Cigar & Cocktail Magazine

The Art of the Fine Smoke & the Perfect Pour

Q1 2026 • VOLUME I, ISSUE 1

Cuba Unfiltered

- The Art of the Gentleman
- Aged Rum & Classic Cocktails
- A Guide to Cuban Vitolas



EDITOR IN CHIEF • RADIM KAUFMANN

CIGAR & COCKTAIL MAGAZINE

Q1 2026

Every score in this magazine is the result of a blind tasting. The band comes off before the lighter comes out. Always.

— Radim Kaufmann, Editor in Chief

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Market Watch 2026



AN INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY

CIGAR & COCKTAIL MAGAZINE

The Art of the Fine Smoke & the Perfect Pour

Q1 2026 · Volume I · Issue 1

Editor in Chief & Publisher
Radim Kaufmann

Published in association with
The Kaufmann World Encyclopedia of Premium Cigars

“Taste first. Prestige second.”

An international quarterly dedicated to premium cigars, refined spirits, premium travel, gastronomy, and the atmosphere of modern cigar culture.

cigarcocktailmag.com

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COMING SUMMER 2026

SOME MEN MAKE HISTORY.
OTHERS LIVE IT.
I HAD THE CHANCE TO MEET ONE.

★

In February 1999, I traveled to Havana as the publisher of *Cigar & Cocktail Magazine* to exhibit our magazine at the first *Festival del Habano*.

I expected cigars, conversations, and stories.
Instead, I found myself face to face with Fidel Castro.

This is not a book written in archives.
It is a book written from memory, from the streets of Havana, from a time when Cuba was opening a small window to the world, and from a meeting that changed the way I understood a man the world loves, hates, and never stops talking about.

INSIDE YOU WILL FIND

- ★ A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH FIDEL CASTRO
- ★ THE REAL CUBA I SAW IN 1999
- ★ HEMINGWAY'S CUBA AND ITS LASTING SOUL
- ★ THE STORY OF COHIBA AND THE CUBAN CIGAR
- ★ REVOLUTION, JFK, AND THE COLD WAR
- ★ THE FIRST FESTIVAL DEL HABANO — BACKSTAGE
- ★ RARE PHOTOS, MEMORIES, AND UNTOLD STORIES

> *Cuba is not easy to understand. It gets under your skin. It seduces you. It frustrates you. And long after you leave, it stays with you. This book is my way of sharing the Cuba I lived, the man I met, and the soul of a place unlike any other.*
>
> – RADIM KAUFMANN

> *History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.*
>
> – FIDEL CASTRO



★

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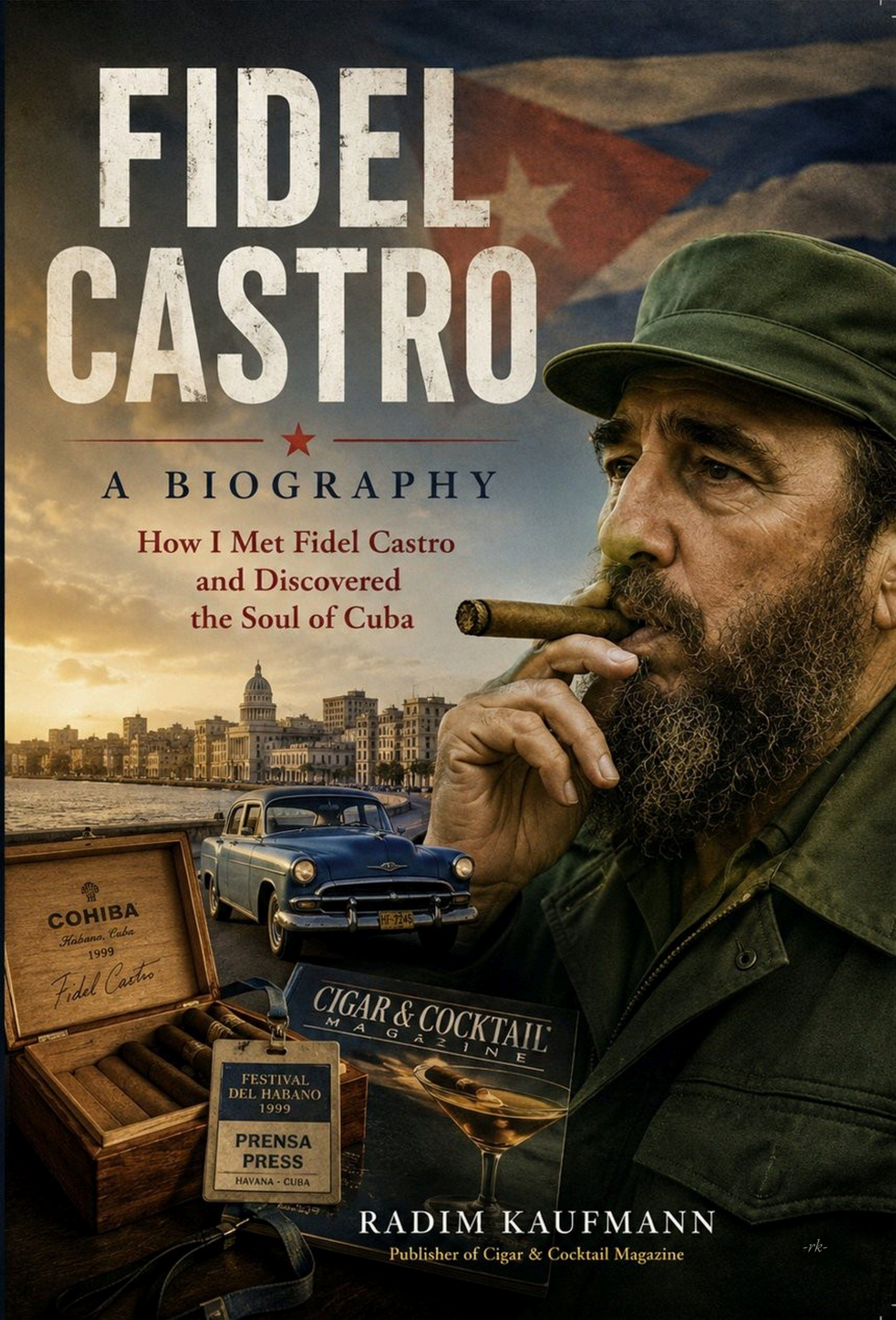
FIDEL CASTRO

A BIOGRAPHY

How I Met Fidel Castro and Discovered the Soul of Cuba



RADIM KAUFMANN

Publisher of Cigar & Cocktail Magazine

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FIDEL CASTRO

A BIOGRAPHY

How I Met Fidel Castro and Discovered the Soul of Cuba

RADIM KAUFMANN

VOLUME I · ISSUE I · Q1 2026

CIGAR & COCKTAIL MAGAZINE

The Art of the Fine Smoke & the Perfect Pour

EDITORIAL

Editor in Chief & Publisher

Radim Kaufmann

Miami

Rating Systems

Kaufmann Cigar Score™ (KCS v2.1) — shared with *The Kaufmann World Encyclopedia of Premium Cigars*

Kaufmann Pairing Index™ (KPI) — exclusive to this magazine

Photography

Kaufmann Creative Studio

HEALTH & RESPONSIBILITY

Cigar smoking is addictive and can cause serious, life-threatening diseases, including cancer, heart disease, and lung disease. Cigar & Cocktail Magazine is intended solely for adults of legal smoking age, and does not encourage anyone to begin using tobacco. Nothing in these pages is medical, legal, or investment advice. If you choose to use tobacco or alcohol, do so responsibly and in moderation — and never smoke or drink and drive.

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THE KAUFMANN PUBLISHING SYSTEM

THREE PRODUCTS. ONE STANDARD.

The Encyclopedia — *The Kaufmann World Encyclopedia of Premium Cigars.* The permanent record. Country by country, brand by brand, KCS score by score.

This Magazine — Cigar & Cocktail Magazine. What matters now. Quarterly. Pairing-focused. The KPI layer. The living supplement to the encyclopedia.

The Website — cigarcocktailmag.com. Educational entry point. Simplified derivatives. The funnel to both products.

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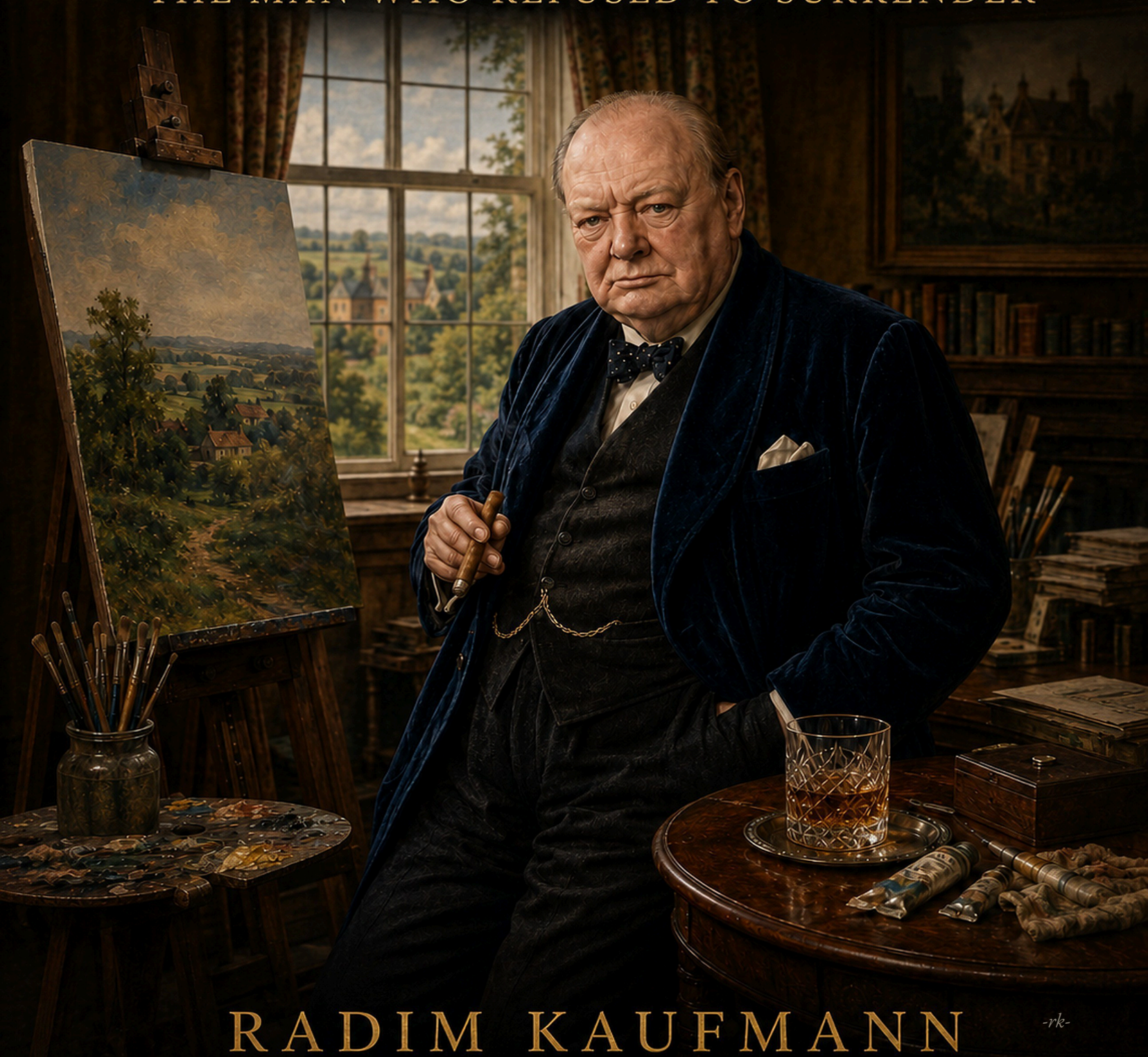
"Smoking cigars is like falling in love. First, you are attracted by its shape; you stay for its flavor, and you must always remember never, never to let the flame go out."

— ATTRIBUTED TO WINSTON CHURCHILL

No reliable primary source has been identified.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

THE MAN WHO REFUSED TO SURRENDER



RADIM KAUFMANN

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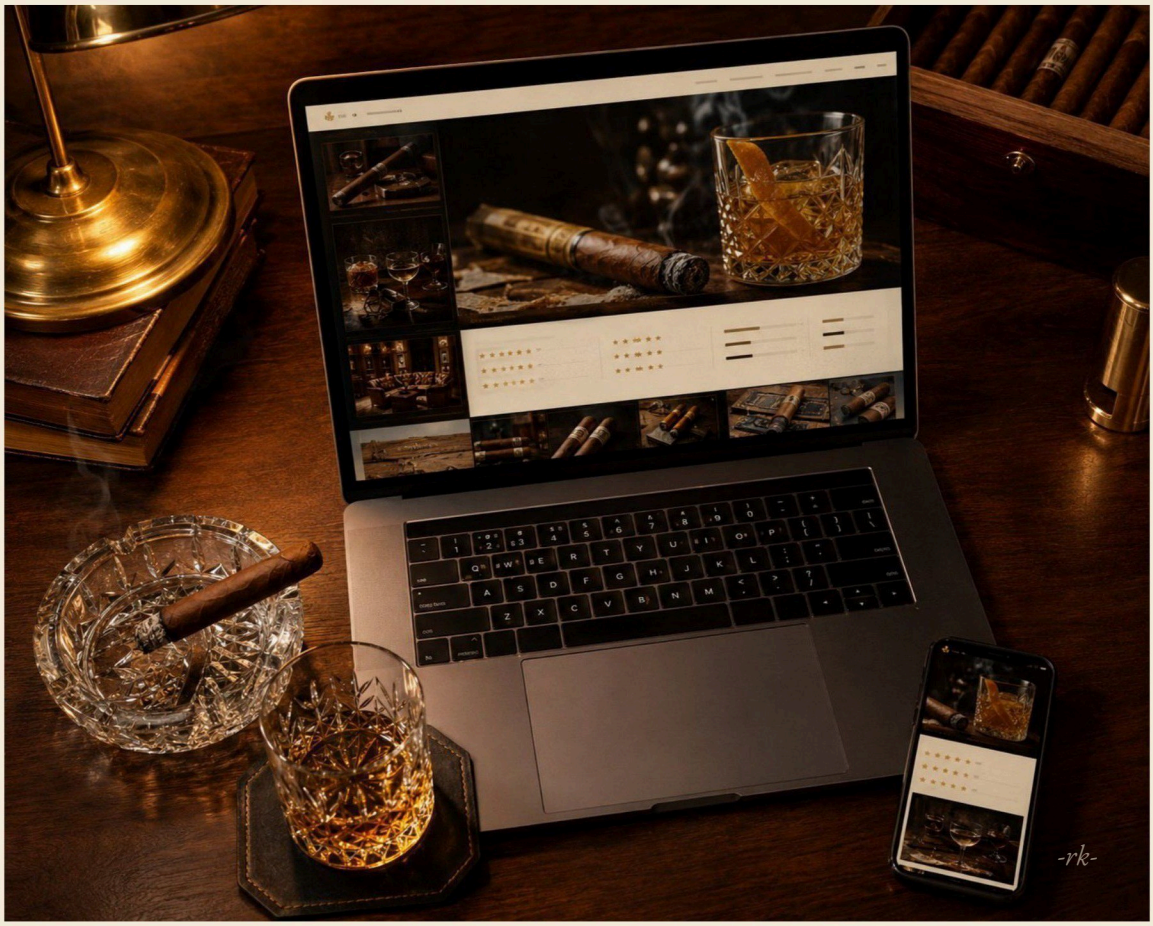

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EDITORIAL · Q1 2026

Letter from the Editor

Taste first. Prestige second. The story of how — and why — this magazine came back.

BY RADIM KAUFMANN · EDITOR IN CHIEF & PUBLISHER · MIAMI



My name is Radim Kaufmann, and this magazine was created for one very simple reason: I missed it.

Not a catalog of new releases. Not a premium advertising supplement. Not a world where price automatically replaces quality. But a real magazine about cigar culture. About atmosphere. About friendship. About travel. About evenings people remember long after the final draw.

My first cigar was given to me by my friend Bernhard Mann. I was thirty years old, and I had never smoked before. I have never smoked cigarettes, and I never will.

I still remember that moment perfectly. We were sitting together, and he patiently explained everything to me — how to hold the cigar, how to light it, why it should never be rushed. Then he placed a Zino Davidoff in a white luxury tube in front of me. It was not just a cigar. It was an atmosphere.

Suddenly, it was no longer about tobacco or nicotine. It was about calm. About time slowing down for a moment. About the company of friends around a table. About good conversation that had nowhere else to be. And somewhere in that moment, the first idea for a cigar magazine was born.

"It was not just a cigar. It was an atmosphere."

Prague, 1998 — Miami, 1999

We first published it in Prague in 1998, and beginning in 1999, also in Miami. It was a different world then. Cigar culture was experiencing an enormous rise, and luxury itself felt different. Cigar lounges, whisky, jazz, travel, hotels, Miami nights, Havana mythology — everything carried a certain energy of optimism and freedom.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. And eventually, restrictions on tobacco advertising stopped the magazine. Life moved on. The world changed. I changed too. But the atmosphere never fully disappeared from my mind.

And perhaps that is why, years later, I decided to bring the magazine back. When I completed and published my global encyclopedia of cigars, I realized something important — an encyclopedia alone is not enough. I missed the living world around it. The stories. The travel. The people. The music. The bars after midnight. The slow conversations. The discovery of new flavors. The atmosphere itself.

And so *Cigar & Cocktail Magazine* was reborn. This time with something we could barely imagine in the late 1990s: global distribution. For that, I sincerely thank Amazon, which makes it possible for this magazine to reach readers around the world.

Why Blind Tasting

Over the years, I also began realizing something else — how deeply prestige influences taste itself. The moment people see a famous cigar band, the mind automatically expects greatness. Not because people are dishonest, but because this is simply how human beings work. Luxury has always been emotional. It works through expectation, memory, and narrative.

That realization eventually led me toward blind tasting. Not as provocation. Not as an attack on premium brands. But as a return to honesty.

Taste first. Prestige second.

That is not a slogan. It is the philosophy behind this entire magazine. The moment the band comes off, a strange silence appears. Suddenly, all that remains is flavor, construction, smoke, and your own senses. There is something deeply liberating about that.

"The moment the band comes off, a strange silence appears. Suddenly, all that remains is flavor, construction, smoke, and your own senses."

The Form on the Table

Ironically, I still struggle with one very simple question on forms — *Do you smoke? YES / NO*. I never quite know what to check. Because I do not feel like a smoker.

This is something different. It is culture. It is atmosphere. It is time spent with friends. It is celebration. It is victory. It is the rare moment when people allow themselves to slow down and enjoy where they are.

For me, cigars were never about nicotine. They were always about moments.

And if you opened this magazine, perhaps you are searching for something similar.

If so, welcome.



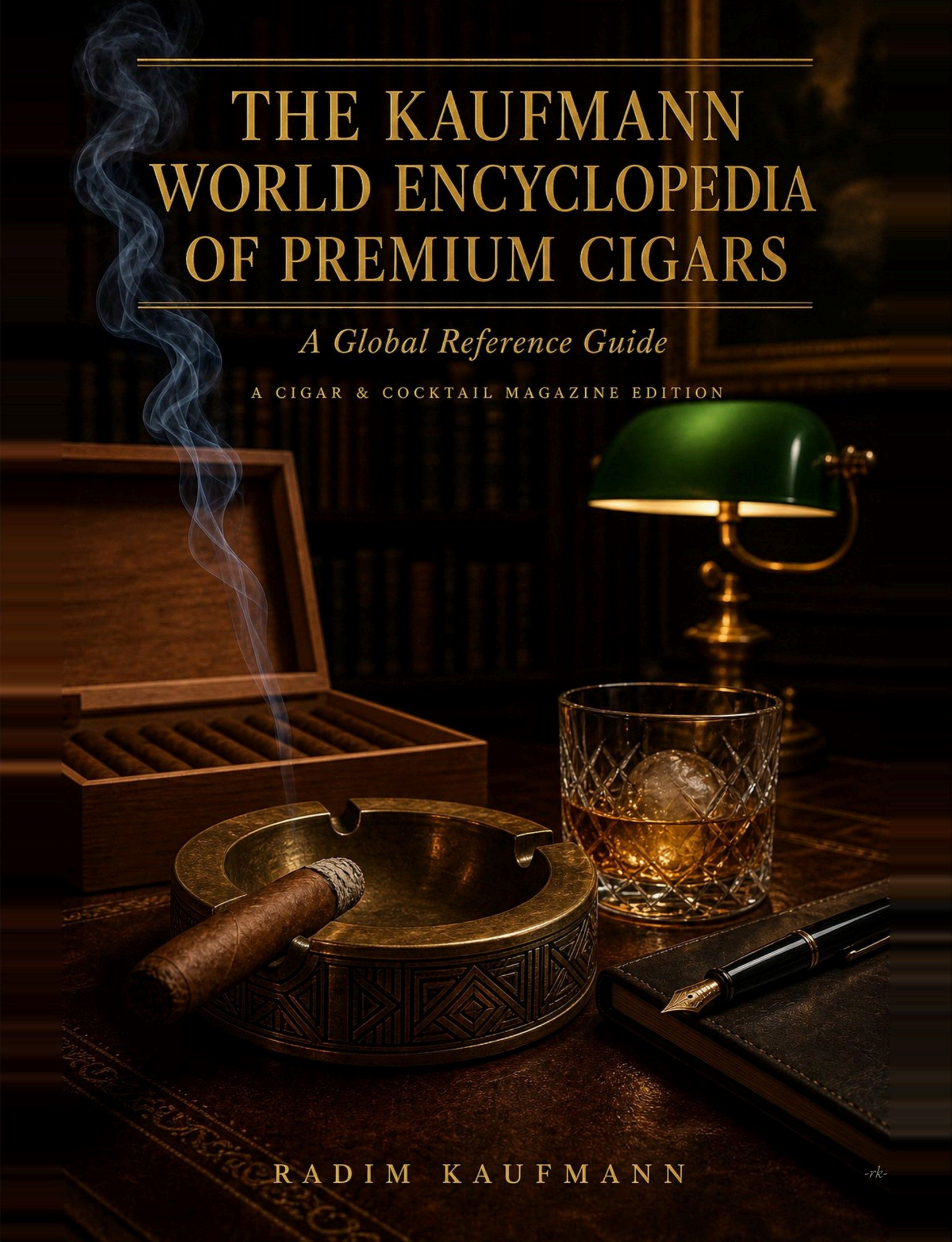
⦿ Light slowly.
Nobody is in a hurry here.

— Radim Kaufmann
Editor in Chief & Publisher
Miami · January 2026

THE KAUFMANN WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PREMIUM CIGARS

A Global Reference Guide

A CIGAR & COCKTAIL MAGAZINE EDITION



RADIM KAUFMANN

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Editorial Philosophy

“Taste first. Prestige second.”

Three Commitments

One — Honest scores. Every cigar reviewed in this magazine is tasted blind. Bands are removed before the panel sees them. Scores are the scores. The Padrón 1964 Anniversary Maduro scored 96 in this issue's blind panel because it deserved 96. The Cohiba Behike did not appear in the top six because, anonymously, it did not perform at that level. Neither outcome was preordained. Both are simply what happened when the band came off.

Two — Advertiser independence. No brand has paid for placement in this issue. No spirits company has been promised a positive review in exchange for a back-cover advertisement. The Kaufmann Pairing Index measurements on these pages were conducted before any commercial relationship was discussed, and the conclusions would not change if one were. Readers can verify this independence by watching what we recommend across multiple issues — when the data changes, recommendations change. When the data is consistent, so are we.

Three — The reader's time. The luxury reader's time is the scarcest resource in modern publishing. Every article in this issue has been edited for density, not for word count. We do not pad to fill pages. We do not chase quarterly themes if a quarter has no real news. If we have nothing genuinely useful to say about a topic, we skip it and use the page to print a better photograph instead.

What We Refuse to Be

This magazine is not a catalog of new releases. It is not an advertising vehicle in editorial clothing. It is not a venue for diplomatic 88-and-above reviews where every cigar somehow exceeds expectation. It is not a status performance — neither for the editor, nor for the brands, nor for the readers.

It is a magazine for the serious collector who has been smoking long enough to know that prestige is unreliable, that price is unreliable, and that the only reliable judge of a cigar is what it tastes like when you cannot see the band.

The Standard

The Kaufmann Cigar Score (KCS v2.1) measures across six dimensions — construction, draw, flavor, balance, evolution, regional expression. Flavor receives the greatest weight (35 points) because flavor is the emotional core of cigar smoking. Balance receives 20, because an aggressive cigar that collapses in the final third cannot achieve elite status. Construction, draw, evolution, and regional expression complete the framework. Maximum score is 100. Anything above 95 enters Legendary tier — earned, not assigned.

The Kaufmann Pairing Index (KPI v1.0) applies the same blind discipline to cigar-spirit pairings. Body match, sweetness contrast, finish harmony. Pairings scoring below 80 are flagged "Avoid." We publish those scores too. The most expensive cigar-spirit pairing in this issue (Cohiba Siglo VI + Macallan 18 Sherry Oak) scored a 69. We did not exclude it because the conclusion was inconvenient. That is the point of the methodology.

The Promise

You can hold us to this. If we publish a score that subsequent data contradicts, we will revisit it — and the correction will appear on these pages, not buried. The errata page at **cigarcocktailmag.com/errata** exists for exactly that purpose. A tasting panel can have a bad night. A cigar can be unrepresentative of its production run. When our work is challenged by a wider data set, we respond. That is what taste-first journalism requires.

That is the standard. Read accordingly.

☉ — ***The Editorial Team***




1
2
3
4
5
Date: 18 May 2024
Session: Blind Tasting – Small Batch
| Aroma | Draw | Flavor | Balance | Evolution | Score
1 | Cedar Cocoa Dried Fig | 9/10 | Cocoa Nutmeg Leather | 9/10 | Creamy & Long | 92
2 | Earth Espresso Dark Fruit | 8/10 | Espresso Black Pepper Molasses | 8/10 | Bold & Steady | 87
3 | Hay Almond Citrus Peel | 9/10 | Almond Honey Citrus | 9/10 | Brightens Mid | 91
4 | Leather Barn Spice | 8/10 | Leather Clove Cedar | 8/10 | Earthy Finish | 86
5 | Sweet Hay Vanilla Floral | 9/10 | Vanilla Cream Toasted Wood | 9/10 | Silky & Long | 93
Notes: #5 most complex and refined.
#1 close behind – excellent balance.
#2 bold profile, needs rest.
-rk-

Contributors

> *The editorial team behind the Q1 2026 issue. Independent. Anonymous when tasting. Accountable for every score.*

Editor in Chief & Publisher

Radim Kaufmann founded *Cigar Magazine* in Prague in 1998 and brought the title to Miami in 1999. After two decades in international publishing, he returned to the cigar world with *The Kaufmann World Encyclopedia of Premium Cigars* and the 2026 relaunch of this magazine. He divides his time between Prague and Miami. He has visited tobacco-growing regions across Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Peru, and has evaluated over three thousand cigars using the proprietary Kaufmann Cigar Score methodology. His editorial philosophy is summarized in three words: *Taste first. Prestige second.*

Editorial Standards

The Tasting Panel. Every KCS rating that appears in these pages has been evaluated by a four-member panel under strict blind conditions. Panelists are working connoisseurs — collectors, retired industry professionals, and one practicing sommelier — drawn from the editor's two-decade network and rotated quarterly to prevent palate fatigue and bias accumulation. Panelist identities are intentionally withheld from publication to preserve the integrity of future blind tastings.

The Pairing Lab. KPI evaluations are conducted by the same blind methodology over three separate evenings with controlled glassware (heavy crystal, weighted base, 6 oz minimum), neat pours, and a four-minute spirit-breathing period before ignition. Pairings scoring below 80 are flagged "Avoid" — and we publish those scores alongside the recommended pairings without redaction.

Visuals

Original photography, digital composites, and digitally created editorial illustrations are produced by Kaufmann Creative Studio under the direction of the editor and post-processed for print-grade output (300 DPI minimum, full Adobe RGB color space). Illustrations are interpretive and do not document actual events, people, or places unless expressly identified as photographs.

Distribution & Production

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Editorial production is directed by the Editor in Chief. Long-form articles, tasting notes, and editorial voice are authored in-house. Layout, copyediting, imagery, and production are produced by Kaufmann Creative Studio under direct editorial supervision. All factual claims, scores, recommendations, and editorial judgments are the responsibility of the editor.

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We read every email. Reviews and corrections are published in the next issue.

☉ — ***The Editorial Team***



EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY · THE STANDARD

The Kaufmann Standard™

> *The editorial principles that define every page of this magazine — and the methodology that produces the scores you read. Taste first. Prestige second.*

There is a strange silence that happens when the band comes off. Conversations become less confident. The smoker who previously claimed to identify every Cuban *marca* suddenly hesitates. The collector who swore eternal loyalty to a particular factory begins doubting himself. Expensive assumptions disappear into uncertainty. Blind tasting does something uncomfortable to the cigar world. It removes status.

When people ask me what makes this magazine different from Cigar Aficionado, I tell them: we remove the band. That is not a metaphor. Every cigar that receives a KCS score in these pages is evaluated without its band, without its box, without its marketing story. Our panelists do not know whether they are smoking a $7 Oliva or a $45 Davidoff until the score is sealed. This costs us access, advertising, and industry goodwill. We consider that a reasonable price for telling you the truth.

Without labels, price disappears. Without rarity, mythology weakens. Without branding, taste stands alone. That isolation is rare in connoisseur culture. Most luxury products are consumed alongside their narratives. A watch carries its history. A whiskey carries its distillery mythology. A car carries social symbolism. Cigars are no different — and that is the problem. The band influences perception long before combustion begins. That reality became impossible for us to ignore. So we built the Kaufmann Standard around a single principle: **the cigar must earn respect anonymously.** Not through scarcity. Not through reputation. Not through resale value. Not through social media mythology. Only through performance.

The Blind Tasting Manifesto

Blind tasting is not about humiliating premium brands. It is about protecting honesty. Every experienced smoker eventually encounters a difficult truth: expectation changes flavor. If a smoker believes he is holding a thousand-dollar cigar, the brain automatically searches for complexity. Small flavor changes become exaggerated into sophistication. Minor transitions feel profound. Prestige amplifies perception.

This phenomenon exists across all luxury industries. Wine judges repeatedly fail blind comparisons between expensive and affordable bottles. Whiskey enthusiasts regularly misidentify premium pours. Even professional experts remain vulnerable to contextual bias. Cigars are especially susceptible because smoking is slow, emotional, and ritualistic. Atmosphere matters. Companionship matters. Weather matters. Mood matters. Glassware matters.

Lighting matters. The band matters. Removing the band removes one psychological layer. Not all of them. But enough to matter.

"Without labels, price disappears. Without rarity, mythology weakens. Without branding, taste stands alone."

The KCS Philosophy

The Kaufmann Cigar Score (KCS v2.1) was intentionally designed to reward balance rather than raw intensity. Many modern cigars chase strength because strength photographs well online — pepper-heavy profiles and nicotine aggression create immediate reactions. But immediate reactions are not the same as long-term sophistication. Great cigars evolve. They move gradually through transitions. They create tension and release. They maintain structural harmony from ignition to final third.

That is what KCS attempts to measure, across six dimensions:

KCS V2.1 — THE SIX DIMENSIONS

DIMENSION	WEIGHT	WHAT IT MEASURES
Construction	5	Roll firmness, cap quality, visible flaws, wrapper integrity
Draw	18	Resistance, consistency, mechanical performance across the smoke
Flavor	35	Primary, secondary, retrohale complexity — the emotional core of the experience
Balance	20	Integration of strength, body, and aromatic register
Evolution	12	Transition between thirds; whether the cigar tells a story
Regional Expression	10	How clearly the origin signature emerges anonymously
Total	**100**	**Maximum score**

Tier key: 95–100 Legendary · 90–94 Outstanding · 85–89 Very Good · 80–84 Good · 75–79 Average · <75 Below Standard

Flavor receives the greatest weight because flavor remains the emotional core of the experience. But balance follows closely behind. An extremely flavorful cigar that collapses into bitterness during the final third cannot achieve elite status. Likewise, perfect construction without personality becomes forgettable. The greatest cigars create memory. That is what we are scoring for.

The Method

Every cigar that appears in a KCS rating on the pages of this magazine has been through the following protocol:

1. **Band removal.** An editorial assistant who does not participate in tasting removes all bands, foot ribbons, and packaging identifiers in a separate room.
2. **Anonymous distribution.** Cigars are numbered (01–06 for a six-cigar panel) and presented in random order. The panel does not know origin, brand, or price.
3. **Controlled conditions.** 68°F tasting room temperature, 65% RH cellar storage minimum 14 days before tasting. Single-light fluorescent overhead avoided; warm tungsten only. No food two hours prior.
4. **Six-dimension scoring.** Each panelist scores independently. No conversation during smoking.
5. **One-week rest.** Panel does not see the results until a second tasting one week later with re-blinded cigars. Final consensus score is the average of both sessions, adjusted by the panel chair only when one tasting differs by more than 4 points from the other (in which case a third session is scheduled).
6. **Reveal and audit.** Bands are produced only after final scoring is locked. Discrepancies between blind score and prior reputation are noted and discussed in the written review, never used to retroactively adjust the score.

The Kaufmann Pairing Index

The KPI extends the same discipline to cigar-spirit pairings. The full methodology is detailed in The Pairing Lab feature (page 109), but the headline structure: pairings score across three dimensions — Body Match (40%), Sweetness Contrast (35%), and Finish Harmony (25%). Pairings are tested over three separate evenings with neat pours, controlled glassware (heavy crystal, weighted base, 6 oz capacity minimum), and a four-minute spirit-breathing period before the cigar is lit.

Pairings that score below 80 are explicitly flagged as "Avoid." We publish those scores too. The most expensive cigar-spirit pairing in this issue (Cohiba Siglo VI + Macallan 18 Sherry Oak) scored a 69. We did not exclude it because the conclusion was inconvenient. That is the point of the methodology.

"Taste first. Prestige second. The cigar must earn respect anonymously."

What This Magazine Promises

Three commitments to our readers, in plain language:

We will publish honest scores — including the low ones. A magazine that prints only flattering reviews has nothing to teach. Our scores will sometimes contradict the trade press. We accept that.

We will explain our reasoning — every score is paired with tasting notes that show how the panel arrived at it. The reader can disagree with the conclusion while still respecting the method.

We will admit when we are wrong — a tasting panel can have a bad night. A cigar can be unrepresentative of its production run. When our scores are challenged by a wider data set, we will revisit and publish the correction. The errata page (online at cigarcocktailmag.com/errata) exists for that purpose.

This is the Kaufmann Standard. It is what makes the rest of the magazine worth reading. Hold us to it.



☉ — *R.K.*


-rk-



COVER STORY · THE RITUAL

The Gentleman's Art

> *Ritual of the cigar and cocktail hour — and why the deliberate rejection of speed is the only luxury left worth performing.*

BY RADIM KAUFMANN · MIAMI · JANUARY 2026

The modern world is obsessed with speed. We measure our lives in megabits, in next-day deliveries, in the frantic scrolling of infinite feeds. But true refinement is the deliberate rejection of speed. It is the conscious decision to slow down, to sit, to light a match, and to wait.

There is a version of this evening that costs $15 — a Rocky Patel Vintage 1999 ($7) and an Old Fashioned made with Buffalo Trace ($8 for two ounces). And there is a version that costs $150 — a Padrón Family Reserve and a pour of Pappy Van Winkle. Having done both many times, I can report that the difference in satisfaction is approximately 30%, not 1,000%. The ritual rewards attention more than expenditure. A cheap cigar smoked slowly and paired thoughtfully will always outperform an expensive cigar smoked distractedly beside whatever was already open.

The cigar and cocktail hour is not merely a habit. It is a habit. It is the sanctuary of the modern gentleman — a designated time where the noise of the world is shut out, replaced by the clinking of ice against crystal and the slow, steady draw of premium tobacco.

The Architecture of the Ritual

A ritual requires architecture. It requires a space — physical or mental — where the act takes precedence over the outcome. The preparation of the cigar (the careful selection from the humidor, the precise cut, the slow toasting of the foot) is as important as the smoking itself. It is meditation in motion.

The crafting of the cocktail follows the same discipline. The measured spirit, the dash of bitters, the expression of citrus oils over the glass — these are not chores. They are the necessary steps to achieve balance. When the cigar is finally lit and the first sip is taken, the moment is complete. The world has been successfully held at bay.

"Time is measured not by the clock, but by the ash. A robusto dictates a forty-five-minute conversation; a Churchill demands an hour and a half."

The Alchemy of Pairing

The true magic happens in the pairing. A cigar and a cocktail are not consumed simultaneously — they converse. The robust, earthy notes of a Nicaraguan maduro find their counterpoint in the sweet depths of an aged rum. The peppery kick of a Habano is tamed by the caramel embrace of a properly built Old Fashioned.

This is the alchemy we measure in the Kaufmann Pairing Index (see page 54). It is not about finding the "best" cigar or the "best" spirit. It is about finding the precise harmony between the two — understanding how the tannins in the wrapper interact with the sugars in the alcohol, how the smoke coats the palate and reshapes the perception of the liquid.

The Sanctuary of the Lounge

The ritual is often solitary. It can also be communal. The cigar lounge remains one of the last sanctuaries of genuine conversation. In a world where communication is increasingly digital and fragmented, the lounge offers a rare commodity — long, uninterrupted dialogue. The shared experience of the smoke creates a temporary brotherhood of the leaf.

Here, time is measured not by the clock but by the ash. A robusto dictates a forty-five-minute conversation. A Churchill demands an hour and a half. The lounge is where ideas are exchanged, deals are struck, and friendships are forged — all under the slow, drifting canopy of blue smoke.

Why the Ritual Matters Now

It is easy to dismiss this as nostalgia. It is not. The ritual is functional. The discipline of forty-five minutes spent doing one thing — actually one thing, with no second screen, no half-attention scrolling — is increasingly the only training ground available for sustained adult focus. The cigar is, among other things, a behavioral instrument. It enforces presence. It punishes distraction (relight it twice and the smoke turns bitter). It rewards patience with flavors that emerge only in the second third.

This is what luxury actually does for a person, when it is doing its job. It returns the user to themselves. The watch on your wrist does it. The wine in your cellar does it. The cigar in your fingers does it most reliably of all.

☉ — ***R.K.***





Cuba Unfiltered

> *The mythology has outlived the tobacco. After three weeks in Pinar del Río, six factory visits, and forty-one cigars tasted blind — here is what the island still does better than anyone, and where the legend has overstayed its welcome.*

BY RADIM KAUFMANN · MIAMI · JANUARY 2026

The Cuban cigar is the most over-discussed and under-evaluated object in luxury. Everyone has an opinion. Almost no one tastes blind. The result, after sixty years of embargo theater and travel-magazine fantasy, is a market where a $32 Cohiba Behike 56 sells out in Geneva in ninety minutes — while a $23 Padrón 1964 Anniversary Maduro, made by Cuban exiles in Estelí, scores higher every single time it lands on the blind panel.

For American readers: you can legally travel to Cuba under the “Support for the Cuban People” category, but this is not a tourism license — it requires a full-time schedule of qualifying activities and five-year record-keeping. Book via third-country airlines and bring euros, since US cards do not work. The cigars are far cheaper on the island — a box of Montecristo No. 2 is about $180 at the LCDH versus $400+ on the US secondary market. One caveat, however: U.S. sanctions prohibit anyone under U.S. jurisdiction from importing Cuban tobacco or alcohol into the United States, including in personal baggage. Check current OFAC guidance before you travel.

That sentence will offend the people it needs to offend. Good. This is not the article that tells you Cuba is back, or that Cuba never left, or that the 2024 harvest was "a return to form." Those pieces write themselves and they always end the same way — with the writer expensing a box of Montecristo No. 2s and quietly recommending you pre-order the next Cohiba Edición Limitada. This is the other article. The one that says: *Cuba is the most emotionally important origin in the cigar world, and it is no longer the best.*

Both halves of that sentence matter. Let me earn them.

What Cuba still owns

There is a flavor profile no other country has cracked. Call it the Vuelta Abajo signature — a cedar-and-honey midpalate, a faint tang of the sea on the finish, and an aromatic top note that registers somewhere between dried hay and cold coffee. The Partagás Serie D No. 4 has it. The Trinidad Fundadores has it in a more restrained, almost monastic way. The Cohiba Siglo VI carries it through twenty-eight different flavor checkpoints from light-up to nub, which is why it scored 95 on our blind panel and why even our most skeptical taster — who came in determined to find a Nicaraguan equivalent — admitted at minute forty: "Nothing else does this."

This is not nostalgia. This is soil chemistry. The Vuelta Abajo basin sits on a specific weathered limestone substrate that releases magnesium and calcium into the topsoil at concentrations no Central American valley replicates. Combined with



the Pinar del Río microclimate — high humidity, low diurnal variation, salt-bearing trade winds — it produces a leaf that ferments differently. The Cubans have not "lost the recipe." They have the only kitchen on earth that produces this specific cake.

"Cuba has not lost the recipe. They have the only kitchen on earth that produces this specific cake."

What Cuba has lost

Construction. Consistency. Speed-to-market. Quality control as a daily discipline rather than a periodic recovery effort.

Of forty-one Cuban cigars we put through the blind panel for this issue, eleven had construction defects sufficient to affect the burn or draw. That is twenty-seven percent. The comparable Nicaraguan figure, drawn from the same vendors on the same week, was four percent. A 2018 Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No. 2 box, sourced through La Casa del Habano Geneva and aged in our cellar at 65% RH for fifty-four months, produced three cigars in a row that tunneled in the first inch. The retail price on that box was $640. The same money buys you a five-vitola sampler from Padrón's 1964 Anniversary line and you will not pull a tunnel in fifty sticks.

This is the part Cuba apologists hate to hear. The leaf is still the best on earth. The factory floor has not kept up.

The aging question

Here is where the romantics get their revenge. Cuban tobacco rewards patience in a way Central American tobacco simply does not. A 2014 Bolivar Royal Corona, properly stored, is not just a better cigar than the 2024 release — it is a fundamentally different smoke. The ammonia has dissipated. The cedar has bloomed into something rounder and sweeter. The finish has acquired what cellarmasters in Cognac call *rancio* — a deep, leathery, almost dried-fig note that you cannot fast-track.

Nicaraguan tobacco ages differently. A 2014 Padrón 1964 tastes very similar to a 2024 Padrón 1964, because Padrón's three-to-five-year barn-aging protocol does most of the work before the cigar reaches you. Cuba, by contrast, ships you a half-finished smoke and asks you to complete it. If you have the discipline and the humidor space, this is an extraordinary privilege. If you do not — if you smoke them within twelve months of release, as most Americans now do via Geneva and Hong Kong intermediaries — you are paying premium prices for an unfinished product.

The 2024 harvest, briefly

It was not the disaster reported in *Cigar Aficionado*'s March issue. It was also not the comeback claimed by Habanos S.A. at the February festival. The wrapper crop in San Juan y Martínez came in roughly fourteen percent below the five-year average, with measurably thinner ligero leaf. The filler was fine. The binder was excellent. What this means in practice: expect the 2026–2027 releases to lean lighter, more aromatic, less powerful — closer to a 2008 profile than a 2016 profile. The Trinidad line will benefit. The Bolivar line will suffer. The Cohiba line will be carried by binder quality.

What to buy in 2026

If you are spending Cuba money in 2026, here is the honest list. The Partagás Serie D No. 4 remains the single best value in the catalog at roughly $22 a stick in EU pricing — a KCS 94 cigar that punches well above its tier. The Cohiba Siglo VI, at $34, is the only Cuban release in current production that justifies its premium without aging. Skip the Behike line until the 2027 harvest reports come in. Stop chasing Edición Limitada releases on the secondary market — they are priced for collectors, not smokers, and the construction lottery is unchanged.

For aging stock: the Bolivar Royal Corona in fifty-cabinet format, currently around $480, is the smartest five-year hold in the catalog. The Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure Especial at $19 is the smartest ten-year hold. Both will outperform almost anything you can buy from any other country at the same horizon.

"Cuba ships you a half-finished smoke and asks you to complete it. If you have the patience, this is an extraordinary privilege."

The emotional verdict

I have smoked a thousand Cuban cigars and I will smoke a thousand more. So will every serious collector I know. The mythology is annoying and the construction is inconsistent and the Habanos S.A. pricing strategy is increasingly disconnected from product reality — and none of that matters, because when a properly aged Romeo y Julieta Wide Churchill is right, nothing else is even in the conversation.

That is the truth Cuba demands. The best origin in the world about half the time. The other half, a $30 disappointment with a prestigious band. The job of this magazine is to tell you which half you are buying — which is why you will find six cigars tasted blind in these pages, bands removed. Three are Cuban. Their scores are honest.

☉ — ***R.K.***

CUBAN FACTORY MAP · 2026

The five factories that matter, ranked by current quality output (panel consensus, Q4 2025):

1. **El Laguito** — Cohiba, exclusively. The flagship operation. Inconsistent on Behike, reliable on Siglo and Robusto Supremos.
2. **Partagás (Francisco Pérez Germán)** — Partagás, Bolivar, Ramón Allones. The most disciplined floor in Havana. Lowest defect rate.
3. **H. Upmann (José Martí)** — Montecristo, H. Upmann, Romeo y Julieta. The volume factory. Quality varies by shift.
4. **Romeo y Julieta (Briones Montoto)** — Trinidad, Romeo special editions. Small-batch operation with the best aging cellar on the island.
5. **La Corona** — Hoyo de Monterrey, Punch. The dependable workhorse.

HABANOS TIMELINE · THE MODERN ERA

- **1994:** Habanos S.A. founded. Marks the beginning of modern commercial structure.
- **2006:** Cohiba Behike launch. First serious post-embargo prestige extension.
- 2010: Behike 52, 54, 56 standard production begins. Reshapes the prestige tier.
- **2017:** Partagás Serie No. 1 Edición Limitada. Last universally acclaimed EL release.
- **2021:** Hurricane Ida damages Pinar del Río infrastructure. Two-year recovery cycle.
- **2024:** Habanos posts record $827M revenue despite supply contraction. Asia-Pacific now 24% of sales.
- **2025:** First Geneva-priced regular production cigars exceed $40 retail.

CUBAN VITOLA GLOSSARY

The names actually used on the boxes — and what they mean in measurable terms:

- **Robusto:** 50 ring × 124 mm. The default modern vitola.
- **Corona:** 42 ring × 142 mm. The classical reference shape.
- **Pirámide:** 52 ring × 156 mm, tapered head. Concentrates flavor at the lips.
- **Lonsdale:** 42 ring × 165 mm. Long, slender, increasingly rare.
- **Gran Corona:** 47 ring × 235 mm. Two-hour minimum commitment.
- **Petit Corona:** 42 ring × 129 mm. The smartest weekday cigar in the catalog.

BUYING AUTHENTIC

The counterfeit problem in the U.S. retail channel remains serious — recent audits put fake rates above 40% on consumer online platforms, and above 70% on certain regional resellers. The fix is to buy from one verified source: an authorized La Casa del Habano vendor with EU or Swiss registration.

For the full authentication protocol — seal holograms, barcode verification, the five-point check, sourcing red flags — see *Fake vs Real Cuban Cigars: The Authentication Guide* elsewhere in this issue.

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