

GO FIGURADO

Figurado fever is gripping Havana, with high-profile launches and special editions of these once-niche, fully flavoured torpedo-shaped cigars. Nick Foulkes gets to the point. Illustration by Andy Bunday

Question: when is a torpedo not a torpedo? Answer: when it is – deep breath – a Salomon, a Diadema, a Rodolfo, a Romeo, a Pirámide, a Pirámide Extra, a Petit Pirámide, a Campana, a Taco, an Exquisito, a Petit Bouquet, a Generoso, a Favorito, a Forum, a Petit Belicoso or a Petit No. 2... in other words, when it is a figurado – a shaped cigar rather than a straight-sided parejo.

The above list seems at odds with Kipling's famous line "a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke". Actually, a cigar is much more than a smoke. What most fans in their ignorance or, in my case, laziness (I simply cannot hold all the different dimensions in my head) refer to as a torpedo – any cigar with one or both pointed or tapering ends, and sometimes a slight bulge in the middle – is in fact an entirely discrete culture of cigars. Think of it as going into a car showroom and asking to buy a convertible and then being bombarded with all the different marques, engine sizes, body styles and so forth.

This is what I love about the world of Havana cigars: the sheer joyous variety, the bewildering explosion of choice. I glory in it much as Ruskin revelled in the individuality of Gothic architecture, which was, said the great Victorian, "hardly too rich in its changefulness", and which delighted in "the accumulation of ornament". I am not sure if Ruskin was a big cigar smoker, but had he been he would have been a figurado man. Indeed, for a while at the beginning of the last century there was a John Ruskin brand of figurado cigars sold in America.

The last big thing to happen in figurados was almost 20 years ago in 1996 with the launch of Cuaba. Cuaba was an interesting idea in that it was a brand that specialised in different sizes of double figurado or perfecto – what, with a level of inaccuracy that will appal cigar geeks, you could call a double-ended torpedo. The largest was the zeppelin-like perfecto known as the Diadema (£36.80), a little under 9½in in length, with a ring gauge at its widest point of 55. Yet my favourite was the slightly girthier Salomon (£34.40), which measured 7¼in with a 57 ring gauge. Although good cigars, they only ever achieved niche status. For most people, they remain a novelty: one of the characteristics of which is a scimitar-like jet of flame that shoots from the end upon lighting.

Now the figurado comes in entirely new sizes of "shaped" cigars, appearing in special editions, and in brands that had not made figurados for years, if ever. Just how busy the torcedores of Havana have been in recent years is explained by Simon Chase, a non-executive director of British importer Hunters & Frankau. "There are now at least eight different detailed formats of torpedoes, whereas for most of my life there have been only two," says the septuagenarian Chase, who has been working in cigars since the 1970s, and describes how confusion has been compounded in recent years. "In the period before the launch of Cuaba, smokers decided to call cigars 'torpedoes' if they were pointed at one end, which became established cigar jargon. The re-emergence of double-pointed shapes became a problem because, if anything, they bore more resemblance to torpedoes than actual torpedoes, if you see what I mean. English-language vernacular did have a word for this cigar shape, which was 'perfecto', but the Cubans preferred the description 'double figurado'."

I remember when I became interested in cigars about 25 years ago, and there seemed to be just two figurados



that were widely available: the Montecristo No 2 (£22.10) and the H Upmann No 2 (£28). Nomenclature was not the only thing that linked them; these Pirámides were also identically dimensioned (8½in with a 52 ring gauge). In those days, the dusty brown bands were almost identical too, and depending on the year in which they were made – the blend does change slightly from year to year – it was sometimes difficult to tell the difference between the slightly fuller-flavoured Monte

and the Upmann. They were primarily smoked by the likes of Lew Grade and others, who wanted to try a slightly fatter cigar. (In those days, the 50-ring-gauge robusto was at the limit of girth in a straight-sided cigar, and there were relatively few marques that offered it.)

However, as wider-bodied cigars became more popular – resulting in ring gauges of 50 and 52 becoming the norm rather than the upper limit – the Pirámide risked becoming almost invisible in a



From far left: Hoyo Short Pirámide, £17.50. Montecristo No 2 Gran Reserva, £63.50. Ramón Allones Petit Belicoso, £18.70. Cohiba Pirámides Extra, £36.20. Bolívar Británicas, £16.60. H Upmann No 2 Reserva, £42.50. Punch Serie d'Oro No 2, £22.80

sea of big-format cigars that pushed ring gauges right up to 60. However, to see it as just another fat cigar is to miss the point. In fact, the point of a Pirámide or perfecto is not the girth, but the point itself. The flavour delivery is unique, in that it offers the complexity and nuanced blending that is afforded by having more tobacco in a wider ring gauge, in particular the inclusion of the slower burning, more powerful ligero; and if cut correctly (a straight cut between 3.5mm to 4mm from the top), it delivers its flavour with the intensity of a slimmer cigar, concentrating the initial taste to a smaller area of the palate. This configuration completely alters the character of the cigar, even within the same brand.

Experienced smokers also comment that the shape of the Pirámide allows for better combustibility. This may not be solely to do with its shape. Figurados are often more difficult to make than parejos, as Lázaro Collazo, head of quality control at the Habanero factory in Havana province, explains: "The main challenge is in the *cabeza* or 'head' of the cigar. In a parejo cigar you cut the binder/filler after you have rolled a cylinder of tobacco. This creates the flat end onto which the cap is placed. With a Pirámide, you have to continue rolling the binder and filler tobacco into a Pirámide shape, and then also add the cap at the end. This is a more complicated and difficult process."

Looking at the needle-sharp point of a good Pirámide, it is hard not to marvel at the manual dexterity that enables a top roller to repeat this precise feature time after time, using only hand, eye and expertise. Grade nine is the highest level of skill to which a *torcedor* can aspire, and only grade-nine rollers are permitted to make the larger figurados (including Rodolfos, Pirámides and Pirámides Extra). Even the smaller figurados – those between 4¾in and 5½in in length, such as Campana, Forum, Petit Pirámide, Petit Belicoso and Petit No 2 – can only be tackled by a grade eight and grade nine. I recall on one factory visit that the rollers selected to work on special projects were designated as the "Brigade Pirámide": further evidence of the high regard in which the figurado is held by the industry.

At the end of 2011, the Pirámide was paid the ultimate compliment that the Cuban cigar industry

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can bestow, when the Montecristo No 2 was made into a Gran Reserva (Reservas and Gran Reservas are made with specially aged tobacco from the 2005 harvest). The Montecristo No 2 Gran Reserva (£63.50) was a richly satisfying, almost majestic cigar, the aged tobacco smoothing away the liveliness of youth with a carpet of harmonious flavours. Nor did momentum slacken over the following years: 2012 saw the launch of the Cohiba Pirámides Extra (£36.20), the first addition since 1989 to the fuller-flavoured Linea Clásica of the super-premium cigar brand. Linea Clásica was the foundation of the Cohiba brand, and the launch of a new format into such a hallowed and classic range was not a decision taken lightly. I tasted the Pirámides Extra shortly after it was launched and rather liked it, finding it docile and quite subtle; more recently, however, I have found it getting a little stronger and developing into something that, thanks to its size and blend (6¼in with a 54 ring gauge), is not to be trifled with.

Last year saw a more mainstream, but no less significant launch: the Montecristo Petit No 2 (£17.80), a cigar tailored to the requirement for short yet substantial cigars. It keeps the 52 ring gauge of its big brother, but is almost 1.5in shorter at 4¾in. Edward Sahakian, proprietor of Davidoff on St James's Street, introduced me to this cigar shortly after its arrival in the UK in December 2013. Sahakian prefers milder cigars, and commented that this was one he could smoke right down to the band without feeling the need to abandon it, as it becomes stronger towards the end. (The usual pattern for a cigar is that there is an initial burst of flavour, but after half an inch or so it tends to settle down, building incrementally in intensity until the end.)

My experience with the Petit No 2 was not quite as pleasurable as Edward's, but I certainly enjoyed the first two thirds of it, and the timing of about 25 minutes is perfect (or, indeed, *perfecto*). It will be interesting to

see how it will taste in a year or so. For now, the surprise is that another emblematic Pirámide – the aforementioned H Upmann's No 2 – is being accorded the Reserva treatment (£42.50). Reserva cigars differ from Gran Reserva cigars in that the tobacco is a minimum of three, rather than five, years old: in this case the tobacco is from the 2010 harvest. In practice, it is hard to compare the differing effects of using five and three-year-old tobacco, as the brands and sizes in which they are released differ from year to year.

There is usually a delay between the announcement of a new launch and its arrival on the market, so although the cigars may have been made, it is unlikely that they will appear in the UK much before the end of the year, giving the blended vintage leaf time to settle. At least some H Upmann No 2 Reservas have been made, as I had the good fortune to taste one and was surprised by the first impression of its strength – something that is not usually associated with an H Upmann – but it was measured rather than overpowering, and the concentration of flavour, characteristic of the Pirámide, provided a pleasing initial tang at the tip of the mouth, which broadened into a sustained and rich cigar that had me looking at the H Upmann brand with fresh eyes.

These high-profile launches have been accompanied by some interesting special-edition figurados; among them the perfecto Bolívar Británicas Extra (£16.60), and the Ramón Allones Petit Belicoso (£18.70), both regional versions for the

UK market in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Other figurados with a short production run include limited editions like the Punch Serie d'Oro No 2 (£22.80) of 2013, and the Hoyo Short Pirámide (£17.80) of 2011.

Interest surrounding these releases has prompted a reassessment of cigars that did not attract much attention upon their launch. For instance, Sahakian recommends the now-discontinued, monumentally built, Rodolfo-sized San Cristóbal Muralla (£31), 7½in with a 54 ring gauge. It requires a quiet hour to polish off, but Sahakian speaks of a smoothly balanced and purposeful cigar that has benefited from several years of maturation (his boxes are stamped with the 2007 year of production).

Meanwhile, Mitchell Orchant, managing director of specialist cigar auction house C Gars is enthusiastic about the Punch Serie d'Oro No 1 (£22) of 2008, describing it as one of the most "outrageously good blends that Punch has made": an observation all the more interesting because at its launch, the 7½in, 52-ring-gauge cigar was, in my opinion, unremarkable, but the extra years of maturation have clearly had an effect.

This figurado fever shows little sign of abating just yet. Next year, the special cigar rolled to celebrate the 225th anniversary of Hunters & Frankau will be released. Called Cabeza Tumbada, this obscurely shaped cigar has the sloping shoulders of the regular Pirámide but, instead of terminating in a sharp point, the very end is flat, an old shape dating from the early 20th-century, when Hunters & Frankau owned Ramón Allones. If nothing else, it is another cigar name to add to the ever-expanding figurado lexicon. ♦

GETTING SOME POINTERS

C Gars, 020-7372 1865; www.cgarsltd.co.uk. Davidoff of London, 35 St James's Street, London SW1 (020-7930 3079; www.davidoff.com). Hunters & Frankau, 020-7471 8400; www.cigars.co.uk.