

Rocky Patel The Sultan of Cigars



For a man who had never known what it is like to even smoke a cigarette, Rocky Patel is creating waves in the cigar industry with his feature brand, RP (Rocky Patel). In an industry where you need to belong to a certain ethnicity or be a part of a family that has long been in the business, Rocky has proved that nothing is impossible. His success comes from hard work, quick thinking, long term planning and taking on challenges. When everyone told him that he could not succeed, he plowed along and did what he set out to do. Rocky Patel cigars are world renowned and are appreciated by cigar aficionados everywhere in the world.

CM: Tell us about yourself.

RP: I grew up in Bombay, India, and lived there until I was 14 years old. While in India, I went to Doon school and later we moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin. I went to high school there and also did my undergraduate studies at University of Wisconsin. I finally moved to LA to go to law school. I practiced law in Beverly Hills for seven years and used to frequent the Grand Havana room, a new cigar bar that had just opened in Beverly Hills.

CM: How did you get into the cigar business?

RP: I started smoking cigars in 1990 because I joined the Grand Havana Room in Beverly Hills. I started smoking as a novice and kept up with it because it was a celebrity fad. I have found that with cigars, you can meet a whole lot of interesting people. I have smoked cigars with Mel Gibson, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis and more!

I started out by making a few cigars in LA while I

was involved with Indian Tabac and was selling about 100,000 -150,000 cigars by 1996 in trade shows. When 1999 rolled around, I decided that I was burnt out practicing law. So, I stopped practicing law and went ahead with the idea of pursuing my dream of making cigars, which brought me to Naples.

CM: So, how did you go about it?

I went to Honduras, Nicaragua and learnt more about cigars. I educated my palate to be able to tell the difference between cigars. I spent five years just learning the art of cigar making. We started distributing cigars to England, Italy and Greece. Now we ship to most parts of the world. We made 60 million cigars last year. We make hundreds of brands of cigars that are sold throughout the country.

CM: What is actually involved in making a cigar?

RP: Cigar making is a very interesting. By the

time you plant the seedling to the time the cigar is ready, about 300 people touch the tobacco along the way. It takes two people to roll cigars to make 250 cigars a day. We have 850 people just in the factory, this is not including the people on the farm. It is a huge operation and every part of it is very involved and interesting.

CM: Is this what you had always wanted to do?

RP: I had never in my wildest imagination thought that I would be in the cigar business. I had never even smoked a cigarette!

CM: What makes your cigars popular, besides the quality?

Each year we take 1500 people to Honduras on a tour. We show them the farm, we play volleyball, cards and we show them everything about the cigar they smoke! We usually have a waiting list for months for people wanting to join us on the tour.

Contd. On Page 29

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Contd. From Page 12

I attend a lot of events and tradeshows. We often do black tie dinners. At all of these venues, I am constantly meeting people, talking to them and I answer questions about the whole cigar smoking experience. They look upon us to educate and guide them. The personal touch I provide also goes a long way.

CM: Do you sell cigars through your website?

RP: Our website gets over a million hits. We do not sell cigars directly. We sell only through retailers and distributors.

CM: What sets you apart from your competition?

RP: What sets me apart is that I am a perfectionist. I am very dedicated and I work hard.

The cigar business has been dominated by the Cubans. It is a form of art and it is passed on through generations. When I got into this business I was told that I would never make it because I am not from a Cuban or a Hispanic family. Now, I look at myself in the mirror and see that I have achieved what I set out to and that's what helps me drive myself even harder.

CM: How does your wife deal with all the traveling?

RP: I am single, I haven't met the right person yet. It is hard to meet a woman in a male dominated business like mine. Besides that, I travel a lot too. I am home for just four days a month!

CM: Do you go to India at all?

RP: I try to go to India every year. And no, I do not go just to Bombay, I end up going all over India and not just to one place. I love going to India.

CM: How do your parents feel about your career choice?

RP: They are quite amazed and astonished by what I have achieved. It was just two years ago that my father went to a tradeshow for the first time and was amazed to see the popularity of my cigars.

CM: What is next on the agenda for you?

RP: We are expanding out with newer ideas. The latest endeavor is that I have recently decided to create a lifestyle catalog which will launch mid year. We are working on it and it will offer consumer and lifestyle products.

We were approached last summer by someone who is an avid cigar smoker to make a reality show based on our lives. They thought my lifestyle was cool and would make a good television reality show so they are shooting a pilot for "Cigar Czar," covering everything we do, from work to play to entertainment. It may air sometime this year if it is syndicated by a network.

CM: Owning a cigar company is probably not a very common dream. However, what would your suggestion be for someone who wants to get in this line of work?

RP: This is a very hard business to crack into. You have to have a talent and ability to pursue a dream. The best advice would be to work with the competition, get some experience, seek the best quality and work hard. You must have a vision, a dream, a cooler quality and a keen eye for new ideas. Don't let yourself stagnate and always be faster than your competition.

When you have these qualities you can do anything! For example, with my experience so far in all that I have done, I can confidently say that I can take on any product anywhere in the world and I can market it to turn it into the top brand based on creativity, competitive ideas, training, building reliability and making it a success.

