

A Career Seasoned With Cigar Smoke and Revolution

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ESTELÍ, [Nicaragua](#), Sept. 22 — José Orlando Padrón, who believes that cigar smoke brings him luck, has puffed his way through some challenging situations over the years.



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As a young man he smoked his way from [Cuba](#), where his family grew tobacco in the prime Pinar del Río region, to a life in exile in Miami. Most of the land where his grandfather began growing tobacco in the late 1800's, and where his father continued the tradition, was nationalized by [Fidel Castro](#)'s government shortly after the revolution that brought it to power in 1959.

In Miami, Mr. Padrón smoked through a series of odd jobs, raising enough money to start a small cigar company of his own. Padrón Cigars, in the city's Little Havana, began in 1964 with a single employee rolling cigars. Back then Mr. Padrón would sell the day's production for about 30 cents apiece to fellow Cuban exiles longing for the flavorful smokes from back home.

Building the company has not been easy. His buildings have been bombed and burned in political disputes he says he never took part in. His crops here in Nicaragua have been wiped out by [hurricanes](#). On top of that, a Reagan-era trade embargo on Nicaragua blocked him from selling what he grew.

“Still, I think I’m lucky,” he said, estimating this year’s production at 5.5 million cigars.

Mr. Padrón’s company has grown steadily over the years, as has its reputation. Industry experts regularly give his full-bodied cigars some of their highest ratings. In Cigar Aficionado magazine’s latest ranking of the 25 best cigars in the world, the Padrón 1964 Anniversary Series Exclusivo was No. 3, behind a Dominican and a Cuban.

“It teems with flavor from the first puff, and the carefully cured tobaccos remain tasty and elegant until the very last,” the magazine said.

Mr. Padrón is credited with helping to put Nicaragua on the map when it comes to tobacco. With the United States trade embargo on Cuba restricting access to its cigars, the hunt for other quality locales has been fierce.

After the revolution in Cuba, most of the country’s big producers shifted operations to the Dominican Republic, but Mr. Padrón swears by Central America, where he says the conditions are most similar to Cuba’s. Eleven of Cigar Aficionado’s top 25 cigars now use at least some Nicaraguan tobacco.

Mr. Padrón, 80, began working in his father’s tobacco farm at the age of 7 and is still a hands-on manager a lifetime later. He now shuttles between Miami and Managua and is a constant presence on the factory floor, plucking bad leaves off the table with a disapproving eye and leaving a trail of smoke behind him.

“Don’t even talk about life without cigars,” said Mr. Padrón, a stocky man who speaks in rapid-fire Cuban Spanish and sticks his nose into tobacco leaves to take in the pungent scent as some might smell a rose.

In the 1970’s, Mr. Padrón began growing tobacco derived from Cuban seed here in Nicaragua’s fertile Estelí region. But politics interfered.

In 1978, as Sandinista revolutionaries battled the longtime dictator Anastasio Somoza, Mr. Padrón was regarded by some as sympathetic to the strongman. His Nicaraguan factory was burned.

Still, he kept smoking, and eventually he was back producing cigars in this country. To do so, he had to meet with the local comandante and make the case that he was employing hundreds of Nicaraguans and not meddling in politics.

The crises did not let up. In 1979, he and other Cuban exiles went back to Cuba to negotiate the release of political prisoners. In a meeting with President Castro, Mr. Padrón was photographed handing the leader one of his cigars, which riled some of Miami’s anti-Castro hard-liners so much that they repeatedly put bombs in his factory.

A group called Omega 7 claimed responsibility for the attacks, which backfired in the long run. Many in Miami sympathized with him and bought more of his cigars. Mr. Padrón posted this quotation from José Martí, the 19th-century poet and fighter for Cuban independence, on his factory wall: “Men are divided into two groups — those that love and build, and those that hate and destroy.”

In 1985 the Reagan administration imposed a trade embargo on Nicaragua, which effectively ended Mr. Padrón’s ability to get his Nicaraguan cigars to his American customers. “I got hit again,” he said.

He hustled some bales of tobacco out of the country to continue producing for a while, then opened an operation across the border in

Honduras. But when the embargo was lifted in 1990, he was back in Nicaragua. “I’m a survivor,” he said.

The challenges he faces these days seem small in comparison.

There is the Nicaraguan government’s recent decision to restrict the harvesting of local cedar, which he uses to make his boxes. Counterfeit Padróns have begun appearing on the market, prompting him to put a serial number on the band of each of his super premium cigars, which can cost as much as \$25 apiece.

Mr. Padrón scoffs at the health notices he is now required to put on the boxes warning that cigars carry the same cancer risks as cigarettes.

Mr. Padrón is sharing the running of the business with his family — Jorge, Orlando, Rodolfo, Lisette and Elizabeth Padrón. Confident of the company’s future leadership, he is nonetheless bracing for the unexpected.

“A businessman has to be thinking all the time, dealing with problems,” he said, puffing away. “I do it best when I’m smoking.”

One of his worries is Nicaragua’s coming presidential election, in which Daniel Ortega, a former president and the leader of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, stands a chance of winning again. Mr. Padrón has learned enough not to take sides, but he is worried about talk that trade relations with the United States may suffer if Mr. Ortega wins.

One of Mr. Padrón’s competitors down the road is Alejandro Martínez Cuenca, a former trade minister and planning minister in the Sandinista government who is now making cigars under the Joya de Nicaragua label. “Orlando has been through a lot,” Mr. Martínez acknowledged.

As for returning to Cuba one day, Mr. Padrón said he would leave that decision for the next generation. “I’ll be in a box by then,” he said, sending out a billow of smoke.