

Where ere's Smoke

How times have changed. At the turn of the century, Sieverts Tobacco had a factory by Halifax harbour where employees would hand-roll cigars to be sold in their store on Barrington Street. Over a hundred years later, that store is still on Barrington Street and still boasts cigars and pipes as the cornerstone of business. The factory, however, is long gone — and so are the days of cigar bars and smoking in public. Even the cigar renaissance of the mid-1990s has cooled, when the glossy and celebrity-studded *Cigar Aficionado* seemed to bring back some of the shine on the stogie.

This isn't a bad thing — smoking anything at all is unhealthy, no question. Still, there's something about the cigar as a mark of success, of celebration, of something going right. Of boardroom conspiracy and collaboration. Of dark wood and leather. And though you may no longer be able to walk in and casually browse Sievert's humidors (Nova Scotia law states tobacco products be shielded from consumers), there is still a cigar culture in Atlantic Canada.

"It's not as busy as it once was," fourth-generation Sievert owner Craig Sievert says, "but we're still in business: the cigar will always have a place at a celebration, as a gift, as something to be enjoyed."

On Moncton's Main Street, Keating's Tobacco Shop is equally a landmark institution. Open since 1926, Keating's boasts one of the biggest cigar selections east of Montreal, displayed lovingly in six double-door humidors.

"Our business is still strong," says Joe Vasseur, taking a quick break on another busy day in Keating's. "We see many professionals, business people, tourists. We serve the people looking for a three-dollar throwaway cigar for around the

campfire as well as the aficionado looking for a fine cigar to enjoy with a glass of Scotch."

Vasseur prickles at talk of tobacco laws, drawing a distinction between mass-market cigarettes and small, cheap cigars and the higher end products that are available. "The laws are definitely not friendly to a business like ours," he says. "But we're a speciality shop, catering to a clientele looking for a premium product."

Whether you enjoy a cigar or not, you can still — perhaps — appreciate the nostalgia it evokes. "People today are in a big hurry," explains Sievert. "They rush their lunches so they can get off early and go home. They don't hang around...When they killed public smoking, they took away some of the time people spend together."

Vasseur shares this lament, which is not so much for a cigar smoke-filled room but for a time when busy working folks took time out to relax, reflect and breathe deeply. "It's much the same as enjoying a nice bottle of wine or a nice cut of meat," Vasseur says. "A good cigar is meant to be consumed slowly, at a leisurely pace — not ripped into. It's not a stress-reliever or something you chain smoke. It's a leisure activity."

"Look, cigars are not for everyone. But those who like one are not criminals... everyone should find what works for them. It's about good living."

Cuba vs. everyone else: "You can't really go wrong with a Cuban cigar," says Sievert. Vasseur agrees, adding that Dominican and some Central American cigars are now about equal, though without the marketing dollars behind them. "Quality is increasing across the board," he says.

Size does matter: If you're buying for someone else, try to find out what size of cigar they like. A big fat stogie is not for everyone.

The last word: "Do not light a cigar with a Zippo or oil-based lighter," says Vasseur, "unless you like the taste of petrol." Use a tasteless butane lighter, a wooden match or — if you're really looking to go all out — light a small piece of cedar (available at finer smoke shops) with your match, then use that to light the cigar. "Hold the flame at least half an inch from the cigar, and turn it slowly, four or five times."

Now sit back and relax. That's an order. | ABM

Not a smoker? What's your guilty pleasure or your favourite way to celebrate the good life? E-mail me at stephaniejporter@gmail.com.

It may not be politically correct to start a business meeting with the proffering of an open cigar box, but the cigar culture is still here. You just have to know where to find it.

