

CIGARS X 10

CIGARS BUY 10! FINE CIGARS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

¿Ortega **está** Ortiga?

A Commentary by David Wayne Mossman ©2007

Something akin to nettle, must have followed the Cuban-exiled tobacco seed of 1959 into the super-rich, magic-black soil of Nicaragua. Seems the cigar industry there has been weeding since.

America's 3rd largest provider of cigars, Nicaragua is finally clearing the leaf crop of weed, enduring each jabbing prod along the way to blossom into fruition.

Most annoying of this *ortiga* may prove as Ortega. In his first reign of the 1980s, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, two-time (and current) Sandinista leader of the nation, ugh, requisitioned the industry. For 18 years, since Ortega's fall, Nicaraguan cigars have fought to gain acceptance as the world's best. Just as they damn near get there, Ortega wins reelection.

Daniel Ortega's "nationalization" of the industry during his first presidency resulted in seizure of privately owned tobacco lands and spawned a five-year US embargo on Nicaraguan products. Growers seeking greener pastures, soon planted in other Central American countries like Honduras, the Dominican, Ecuador and Mexico. Just in case.

Naturally, with his history, Nicaraguan growers begin to worry about thorns festering once more. They quickly scurry together forging an alliance within weeks of Ortega's 2007 return to power.

Due to those election results, American-Nicaraguan relations again pose a major concern to the industry. David Savona, of *Cigar Insider*, quotes Charlie Toraño following Ortega's appointment, as saying, "...we're all going to take a deep breath."

Jorge Padrón's "biggest concern" lies in a change of those relations. After all, the loss of the American market (accounting for 69% of Nicaraguan cigar exports) could devastate not only the cigar trade, but also cripple the overall economy. It's a poor, poor country.

Nicaragua's lower classes remain dependant on foreign subsidies and relief efforts. They've likely grown use to it after 20 years. Prior to the November 2006 elections, Inter-American Development Bank awarded \$800 million in debt relief to the nation of Nicaraguan. Nada since. With Ortega regaining the reigns of the country, posturing by the US to pull aid begins anew.

Political issues certainly enable industry woes, but Nicaragua sustains various forms of crop-crushing threats over the years. Killer hurricanes, like Mitch of 1998, took their best shot at Estelí and Jalapa. Volcanologists follow closely the seven active sites scattered about Nicaragua, now that our entire planet seems to be passing gas. Finally, threats of losing that luscious, perfect tobacco growing *tierra de negra* loomed all through the 1980s.

For ten years Ortega's regime held Nicaragua, resulting in the tobacco field soils suffering severely. Civil war devastation, post-war neglect of the new government and abandonment of the crops by some growers for their "just-in-case" ranches, threatened production quality of the untended fields.

The Sandinista regime fell in 1990, in part due to American-backed Contras. The Estelí and Jalapa fields began re-hoeing, rebuilding and regaining their spectacular, Cuban rivaling, primo-leaf producing earth

Today Nicaraguan tobacco fields flourish, yielding many of the world's great smokes. Padrón transferred operations to Nicaragua in January 2007, Perdomo rolls only Nicaraguan tobaccos while Padilla, Oliva, Pepin's Tatuaje and Savinelli all thrive on Nicaraguan leaf, many for wraps. The Estelí

region alone produces around 50,000 cigars a day from more than a dozen factories. The massive, recently located Oliva factory could conceivably match that rate by itself.

Don Pepin Garcia's team kicks out a "super stuff" blend these days from Nicaraguan tracts, rivaling authentic, old school Cuban leaf, reports *Cigar Aficionado*. Point is; the Nicaraguan cigar industry rolls on, apparently just reaching its prime.

For now (one shaky year into Ortega's new term, lasting till 2011) the industry continues to operate successfully with little, or no interference from Ortega. Additionally – and ironically - the seated administration reportedly encourages the Nicaragua Cigar Guilders Association's growth and alliance. Hmm.

Still, cigar makers carefully weigh the Marxist leader's reputation. It precedes him as communist leadership has already pricked some growers, twice: Ortega's *and* Castro's way back when. Some wounds run deep.

En Español, *ortiga* translates; nettle. And Ortega?