



Opposite page, Seven drawer
Italian Gentili humidor.

Humidors

Thinking *inside* the box

If you think of your cigar collection as an investment — and with the price of premium cigars today, how could you believe otherwise - then think of your humidor as the vault that protects your assets; the safe deposit box for smokers who may want to store a few - or a few hundred - away for a rainy day.

The assortment of humidors offered by tobacconists, cigar shops and online retailers is as diverse as an array of financial investment opportunities. From travel tubes to desk-top and display cases, cigar storage built intricately into chess boards and end tables to free-standing cabinets with multiple trays all the way up to towers that look like housings for grandfather clocks, there is no shortage of storage solutions for the cigar smoker. In addition to the fundamental mission of keeping cigars fresh and flavorful, a humidor finely crafted from rich woods then delicately detailed becomes an elegant addition to any room.

Add cosmetic features, more exotic woods and preferred signature labels, and prices can skyrocket. In fact, a fine quality humidor can itself be a major investment, reaching into the thousands, yes, thousands of dollars. Ed Salinas of San Diego's Liberty Tobacco draws the analogy between shopping for a humidor and shopping for a car. "Are you looking for basic transportation, or do you want a car that talks back to you?" he asks.

By Roy Robertson, photography by lowlightstudio.com





He says luxury desktop humidors from the industry's finest manufacturers can run up to \$25,000. (He doesn't specify if these models will talk back to notify you if your cigars are drying out.) However, if you're searching for the best box to protect your cache of cigars, you don't need to break the bank; you just need to invest wisely.

The size, appearance and features included in high-end humidors are largely a matter of aesthetics and personal preference, and don't necessarily factor in to the functionality of the container. The common denominator for all collectors is finding a humidor that creates a protected environment for your cigars, shields them from external elements, and fits comfortably in your budget.

Call it Zen philosophy for storing stogies. You don't have to think outside the box. You need to focus on the box itself.

There's a clear consensus about what goes into a good humidor at any price level. "It comes down to basics: craftsmanship and materials," says Bill Murken of downtown San Diego's Cuban Cigar Factory, citing the humidor's liner and interior hardware as being essential to its performance.

Both Murken and Salinas agree that selecting a humidor lined in 100% Spanish cedar is a must. The construction and alignment of quality brass hinges is also imperative to maintain the integrity of the humidor's seal. If the seal is compromised, the cigars will be too. Similarly, the atmosphere inside the box needs to be controlled at a consistent temperature and humidity level. By adding and regularly conditioning a humidifying element, you provide a higher level of protection for the humidor's contents.



Opposite page, Vented walls are a special feature of this Savinelli humidor. This page, A digital hygrometer (left) provides a more accurate reading than an analog hygrometer (shown on the right).



There really is no mystery to keeping cigars supple and fresh. A basic 70/70 rule applies. A temperature of 70 degrees and 70% humidity is the preferred atmosphere for optimum freshness. A digital hygrometer will give an accurate reading within a two to three percent humidity range, and may be purchased separately or as part of a new humidor. Murken and Salinas are also in agreement that analog hygrometers are poor indicators of a cigar's condition. "It's just an inexpensive metal coil that reacts to humidity. The technology is just not there," says Salinas.

Fortunately for the consumer who doesn't want to spend twenty-five grand on cigar storage, even simple mass produced humidors provide protection as well as aesthetic appeal. Murken lifts a Vector brand humidor at Cuban Cigar Factory that runs about sixty dollars, and holds thirty to forty cigars. "It's a nice humidor at a good price," he says of the simple, cherry veneer

box with a basic divider that splits the humidor into two compartments. "It's well constructed." He suggests that if someone is purchasing their first humidor, or selecting one as a gift and needs only an entry level humidor, they need to set a firm budget. "When someone's starting to smoke, and investing in a humidor, I don't think they should spend more than a hundred dollars," says Murken.

Ed Salinas suggests you go slightly higher to ensure a benchmark for quality. "I would probably push the \$100 mark. At that point, you know the thickness of the wood, and the craftsmanship will be there." He cautions that thinner exterior walls can warp more easily, disturbing the seal, and exposing the cigars to the dehumidified air of the room. Bill Murken agrees that the seal must remain unbroken. "One hundred percent of the difference between an inexpensive and expensive humidor is the seal."



Blowing Smoke

Fine wood grains and travel humidors are sought out by cigar aficionados.

Asked to specify which brands he recommends, Murken suggests Savoy Humidors, a product of Ashton Cigars, as well as Vector. The website, vectorkgm.com, makes online ordering easy and features a nice selection of humidors under \$150. If a buyer is ready to step to a higher price tier for a higher quality product, Murken advocates Diamond Crown. He says the brand offers a high level of quality that's comparable to high-end brands such as Davidoff, "but you're not paying for the label."

Salinas also explains that a premium price will often be attached to a manufacturer with a reputation for quality, while acknowledging, that along with the Davidoff label, "You're getting something very unique. They do make some outstanding stuff." He pulls a Zino brand desktop model embossed with a Dominican Davidoff cigar leaf inlay lacquered into the top from its display case. Its price tag reads \$1,275, but Salinas says Liberty has no trouble moving some of their high-end inventory. "Some individuals want a piece of furniture." However, Salinas is a great proponent of the Daniel Marshall line, a compromise which offers a high standard of quality and artistry for hundreds of dollars less than most elite name brands.

Humidor manufacturers have made options plentiful to suit almost anyone's tastes. Finishes come in a variety of wood grains including mahogany, teak, walnut, burl, cherry and rosewood. Bill Murken says most of his customers favor a traditional look, saying



shoppers tend to lean toward a simple, solid box with little by way of cosmetic trappings. "You can really match up these solids to most of the décor in your home."

Lock and key combinations (which Salinas points out as a nice safety feature if kids are nearby), engraved brass nameplates, patterns and inlays carved into the box have become universal enhancements. Many styles are available with glass or plexiglass lids or front doors with hygrometers visible from the outside. Salinas advocates the clear panel, saying "It allows you to see what you have without disrupting the humidity level by opening the door," and draws an analogy to storing wine properly. "You don't pull all of the bottles out when you go in to the wine cellar. You just pull out one." He says changing the environment as seldom as possible by leaving the humidor closed will preserve its contents.

Other suggestions Murken and Salinas offered to maximize performance include placing the humidor in a room away from direct sunlight or any other heat sources and flaring open the end of a cigar's cellophane wrapper when placed in the humidor.

Cigars can indeed be a fragile commodity, and selecting the right humidor can maximize your return on investment. Sounding a bit like he's speaking of his own children, Salinas says, "If you really want to take care of them, they need to be babied." He says it's all about the tender loving care they need to mature gracefully. He then jokes about taking them from the humidor and "kissing their little heads at night." At least, we think he was joking.