

SIGNATURE

The Business of Men's Luxury

The Sig Survey No. 9: LA PALINA CIGARS CEO WILLIAM C. PALEY

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William C. Paley
CEO + Re-Founder
La Palina Cigars



William C. Paley—Bill to his friends, Little Bill to his family—is a man born to wealth and style. A trust fund kid who led the type of jet-set life one would imagine the son of the founder of CBS and a true American socialite and style icon, would live. However, for all his advantages in life, Mr. Paley is rather understated, and comes off contemplative and thoughtful. He is quick with a smile, when warranted, and solemn when need be.

SCION OF ICONS: Mr. Paley's parents were New York Society royalty: His father, William S. Paley, the former CEO and architect of the Columbia Broadcast System, took a small radio system and transformed it into one of the big three US television and radio networks (which, little-known fact, once owned the New York Yankees under his tenure). A major modern art collector, he enjoyed a friendship with Picasso. Paley was also a noted philanthropist, whose charitable endeavors carry on today. Upon her passing, his mother, Barbara "Babe" Cushing Mortimer Paley, was described by *The New York Times* as "the ultimate symbol of taste and perfectionist chic, the inspiration for mannequins that line the windows of Lord & Taylor... Her appearance at a public event was a signal for the kind of attention accorded such women as the

Duchess of Windsor and Jacqueline Onassis.” Truman Capote recalled of his once-chum, “Babe Paley had only one fault, she was perfect. Otherwise, she was perfect.”

Curiously, when it came time to go into the family business, it was neither entertainment nor fashion that Mr. Paley chose, but rather the industry of his paternal grandfather, the tobacco tycoon Samuel Paley. Founder of The Congress Cigar Company, and creator of its lead front mark, [La Palina](#), that cigar that still bears the angelic likeness of Mr. Paley’s paternal grandmother, Goldie Drell Paley. Mr. Paley’s father worked for the original incarnation of Congress Cigar after graduating from the Wharton School of Business, as Vice President of Advertising.

While running the media efforts of the family’s business concern, William S. sponsored a small radio show in their home market of Philadelphia, called ‘The La Palina Hour’. The advertising paid off, increasing sales of La Palina and convincing the young William S. the potential value of radio. Captivated by the medium, he subsequently he purchased five radio stations, giving way to the embryonic stage of CBS. With Sam’s retirement, and William’s CBS efforts well underway, Congress Cigar folded in 1926.

EVERYTHING COMES FULL CIRCLE: In the early 1960s, William S. and Babe built Lightbourne House in the tony Lyford Cay enclave of New Providence Island, The Bahamas, just outside Nassau, as a family retreat. This, coupled with a Round Hill ‘cottage’, in Montego Bay, Jamaica, meant that Mr. Paley spent much of his young life (and still does today) in the Caribbean. The impetus of the La Palina revival was actually driven by Mr. Paley’s desire for a “signature luxury cigar” for the Lightbourne House estate, which is still used by the Paleys, as well as being selectively offered to a discriminating (and moneyed) few when the family isn’t in residence.

However, first things first—the Paley family no longer owned the La Palina trademark, and hadn’t since Samuel was alive. When Congress Cigars folded in the 1920s the rights to La Palina were liquidated and passed through a succession of hands until they came to rest in the vast portfolio of [Altadis U.S.A. Inc.](#), a cog in the works of [Imperial Tobacco](#). Mr. Paley purchased the rights back without much fanfare or opposition and set to work on the blending the cigar and re-creating the original packaging.

Mr. Paley didn’t go far to re-create La Palina’s first cigar offering in almost eighty-five years. The ‘Family Series’, a range of four cigars and one limited edition blend, the 1896 Robusto came from a cigar factory just on the other side of the island from Lyford Cay, on a hill overlooking old town Nassau. Housed on the grounds of [Graycliff](#), another storied (though considerably older) Bahamian estate, now a five-star and four-diamond restaurant, hotel, it’s the Bahamas only premium cigar factory. Working under the aegis of Grayciff, but directly with the late Cuban *Master Torcedore* Avelino Lara, and then his son, Abel, Mr. Paley and the Laras blended the Family series using two different wrappers a Costa Rican and an Ecuadorian capa. The line was well received (rating scores from *Cigar Aficanados*’s “Cigar Insider” ranged from 87 to 92,) but noted as pricey.

For his second cigar line, El Diario, Mr. Paley stayed within the Caribbean Basin, but travelled decidedly further, to Honduras and Raices Cubana factory. There, with their in-house team, and some additional assistance from by boutique cigar maven [Alec Bradley](#) CEO and Founder Alan Rubin, Mr. Paley created El Diario. A much more affordable line, it compliments the Family Series nicely. The recently released “Kill Bill”, with a Honduran Corojo wrapper, has been buzzing the blogosphere.

I’ve had the pleasure to meet Mr. Paley on any number of occasions, most recently at a dinner he hosted a few weeks ago at the luxe Grand Havana Room atop 666 Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan. It was there I had the opportunity to sample the Kill Bill blend/cigar for the first time (it is worthy of the buzz) and watch him mingle with his guests. Mr. Paley wanted to take his time to craft his answers below, and as such they were submitted via email.

How would you describe the ‘La Palina’ style or lifestyle? Balance distinguishes the La Palina lifestyle. Balance is not something which is achieved, but something which is maintained. The balance of selflessness and self-regard, open-mindedness and principle, taste and indifference to fashion, are all elements of the examined life. The pursuit of happiness counter intuitively requires attention to service and the overlooking of the self. Smoking a fine cigar is one of the most unnecessary activities one can partake in, but therein lies its great value, in the enhancement of the moment and utter selfishness of the smoker. If you don’t want to be selfish, share one of yours with a friend.

What’s your definition of luxury? Luxury is used to define anything that exceeds the essential. In my mind it encompasses those things that typify the best of their kind. The best corned beef sandwich, like the best cigar, pair of shoes or sports car are things I will go out of my way to find, acquire and enjoy. Luxury may also be an experience that surpasses what one is accustomed to. Would I enjoy a cashmere sweater as much if it were all I wore? Personally, I don’t think I would get as much enjoyment out of my bespoke suits if I didn’t usually wear jeans and a polo shirt. I do smoke a La Palina everyday however, and wonder why I enjoy them so much.

What’s your assessment of the luxury market today? The luxury market is filled with articles claiming to be luxury items because of their labels, packaging, or materials. Luxury should be about quality period. Luxury items are often a bargain because the materials, craftsmanship and design translate into long lasting, efficient and beautiful products.

Is the US the only market driver for your business? At the moment, Cuban cigars of good quality dominate the markets outside of the US. This is quickly changing as the world comes to recognize the quality coming out of the US, Caribbean and Central America. We are a small boutique company concerned with producing a super-premium product and at this moment only selling in the US. As with any luxury product whose price quality ratio is correct, the world will notice.

What has been your most challenging project to date? The biggest challenge for me was the steep learning curve about the elements of cigar sourcing and production. I knew a great deal about the appreciation of fine cigars when I started but soon realized I had much to learn about

the actual manufacturing process. Over 200 hands touch the product between seed and store. First there is the agricultural aspects of seed sourcing and growing environments, then comes the appropriate harvesting of each level of leaves on the plant, next the curing and fermentation, the drying, the maturing each having a variety processes, proprietary to different producers. Last comes the selection and blending of up to 10 different leaves in the construction of a single handmade cigar. Just beginning to get a little insight into these elements took a couple of years.

Describe the ideal La Palina cigars client... The ideal La Palina client has arrived. He isn't striving. He or She has nothing to prove. They know what they like and get it.

What's the 'next big thing'? La Palina will continue to seek out the best tobaccos, the best blenders and the best manufacturers and commission from them small production runs of super-premium examples of the highest craftsmanship and quality.



Bill S. & Babe Paley at their Round Hill cottage, Montego Bay, Jamaica, 1960s.



Picture Perfect: Babe & Bill S. Paley take a post lunch stroll.



Limited Production 1896 Robusto



The La Palina El Diario



The all-new La Palina Kill Bill