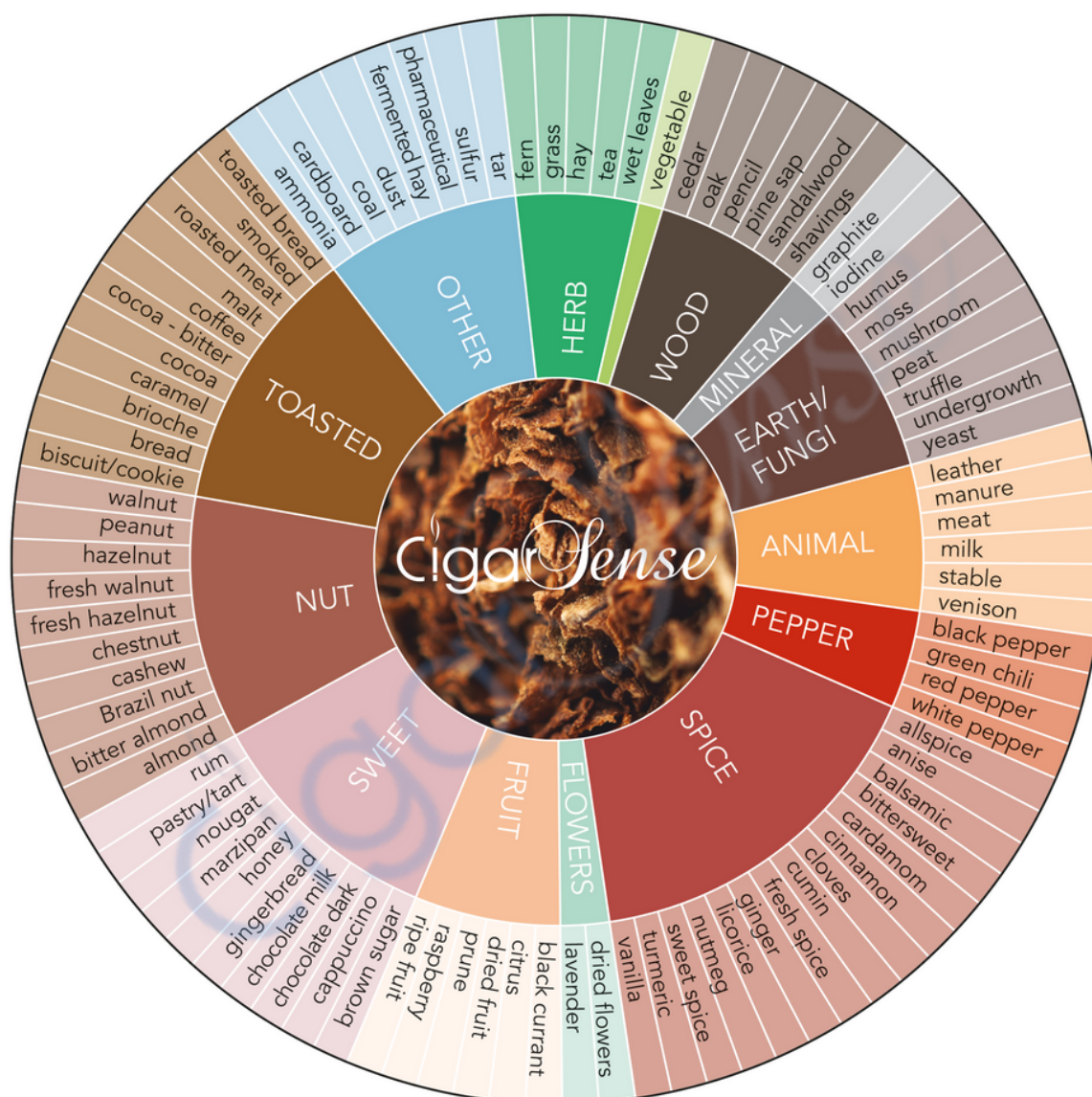
TASTES

The 5 tastes we encounter when tasting a cigar are: salty, savory (umami), sour, sweet and bitter.

TACTILE SENSATIONS

In addition to tastes, tactile sensations are frequently detected in the mouth membranes during cigar tastings.





AROMAS

The finest aromas can be perceived through direct olfaction from the foot of the lit cigar. Here the wrapper plays a considerable role thanks to a great amount of volatile, odorous molecules generated by the distillation of oils, resins and waxes that reside in the tobacco leaves.

If you want to explore more deeply the aromas that originate from binder and filler, you can retro-hale. This consists in drawing some smoke into your mouth. After having exhaled most of the smoke through the mouth, move the remaining smoke from the back of your mouth up through the nasal cavity. You can help yourself with tongue movements. Finally, exhale the remaining smoke through the nose.

If you are new to cigar smoking, you can exercise the retro-hale after cutting the head of the cigar but before lighting the cigar. You will not find the same flavors in the burning tobacco of that same cigar, but exercising with air rather than smoke it will not burn your nose.

If your nose is very sensitive when you retro-hale while the cigar is lit, you might find this alternative exercise useful.

Aromas can be connected to a large spectrum of very heterogeneous substances of numerous organic compounds belonging to different chemical groups.

Such compounds can vary in quality and quantity, depending on a number of factors: tobacco species, ecotype, geography, climate, terroir, biotic factors (presence of insects, for example), growing techniques, fertilizers, harvesting process, curing, fermentation, storage ...

In addition, the reaction of the different molecules in presence of other molecules may generate surprising aromas.

This is why:

- most of us can't easily predict a cigar's flavor experience based on the knowledge of the tobacco varieties that compose a blend
- machines have limits in helping us analyze tobacco.

"PICKING UP FLAVORS"

We refer to "flavor" as a complex synergy of retro-nasal aromas, - this is why flavor is also called "aroma by the mouth" - tastes and tactile sensations.

We all know that it is easier to identify and memorize tastes and tactile sensations. More on these descriptors in the following pages.

On the contrary, in a cigar, we can find many different aromas. Our memory and experience trigger our ability to perceive them. We can use poetry to help us describe a specific aroma. However, if we want to make it useful for other cigar lovers, it is important to adopt a common language.

In this section, we focus on the part of flavor that pertains to aromas.

How do you pick up aromas?

A lot is possible with training, but don't worry. You don't need to study psychophysiology in depth. We suggest a step-by-step approach, which is not so much based on increasing difficulty of the suggested tips. It is rather based on increasing effectiveness and accuracy in the resulting identification of flavors in a cigar.

- **when you are alone:**
 - regularly bring your attention to anything that has a smell and that is around you

- use aroma standards, some are more relevant to cigar smokers than others, but you can easily buy them
 - use an aromas wheel
 - think of making associations that help you remember the smells you identify
 - **at events:**
 - find at least two people smoking the same cigar at approximately the same pace
 - ask what others are experiencing
 - probe further any descriptors that seem odd to you
 - remember, it's better to be directionally correct than precisely wrong: if someone says "hazelnut" and another "walnut", just retain "nut"
 - just focus on the aromas, don't mix up with other elements of an evaluation
 - **more accurately:**
 - find more accurate benchmarks. For example, with the free Cigar Sense membership you can view core cigar profiles and you can compare them with your findings. Do that after you are done with your own notes
 - join one or more seminars where we play a sensory game that helps you see how distant your results are from those of other people at any stage in their cigar smoking career. More about this in the next page.
- You can find links to useful videos on how to "pick up flavors" [here](#).

FLAVOR ALIGNMENT EXERCISE

This is a free exercise that we like to do with our members: a sensory game, which can lead to a calibration of our perceptions.

It helps see how everybody's tasting notes can be different from others' and why.

In addition, during the exercise, we often share how to:

- identify flavor notes when tasting a cigar
- focus on substantiating a cigar's characteristics rather than promoting the cigar
- make the cigar tasting a game rather than a rigorous exercise

And we discuss many other topics brought up by our members.

Select the intensity of each aroma below on the scale of 0 (absent) to 9 (extremely strong)

Toasted *(Required)*

- ☐ 0
☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5
☐ 6
☐ 7
☐ 8
☐ 9

Wood *(Required)*

- ☐ 0
☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5
☐ 6
☐ 7
☐ 8
☐ 9

Spice *(Required)*

- ☐ 0
☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5
☐ 6
☐ 7
☐ 8
☐ 9

Other retro nasal descriptors

Choose the name of the aroma then select the intensity of each aroma below on the scale of 0 (absent) to 9 (extremely strong)

Free Aroma 1

Aroma 1 Intensity

- ☐ 0
☐ 1
--

Free Aroma 2

Aroma 2 Intensity

- ☐ 0
☐ 1
--

THE AROMAS WHEEL

Recognizing aromas works mostly through analogies, or metaphors. It is the result of appropriate training, not of imagination, nor poetry.

The Cigar Sense aromas wheel is a useful tool in support of the associations we need to make with the terms that describe the aromas we encounter in a cigar. You can [download it for free](#).

Smoking a cigar offers many different sensations at the same time: aromas, tastes, tactile sensations. In addition, nicotine and harsh combustion residues are often confused with some flavor sensations. This tool can help the focus on one aroma at the time.

Use it after having given a try to name an aroma you sense. Your brain needs exercise. One aroma at the time.





TASTES

They arise from compounds mainly present in filler leaves, which are soluble in saliva, that constitute most of the smoke providing taste. When such substances dissolve, they reach our taste buds and the relevant sensory information is sent to the brain.

Taste refers to those sensations arising from the taste system, which includes the **five basic tastes**: sweet, salty, sour, bitter and savory, or umami.

The term taste tends to be used instead of the word flavor which, as we have already seen, is a more inclusive term denoting the complexity of sensory elements, including those arising from olfaction and tactile systems, in addition to taste.

The tongue map, so often reproduced when talking about tastes, is wrong. It was debunked many years ago.



If you sense the taste bitter in the back of your tongue, it's not because that's the only place where that taste's receptors are. There are other scientific reasons for this.

Especially found among native English speaking people, there is a phenomenon referred to as the **sour-bitter confusion**. Sour may happen to be called bitter and vice versa. It seems that one reason for this phenomenon to appear is that the affected people have more cultural experience with sweet and salty foods than with sour and bitter foods. And of course the incorrect labeling of typically sour foods as bitter, for instance, bitter lemon, causes the phenomenon to expand. It is good to be aware of this as it may impact the way you understand your sensations when tasting a cigar.



TACTILE SENSATIONS

On the tongue and throughout the mouth, we can sense certain components of the smoke that stimulate the trigeminal nerves and touch receptors.

Spicy, cooling, creamy, dry are the most common tactile sensations that we encounter in a cigar.

Some are physical, some are chemical reactions. Knowing this helps us differentiate among sensations.

Knowing the differences among all the sensations that "flavor" includes, helps us naming those sensations correctly.

The "dry" sensation is also confused with the "sour" taste. The sour taste stimulates the production of saliva, whereas the "dry" tactile sensation, as its name says it, generates a sensation that dries the mouth.

Creamy is another tactile sensation that does not necessarily come with "luscious" aroma descriptors. For example, milk or chocolate aromas may be found in a "dry" and "savory" cigar.



NICOTINE

Nicotine is an alkaloid. Its levels of concentration vary from the root to the buds of the tobacco plant, based on many different factors, including the variety of the tobacco plant, the foliage position, the sunlight and temperature exposure of the plant, the fermentation process.

Nicotine level is normally measured during a cigar tasting by evaluating the perceived intensity at the larynx. Sometimes this can be confused with other irritating sensations in the smoke. Therefore, some people measure it in the nose. Some others simply evaluate the strength of a cigar by the "buzz" they feel during or after the smoke.



CHAPTER 4

WHAT ELSE IS IMPORTANT?

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WHAT ELSE IS IMPORTANT WHEN TASTING A CIGAR?

Priming is the term that refers to the overall tasting preparation. It includes physical and mental aspects. Such guidelines are imperative for analytical tastings, but help you understand the cigar also when you smoke in leisure mode.

Bear in mind that tasting is not the prerogative of geniuses or of super tasters. We all have a sensory memory and can all succeed in picking up "flavors". You can apply some practical tips explained in chapter 3.

Dealing with your own cognitive errors, also known as biases, represents the more challenging activity.

In fact, even if your sensory system works well, your mind gets in the way, in any possible way.

There are many different types of biases, motives are part of them. In addition, personal taste often risks to play a huge role in cigar evaluations.

If you found a reviewer that seems to have a taste similar to yours, that's great! However, if you wonder why the strategy only worked for a short time, now you know why: this is not just about cloning somebody else's tastes, it's about cloning their biases and embracing their motives.



"...PEOPLE DON'T JUST EAT
FOOD, BUT ALSO WORDS,
AND THE TASTE OF THE
FORMER IS OFTEN OUTDONE
BY THE TASTE OF THE
LATTER."

-
- ALBERT KORZYBSKI

THIS IS WHY YOU ARE MUCH BETTER OFF IF YOU
DEVELOP YOUR OWN PALATE!

C I G A R S E N S E . C O M

5

CHAPTER

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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GOING BIGGER

If this small e-book intrigued you, you can get a much deeper and complete understanding of cigar tasting in this course.

Also, you can explore and experiment with your personal preferences, get personalized cigar recommendations, see many analytical reviews, rate cigars, write your own tasting notes, search in our large database and more at cigarsense.com:

T E L L Y O U R F R I E N D S T H E Y C A N
G E T S T A R T E D F O R F R E E

C I G A R S E N S E . C O M

REFERENCES

The list would be too long for this e-book, which is a collection of summaries of articles, podcasts and fractions of A Cigar Tasting Course. Such works, all available from Cigar Sense, contain the exhaustive lists of references for the specific topics.

IMAGE CREDITS

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