

El Reloj: An Ybor City Institution

By Vikki Moran

In the late 1890s, while the first Ellis Island Immigration Station was opening, Julius C. Newman and his Hungarian family were settling in Cleveland, Ohio.

As many immigrant families have done before and since, Julius came to the United States to join family that had settled earlier, paving the way for those who followed.

Neither a hub for the immigrating Hungarian population nor the cigar capital of the world, Cleveland is where Julius got his start in the cigar industry.

His mother secured her then-14-year-old son an apprenticeship so he could learn the art of cigar rolling in a family barn.

The apprenticeship led to the founding of what today is America's oldest family-owned cigar company, El Reloj—Spanish for “the clock.” The last operating cigar factory in Tampa—known as the Cigar

City—it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Ybor City National Historic Landmark District.

It is within these walls that Drew Newman—fourth generation of the family cigar dynasty and the company's general counsel—chats about the past, present and future of J.C. Newman Cigar Co.

“I actually work from my grandfather's office, and think every day about what it all means,” says Drew, who works alongside his father, Eric, and uncle, Bobby.

The company's staying power is based on a command of manufacturing operations, a healthy respect for the past and a deep love that translates to a passion for their product.

From humble beginnings in Cleveland, Julius and his sons gained recognition for their craft. When the family saw a future in premium cigars, Stanford—one of J.C.'s two sons and Drew's grandfather—was tasked with finding a factory in Tampa.

Catering to Cigar Lovers

Steeped in history, cigar smoking has been viewed as a status symbol, exemplifying strength and relaxation.

It has been enjoyed by everyone from Al Capone to Winston Churchill and John Kennedy, with growing numbers of female smokers and aficionados.

In addition to opening their factory to the public, the Newman family has created upscale, friendly respites for cigar lovers.

Located nationwide, Diamond Crown Cigar Lounges have a knowledgeable staff that guide smokers through an array of choices. For updated listings on lounges, visit jcnewman.com.

He happened upon the Regensburg Co. factory. It was started in 1886 by legendary Cuban revolutionary Vincent Ybor, who founded the immigrant-populated cigar manufacturing town of Ybor City just outside Tampa in 1885. Regensburg Co. ceased operations at this location in 1952.

The Newman family reopened the doors in 1954, restoring the hourly chimes on the building's brick clock tower. The working chimes is the reason for the factory name.

“Cigars shaped our cultural fabric here in Tampa,” Drew says.

Other cigar brands headed to the area to set up shops, but J.C. Newman is the only remaining independent maker.

Drew says blending and rolling cigars is an art form, with each all-natural tobacco leaf having its own flavor profile.

The J.C. Newman Co. creates cigars much the same way as it did decades ago, beginning with blending a variety of tobacco leaves, then rolling them either by hand or on 90-year-old machines.

“Machines are still considered state of the art, even though they are now antiques,” Drew says. “We do our own repairs and actually make our own machine parts.”

To celebrate the rich history of cigar making in Ybor City, Drew opened J.C.



The four generations of the Newman cigar dynasty start with Julius C. Newman—shown in the painting on the wall—and include his son, Stanford, seated, great-grandson Drew, left, and grandsons Eric, center, and Bobby. PHOTOS COURTESY OF J.C. NEWMAN CIGAR CO.



Drew carries on a family legacy, serving as J.C. Newman Cigar Co.'s attorney.

Newman's working factory to tours and created a museum and interactive theater of cigar-rolling films.

He says visitors—who can take cigar hand-rolling classes—are split evenly between nonsmokers and cigar aficionados.

"It makes sense, since cigars and Tampa/Ybor are so closely aligned," Drew says.

A top-to-bottom tour of El Reloj runs about one hour and 15 minutes, taking guests through the process of cigar making both by hand and on the antique cigar machines, the Newman family legacy and the history of Cigar City.

The museum touches on history, Cuban culture, engineering and architecture.

Three stories high and one city block long, the historic factory appeals to cigar

enthusiasts, history buffs, and those with interests in manufacturing and technology.

"This building and our lobby museum mean so much to me because it is all part of the legacy of my family," Drew says. ■

The cost for tours is \$15 for adults, and \$12 for seniors, students and veterans. Tours are available Monday through Friday at 9:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. Make reservations to ensure your desired slot is available.

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