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FINE cigars



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The Cigar that Built CBS

The legendary La Palina, created by the Paley family, makes its return.

As someone who has covered the worlds of both cigars and watches, it is one of my pet peeves that brands like Dunhill and Davidoff, now widely known as purveyors of fashion and luxury accessories, including watches, take great pains to obscure their tobacco-industry roots. Certainly, today's anti-smoking attitudes figure into their decisions to play up the mystique of their founders' names while distancing themselves from the tobacco products that made those names famous. But trading on the name of Alfred Dunhill without mentioning pipes or of Zino Davidoff without mentioning cigars is like penning a tribute to Henry Ford and leaving out all that stuff about automobiles.

Conversely, however, the reintroduction of the classic La Palina cigar brand, headed up by William C. "Bill" Paley, son of CBS founder William S. Paley, has served as a reminder that the famed Tiffany network also has tobacco leaves woven into its foundation.

In the 1800s, a Ukrainian immigrant named Samuel Paley came to Chicago and went to work in a cigar factory as a *lector*, an employee who read books and newspapers to the other workers. He worked his way up to being a roller and then a blender, and in 1896, opened up his own shop and factory, calling it Congress Cigar Company. Its first and most popular product was La Palina (literally, "female Paley"), a cigar named for Sam's wife Goldie Drell Paley and which even featured her likeness on the band.

Sam's son, William, came on board as Congress Cigar's vice president of advertising after the company moved to Philadelphia in 1906. William, enamored

with the emerging marketing possibilities of radio, created "The La Palina Hour," a radio program sponsored by the brand that helped to increase its sales. The success of this endeavor motivated (and financed) William in his next career move: he purchased five Philadelphia radio stations, which became the basis of the Columbia Broadcasting System, or CBS. William's broadcast network became a giant; Congress Cigar Company, on the other hand, closed up shop after Sam's retirement in 1926.

It was left to the next generation of Paleys to resurrect La Palina. The project began with Paley, Jr.'s desire to create a specialty cigar for his guests at Lightbourne House, the Paley family retreat in the Bahamas. After re-acquiring the rights to the brand name, Paley, Jr. approached Avelino Lara, the expatriate Cuban cigar master who had been making cigar blends for Graycliff, a boutique cigar brand located in Nassau. Lara took him up on the offer to create a modern-day line of La Palina cigars. Made at Graycliff's small Nassau factory, it de-

buted early this year with the 1896, a 4¾ x 52 robusto with Honduran and Nicaraguan filler, a Costa Rican binder and an Ecuadorian wrapper. Named for the year of Congress Cigar's founding, the 1896 is a tribute to Samuel Paley. The follow-up Family Series introduced a Costa Rican wrapper to the line and consists of four cigars named in honor of Paley family members: The Babe (a 5¼ x 50 toro named for Paley, Jr.'s mother, fashion icon Barbara "Babe" Paley) and Pasha (a 7¼ x 52 Churchill with an unfinished foot that bears his father's nickname) use a velvety Costa Rican wrapper. The Alison (a 6 x 52 torpedo named for Paley, Jr.'s wife) and Little Bill (a robusto named for Paley, Jr. himself; it was the nickname that distinguished him from his father) both use the same spicy Ecuadorian wrapper as the 1896.

After tasting one from each blend, I found the 1896 to be a fairly powerful, full-bodied cigar, with loads of espresso and bittersweet cocoa notes layered over a rich, creamy structure. Unfortunately, with its short length, it's over before the flavors develop fully in their complexity, and leaves you wanting more. On the other hand, the Pasha is just the right size for a truly leisurely after-dinner smoke. The uncut, ragged foot takes a while to light evenly, but it's worth it: rich flavors of caramel, roasted nuts, chocolate and a dash of pepper build in complexity as it slowly burns, and leave a pleasantly spicy, cedary aroma. Best of all, Goldie Paley still smiles from the ornate band, frozen in time and surely not at all ashamed of the debt her family's broadcasting empire owes to a little cigar factory in Chicago. ○

The La Palina 1896 Series

