

PASSION for TASTE



Naresh Mohan showing
Tuanku Jaafar and Tuanku
Najmuddin the auction lots
before the Habanos Royal
Charity Dinner Auction.

A Cigar Aficionado

A passion for cigars has made Trinidad Holdings' Managing Director, Naresh Mohan one of the best-known cigar aficionados in this country. A passion that began as entertaining fun in a young boy but which led to the building of a cigar empire in Malaysia and a life many imagine but few live. PASSIONS caught up with this delightfully down to earth, driven, fun to be with and passionate individual and we learnt a lot about cigars in a pretty short period of time!

"I developed an interest in cigars at quite a young age...uhhh...just about the legal age," he said, neatly covering his slip. That little hesitation itself makes us wonder whose perspective of legal age that would be... As a boy, Naresh enjoyed occasional smoke with his friends, never mind the fact that he stole the cigars from his father in the first place! A

thrilling experience for a young inquisitive boy who even at that early age needed to add a little spice into his life...a prelude of things to come.

A Seed Is Sown In Malaysia

When Naresh first came to Malaysia in 1993, hailing from Singapore, he found that there were quite a lot of cigar aficionados here. However, he realised that cigar smokers who enjoyed Cuban cigars did not really have a spot to purchase the cigars. Only the Davidoff cigars, a Dominican cigar variety, were available at that time. So, Naresh and Datuk Sulaiman, his cigar comrade, decided that it would be good idea to open a cigar shop that offered a variety of good cigars to the local people.

"It is always with good friends and good company that you really enjoy your cigar."

Naresh got into this business because it was our passion and we enjoyed it", he reflects. It wasn't about a great business plan, it was about doing what they loved and enjoyed. Once they had secured the rights to be the distributors of Cuban cigars in Malaysia, they opened their first shop in Lot 10 in 1994. Gradually, Naresh expanded their business throughout Malaysia by making cigars available in hotels and top restaurants so that more people may have access to the cigars.

Naresh's luck was with them because, as time passed, cigars became a global trend and their business was already primed when the cigar boom happened in the mid-90s.

Early Perception of Cigar Smoking In Malaysia

In the past, cigars and cigar smoking were a common pastime among Westerners and it was pretty much a cultural activity. Cigars were looked upon as a "super premium product" while cigar smoking was frequently "associated with personalities, accomplished people and very rich people". It was only during and after the world war when foreign powers came and occupied Malaysia that we started acknowledging cigars as a leisurely activity.

Nevertheless, there was a great need to educate the public regarding the frequent misconceptions about cigars and cigarettes. According to Naresh, a lot of marketing activities were done and are still being done "to make a clear distinction between cigars and cigarettes", although many people bundle it up and call it tobacco.

Naresh likened the two as being similar to the very different experiences of driving a Perodua and a Mercedes or BMW. However, he was glad that more people have come to distinguish the differences. "Tobacco is different, it is aromatic and not as pungent as cigarette smoking," he says. Though many people have come to accept the aroma of cigar smoking around them, they are still quite resistant to the idea of staying in a place filled with cigar smokers.

The cigar smoking itself is considered to be a very special experience for Naresh and every other cigar aficionado like him. According to him, it usually after a meal that he and his fellow cigar comrades indulge themselves with cigar smoking.



Jeffery Pereira, Malaysian Country Manager of VISA (Left) and HE Pedro Monzon Barata, Cuban Ambassador in Malaysia (Right) were strong supporters of the Festival Cubano, seen here with Naresh at the finale of the festival.

"While you chat among your friends and light up your cigars, you just tend to lose track of time because you are enjoying yourself immensely". He proudly revealed that he has been lucky to do this all over the world. The conversations that they have usually revolve around various topics, not just a particular one.

To the cigar lovers smoking cigars is not just about experiencing the aroma and taste of cigars, it is based on the concept of sitting with your friends and relaxing and sharing views among one another. And as Naresh puts it, "It is always with good friends and good company that you really enjoy your cigar".

Made-in-Malaysia Cigars

In Malaysia, the cigar industry has grown tremendously from the time Naresh started and over these years, the industry has grown "more than ten folds in terms of volume and consumption". In fact, Malaysia has its own cigars as well; the Borneo from Sabah and De Kayang from Perlis.

Unfortunately, according to Naresh, the Borneo cigars did not really perform well

in the market as it did not reach the volume targeted. Nevertheless, the De Kayang cigars are doing quite well and are "on the right track".

Having been in this field for a long time, Naresh believes that it will take a long time before any Malaysian made cigars are recognised in this world as a premium product because of the challenges that they have to face in making a good cigar. He said that the cigar making business is something that has evolved over 500 years, something that has been passed on from generation to generation, and which involves the combination of the soil for tobacco growing, the climate and especially the skill.

The Art Behind The Smoke

"It is not just about rolling cigars, there is a lot of skill and passion involved in the making of cigars...it starts from the time you plant the seed...that's what makes a great cigar," Naresh explains.

Apparently, different countries employ different methods of making cigars, the major differences include the rolling of cigars, the skill of rolling of cigars, and the tobacco itself. The tobacco that is grown in Cuba is "very strong, full-bodied tobacco" and though the tobacco grown in other parts of the Caribbean are good, it is "sometimes not as rich as the Cuban tobacco".

Naresh explains that apart from having rich tobacco, the blending of tobacco is equally important, and "it is a combination of tobacco growers and the blenders that brings different tobacco together". Finally, the ingredient that makes people want to come back for more is the consistency. The ability to continuously deliver the same essence in the cigars that are produced, at every single time, "that's what the Cuban's have mastered and it takes a long time to get there."

Cigars - A Lucrative Business

Currently, the most expensive brands available in the market from the Cuban cigars are Cohiba and Trinidad. These cigars are expensive because the tobacco is double-fermented and are rolled in a specific factory known as El Laguito. Most of these super premium cigars cost about RM130 to RM140 each. Apart from these cigars, the vintage cigars auctioned at auction houses like Christies and Sotheby's also fetch prices that can go up to 500P to 20,000P for a box of cigars, or more depending on the bidder. These cigars are rare and exceptional, normally made before the Cuban revolution, such as Dunhill and Davidoff. Collectors pay heavy premiums on cigars like these. A cigar stick can cost RM600 per stick or maybe even RM1000 per stick.

Having secured the rights to distribute Cuban cigars in Malaysia, one may wonder how has the relationship between Cuba and Naresh been faring all these years...There is a close relationship, which dates back to 13 years ago in 1993, when Naresh first went to Cuba. It was the people, the atmosphere and the way of life there...he just fell in love with the place. "The people were proud and passionate about what they do, they were friendly even during their hard time after the collapse of the USSR," he reflected.

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Naresh is happy to say that the relationship has only grown deeper and this business has allowed him to go back frequently. So much so, his wife, Sue Wahab, calls it his "annual pilgrimage". Though they no longer do retailing, they are still working with retailers while concentrating more on the distribution and supply of cigars. Just recently in May, they concluded the Cuban festival, Festival Cubano 2005, where they toured the country with a chef and cigar roller, trying to expose the Cuban culture to the local people here.

Naresh can now proudly say that today "you can find young executives picking up cigars and enjoying it" as they have managed to change some of the earlier perceptions on cigars. And we thank the untiring passionate drive of the ambassador of Cuban cigars, Naresh Mohan in sharing his love for cigars with the rest of the country.

Victor Sassoon of the Corum being shown one of the auction lots.

