

Financial Times- How to Spend It (online)

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MEN'S STYLE / PERSONAL LUXURIES

London's most glamorous venues for cigar lovers

Smart clubs, elegant smoking terraces, savvy cigar sommeliers, humidors full of the rarest cigars and a hip, new clientele...
is London now the cigar capital of the world? Nick Foulkes reports



From far left: Manu Harit, head cigar sommelier of The Arts Club Group, Darius Namdar, cigar sommelier for the Birley Group, and Paola Paolillo, cigar lounge manager for Ten Trinity Square, at The Arts Club in Londonwith, bottom right, a Trinidad 40th anniversary humidor | Image: Rick Pushinsky

NOVEMBER 17 2017 / NICK FOULKES



It is a mild autumn evening and a sharply suited, neatly coiffed young man with a small pin bearing the words "Master of Havana Cigars" displayed discreetly in his lapel, is sitting on the outside terrace of The Arts Club in Mayfair. He lights his cigar, disappears for a moment in a haze of fragrant blue smoke and, as it clears, fixes me with his intense gaze.

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The humididor room at the Wellesley hotel in Knightsbridge, which has lacquered wood walls | Image: Michelle Chaplow

“You know, for cigars there is no other city like **London**,” he says in French-accented English. He vanishes into a nimbus of cigar smoke again and reappears with an example. “Last year, just 50 of the Cohiba 50th anniversary **humidors** were made for the whole world; everyone wanted one. Of those, 10 are within a few hundred metres of where we are sitting. There are two here,” he jabs his cigar down to the floor indicating the humidified vaults in the basement. “Between the Lanesborough, The Wellesley and 5 Hertford Street there are another eight. That is 20 per cent of the world’s production, within a few minutes’ walk of each other.”

To help explain the significance of this figure, the first Cohiba anniversary humididor containing 50 specially rolled cigars sold at auction in **Cuba** for €320,000, and demand for the remaining 49 so far exceeded supply that the last time one changed hands it is rumoured to have fetched almost £450,000.

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A portrait of famous cigar smoker Winston Churchill in the humidifier room at the Wellesley hotel in Knightsbridge | Image: Paul Harmer

The fact that 10 of them are within a grid of a few streets is one of the symptoms of London's emergence as a world cigar hub. The young man sitting in front of me puffing contentedly on the aged limited edition Ramon Allones is another: Manu Harit is the group head cigar sommelier of The Arts Club Group (branches to open in Dubai and LA). He is talking excitedly about the double-height cigar room he is planning for Dubai, the online trading platform that he is putting together for members to buy and sell cigars to each other, and some of the other treasures that he has in his cellar, including such rarities as the 30th anniversary box of Cohiba and the 40th anniversary of Trinidad.

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Boisdale restaurant in Mayfair and its cigar terrace | Image: Tom Willcocks

Yet until five years ago he had never seen a Havana cigar. The words “I’m just a kid in this business” recur frequently in his conversation. In 2012 he was in London doing an internship for a degree in hospitality, and out of curiosity he visited the newly opened **Bulgari** Hotel where he stopped at the Edward Sahakian Cigar Shop. “I was so impressed with the way that cigars were presented – they were treated in the way that I was used to seeing fine wine handled. I did not know it but I was served by Eddie Sahakian, son of the famous Edward who opened **Davidoff** in London in 1980. My internship had 10 weeks left, I bought a box of 10 cigars and I would go there once a week to smoke one.”

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The Edward Sahakian Cigar Shop at the Bulgari Hotel

It was a box of cigars that changed his life. He went to work for the Sahakians: "I owe everything to them." Next, he caught the attention of Jemma Freeman, owner and managing director of Hunters & Frankau, the sole importer of Havana cigars into the UK, who recommended him to the Corinthia Hotel which had opened a cigar shop and, with it, a comfortable cigar courtyard dotted with tables and sofas. Then in 2016 he moved to The Arts Club.

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The sampling lounge at the Edward Sahakian Cigar Shop at the Bulgari Hotel, which treats cigars as if they are fine wines

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He is just one of a growing band of young cigar sommeliers in their 20s and 30s presiding over humidors full of rare and beautiful cigars, and equipped with elegantly appointed sampling rooms and terraces frequented by similarly aged collectors and aficionados.



The Birley Cigars shop in Mayfair, which has unprecedented storage and maturation facilities and a remarkable array of rarities

Harit's rise through the London cigar world has coincided with the rise of the city itself as a world cigar capital. London has long been an important cigar city. As well as its established merchants, of which Davidoff and James J Fox are the best known, the city boasts regular auctions arranged by cigar retailer C Gars. And when Ranald Macdonald opened the Boisdale restaurant-cum-whisky-and-cigar-bar in Belgravia in the late 1980s, it found such a loyal following that he replicated the formula in Mayfair, Bishopsgate and Canary Wharf, while The Lanesborough (recently refurbished) had established itself as popular with cigar lovers.

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Mark's Club, which reopened in 2015 and hosts cigar dinners on its terrace | Image: Paul Griffiths

Then five years ago the established cigar scene got an injection of glamour. As well as the opening of the cigar shop at the Bulgari, The Wellesley hotel opened on **Knightsbridge** featuring a wonderful humidor room with lacquered wood walls, a marble floor inlaid with a map of Cuba and glass-fronted display cabinets stuffed with **rare cigars**; this was complemented by two cigar terraces surrounded by high hedges and equipped with outside fireplaces.

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Part of the new Annabel's, which is opening in 2018 and is working with a Master of Havana on its cigar selection

Meanwhile, in Shepherd Market, members' club 5 Hertford Street opened for business and with it, the Birley Cigars shop. Birley Cigars is a jewel, with unprecedented storage and maturation facilities, a remarkable array of rarities such as vintage Davidoff Dom Pérignon (£600), Cohiba Sublime 2004 (£480) and Partagás 165 (£650), and a small but exquisitely appointed sampling room, complete with dainty silver platters of palate-clearing chocolate.

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The interior and exterior of one of the 50 Cohiba 50th anniversary humidors | Image: Rick Pushinsky

These venues view fine cigars, almost exclusively Cuban, not so much as a tobacco product but a **gourmet delicacy**. Sampling room facilities became increasingly important as certain rare cigars soared in price and even current and recent production such as Cohiba Behikes easily topped £100 a cigar, making a box of 10 or 25 a four-figure investment.

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Hunters & Frankau's Freeman has also noticed a change. "The training programmes we had in place were simply not meeting the level of increased knowledge that we were encountering in the trade. So we started to build a curriculum for what we call the 'Master of Havana Cigars'. Nobody, anywhere else in the world, offers this level of training.

"In our experience, most of those taking the exam are only a few years out of their 20s, which is a reflection of the broader age spectrum of people smoking cigars today. After about six months' coursework, candidates sit a five-part written exam of almost 200 questions on all aspects of tobacco cultivation, cigar-making, serving, history and culture. There is then a practical exam that includes selecting, preparing and serving the cigar in front of a panel of experts. It is not easy. This year only 10 per cent passed first time."

Thirty-year-old Darius Namdar, who passed in 2016, is director of the Mark's Club and now, in his role as Birley Group cigar sommelier, is working on preparing the selection for sibling establishment Annabel's when it opens in its new location in 2018.

"At Mark's we have a wonderful terrace so we started holding cigar dinners, and I have met a younger group of cigar smokers as a result. This is quite a nerdy but incredibly stylish generation of smokers: they will wear a dandyish suit and smoke a very old Bolivar or Ramon Allones – stuff you don't ever see – and our dinners are also attended by a very important group of cigar Instagrammers. They all have this passion for collecting, trading and sharing the experience of enjoying cigars, some of which were made 30 or 40 years ago."

Since passing his Master's, Namdar, who will represent the UK in next year's Habanos Sommelier World Championship, has become more adventurous in his recommendations, suggesting that instead of the ubiquitous short, heavy-gauge cigars (typically Romeo y Julieta Wide Churchill or Trinidad Vigia) his guests try cigars that are often overlooked, such as a Punch Double Corona from 1999 (£70) or a Punch Corona from 1997 (£40). "Members are much keener now to hear about cigars that are new to them because they know there is more authority behind the recommendation."

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Across town at the newly opened members' club **Ten Trinity Square** in the City, Paola Paolillo, the venue's cigar lounge manager, has also found a greater degree of trust since she has worn her Master's badge. "At the beginning it was very difficult being a woman in the cigar trade. There was an assumption that I didn't know anything about cigars, but when I began wearing my Master's badge, I noticed that clients started trusting me and being fascinated by what I had to say."

The most recent addition to the rarefied upper end of the London cigar scene, Ten Trinity opened in September and takes its cigars as seriously as it takes its **wine**. As well as the club restaurant and private dining rooms, there is a **Château Latour** Discovery Room devoted to the famous Bordeaux vineyard and a cigar shop and sampling room, with a commensurately grand list of cigars, a sort of greatest hits compilation, suggested by Eddie Sahakian, who was a consultant for the project before it opened. "The opening of Ten Trinity is further confirmation of London's status as capital of the gourmet cigar world," says Sahakian. "Ten years ago there was nothing like the interest you have today in premium cigars. My father and I kept these sorts of items stored away, they were only known to a small number of ultra-keen collectors. Today, if you want to be taken seriously in this environment, you should be spending at least £1m on stock."

Thus, at Ten Trinity, there are Cuban Davidoffs (from £250), the **Partagás** Lusitania Gran Reserva 2014 (£240), the Cohiba Millennium Piràmides (£240) and Montecristo Robustos (£240) in ceramic jars from 2000, all three sizes of Cohiba Behikes (from £85) and such rare cigars as the Cohiba Siglo VI Gran Reserva 2009, which at £530 a stick seems a hefty chunk of money... until one remembers that at £450,000 a box, the going price for a 50th anniversary Cohiba is in the region of £9,000 a stick.

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