

While Carlos Sr., 77, is technically retired, he is still very involved in and enthusiastic about the work of his "little boy," Carlito.

The Fuente Family

A Century and Still Going Strong

by Frank Seltzer

When a family-owned business makes it for 100 years, it's a big deal. For the Fuentes, it's even bigger because the road has been neither smooth nor easy. In fact, the family has endured many a setback, only to come back stronger than before. Next spring, the Fuentes will celebrate their history, and now refer to 2013 as "year one" of their family's second century in the cigar business.

The story begins in 1906 when 19-year-old Arturo Fuente left his home in Cuba for America. Like thousands of others, he arrived in Key West looking for opportunities in the wake of the Spanish-American War, which had left Cuba's economy in shambles. He was soon rolling cigars in the area's now-fading cigar operations… but he did not stay long.

The remote locale offered precious little real estate, and the constant threat of fire forced cigarmakers to look elsewhere after a devastating blaze swept Key West in 1886. Vicente Martinez Ybor finally settled in Tampa for its huge bay, proximity to the railroad, and favorable climate. There he created Ybor City, which would become one of America's premier cigar-manufacturing areas.

Within the year, young Arturo made his way up to West Tampa. Six years later in 1912, he made the very first cigars to bear his name. At age 25, he had his own three-story factory—A. Fuente & Co. It was one of several hundred cigar companies in the Tampa area during that time and crafted millions of cigars using Cuban tobacco.

By 1924, the Fuente operation had 500 employees and was incorporated with stockholders. Then disaster struck; while Arturo was in Cuba on a tobacco-buying trip, his Tampa factory burned to the ground. This would be only the first time the Fuente business would be destroyed by flames.

Arturo did not have enough insurance to rebuild. In order to support his family and pay off creditors without declaring bankruptcy, he went to work for other cigarmakers. He pushed ahead, even through the Great Depression, and reopened the Arturo Fuente Cigar

A Century of Fuente

1900s

Arturo Fuente leaves his home in Cuba for America.

1910s

At age 25, Arturo Fuente runs his own three-story cigar factory in West Tampa.

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Company with the help of relatives and his elementary-school-aged sons, Arturo Oscar and Carlos. The new factory was not impressive; in fact, it was on the back porch of the family home.

Both Carlos and Arturo Oscar were expected to roll 50 cigars every day after school, and their father trained both in the finer points of blending and curing tobacco. But devastation struck the family again when Carlos was diagnosed with polio, which forced the 11-year-old boy to be quarantined from family and friends. In a biography published by Prometheus and written by Loy Glenn Westfall, Carlos recalled that his father visited him every morning. Through the window, with tears in his eyes, Arturo Fuente would encourage Carlos to fight. "He didn't ask how I felt that day," he said. "He just told me to have faith." Carlos was indeed a fighter and made it through, though he had to learn to walk all over again.

Like Carlos, the rest of the Fuentes pushed ahead no matter the resistance. By the late 1940s, even though there was lots of work, money was tight. The little company needed to expand from the porch so Arturo got another factory—this one a two-story affair that housed the business on the ground floor while the family lived upstairs. Carlos, who opted for work over school, was married by 1953. Despite the increase in the family operation's size, there was still very little money to support Carlos and his family, so both of the younger Fuente men worked for their father while Carlos's wife took a job at another cigar company. In 1954, Carlos had his first child—Carlos Jr., or Carlito as he is commonly known.

By 1957, Arturo was 70 and ready to retire. Initially he thought his elder son, Arturo Oscar, would take over but it was Carlos who spent more time at the factory. He stepped up and bought the business for one dollar, not much money but definitely a bold move for a 22-year-old. It was also at this time that Carlos moved his young family from his father's house and factory in Ybor City to West Tampa.

Carlos had dreams of further building the business. Up until the late '50s, all of the company's cigars were sold in the Tampa area for cash. In addition to making cigars, Carlos sought to expand the reach of the company by allowing customers to buy on credit in markets outside of Tampa, primarily New York City and Florida regions with large Latin populations. It was not easy however, as cigar smokers were very brand-loyal to names like Bering and Perfecto Garcia.

When the Cuban embargo hit in 1962, the cigar landscape changed; according to Carlos, this event leveled everything. He began getting tobacco from Puerto Rico and Colombia to use in addition to his stockpiled Havana leaf. He then worked hard blending tobaccos to come up with a new cigar, something that would replace the popular Clear Havanas that were Tampa's main product.

Even while this leveling of the playing field had every Tampa manufacturer scrambling for new blends, the Fuente business continued to grow. Arturo had always wanted a "real" factory so when the four-story Charles the Great operation in Ybor City became available in the mid-'60s, the Fuentes bought it. Arturo, then in retirement but still active with the company, finally had his large factory. Carlos remained company president and Arturo Oscar left his outside job to serve as vice president.

The '70s brought great changes to the family, beginning with Arturo's death in 1973. To honor his father, Carlos began selling a cigar made from a blend personally crafted by Arturo. Carlos called it the 8-5-8 and, according to published accounts, the name came about because, both forward and backward, it read "85," the age at which Arturo passed. It became a hugely popular cigar that remains a strong seller today. That decade brought other tribulations as well, as inflation ravaged the US, and a lack of Tampa cigar rollers prompted Carlos to look toward Central America, specifically Estelí, Nicaragua, where other Cuban exiles had set up shop.

The Fuentes found a hospitable location there and, for the first time, began to make premium cigars outside of the US while still maintaining the machine made operation in Tampa. Production grew modestly but trouble was on the horizon as the corrupt and brutal regime of Anastasio Somoza had become too much for Nicaragua to bear. Encouraged by the socialist Sandinista party, revolution was in the air by 1978, and Estelí was ground zero (in fact, still today, you can see bullet holes in many of the city's buildings). The uprising caught the Fuentes by surprise and they, like so many in the industry, fled across the border into the safety of Honduras while their factory burned to the ground. However, the Fuentes' foray into Honduras was not to be; within two years, an electrical fire claimed that factory as well.

As 1980 began, the Fuentes were out of options. Completely broke, the company could either exit the premium-cigar business or move once again. Carlos reached out to his son Carlito. Like his father before him, Carlito grew up in the business and fondly remembered his grandfather Arturo, always with a cigar in hand, telling him all about Cuba and its rich tobacco heritage. There was never any doubt that Carlito would enter the family operation. The two put up what little money they could raise and headed to the Dominican Republic, where

1920s
A long rebuilding begins after the Tampa factory burns to the ground.

1930s
Production continues with the help of Arturo's school-aged sons, Arturo Oscar and Carlos Jr.

1950s
Carlos marries and Carlos Jr. (Carlito) is born. Carlos buys the family business for $1.00.

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In the mid-'60s, Arturo Fuente purchased his family's first "real" factory: the Ybor City building that formerly housed the Charles the Great cigar operation.

Tabacalera A. Fuente opened with just seven employees.

Within a stable political climate, the Fuentes slowly began to rebuild. Working 18-hour days soon paid off as Carlos and Carlito gradually saw increasing sales. Then, in 1983, the company introduced the Arturo Fuente Hemingway in the Perfecto shape, a style that was once extremely popular but had since faded into obscurity. Carlito loved the idea of keeping the past alive and convinced his father to scour their Ybor City warehouse for molds to use on this type of cigar. It was fortunate that Carlos had been taught to roll these special smokes (once called "Fancy Tails" by Arturo) because none of the modern *torcedores* knew how. He trained his master roller, who then educated the rest of the team. Due to its unique status as one of the only shaped cigars on the market, the Hemingway was a hit. Of course, this brought some well-deserved attention to the Fuente family.

In 1986, Carlito wanted to do something special for his father. Using a Cameroon wrapper, the family launched the Don Carlos, primarily in the European market but eventually everywhere after it became recognized as one of the finest Fuente cigars. At the same time, Carlos hoped to expand sales while simultaneously lowering costs. His brother Arturo Oscar was in Tampa, where the machine made operation was becoming too much. Carlos approached longtime colleague Stanford Newman to request that the J.C. Newman Cigar Company manufacture the Fuentes' machine made smokes. Stanford agreed and then asked if the Fuentes could, in turn, make handrolled premium cigars for J.C. Newman. "In 1990, Carlos and I expanded our relationship," the late Stanford Newman once said. "He'd continue to make our handmades and we'd sell and distribute his Fuente and Montesino cigars. At that time, he only used brokers and we had a large-selling organization, so we got together and started distributing Arturo Fuente." Since then, the families' bond has grown, and the Newmans now represent Fuente all over the world.

By 1992, Carlos's daughter Cynthia, who'd carried a dual major of marketing and business at the University of South Florida, joined her family in Santiago to help with administration. Her timing was perfect; the Cigar Boom was just beginning and the Fuentes found that they couldn't keep up with demand. To complicate things further, new factories were springing up in Santiago… and stealing rollers from Fuente.

Throughout this very hectic time, something chewed away at Carlito—the fact that there was no wrapper leaf being grown in the Dominican Republic. He vowed to change that and, by 1993, experiments were begun on the farm that would eventually become Chateau de la Fuente. The first crop was a good-looking sun-grown Piloto

A Century of Fuente

1960s

The Fuentes purchase the four-story Charles the Great operation in Ybor City.

1970s

The Fuente family creates the 8-5-8, named in honor of Arturo, who passed away at the age of 85.

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Cubano leaf followed by a shade-grown that proved to be quite an accomplishment. Two years later, the Fuentes released their most expensive and possibly most successful cigar, the Fuente Fuente Opus X, which featured that very Dominican wrapper. That same year also brought tragedy when yet another fire claimed two barns that held over 1,800 bales of aged tobacco. It was certainly a setback but, due to so much previous experience with fire, the Fuentes had diversified by storing tobaccos in many locations.

When the Cigar Boom ended, the Fuentes' success carried on, although their troubles were not over. In 1998, Hurricane Georges ripped through the Dominican Republic, causing over one billion dollars in damages and claiming nearly 400 lives. It destroyed all but two of the Fuentes' curing barns, ruining the wrapper crop for the Opus X. But as Carlito says, when you can't use salt, try pepper. The family held back on the Opus X line and instead developed the Añejo, a cigar with a similar blend but a different wrapper.

The challenges faced by the Fuentes obviously influenced their outlook and, as a result, they wholeheartedly believe in supporting their community. In 2001, the Fuentes and the Newmans formed the Cigar Family Charitable Foundation, which today is recognized by the United Nations as the model of giving back in the Dominican Republic. "We have over 500 children we support in over 13 communities," says Carlito with noticeable pride as he elaborates on the clinic, baseball stadium, amphitheater, elementary school, preschool, and high school that serve a 26-acre area surrounding Chateau de la Fuente. "When the children graduate, they speak three languages. We've already had several graduating classes. They are all in university and each one has received a scholarship."

The Fuentes originally planned to mark their business's 100th year in 2012, and Carlito was excited about the cigars being created to celebrate this milestone. But shortly after last year's trade show, yet another fire destroyed two of the warehouses holding the family's store of aged tobacco, some of which was destined for the commemorative cigars. While this setback delayed the family's anniversary plans, it has not stopped the Fuentes from moving forward. "My responsibility is more than celebrating," Carlito says. "That is why we have this whole campaign, '2013: Year One, Time Begins.' My responsibility and my big contribution to my family is to pass the torch to the next generation."

To celebrate their second century in the business, Carlito and his family will debut the Don Arturo Aniversario Destino al Siglo, a high-end, limited-release smoke offered once a year like the Añejos. Another anticipated launch is the Angel's Share, a white-banded version of the Opus X made with the lightest, sweetest tobacco from the heart of the plant. "It is amazing!" Carlito says. "The idea is, the smoke goes up to heaven; it is the angel's share of the smoke." A percentage of Angel's Share sales will fund the Cigar Family Charitable Foundation. There will also be a third line, a revival of an old family brand called Casa Cuba.

The Fuentes have no plans whatsoever to slow down anytime soon. In fact, they're planning a big party to be held in Tampa next spring. "It is our life. It is our blood and our family," says Carlito. "My father has shown me by example. Still today at 77, he flies to the Dominican Republic every week, not because he has to but because he's worried about his little boy—who's 58. He still wants to help me out. He is the Vince Lombardi of cigarmaking!"

Is adversity a key element in creating exceptional cigars? Who knows? In the case of this long-standing family business, it certainly has played a role. But with such dedication, strength and endurance, is it any wonder that the Fuente family and its cigars have prevailed for over a century?

Carlos, Cynthia and Carlito hardly bear the faces you'd expect of a family that has witnessed so many catastrophes within their business! The resilient Fuentes' positive attitude (not to mention strength, dedication and patience) has certainly helped to make their respected brand what it is today.



1980s

After troubled times in Central America, the company finds a stable environment in the Dominican Republic.

1990s

The Fuentes release their most expensive and possibly most successful cigar, the Opus X.

2000s

2013: Campaign "Year One, Time Begins" celebrates the Fuentes' second century in the business.