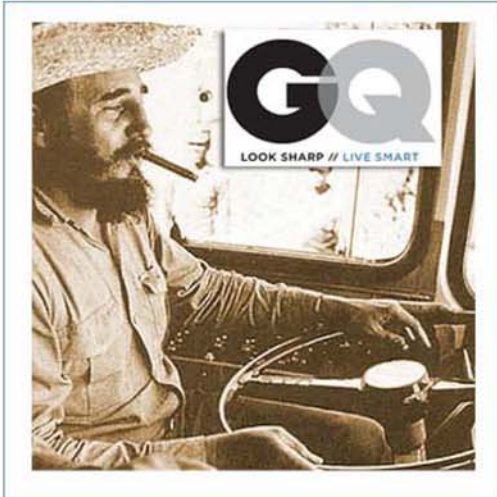


A Cigar Fit for a Dictator - GQ Magazine



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Elements of Style - A Cigar Fit for a Dictator

by Michael Kaplan, Edited by Brandon Holley.

Hi-Fidelity: Castro in 1966, when Lara rolled.

Anyone who doubts the cigar-rolling prowess of Avelino Lara needs to check out his previous employer: Fidel Castro. Prior to landing his current gig at Graycliff, a venerable mansion-style guest house and restaurant on the Bahamian island of Nassau, Lara served as the Cuban dictator's private cigar roller. These days, Lara applies his talent to satisfying the tobacco needs of capitalistic vacationers who enjoy lounging on the comfy sofas of Graycliff's parlor, grooving to the in-house piano player's jazzy classics, imbibing from the well-stocked cellar (one reveler recently spent \$60,000 on an 1875 Romanée-Conti) and sending up puffs of fragrant smoke from the magnificently fresh, deliciously rich homespun stogies.

Enrico Garzaroli, who owns Graycliff with his son Paolo, happens to do a fair amount of business in Cuba, and that is where he first encountered Lara, a man with pointy features, a mane of gray hair and the goofy habit of wearing neckties with guayabaras. "It wasn't difficult to roll for Castro", Lara insists, sipping an espresso and deftly twisting tobacco at a black table in a far corner of Graycliff's entryway. "Everything was checked, then rechecked [for perfection and purity] by Fidel's people. And nothing was ever sent back to me."

Never mind Lara's iconoclastic fashion sense, it's his way with wrapper and filler that got him in good with Castro. Viewing Lara as a national treasure - and surely feeling like a Yankees scout who spots the next "El Duque" Hernandez hurling fastballs for Fidel's starting nine - Garzaroli negotiated a deal with the Cuban government that allowed Castro's man to make guest appearances at Graycliff cigar dinners. The events were fabulously successful. Who, after all, wouldn't want to have his cigar spun by the most prized roller in Cuba? And after Castro gave up his beloved smokes (officially in 1986, really in 1991), Garzaroli negotiated for Lara to join him full-time. "the deal is that we take care of Avelino and give him and his family members [many of whom remain in Cuba] whatever they need," explains the bearishly built Paolo Garzaroli, pointing out that his father's close friendship with top officials in Cuba helped smooth the way for Lara's Bahamian immigration. "Avelino lives upstairs," says Paolo. "The maids take care of his laundry; he eats with me every night. All he needs to do is check the tobacco and oversee the blending and roll during dinner seven nights a week. We call him the Michelangelo of cigar makers. He's our artist in residence."

Because it is almost impossible to import raw tobacco from Cuba (although Cuban cigars sell legally and briskly in the Bahamas), Lara fashions his stogies from Honduran, Nicaraguan, Ecuadorean and Brazilian filler inside wrapper from Java, Indonesia. Though Paolo gripes Lara is "building Lamborghinis with Corvette Stingray parts," the patrons don't seem to mind. This is evidenced by a clutch of British financiers enjoying a bottle of pre-Depression Armagnac and puffing away on some of Lara's torpedoes.

After experiencing the beautiful symmetry of smoking a Graycliff at Graycliff, I find bringing home a fistful of Lara's hand-rolled beauties a pleasure in its own right. Relieved of the sweaty tension that's routinely generated when I enter the United States with a box of Cohibas stashed inside my golf bag. I happily declare a dozen label-free Graycliffs to the customs inspector. He sniffs them skeptically, then agrees that "they are very nice cigars, indeed" and politely waves me through.

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