

Garzaroli & Lara Interviews - Top 25 Cigar



Graycliff Interview at Top25Cigar.com

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Interviews with Graycliff Owner Enrico Garzaroli and Graycliff Master Torcedor Avelino Lara

The perfect combination is difficult to find. Apple pie and vanilla ice cream come to mind, as does daytime baseball at Wrigley Field. We at Top25Cigar are going to be bold enough to volunteer an additional "perfect combination" Graycliff Hotel and cigars.

You probably have seen the Graycliff Pirate climb the rankings in the recent Top25 Cigar charts, and perhaps even had the chance to sample one. We're going to provide you the story behind the great cigars that originate at this fantastic vacation destination.

Following is our interview with Enrico Garzaroli, the heart and soul of Graycliff Hotel, and Avelino Lara, the storied cigar expert that helped him build the Graycliff cigar brand.

INTERVIEW WITH ENRICO GARZAROLI

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND HOW YOU GOT INVOLVED IN THE GRAYCLIFF HOTEL?

I was born in Italy and graduated at the Hotel Catering School of Stresa. During one of my trips, I met a Lady Dudley an old friend of my Grand, that owned a house there. I was invited to a party in Nassau where most English were leaving the island as it was going to be Independent. She offered me a very good deal and I bought the property. To pay for the 17 persons she had on payroll, I decided to open doors to the public, it was an instant success as the house is one of the most famous history full and oldest property on the island and the black governing community wanted to be seen here. This is how I started the Graycliff Hotel.

WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR THE GRAYCLIFF HOTEL? WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE HOTEL'S FUTURE? Graycliff has become a Tourist landmark in Nassau and I am planning to maintain the status through continuous updating and modernizing.

WHERE DO MOST OF YOUR HOTEL GUEST COME FROM? Most of my restaurant guest come from the USA, but hotel guests comes from every corner of the world.

WHAT IS THE SECRET TO RUNNING A WORLD CLASS HOTEL AND RESORT? DO YOU PLAN TO DUPLICATE THE GRAYCLIFF EXPERIENCE ANY WHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD? There is no secret in running a world class hotel, only continuous attention to details and hard work. Maybe my son wants to duplicate Graycliff, but as far as I am concerned no immediate plans.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS HAD A PASSION FOR FINE CIGARS? Cigars have been my only smokes since my young age, my first cigars were the Montecristo No.4 and on better days, the Romeo y Julieta Churchill.

HOW DID YOU GET YOUR START IN THE CIGAR BUSINESS? Being in Nassau, I had access to a good selection of Cuban Cigars and I was offering Cuban Cigar in my property since 1978.

HOW AND WHEN DID YOU GET THE IDEA OF BECOMING A CIGAR MANUFACTURER? After going quite often to Cuba, I thought it could have been a decent idea to start manufacturing cigars in Nassau as the duty is 200% , so if I was able to get a good material, I had my chance.

THERE ARE MANY FINE CIGAR MANUFACTURERS THAT MAKE CIGARS FOR OTHER BRANDS, WOULD IT HAVE BEEN EASIER TO HAVE THEM MAKE THE CIGARS UNDER YOUR BRAND FOR YOU? For the same Customs Duty, it was not interesting, I could have had the real Cubans with more success.

WHAT MADE YOU THINK THE GRAYCLIFF BRAND COULD SURVIVE IN SUCH A TOUGH MARKET? With the help of a few friends in Europe and the touch of Avelino, I was able to put together a cigar that in my mind is not second to the Cubans and being rolled by the old Cuban Masters can offer a better craftsmanship. We actually came on the market at the starting of the recession, but we were very confident of the product.

WHAT IS YOUR GOAL FOR THE GRAYCLIFF BRAND OF CIGARS? Graycliff is a small boutique factory and I want to keep this status, high quality and satisfied customers.

HOW MANY CIGARS DO YOU PRODUCE A YEAR? We are producing around 450,000 cigars a year, we have only two lines, the Graycliff and the second line called Bahiba. Now we will be launching at the RTDA a more complex line call "Professionale" made out of the super selected cured and aged leaves. This line is for the advanced smoker and from the testing we had, the response has been superb. We have been chosen by the Cannes Film Festival, Vinexpo 2001 in Bordeaux and a lot of celebrities you will hear at the RTDA. We are only planning to slightly increase production if the market will so command, but in no way against the quality.

MR. GARZAROLI HOW AND WHEN DID YOU FIRST GET THE NOTION TO HAVE MR. LARA INVOLVED WITH GRAYCLIFF CIGARS? I have been courting Mr. Lara for quite some time, until he decided to retire and come to lead a small but very exciting team of Cuban Masters

IF YOU COULD SMOKE ONLY ONE CIGAR, IN ANY ONE PLACE, WITH ANY ONE PERSON, WHAT CIGAR WOULD IT BE, WHERE WOULD YOU SMOKE IT , AND WHOM WOULD YOU SMOKE IT WITH? The natural selection would be a Churchill Professionale to be enjoyed with Avelino and a great port or cognac at Graycliff.

INTERVIEW WITH AVELINO LARA

TELL US HOW YOU GOT STARTED IN THE CUBAN CIGAR INDUSTRY? On January 3rd, 1934 I started in Santa Clara my career in the cigar industry and then became a specialist in H. Upman and for Larranaga.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY ABOUT WORKING IN THE CUBAN CIGAR INDUSTRY? I have a lot of favourite memories: From the 17 years under an extremely strict security we were making the cigars for Fidel Castro to the 25 years that I worked with the Cohiba brand or the 20 years working with Davidoff, Developing the fermentation of leaves and the field checking of the raw materials.

COHIBA CIGARS AMONG THE MOST FAMOUS AND SOUGHT AFTER CIGARS IN THE WORLD. HOW AND WHY WAS THE COHIBA BRAND CREATED? HOW AND WHY WERE YOU CHOSEN TO BE INVOLVED WITH COHIBA? WHAT WAS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY AT COHIBA? WHO DID YOU REPORT TO? Fidel thought and developed the idea to a brand of cigar completely Cuban. Celia Sanchez, Secretary to the board of Ministers and help to Fidel was in charge of the development that was called "Cohiba". The name that the Cuban Aborigenes were given to the cigars. The factory started as "special plan for cigars" and then got the name 'El Laguito". For my personal curriculum, I was chosen to run the factory but in reality my principal mission was to supervise the special cigars for Fidel. The rest was collateral and of second importance. I was reporting about my work to Daniel Solana, Director of Cubatabacco, that from the starting till 1972 was managing the industry, from the agriculture to the national or international sales. After 1972 always to Solana but in a different ministry.

MANY EXPERIENCED CUBAN CIGAR SMOKERS SAY THAT THE COHIBA CIGARS BEFORE THE EARLY 1990'S WERE VERY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE BEING MADE IN THE LAST 4 OR 5 YEARS. WHAT HAS CHANGED? WERE THOSE CHANGES MADE ONLY WITH THE COHIBA BRAND OR ALL CUBAN BRANDS? When I was running the factory I had priority in the choosing of the leaves and I always had old stocks re-fermenting. These changes have been in all brands and the extra problem is in the construction of the cigars. The learning time has been reduced from 9 to 3 months and some young rollers are rolling the best cigars.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MYTHS AND TRUTHS THAT SURROUND CASTRO AND COHIBA CIGARS? DID YOU KNOW CHE GUEVARA? The myths do not exist. All is clear Fidel used the Cohiba cigars as the official government brand for the protocol attention and for gift to leaders of other countries. I met Ernesto Guevara only in meetings that he was presiding as minister and I was attending as Director of Enterprise.

WHAT CHANGES DID YOU SEE AND EXPERIENCE FROM THE TIME THE CUBAN CIGAR INDUSTRY WAS NATIONALIZED UNTIL THE TIME YOU LEFT CUBA? From 1960 there have been numerous changes but the most important is that since 1977 all cigars are made with “the bonce” and no longer 100% by hand.

HOW DID YOU COME TO KNOW MR. GARZAROLI? HOW DID YOU COME TO WORK FOR GRAYCLIFF? I met Enrico Garzaroli in 1991 when in company of Marvin Shanken and James Suckling came to the factory for an interview and to visit the factory. This interview was published in “Wine Spectator” and Enrico brought me a copy and we had a few meetings. The following year 1992 again Enrico came with Marvin Shanken and James Suckling for another interview that was published in the first issue of Cigar Aficionado. Enrico brought me later a lot of copies. We became friends and he visited me and I was visiting him when he was in Havana. Around 1993 I went to Nassau for a period and did demonstrations about cigar rolling in his restaurant, the visits went on and we spoke about the possibility of creating a cigar factory. The Bahamian Government gave the authorization and we then started to look for master cigar rollers in Havana. We made a lot of trials and we finally reached a very good result, the factory opened in October 1997.

CAN YOU USE CUBAN TOBACCO IN GRAYCLIFF CIGARS? We cannot use Cuban tobacco in our production for two reasons. Cuba does not sell leaves to make cigars and second, we are not allowed to use Cuban tobacco as we sell to the USA. Our big result has been to create a great cigar that can compete with Cubans in the world market, a great satisfaction for me as a tobacco expert and also for Enrico.

IF CUBA RE-OPENS TO US TRADE, WHAT CHANGES, IF ANY, DO YOU THINK WILL HAPPEN TO THE CUBAN CIGAR INDUSTRY? WHAT WOULD BE THE IMPACT ON THE OTHER NON-CUBAN CIGAR MANUFACTURERS? Cuba will need to increase the production capacity, that means more cigar rollers, more escogedores, more workers, more agriculture production, more factories for export. The impact on the non Cuban Companies will be devastating, only the best will survive. I still remember the great crops that were making the Cuban tobacco the best in the world and even now, they could produce the best cigars.

IF YOU COULD SMOKE ONLY ONE CIGAR, IN ANY ONE PLACE, WITH ANY ONE PERSON, WHAT CIGAR WOULD IT BE, WHERE WOULD YOU SMOKE IT , AND WHOM WOULD YOU SMOKE IT WITH? I suppose to have dinner with Enrico, like the ones that we have most nights. The one that I would like to remember is with a Barbaresco Gaja, very full as I like it. After dinner to have a strong espresso and sitting in the lounge enjoying a nice cognac with a Pirate Graycliff Professionale, smoking it very slowly, after finishing my cognac and when my cigar starts expressing a monumental personality, enjoy a nice glass of port, at this point, tell to Enrico: “ I reached the epitome of my success”.

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