

## EXECUTIVE LIFESTYLE

By Jennifer K. Stuller

## Sipping Serenity

*Relaxing with Scotch and cigars in Seattle and beyond*

**ONE** is reputedly an “old man’s drink” and the other a sinfully sensuous pleasure that the health police have virtually outlawed.

Regardless, departing the curved black bar at Seattle’s El Gaucho dinner club one recent evening, relatively young men and finely-dressed women are heading down to the Pampas Room. This night is the quarterly Scotch and Cigar Event, and it will feature pairings as cool as Bogey and Bacall, and as well-matched as Homer and Marge.

Guests will sample a variety of single malt Scotches from the Macallan label and two distinctly different cigars. Ask bartender Karl Sexton for a taste of the best Scotch around and he’ll pour you a Lagavulin that’s been aged for 16 years. It has a peaty, smoky taste that is not for everyone. Perhaps something sweeter? “Try the

Glenmorangie,” says the resident expert. Ah yes, with its port wood finish this 12-year-old whisky hits the spot.

With locations in Seattle, Tacoma and Portland, El Gaucho is one of the top Northwest establishments in which to enjoy a fine cigar – a rarity in this time of prohibition on public smoking. The downtown location has a cigar lounge that’s open nightly and private rooms for rent. Member boxes are also available to rent in two different wall-to-wall humidors. Lined with cedar and temperature-controlled,

**The Macallan is one of the more high-end Scotches on the market and is delectable when partnered with a good cigar.**

the yearly cost of a box rental is \$400. In return you get a \$200 gift certificate to the restaurant and assurance that your investments maintain proper humidity. Each locker is capable of holding three or four boxes and can be personalized with the renter’s name or alias. Current labels include “Jedi” and “A-Rod.”

El Gaucho is not the only Puget Sound restaurant that offers fine Scotch and cigars. The high-end Metropolitan Grill has Scotch and cigar menus that rival El Gaucho’s. Cigars at both are priced between \$8 and \$100. Single malt Scotches are available for roughly \$8 to \$375 per glass.

For a more casual atmosphere, The Pike Pub and Brewery has a ventilated cigar room with leather couches. Because Scotch and cigars can go together like wine and cheese, the brewpub currently offers six different scotch options, including Lagavulin, Glenlivet and Cragganmore.

Because of the expense, rarity and no-smoking laws, the Scotch and cigar market is limited to a few urban, upscale restaurants; clearly, you aren’t going to find a \$375 shot of 50-Year Macallan at Applebee’s, but if you happen to be in eastern Washington, try the members-only cigar room at Niko’s Greek Restaurant and Wine Bar on West Riverside Avenue in Spokane.

Scotch has to be distilled in Scotland and aged for at least three years to qualify as “Scotch Whisky,” but 12 years is somehow a magic milestone. As with wine and coffee, there are specific growing regions for the malted barley that goes into great Scotch, with the highest concentration of distilleries located in Speyside. The single malts served tonight were produced in this Highland town.

Former cigarette smokers have an inherent dread of inhaling and re-acquiring a nicotine addiction. El Gaucho Cigar Captain Steve Smith eases those fears with his good-natured demeanor, cigar savvy and advice on sipping the smoke like wine on the palate. He can be seen quietly providing one-on-one smoking lessons.

First served is the Opus X, which Smith suggests is legendary, precious and something to be savored. And indeed he’s right. However, some believe that nothing beats a Cuban cigar, which currently must be smuggled into the United States. Until Castro dies or American policies change, few will get to make a comparison. But as with wine and barley, soil can be as important as the processing and production.

“Let me tell you something about Cuba,” says Harold Nathan, owner and founder of Victory Cigars – the fastest growing cigar company in the business and the largest supplier of custom label cigars in the world. “I call it Bordeaux.” But as the country stands today, he adds, Cuba isn’t capable of producing what many expect from a “Cuban.”

Besides, exceptional labels such as the Fuente Fuente Opus X are being produced in the more accessible Dominican Republic. “The Opus X is coveted by cigar smokers all over the world,” says Nathan, whose company supplies signature labels for cigar-friendly restaurants such as El Gaucho and the Metropolitan Grill.

So why is the Opus X so special? For one, it’s rare. Only about 750,000 are produced a year. It’s also the first all-Dominican cigar, with wrapper, filler and binder all being produced in that country. Carlos Fuente Jr. had been told an all-Dominican couldn’t be done. Now he’s often stopped and asked to sign autographs. “To some people,” says Nathan, “Carlos Fuente is a god.”



COURTESY OF REMY

**El Gaucho's Steve Smith helps a customer ignite a cigar at the restaurant's cigar lounge. Cigars at the restaurant run from \$8 to \$100.**



SAM TROPP

After smoking an Opus X, there's no doubt that Fuente's celebrity is deserved. An inhalation onto the palate is sublimely reminiscent of drinking a Mexican hot chocolate-velvety and spicy. The Scotch, moreover, is deliciously complimentary.

While the robustos are savored, various whiskies from the Macallan label, including the Sherry Oak 12 years and 18 years, are served. The residual sherry in the oak casks makes these Highland treasures

slightly sweet. But the real treat of the evening is the Macallan Cask Strength. It's rich and spicy — a perfect warming drink for cold Northwest evenings. The hints of vanilla and clove compliment the chocolate and cinnamon of the robusto. This is, indisputably, Scotch and cigar heaven.

Steve Smith looks satisfied. He has a genuine desire to bring these traditional pleasures to the masses and has created a cigar menu to appeal to the average Joe,

the young woman, the middle-aged executive on the company budget, as well as the old man. "I want everybody who comes here to be able to come here and have a cigar," he says. "We stock quality affordable products, as well as the most decadent and special. I just want everyone to have a good time."

*Jennifer K. Stuller is a Seattle-based freelance writer.*