

Cigar Lounges:

Cigar aficionados are still able to find sanctuary in Southern California

by Roy Robertson

If you consider enjoying a fine cigar to be one of life's simple pleasures, you know that in California, finding a place to sit down and smoke that cigar isn't quite so simple. State laws restrict smoking in most indoor public places, which since 1998, has included bars and restaurants. Subsequently, smokers have been snuffed out at some parks and beaches, at stadiums, and in some cases, entire communities. In California today, it's difficult to find a place to smoke outside, let alone indoors.

Yet, cigar lounges are sanctuaries where cigar smokers can congregate, and in some cases, even enjoy a glass of wine or a pint of beer with their cigar. A customer at one San Diego downtown cigar lounge marveled at the very idea.

"I can smoke, drink and watch football? That's almost like I live in America!" he said, drawing laughter from those in the lounge, saying as he departed, "All right group; enjoy your freedom!"

Tom Kalasho, owner of the Kearny Mesa Excalibur Cigar Lounge says state restrictions work to the advantage of the cigar lounge owner. "If people can't smoke cigars on the beaches or in the parks," he reasons, "they're going to be looking for a place to smoke."

Though few and far between, *Southern California's cigar lounges have carved out their own distinctive niches and developed their own faithful clientele.* In their humidors, there's quite a bit of commonality, but each local lounge has its own unique personality. For this issue, we visited several of San Diego's hot spots for cigar smokers.

Although some are tucked away in nondescript strip malls you may pass without notice, three of San Diego's most popular cigar lounges are within a few blocks of the Gaslamp Quarter downtown. At 5th and Island, Cesar Cigar Lounge and Wine, (503 5th Avenue; 619.233.3166) is arguably the most upscale, and certainly the most ambitious, of San Diego's lounges. Cesar Espinal, the general manager, is close to completing an expansion that will add a new Caribbean fusion restaurant named Mangu, as well as a full liquor license, and an extended patio, which is perfect for people watching in the Gaslamp. Bar manager Pedro Martinez says that cigars will still be a focal point of the operation, even after the restaurant opens. "We want people to understand the cigars are still going to be here," he says. You'll be able to eat here, have a nice drink and smoke a cigar after dinner." Inside, Cesar has a well-stocked walk-in mahogany humidor, whose climate feels like much like his native Dominican Republic. The lounge is nicely appointed with dark wood bar stools and tables inside and out. Wine is served by the bottle or glass, and a diverse selection of draft and bottled beer is available.

Just a few doors up is the Cuban Cigar Factory (551 Fifth Avenue; 619.238.2496), owned by Art Kalasho. The Kalasho family can be considered the 'first family' of San Diego cigar lounges. Three brothers, who emigrated from

Iraq in the early Eighties, operate their own individual lounges. Art, who operates the lounge with partner Rod Razooky, says the Kalasho brothers are supportive of one another, and of their customers' needs.



"We work together. If one of us needs something, we know we can always go to another brother." You can't miss the tall carving of a Native American holding a cup of cigars at the modest entrance to the Cuban Cigar Factory. Latin music plays overhead, and a few brightly painted Cuban murals add color to the narrow brick-lined building. The setting is simple and unpretentious, with just a handful of tables where regulars enjoy their favorite brands, or a cigar handmade on premises by a full time cigar roller. Walking down Fifth Avenue, you can watch Julio Ramirez practice his craft from the street, rolling a blend of Oliva and Rocky Patel tobaccos for the house brand.

Two blocks away, Tabac Specialty Coffee & Cigars (589 Third Avenue, 619.342.1380), sits just on the periphery of the Gaslamp, and offers a quieter setting for conversation over cigars. Its bright lounge and patio have a comfortable bistro feel. Tabac caters to the

late night Gaslamp crowd, staying open until 3 am on the weekend, serving European desserts and specialty coffees as well as hand rolled cigars.

Tabac is the offspring of the Gran Havana Cigar Factory, which became the victim of an eminent domain action imposed by the city. The ruling, which makes way for a new hotel, resulted in the demolition of Ahmed Mesdaq's Gran Havana, and subsequently, the creation of Tabac, operated by his brother Sol. More than thirty types of Gran Havana cigars, which are equally flavorful and affordable (especially when purchased by the bundle), can be found in the humidor. Sharing a hookah pipe filled with fruit-flavored tobaccos is the preference of many younger visitors and female patrons, say the Mesdaqs. Among their clientele is Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who Ahmed says "just wandered by" Gran Havana a few years ago, "and became a patron."



A few miles north, in San Diego's Old Town, you'll find Churchill Cigar Lounge (2415 San Diego Avenue; 619.546.7758), an airy courtyard patio lounge adjacent to the Old Town visitor information center. Owner Dani Hurmiz stocks a number of rarities in his display case humidor, such as the Oliva Series V. Churchill is one of only seven statewide retailers where the cigar

can be found. Hurmiz complements the elite collection of cigars he carries with fine boutique wines he purchases on regular trips to Napa. He says his visitors come in as much for wine as cigars.

"We have higher end premium cigars for our customers," says Hurmiz, "and we have relationships with the companies where we get special allocations and reserves. We sell only the best quality wines and the finest cigars." Dani also cited the ambience of the Old Town patio, which seats up to 25, as another draw to his visitors. Special events which pair wine tastings with cigars are staged regularly. Churchill recently installed 54 mahogany lockers available for rental on a monthly basis. For customers concerned about Old Town's parking crunch, Churchill offers an underground garage accessible from Conde Street.

The former owners of the Churchill Cigar Lounge, Tom and Nathan Kalasho, decided to leave the Old Town location, and its steady stream of tourists, to cater to locals in two small strip mall locations on Miramar Road and Clairemont Mesa Boulevard. Nathan operates Excalibur Fine Cigars and Wine Bar (7094 Miramar Road; 858.549.9952) across from MCAS Miramar. The lounge's manager, Matt Sloman describes it as "definitely a destination location," tucked away along the corridor of carpet and furniture stores that line the boulevard. The entry takes you directly into the humidor, which you pass through en route to a bright, spacious lounge with a bar at the rear of the shop. Two flat panel TVs hang above the marble bar, and the leather sofas and wine racks atop hardwood floors give the lounge the feel of the 19th hole at a golf club. "Nathan and I tried to make this like your living room," explains Sloman.

Of the relaxed atmosphere his regulars enjoy, he says, "It's therapy. Guys sit down and talk for a few hours before heading home." But, he stresses, it's definitely not for guys only. He points out that a group of women had been in the night before. "We don't want this to be a gentlemen's club," Sloman says.

The third Kalasho brother, Tom, operates the Kearny Mesa Excalibur Fine Cigars and Wine Bar (8199 Clairemont Mesa Boulevard; 858.277.1148). Tom's lounge is similarly configured to the Miramar location, but proportioned differently. The humidor in front is larger and has one of the best selections in San Diego; the lounge in back is smaller, darker,

and not quite as well ventilated as brother Nathan's. Excalibur in Kearny Mesa is located in what Tom Kalasho jokes is "the men's center," noting his neighbors in the strip mall include a strip club, as well as a woodworking store and Men's Wearhouse. On my first visit Tom greeted me as though I was a regular, spending an hour talking over

a cigar and a Stella Artois from the bar. "It's better when you run the show as a business owner," he says of his seventy-plus hour work weeks. Clearly, he enjoys being a hands-on owner, as he greets regulars and newcomers on a Friday afternoon, saying, *"This is a social opportunity. People just want to come in, spend an hour and relax."*

A mile up the boulevard, people are relaxing while gathered around an enormous TV at Liberty Tobacco (7341 Clairemont Mesa Boulevard; 858.292.1772). Seldom is there a time when there aren't a dozen regulars inside Liberty's lounge, outside on the patio, or congregating around the entryway. Liberty is one of San Diego's most well-known, and well-stocked, cigar shops, and there's no pretense to the lounge at Liberty Tobacco. It's strictly casual comfort for the steady stream of visitors who want to roll up their sleeves and light up a cigar. Seeing fifteen guys gathered around the big screen watching the comedy spoof "Galaxy Quest" on a Friday afternoon gave Liberty's lounge something of a frat-house feel. Outside, away from the TV, a patron sits quietly working on a laptop, accessing Liberty's wi-fi connection, a scene more from Starbucks than a cigar lounge. Owner Charlie Hennegan has been running Liberty Tobacco since 1986, and built his business not only with a great inventory of cigars but also an extensive collection of pipes and accessories, in the addition to the lively lounge.

Clearly, there's more camaraderie than competition among cigar lounge owners who cater to San Diego's cigar aficionados. A fraternity exists among the business owners, who each seem to know one another's operations, as well as the challenges inherent in California's anti-smoking climate.

Tom Kalasho summarizes their situation, saying, "To put up with the taxes and the licensing issues, you've got to love the business."

San Diego isn't the only Southern California area offering excellent respite for enjoying your favorite cigars. When in Southern California be sure to stop by the locations listed below:

Hemingway's Cigar Bar
and Wine Tasting Lounge
La Ceresa Winery
34567 Rancho California Road
Temecula, CA 92591
951.699.6961

Cohiba Cigar Lounge
The River
71800 Hwy 111
Rancho Mirage, CA 92270
760.346.4748

Siglo Cigar Lounge
1000 N Bristol St
Newport Beach, CA 92660
949.553.1891

Ceniza Cigar Lounge
260 E Colorado Blvd, Ste 225
Pasadena, CA 91101
626.795.4664

Cohiba Nightclub & Lounge
110 E Broadway
Long Beach, CA 90802
562.491.5220