



A worker carries boxes with tobacco leaves at a tobacco farm in Esteli, Nicaragua.



A worker smokes a cigar at a cigar factory in Esteli, Nicaragua.



Nicaraguan Sergio Torres, marketing manager of the company Plasencia Cigars, looks at tobacco leaves at a tobacco farm in Esteli.

NICARAGUA PUFFING UP STATUS IN RAREFIED WORLD OF PREMIUM CIGARS

From "rich and full-bodied" to "complex with hints of licorice," aficionados exhaust the lexicon to capture the essence of Nicaragua's most highly-prized produce—not wine, but cigars, which are especially popular in the United States. The recognition turns the vibrant green hills of Esteli, in the troubled Central American country's northwest, into a hive of activity come harvest time. Here, 800 meters (2,620 feet) above sea level, half of the population of 110,000 is employed in the tobacco industry—picking, drying or curing, or rolling cigars in factories. "No one has soil as good for tobacco as Nicaragua," explains Nestor Plasencia, whose family business is one of the country's leading cigar exporters, as he sits and savors the sweet aroma of one of their creations.

Nutrient-rich volcanic soil and know-how imported from Cuba more than 50 years ago, as well as a knowledgeable workforce have set Nicaragua apart when it comes to growing flavorful top-quality tobacco. Apart from Esteli, the two other tobacco-growing regions are the Condega and Jalapa valleys in the north, each with their own distinct soils and minerals. Part of the lure of Nicaraguan tobacco is that "the same seeds planted in different soils and climatic regions give different flavors," Plasencia said, between spiraling puffs.

Cuban cigars may easily outsell the lesser-known Nicaraguan product in Europe, but Nicaraguan brands have taken advantage of the crippling US embargo on Havana-in place since 1961 — to sell to the Americans. Nicaraguan cigar exports to the US have increased by 40 percent since 2008, reaching 140 million cigars in 2018, outstripping the Dominican Republic and Honduras, according to figures from the Cigar Association of America (CAA).

Nicaragua's industry is a young one—it was started by Cuban exiles who fled Fidel Castro's revolution in 1959. When the Central American country's civil war ended at the start of the 1990s, the industry started to flourish.



A worker puts tobacco leaves to dry at a tobacco farm in Esteli.

"My family started in tobacco in Cuba in 1865. Today we operate in Nicaragua and Honduras," says Plasencia, whose father hails from the Caribbean island.

Cuban know-how -

Today, the country has 70 factories producing more than 5,000 brands, says the director of the Nicaraguan Chamber of Tobacco Producers, Wenceslao Castillo. Karina Rivera, a quality control supervisor at Plasencia Cigars, tests an average of eight cigars a day. "If I see that it's not at the level of quality demanded by customers, we report immediately to find out where the problem is," she said. Smokers say a lot is going on in a cigar during puffs, tasting richness, balance and complexity—a variety of flavors and aromas that have helped several Nicaraguan brands conquer the US market. In 2018, American trade magazine Cigar Aficionado named seven Nicaraguan brands in the top 10 of its annual ranking.



A worker of a tobacco factory smokes a cigar.

As for the Best Cigar of the Year, the "E.P. Carrillo Encore Majestic" is made in the Dominican Republic, but with Nicaraguan tobacco, the magazine says. "The strength of the Nicaraguan tobacco industry is our focus on quality, which is why we are today the largest exporter of premium cigars to the United States," Castillo says proudly.

Fermentation and aging

It's clear that in the rarified world of premium cigars, names are important. To the aficionado, in clubs and the best bars, they trip off the tongue—La Oportunidad Toro, La Imperiosa, Villiger La Vencedora Churchill... "We believe that 60 to 70 percent of our success is due to the way tobacco is dried and the time spent on fermentation and aging—we don't rush things," says Castillo. "The trilogy of this success is the soils, the microclimate and the people, the care they put into their work," says



A woman works at a cigar factory in Esteli.

Plasencia, who runs two factories in the Central American country and exports 15 million cigars a year to the United States.

The cigar industry has had to do more than resist climatic changes to survive. It's one of the few to emerge largely unscathed from the political and economic crisis that has rocked Nicaragua for more than a year, after a violent crackdown on anti-government demonstrations left more than 325 people dead and forced 62,000 into exile. It also put 400,000 out of work in an economy that had enjoyed annual 4.0 percent growth, according to the private sector. "If it weren't for these factories, Esteli would surely be deserted," says 43-year-old Silvia Moreno, who has worked in the tobacco industry for half her life. — AFP

OMEGA awards the winners of the Stephen Hawking Medal for Science Communication

'A special Speedmaster prize for Buzz Aldrin, Elon Musk, Brian Eno and the makers of the Apollo 11 documentary.'

The Swiss watchmaker OMEGA has awarded four unique Speedmaster watches to the winners of this year's Stephen Hawking Medal for Science Communication at the 2019 Starmus V Festival in Zurich, Switzerland. On stage were the winners including Brian Eno, for his contribution to the popularization of science: Apollo 11, a documentary by Todd Douglas Miller, for its breakthrough look at the famous space mission; and a special Lifetime Achievement Award for OMEGA ambassador Buzz Aldrin, whose legendary passion for space continues to inspire us today. A medal and watch will also be separately presented to Elon Musk, for his accomplishments in space travel and for humanity.

The Stephen Hawking Medal for Science Communication is one of the world's most celebrated science communication awards. With its partnership of the Starmus Festival, OMEGA is proud to align itself with the prize and contribute specially crafted timepieces for the annual winners.

Presenting the watches on stage was Raynald Aeschlimann, President and CEO of OMEGA. He later said, "It's a great honor to be here amongst so many esteemed names in the science community. I know these winners are truly deserving of the medal and they have all shown a great commitment to human understanding and progress. OMEGA has its own pioneering history and future in space, so we are thrilled to join the celebrations and share in this common quest for excellence.

The winning watch is a Speedmaster Moonwatch crafted in 18K

Sedna gold. The model is known as the "First OMEGA in Space," and is based on the iconic watch that astronaut Walter Schirra wore during the Sigma 7 mission of the Mercury program in 1962. Today's updated design features a brown polished ceramic bezel ring and a matt chromium nitride tachymeter scale, as well as brown PVD subdials and a central opaline silvery dial. The watch is distinguished by its caseback, which includes the words, "WINNER OF THE STEPHEN HAWKING MEDAL FOR SCIENCE COMMUNICATION", as well as a laser-engraved medallion that follows the exact design of the medal itself. This includes the Starmus logo and images of Alexei Leonov during the first human spacewalk and the "Red Special" guitar of Queen's Brian May.

The Starmus Festival, a combination of science, art and music, helps the general public understand and appreciate science. Since 2011, it has included performances and presentations from astronauts, cosmonauts, Nobel Prize winners and prominent figures from science, culture, the arts and music. For the 50th anniversary year of the Apollo 11 mission, this year's festival included a remarkable roster of science and space luminaries, including Apollo astronauts such as OMEGA ambassador Charlie Duke - the youngest person to walk on the moon. Also joining the speaker roster was Nicole Stott, also an OMEGA ambassador and veteran astronaut who has worked on both the International Space Station and the Space Shuttle.



Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin (left) and President and CEO of OMEGA, Raynald Aeschlimann.



Cooing doves an attraction in Singapore's birdsong contest

Just after dawn in Singapore, about 150 black-and-white striped zebra doves were hoisted in their cages on to tall poles in a large field for a singing competition. The contest, popular among retirees in the ageing city-state and Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, is fiercely competitive and top performers can be worth thousands of dollars. But the prizes are more about trophies and bragging rights. Jason Tan, 66, a Singapore resident born in Thailand who has won the competition dozens of times, said he finds the cooing of the birds, domestically known as 'merbok', relaxing.

"It's not easy to come by a beautiful bird that can perform," Tan said, introducing his entrant, a relative novice at 17 months old. "His tone is like a human singer, beautiful and sweet, and echoey." Sunday's competition, which lasted four hours in the middle of a nondescript housing block in a central Singapore neighborhood, is one of several held each year. The doves are divided into three categories depending on the pitch of their songs, and three judges decide the winners. Jerry Lye, a Malaysian who has been judging birdsong since the '90s, said the best songs feature a crescendo.

"You have to listen out for the birdsong that has more texture, that is sweeter, that has a long ending, the middle has to be short, and slow...If it's like that, then they will be at the top, so that is considered a good bird." Tan, whose bird finished third, left a little disappointed but optimistic for the dove's singing career. "The first time, second time, cannot be successful. Rome wasn't built in a day, it took me 50 years," he said. — Reuters