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CONNECTICUT

Old World, New Business

November 8, 2002

By KIM MARTINEAU, Courant Staff Writer

ENFIELD -- You may not be able to buy a Cuban cigar here, but under the hanging antique muskets, behind the glass doors of the humidor cabinets and stacked in boxes stamped with portraits of Stonewall Jackson and Ulysses Grant is the next best thing.

A cigar rolled by a Cuban.

The Connecticut Valley Tobacconist makes three lines of hand-rolled cigars, and Walter Peña, the small gentleman seated behind the wooden desk who shakes his head at the mention of Fidel Castro, has had his hands on each.

Connecticut may not be widely known for its cigars, but it is known for its flavorful, shade-grown wrapping. And the store's owner, Michael Tarnowicz, is betting that Peña's skill developed as a child, and the mystique surrounding a Civil War gunpowder manufacturer, will set his cigars apart.

Old Powderkeg, one of the strongest cigars Tarnowicz sells, is named after Col. Augustus Hazard, who supplied the Union with gunpowder during the war. Hazard's mill was within firing range of Tarnowicz's store in Hazardville, a village in Enfield that takes its name from the colonel.

Old Powderkeg has explosive undertones, Tarnowicz likes to say. "Hazard was a powerful guy," he said. "He had a powerful product."

Peña, 65, fled Cuba during the Mariel boat lift in 1980 and found work in Miami, then Tampa, rolling cigars. Two summers ago, he came north to help Tarnowicz put on an exhibit at the Eastern States Exposition in Springfield. Before flying back to Florida, he slipped Tarnowicz a note, in Spanish. A friend of Tarnowicz translated.

"He said, 'Mike, he really likes working with you. He thinks you're a nice guy and he wants to move to town.'" As Tarnowicz tossed the offer around, an idea took shape.

Peña arrived this spring and started rolling the store's first line of cigars.

The American cigar-making industry started after Gen. Israel Putnam returned from Cuba in 1762 with three donkey loads of hand-rolled cigars. Their popularity grew. The first cigar factory in the United States opened in Suffield in 1810.

By 1890, there were thousands of factories in the Northeast; 5 billion cigars were churned out by hand that year. During World War I, cigar machines were introduced. Cigar rollers could no longer compete. By the 1960s, most of the rollers in America were gone. Today, most hand-rolled cigars are made outside this country; more than 95 percent of the 251 million hand-rolled cigars imported last year came from the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Tarnowicz opened his shop in 1996, in an old pharmacy whose second floor had once been a meeting spot - and cigar smoking room - for members of the Hazardville Fire Department. He had just been laid off from his job as a purchasing manager for United Technologies.

A year later, the cigar boom peaked with 418 million premium cigars imported, according to the American Cigar Association.

The store's Civil War theme started last year. Tarnowicz hung up a Springfield musket. A patron donated a framed photograph of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Another, a retired gunsmith, restored another of Tarnowicz's muskets - a Colt - in exchange for cigars.

It's only fitting that Tarnowicz's Battleground line of cigars, which features heroes from the North and South, seems to be selling best.

"His Civil War theme is going over big in the South," said Don Cox, the retired gunsmith from Windsor Locks who restored Tarnowicz's musket.

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Tarnowicz shops around the globe for what he needs. The wooden boxes come from the Dominican Republic, the cigar filler from Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, the cedar, used to package the cigars, from Mexico.

The broadleaf and shade tobacco he uses to bind and wrap his cigars comes mostly from Stephen Jarmoc, a farmer who lives a mile away.

In the smoke-filled confines of the shop, Peña ignores the banter from the oversized sofa where regulars gather to smoke and talk. He works at a wooden desk one of Tarnowicz's customers built, copied from an old photograph. Peña's focus is on the cigars.

He starts by bunching filler leaves and stuffing them into a mold, where they are pressed. He then pries the rough cigar from the mold, drops it on the leaf and starts rolling, using his fingertips to stretch the wrapper tightly around the cigar. When he gets near the end, he dabs the wrapper with vegetable glue, and pinches what's left of the leaf into a rounded nub. The glue is the only thing holding the cigar together. Later he whacks the head of the cigar with a tool called a tuck cutter, giving it its blunt edge.

Peña rolls 80 to 120 cigars a day.

Cigars start to pile up on the ledge of his desk like logs. They will be tucked into boxes and stored in a backroom humidor for two weeks. As the moisture evaporates, the cigars turn a lighter brown.

Peña is a bit of a mystery at the Connecticut Valley Tobacconist, but he has gained a following. The aficionados like to imagine he is happy, but a language barrier leaves them guessing.

According to his old boss, Wallace Reyes (president of Gonzalez Habano, a small company in Tampa that makes hand-rolled cigars) he is.

"When he called last time he was excited because he was going to see snow," he said. "He loves it. He says it's very quiet, the people are friendly. I told Mike, 'It's a very good change for him.' He's there doing what he loves."

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