

Doctor's Orders

A conversation with Dr. Garo Bouldoukian of Garo Habano Fine Cigars. » **STAFF REPORT**

LICENSED CHIROPRACTOR

and President of Garo Habano Fine Cigars, Dr. Garo Bouldoukian has been creating high-quality cigars for over a decade now. He sells his goods "the old fashioned way," face-to-face with customers and retailers, however, he also takes advantage of the web to get his product out in the market. And with a customer-service driven attitude, this US-based stogie artist is moving his product to various markets around the world. We sit down with the good doctor to talk about his company's success.

TPI: Give a brief history of how you got into cigars and came to start your company.

BOULDOUKIAN: While in medical school in the Dominican Republic, I got the chance to really familiarize myself with cigar-making, from the fields to the finished product. Everyone in the industry was very willing to be helpful in teaching me why certain conditions were necessary for growing the best tobacco, why and how fermentation was done, how to select different types of tobacco for use in cigars, bunching, blending, rolling, just everything about the production of fine cigars.

As it turned out, I had a natural affinity for tobacco and was able to "feel" which leaves would give me the desired result. I have personally

blended every Garo Habano cigar since the company's inception.

TPI: How did you begin working with Augusto Reyes?

BOULDOUKIAN: Señor Reyes' family is one of the best-known in the cigar business, being prominent in both farming and production. It was only natural the I would meet him and develop a relationship. We got along very well and shared the same views on proper manufacturing.

TPI: How involved do you get in the blending / creation of your cigars?

BOULDOUKIAN: I still blend every Garo cigar. I gladly accept input from my tobacco suppliers, torcedores, and factory managers, but the final determination of the make-up of each blend is mine. I have a strong sense of what I want to achieve with each new cigar and select the tobaccos and proportions accordingly.

TPI: Your sales philosophy has been based on the "old model" of doing business. What does this mean exactly?

BOULDOUKIAN: I will go to each store personally and meet the owners and his customers and develop a more understanding relationship. My sales force has remained consistent since I started the company and we have been successful in keeping very close to our customers. People who call the office will reach me or my Sales Manager, Tom Williams, and not a receptionist or operator. They can call us on our cell phones at any time and we respond to each of them as if they were our only customers. It has served us well for more than 12 years and we don't see any reason to change.

TPI: How do you go about finding new retail outlets in various different markets?

BOULDOUKIAN: We travel to different cities doing business the old-fashioned way...meeting store owners and introducing our cigars to them, person to person. We don't visit every store, of course. We do careful and extensive research to find the locations most likely to be good matches to us, and visit those locations. We present our cigars to only those locations we feel are committed to offering the best products and service to their customers.

TPI: What role has the web played in your business?

BOULDOUKIAN: The internet has opened a number of new opportunities for us. In addition to our corporate website, we've taken advantage of exposure on sites like YouTube, CigarReviews.com, and Smokemag.com to interact with





Dr. Garo at this year's IPCPR exhibition in Las Vegas

smokers more directly than would be the case without the web. By participating in online chats, offering videos from our Caribbean facilities and critiquing cigars with so many smokers, we're able to get new and often surprising insights into their preferences. And, of course, we reach a much larger and broader audience than we ever could otherwise.

TPI: What has your experience been like selling/distributing to European markets, specifically those of Central and Eastern Europe.

BOULDOUKIAN: While it is true that people are pretty much the same everywhere, Eastern Europeans are fairly new to western-style commerce. They have strong desire for really premium products of every type, including cigars. After 70 years of third-rate, Eastern-bloc goods, quality and cache are the most important parameters used to make their purchase deci-

sions. Our products are very well-received there. We have also done very well in Russia, Armenia, and Kuwait.

TPI: You do business in your home country of Lebanon. What kind of cigars do people in Lebanon or other parts of the Middle East like?

BOULDOUKIAN: We began selling cigars in Beirut just recently. Being from there originally, this is very exciting for me. Beirut is very cosmopolitan and luxury goods have been a staple there for many years. Those who smoke cigars in the Middle East tend to prefer the finest and most refined cigars and will not accept anything less. Our presence there is a validation of the kind of quality

and consistency we have always delivered in our products.

TPI: What trends do you see the consumers looking for in regards to cigars?

BOULDOUKIAN: In a word, QUALITY. There have been so many new cigars coming into the marketplace in the past 10-15 years that the numbers boggle the mind. Only the most committed and dedicated manufacturers are still around, the quality of their cigars keeps them in place. There is no longer any need to accept the mediocre. Super-premium cigars at moderate prices

TPI: Are you doing any cigar research in Nicaragua?

BOULDOUKIAN: Yes, we've been going to Nicaragua for some time, finding the right facilities for our new ventures. We introduced our first Nicaraguan cigar, UNUM by Garo, at the IPCPR convention in Las Vegas. We're very excited about our prospects with this new cigar, it's exactly what we were hoping for. It's a truly excellent cigar and, we believe, it will help reach a much broader range of smokers.

TPI: What are some of your goals for your business?

BOULDOUKIAN: All of us at Garo Habano really love cigars and we love this business. It is our fondest

desire to share our passion and commitment with smokers all over the world and to continue to develop, produce, and distribute the finest cigars we can make to the world's most discriminating smokers. We expect our growth to continue because we make better cigars, not because we make millions of them. **TPI**

