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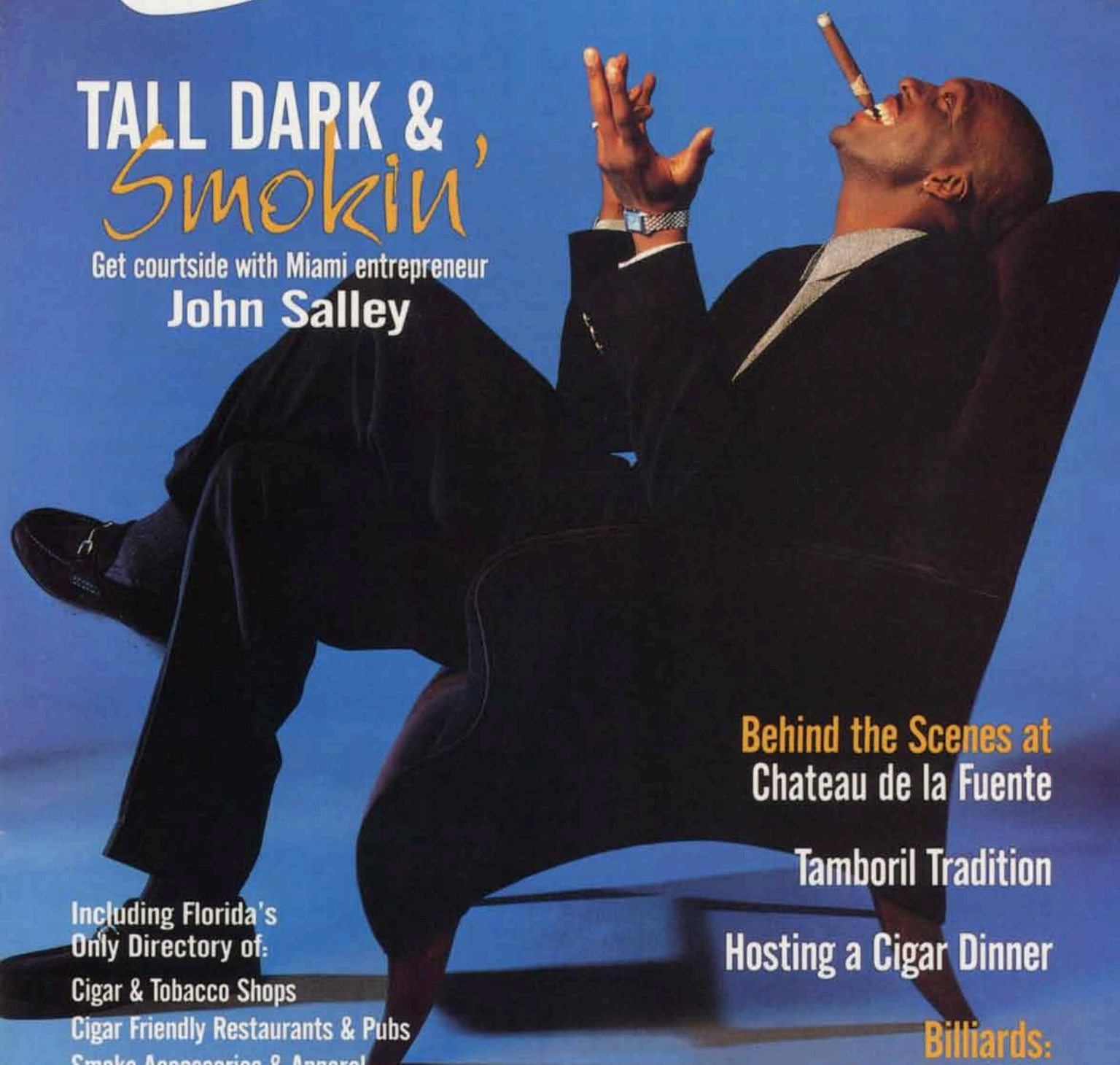
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# Fuente:

## A Word for the Wise



By Linda Janasz & Jeffery D. Zbar



**T**he Fuente family is known the world over as the reigning first family of the cigar industry. While other companies are run by boards of directors and owned by stockholders, Tabacalera A. Fuente y Compania continues to be run by Carlos Fuente Sr., son of

founder Arturo Fuente; son Carlos "Carlito" Fuente Jr.; daughter Cynthia Fuente Suarez and her husband Wayne Suarez.

In an exclusive article culled from a series of interviews held from Fort Lauderdale, and others done on location at the company's factories and plantation in the Dominican Republic, the Fuente family discusses their passion for cigar making, and their visions for the future with *Smoker Magazine*.

### THE ROYAL FAMILY OF PREMIUM CIGARS

The hills of Caribe surrounding Chateau de la Fuente are green with tropical hardwoods and stately royal palms rising high into the Dominican sky.

Yet in these remote foothills, an hour's drive southeast of Santiago, it is the farmlands that give the area its renown character. For it is the tobacco plants themselves, reaching head-high toward the heavens that have captivated cigar enthusiasts the world over.

A cooling breeze whispers among the exquisite leaves, the air gently caressing the senses with a delicate perfumed intoxication. The earth — where it is not blanketed with tobacco plants on this sprawling, 350-acre plantation — is the color of sweet coffee, moist, rich and dark.

Carlos "Carlito" Fuente Jr., president of Tabacalera A. Fuente y Compania, surveys his family's tobacco fields with a watchful and knowledgeable eye. His skill is one honed from 43 years spent as the grandson of family patriarch, Arturo Fuente.

With a dozen thatched drying houses as a backdrop, Fuente makes his way through the fields with master grower Danilo Mocada at his side. Exercising passion and experience, Carlito tenderly inspects a leaf, and smiles. Together, he and his long-time grower, whom Carlos Fuente Sr. himself brought from Nicaragua to oversee the family's Dominican growing operations, carefully examine the plants, ensuring that each has grown to earn its place in a Fuente cigar.

"In order to really understand this business, one needs to touch the tobacco, walk around and sense the vibrations," Fuente says, his voice filled with conviction and sincerity. "There is a culture and history that comes with cigars." He pauses for a moment. "It is my life," he continues, not minimizing the claim.

When asked about his pastimes, Fuente speaks of little more than family and business. "There is no separation between the cigar and myself, not unlike the artist works with heart and soul. It is hard to capture that feeling. It is my blood, and my heritage."

He walks farther through the fields, stopping to inspect another plant. He sweeps his hand across the fields, pointing toward the river that snakes through his plantation, and the block and wood



huts that house the families who call this land home. The sun casts a shadow on the ground.

"This is a blending of nature and of farming. I have dedicated my life emotionally to this," he says, as he breaks off a leaf and drinks in its essence. "It is important to witness it, and to live it."

## RESPECTING A FAMILY HERITAGE

Like a century-old tradition that has been handed down through the generations, Carlito Fuente carries with him the responsibility that is his charge as president of Arturo Fuente, the reigning family of premium cigars.

It was his grandfather, Arturo Fuente, a Cuban émigré, who founded the company in Tampa nine decades ago. Carlos Fuente, Sr., born in Tampa, himself bore a son who has become synonymous with premium cigars. From a Vintage Selection robusto that sells for \$5, to the Fuente Fuente OpusX that can easily fetch \$40, the Fuente's create the most sought after brands in the world. Between their own lines of Ashton, Diamond Crown, Bauza and Diana Silvius and a handful of other brands manufactured in one of six factories in Santiago, Dominican Republic, the Fuente family will produce some 38 million cigars in 1997.

At the turn of the century, Cuba was the leading center for cigar manufacturing. It was a place that was shrouded in a mystique that has captivated the world for decades. From that mythical location, a unique cigar magic and talent blossomed; with it the individuals who spun these enchanting and incomparable cigars. It was there that Arturo Fuente mastered and perfected the art of creation.

Carlos Fuente Sr. has produced cigars in Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico and Puerto Rico. Since 1980, the company has been in the Dominican Republic. Though

he has spent more than a decade living on the island of Hispanola after working in Nicaragua for seven years from the age of 22, Carlito has never forgotten his Cuban — and American — roots.

"Our heritage is definitely Cuban, and we still make our handmade cigars in the Cuban tradition... extremely slowly and meticulously."

## THE PATRIARCH: ARTURO FUENTE

After emigrating to Tampa, FL, in the late 1800s, Arturo Fuente founded the family cigar business. His son Carlos apprenticed at the tender age of eight. Yet, their story is one of intrigue, and cloaked with memories of disaster — and triumph. They are a family that has survived, and prevailed.

The first of many disasters struck Arturo Fuente in the late 1920s, when their factory was destroyed by fire. A man of honor, Arturo swore to pay back his creditors, and worked years for other cigar manufacturers to do so.

By 1930, Arturo had reopened his factory — this time, an extension of his home and life. "My father and I owe a debt that can never be repaid to my grandfather," Carlito says. "He was a man of honor, devotion and loyalty. Not only did he teach us the intricacies of leaf purchasing, tobacco blending and the art of making cigars by hand, he also instilled in us perseverance and a dedication to the art and love of cigar making."

Today, the fourth generation of the Fuente family continues an unbroken line of a heritage that has been the forerunners in the cigar world. Carlito speaks openly and sensitively about the responsibility that has come so naturally to him. "I was born into the factory and my earliest memory is sitting in grandfather's lap. He was smoking a cigar." He laughs.

"I was weaned on milk and tobacco," he says. "I remember Nicaragua at night with gunfire all around



us, we'd be sitting around the domino table with all the great tobacco growers. I would ask about Cuba from these real Cuban masters. I was like a sponge."

He continues, "It has always been a part of my life. I believed that the people who worked with my grandfather were my uncles. They were my family, and tobacco has always been part of our surroundings."

Today, the Fuentes have been internationally recognized for their achievements; Carlos Fuente Sr. is the first living individual to be inducted into the Cigar Hall of Fame. Additionally, both Fuentes Sr. and Jr. were named Tobacco Man of the Year by Tobacco International in 1995. These titles and recognition are representative of an industry that admires, respects and recognizes their talents and their devotion.

"This is a system Carlos Sr. put into place," says Wayne Suarez, Carlito's brother-in-law who helps manage the business. "We're on top of this. We all live here. That's commitment to quality."

## THE ECONOMICS OF TOBACCO

As the company expanded and demand for cigars remained steady, and due to rapidly rising inflation, the Fuente family decided that they could no longer make cigars in Tampa. In the early 1970s, they began to produce their cigars in Nicaragua.

But history and circumstance often dismiss dreams and aspirations. The Sandanista revolution wreaked havoc on the Fuentes as it did a nation, with rebels reducing their factory and society to a heap of ashes. Not dismayed and always adept at transcending tragedy, the Fuentes continued on their quest and moved their operations to Honduras. A few months later, tragedy hit again, and fire ravaged that factory.

Part businessman, part philosopher, Carlito finds solace in the turn of events.

"There is a silver lining to these incidents; fire and revolution hurt us, but not for long," he says. "After each tragedy, our family ties became stronger. I guess, if you really have tobacco in your veins and you are passionate about what you do, you go on. You see, our love for tobacco and cigars gave us the impetus to start all over."

In 1980, the family once again struggled to rebuild their lives and livelihood. With little money and an abundance of conviction, Carlos Sr. mortgaged his home and sold almost everything in their Tampa factory to muster the cash to finance the purchase of a factory in Santiago, bringing Carlito and daughter in tow. They started with only seven employees, and today their cigar empire has expanded to six factories with over 2,500 employees. Yet even in their pursuit, they have enveloped many of their employees as an extension of their kin, and in character, the Fuentes call each employee a "team member."

## EXPORTING A DREAM REALIZED

It is mid-afternoon and the streets of the Zona Franca, or Santiago's Free Zone, are abuzz with activity. Between the cigar makers, garment factories and other exporters, thousands of workers come from the city and surrounding villages to work within these walls.

Always the innovator, one of Fuente's six properties is a bus lot, where a half-dozen aged school buses lie in wait to fetch workers from their homes in the tobacco rolling town of Tamboril 15 minutes toward the mountains. At day's end, the same busses ferry workers home again. What once was a novel and even incendiary idea — early on, local workers were threatened by the influx of labor — today has become commonplace to many companies in the Zona Franca. Even other cigar companies perform the task, as Tamboril is steeped in cigar-skilled labor willing to work in Santiago.





From just inside the loading dock outside A. Fuente factory No. 1 — one of six in the free zone — there's a rising cacophony of sound. Men load box after box of cigars into an 18-wheeler backed up to the opened steel door, with armed aduana or customs agents standing watch. Like every load that leaves this dock, this truck will head for the airport for direct shipment to Miami. The Fuentes send nothing by ship; demand is too great to wait.

The energy that pervades this place is palpable. Inside, more than 600 employees scurry about. Beyond a glass picture window that offers a broad view of the assembly room floor, hundreds of factory workers work in every stage of cigar manufacturing. Bunching, binding and rolling are going on at a break-neck pace, but no one appears rushed. Instead, they're motions seemingly synched to the rhythm of the Cuban brass and drums playing strong and loud from the concert loudspeakers perched overhead.

The place is rocking. Rollers smoke cigars as they twist up new ones — anywhere between 75 to 200 a day. Any one of 30 supervisors inspect single cigars as they emerge from the rollers' hands. They'll then ferry bundles to a caged inspection area — also known as aduana within the company — where the supervisors' handiwork is rechecked, and where the cigars are measured for weight, length and ring gauge and felt for tightness and wrap quality. They then are sent off to the aging vaults and stacked according to the numbers penned on the paper that holds 50 together.

"Nothing's in words," Carlito says. "The only ones who know what those numbers represent are my father and I."

Carlito Fuente and Suarez walk the floors in confident strides. Almost innately, they observe their surroundings without obvious attention. There is authen-



Carlos Fuente, Jr. with Master Grower Danilo Mocado (with hat).

tic respect for the Fuentes, and that respect is shown in kind. Carlito stops and speaks with one of his team members. His voice is thoughtful. He smiles often.

As he walks through the factory, Carlito discusses a brief history of the Fuente's expansion.

"Nine years ago we outgrew our original factory and built factory No. 2. You see, a great many people had become loyal consistent purchasers of our cigars," he says.

There have been three more such construction booms since, with the most recent to emerge being an sprawling box factory and manufacturing facility outside the Zona Franca in a free zone Fuente is building for the company. The Fuentes are one of the very few cigar manufacturers who experienced sales growth several years before the current cigar "revolution."

Once again, Carlito combines his fervor for the industry with the overwhelming success of A. Fuente cigars.

"I firmly believe that the foundation for the consumer

demand for our products is that we have a great passion for cigars, and an overwhelming desire to make the best cigars in the world."

## THE SUPERIORITY OF DISTINCTION

One distinctive ingredient that differentiates a Fuente cigar is the smooth, rich, reliable flavor that captivates smokers. The Fuentes maintain that cost will never interfere with their goal of superior excellence. It is estimated that they may have the largest inventory of aged, vintage tobaccos. In fact, within one of the buildings, which also houses the company's administrative offices, are thousands of bales stacked high on metal racks. Some date back to the 1970s, others were bought in 1997. All will be used.

"We paid prices, however high the costs, to get those leaves," Fuente says. "You can't make cigars without tobacco, and you can't make great cigars without great tobaccos. Whatever we do to make outstanding cigars is determined by our hearts, not our pocketbooks."

Because the Fuentes only roll the finest tobacco into their products, they are consistently faced with a finite supply of the rare tobaccos that they blend into the two series. In turn, one of their greatest challenges in consistently producing some of the world's finest cigars is the often limited product supply that is available to their loyal customers.

While awe-inspiring tobacco bales stacked high in the factory draw wonder from visitors, more impres-

sive are the cedar-lined, climate controlled aging vaults that store the finished product for months. Upward of 500,000 Hemingways will spend a half-year being rotated through the vault, with each step logged onto a clipboard.

The aging process allows separate strains of tobacco in the blend to combine flavors, Fuente maintains, so rushing the process will short-change mother nature's natural process.

"This is just like a child. The whole history of the cigars is documented," Carlito says, pausing to close the vault.

"We deeply regret inconveniencing our smokers who would like to purchase more Hemingways and Don Carlos," he offers, explaining that those two premium lines are among the most oversold in the industry. "Even though we are releasing more of these cigars this year than ever before, we just can't keep up with demand."

## AN EVOLVING INDUSTRY

As the business evolves, there have been many transformations in an industry that has been steeped in tradition. At one time there was an accepted gentleman's code, where together, leaders would break bread with dignity and integrity.

This is no longer the case, says Carlito, as he sipped a Dominican Soberana beer and enjoyed a Fuente Fuente OpusX double corona while dining at the upscale Argentine bistro, Messaluna, just minutes from the Zona Franca.

"Cigars have become big business. I have seen many people join the cigar world, not because of family or heritage, but because they want to make a quick buck," Carlito says. "There have also been a lot of wonderful individuals who have come in with new ideas and young blood, but unfortunately, many did not enter for the right reasons. Yet, I also believe that the cigar 'revolution' of the past five years will remain," he continues. "So many young men and women in the past few years have tried cigars, loved the taste and experienced the relaxation one can experience with them. Undoubtedly, the sale of premium cigars will not perpetually rack up 50% annual increases; that is not to be expected. But, I do believe that we shall see sales of handmade cigars continue to go up for many, many years to come."

What will set the Fuentes apart from their competition in the years to come? Personal drive and commitment to a quality product, Carlito says. His father has set the example for A. Fuente and other premium cigar makers. Set a goal, achieve it, then move the goal line up a notch, he says. He sets that standard even today, as the 62-year-old man spends upward of 18 hours each day — including weekends — in the factory, checking



PHOTO BY JEFFERY D. ZBAR



PHOTO BY JEFFERY D. ZBAR

Wayne Suarez, of  
A. Fuente Cigar Company

inventory, working the numbers, shepherding the company with the fortitude of a young man. Carlito has learned well; ask him his pastime, and two words arise: family, which includes his wife and two daughters, and cigars.

As the industry continuously evolves, his dedication to their product and its

success is clear.

"I am like a raging bull and there is a red cape in front of me," he says. "I am clearly focused on our success. You see, there is no other area in my life. Everything that I do have is for making cigars. And, I am the happiest man on earth, and the only thing I would do... is more."

One of the apparent motivators for Carlito is the joy that he receives knowing that smokers worldwide realize pleasure from his cigars. Carlito himself would inspire jealousy from his patrons. During his day in the factory, walk a publisher and journalist on a tour, the breast pocket of his guayabera puffed with up to a half dozen Fuente Fuente OpusXs — a gold mine sewn of cotton to any impassioned cigar smoker.

"When I have the opportunity to attend conventions, and people come up to me and tell me about the joy that they receive from a cigar that bears my family name, it fuels my soul, motivates me, and creates a fire that comes from within."

## HERITAGE, COMMITMENT, DEVOTION AND PASSION

Love and devotion are only rivaled by dignity and price in the Fuente family. Numerous family members, and a handful of close confidants, are a part of the



team that has made their cigars leaders in the industry. Cynthia, Carlito's sister, has been a vital component of the Fuente team since her college days. Today, she is a strong right arm for her father and is an integral to the direction of their administration.

The warm, bearded presence of Cynthia's husband, Wayne Suarez, represents the company nationally at cigar dinners, Big Smokes and trade shows. Carlito's wife Rosita has taken on an active role by serving as administrator in one of the factories, in addition to handling public relations in the Dominican Republic.

As the fourth generation continues to grow strong, there is the hope that the next generation will one day take over the reins.

"With God's will, the cigar brands that bears our family name will still be in great demand when the eighth, ninth and later generations of Fuentes are running the show."

As the sun begins to set over the Dominican hills, soft and rich pink hues cover the land. A velvety breeze makes its way through the lush fields. Carlito is looking over the family's acreage, speaking of plans — more drying houses, maybe a homestead of their own on the plantation. And he speaks of history, and how the two grow strong together.

"I have witnessed our ups and downs," he says thoughtfully, looking across the land that supports his family's life and name. "From Cuba to Tampa, and finally here...I know what it means to experience fires, embargoes and numerous other trials that have threatened us, yet we have persevered."

Carlito pauses, pensively, lights his double corona, and begins again.

## FUENTE FUENTE OPUSX AND UNIVERSAL DEMAND

Even with the impressive success of their other cigars, never in the history of the industry has there ever been such an immediate and overwhelming demand for one brand — their marquee label, the Fuente Fuente OpusX. This cigar has inspired smokers everywhere, and it is ubiquitously considered one of the most important cigars of the century. If the Don Carlos and Hemingway cigar aging vaults represent pent up passion under lock and key, then deeper in the factory is a vault that personifies outright lust. Behind lock and key is the most impressive vault of all: the one that holds the Fuente Fuente OpusX. Set deep within the company and behind a door whose access is computer monitored, the place is the Fort Knox of the cigar industry. Some 840,000 of the charmed wonders lie in wait of packaging and shipment. Some have been aging since 1991, when Fuente first created what would become the industry's most sought-after legal cigar.

The Fuente Fuente OpusX has its roots in their Dominican wrapper plantation, Chateau de la Fuente, which was acquired in 1991 from the family of Angel Oliva, the renown Tampa tobacco growing institution. The acquisition of Chateau de la Fuente, and subsequent additions of land to expand the facility was an important strategic investment.

"It was a tremendous financial risk for us to buy this plantation, but my father and I had a dream of growing world-class wrapper leaves to be used exclusively for the Arturo Fuente cigars," Carlito says. "When we saw our first crop, we decided to develop a cigar made solely from the leaves grown on the Chateau."

It was a decision that they would celebrate.

The first crop was harvested in 1992. Their fervent prayers, drive and ingenuity resulted in tobacco wrappers that far exceeded their expectations. The wrappers were superb: shiny, oily and sumptuous. The Fuentes were able to achieve these results despite the fact that many "experts" told them that great wrapper leaves could not be grown in the Dominican Republic.

Today, many of the Fuente's harshest critics are now attempting to duplicate their efforts by growing wrapper leaves on their farms.

One interesting facet of Fuente Fuente OpusX project was that both Carlos Sr. and Junior agreed to keep the venture secret during the program, calling it Project X. Only a handful of people knew what they

were attempting to develop. Carlito reminisces about the project.

"While we were conducting tests of different tobacco blends, I looked in a dictionary for the definition of the word 'opulent.' I thought this best described these exceptionally rare cigars. I accidentally came across the word "opus" in the dictionary: a masterpiece, a work of a lifetime," says Carlito, himself a skilled musician who also knew from experience the musical application of the word. "We adopted the word opus, and added Fuente Fuente as representative of my father and myself. We then combined it with our code name Project X and the result – Fuente Fuente OpusX."

Today, the manufacture of the Fuente Fuente OpusX is an operation unto itself within the A. Fuente organization. In an upstairs rolling room, chilled with air conditioning and painted in the company's standard mustard yellow, a dozen young Dominican men – almost boys – apprentice at rolling cigars. Overseeing the effort is Ariel Rosario, son of the company's master roller, and himself a master's apprentice.

The Fuentes are keen to keep the apprentices and even the daily rollers of its top brand apart from the rank and file, Carlito says. "We don't want them rushing, competing to roll faster than the others, or picking up habits from other rollers," he says. "We want them to focus only on what we show them. That's why this is the finest cigar."

Once they've graduated from apprenticeship, these rollers will walk a fabled hall built upon ceramic tiles that bear a yellow and brown "X". They'll take their seats, again in a mustard yellow room, and with the music playing loud and strong, they'll work to turn out some 75 Fuente Fuente OpusXs each per day.

From these closed rooms the cigars travel to the secured aging room, where the pungent and sweet aroma of curing tobacco and the ammonia it emits is enough to choke up a newcomer. Carlito, though, seems right at home, sporting a wide, proud grin as he walks past bundles of Fuente Fuente OpusXs.

As he has known for seven years, Carlito is onto something here. He is the caretaker of a brand that has set a new standard in the industry.

His grin, it would seem, is well earned. ☺



PHOTO BY JEFFERY D. ZBAR

*Carlos Fuente, Jr. and publisher Sandy Lechner, in the Fuente Fuente OpusX aging room.*

"I think that when I look back, it is my father that has led us through the fire to safety," he says. "I have the ultimate respect for him. His life and success is a story of love. He was always led by his heart. He is a remarkable human being. He had no formal education; leaving school in the eighth grade to work with his father. He has resisted corporate takeovers, he has even survived Polio, and he has built an empire.

"My father is the backbone of my life, and I don't think he is given enough credit because most people don't have an opportunity to speak with him," he says, thoughtfully. "I could never fill his shoes, but I can follow his footsteps.

"We are very lucky. We have never felt more committed, or more willing to go forward. Each and every cigar will continue to be made with heart."

His hand moves to his chest. "The size of my heart is only growing and it is my goal never to let our smokers down. This is not about money, but about what we love. It is a destiny filled with mystical folklore."

The sun has finally dipped below the mountains in the Dominican; the sky is a smoky blue. The Fuente fields look dreamlike. Carlito once again surveys his land with pride before climbing into his Mitsubishi

Montero for the hour-long ride back to the office, where he has a few more hours of work before calling this Saturday complete.

"I believe that we are building a bridge that bonds people together," he offers, smiling. "Cigars dissolve facades and something magical happens. We are continuing a history and a culture. After all, a cigar is not a cigar... without a person." ☺

