



Photos courtesy of Tabacalera El Artista

FOR THE LOVE OF ART

Seemingly one of the premium cigar industry's newest companies, Tabacalera El Artista has 64 years of knowledge and experience regarding tobacco and cigars behind it.

BY STEPHEN A. ROSS



Radhames "Ram" Rodriguez (left) and Osvaldo Rodriguez



Kevin Newman

El Artista Continued

Radhames "Ram" Rodriguez fondly recalls the first International Premium Cigar & Pipe Retailers Association (IPCPR) trade show and convention he attended in 2007. He was in his late teens and had grown up around the tobacco business. His grandfather, Ramon "Pulita" Rodriguez, had established the company, which was then named Puros Cibao, in 1956. Ram's father, Osvaldo Rodriguez, had assumed management of the company upon Pulita's death in 1986, and a decade later he changed the company's name to Tabacalera El Artista.

Ram had many interests growing up. At one point he wanted to be a doctor before changing his professional goals to doing something in IT or perhaps within the communications field, but throughout his childhood years, the family business always played a part in his life. Ram's parents didn't give him an allowance. Instead, they insisted that if he wanted spending money he could earn it by performing small jobs at the factory after completing his schoolwork for the day. His parents were teaching him a strong work ethic as well as respect for the family business. That respect turned to love when Ram attended the IPCPR trade show 13 years ago, and it set him on the course to fulfill the role he plays today as the third generation of the Rodriguez family to become involved at Tabacalera El Artista.

"When I went to my first trade show and I realized what happened to cigars after they left the factory, I discovered the culture and lifestyle of cigars, and it really impressed me," the now 30-year-old Ram remembers. "I discovered that I wanted to be a part of that beautiful tradition. I studied industrial engineering in the Dominican Republic so I could learn how to make our factory better. I studied business administration as well in upstate New York to help me carry out my vision for our family business."

A New Vision

Upon completion of his formal education, Ram began working daily at Tabacalera El Artista in 2011. Not only did he steadfastly perform his

daily work responsibilities, but he also birthed a vision for the company's future. Despite its start in the late 1950s, the Rodriguez family business was little known outside the Dominican Republic or by anyone who was not a cigar industry insider, and Ram wanted to grow awareness of Tabacalera El Artista to an even wider audience of retailers and consumers.

Pulita began the company in 1956 with a small group of cigar-makers who produced the Puros Cibao brand for sale in and around Tamboril, Dominican Republic, where he established the factory. By the 1970s, Puros Cibao had nationwide distribution, but in the 1980s, cigar consumption within the Dominican Republic declined, and Pulita and Osvaldo switched the company's focus to becoming one of the industry's largest tobacco growers, with vast tobacco farms located throughout the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. During the Cigar Boom of the 1990s in the U.S., Tabacalera El Artista provided the Don Augusto brand to the American market, but as the boom ended, so did the company's efforts to produce its own brands for sale in the U.S. Instead, Tabacalera El Artista focused on selling tobacco to other manufacturers, developing new tobacco varietals and providing private-label cigars for many companies. Tabacalera El Artista was a giant that hardly anyone knew about, and Ram wanted to change that by creating Tabacalera El Artista brands.

"There were a lot of motivations for me wanting Tabacalera El Artista to produce its own brands," Ram says. "The most important is my dream to make people see Tabacalera El Artista as an authentic cigar company capable of making great products that add a lot of quality to the industry. Beyond that, on a more personal side, when I hear a 'no' or see a challenge, or see where there are paradigms where everybody goes in the same direction, I like to question things and find my own path. I like challenges and breaking paradigms, and that motivated me to do this."

One of those challenges Ram faced was convincing his father that creating its own brands would be a good move for Tabacalera El

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El Artista Continued

Artista. Under Osvaldo's care, the company had grown to become one of the industry's largest leaf suppliers and had more than 3,000 acres of cultivatable land in the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. Osvaldo had also set up an experimental farm near the factory, where Tabacalera El Artista works on creating new tobacco varieties such as HBA, Criollo '99, T13, Negrito and 1900, a hybrid broadleaf tobacco. Then there was the company's private-label cigar business to consider—Tabacalera El Artista was producing several million cigars annually for its clients. Would creating its own brands stress the factory's infrastructure to a point that its existing business would suffer? Thankfully for the Rodriguez family, the answer was no.

"I was against the move into creating our own premium cigar brands in 2012 when Ram first proposed it to me," the 60-something-year-old Osvaldo recalls. "It wasn't really resistance but concern that it would be a very big challenge for us. I wasn't 100 percent confident that Ram would be able to fulfill the requirements to establish ourselves in new markets. I wasn't scared, but I was concerned. Ram was 21, and I knew that he was focusing on a very big responsibility that would need a lot of resources and time. At the end, I knew that Ram would accomplish what he wanted. I am very happy with the results. I want to let the third generation of the family take our company into the future, and I'm going to help and support them any way I can. So far, the future looks very promising."

Where the Factory is the Artist

The future does indeed look promising, and the present isn't too shabby either. In 2020, Tabacalera El Artista continues to be a huge player in the tobacco supply market, and the factory now makes approximately 7.5 million cigars per year, with 1.5 million of that production figure being the company's own brands: Pulita, Big Papi, Puro Ambar, Got Your 6, Exactus, Cimarron, The Slugger and Buffalo Ten. Tabacalera El Artista has expanded to create its own box factory, and the company recently opened a call center to expand its sales force. It has also hired



Ramon "Pulita" Rodriguez's rolling table (right) remains inside the Tabacalera El Artista factory as part of a memorial honoring the company's founder.

Kevin Newman, formerly of Ventura Cigar Co., to lead the company's sales and marketing efforts in the U.S.

Newman had a wealth of experience in growing businesses before joining the cigar industry in 2012, and he has continued his successful track record. While at Ventura Cigar Co., Newman became familiar with Tabacalera El Artista through its production of Cuban Rounds and Cuban Rejects Connecticut. After leaving Ventura, Newman began consulting with Ram as Tabacalera El Artista rolled out the Big Papi cigar for Major League Baseball star David Ortiz (see sidebar). Newman has taken over much of the operation in the U.S. market. Ram continues to consult with him on new brand development and overall strategy in a rapidly changing premium cigar landscape.

"I knew of him and of his family, but I didn't know the scope of the operation, and I was curious," Newman explains. "The product they made for Ventura was always consistently good in both quality and construction. When I came to the Dominican Republic, Ram always took time out of his schedule to visit with me. During those times, I learned a lot about him, and I could see his ambition. It reminded me of me when I was his age. What attracted me to this organization and to Ram and his father was the scale of the operation. I think it's completely underrated outside of the Dominican Republic. To me, that's interesting, and it presents a challenge. It's an authentic story, and they're doing it the right way."

The right way to which Newman refers begins at the experimental farm across the street from the Tabacalera El Artista factory in Tamboril. There, the company grows the seeds it plans to use for the upcoming growing season and plants experimental crops, and three full-time agronomists tend to the fields and oversee the new tobacco development.

"We are among the front-running agrosience tobacco companies in developing new seed strains," Newman says. "We are invested in the whole process: tobacco growing, box making and everything else. It positions El Artista in the U.S. market as a top-tier manufacturer. ➤

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They are in the same class as the few cigar companies who grow their own tobacco and do everything else. It's the new company that's been around for more than half a century. They're never satisfied with the way things are but are always trying to pick up efficiencies and make things better to improve the quality of the tobacco. They're always trying to do something exclusive."

Tabacalera El Artista's innovative spirit also extends into the factory, where the Rodriguez family encourages its employees to consider the cigars they make as their own brands, thus engendering a sense of pride in the work they do. Juan Francisco Almonte Rodriguez, who is known as "Kiko" among his friends, is Tabacalera El Artista's head production supervisor and master blender. According to Kiko, the company's quality control standards are among the strictest that he has seen in his 26 years of working in the cigar industry. Thanks to growing its own tobacco, Tabacalera El Artista also has a deep tobacco inventory that allows Kiko to select well-aged tobacco for cigar production. Rarely does he use any tobacco that isn't at least three years old. Perhaps most refreshing for Kiko is the company's willingness to experiment.

"Tabacalera El Artista is a tightly knit family business, which has allowed our relationship to be more flexible and friendly," Kiko explains. "They have adopted me very well into the company and treat me as a family member almost. That is the best part of working here. They are more encouraging for experimentation. I have creative freedom here. I am grateful to have this opportunity, and I have created some of the blends that have resonated with the market. This has been the most growth I've had in my career thanks to the freedoms I have been given here, and I hope that I can continue to grow."

The Rodriguez family mirrors Kiko's hopes that Tabacalera El Artista's reputation as authentic Dominican premium cigar producers will continue to grow. While Ram has spearheaded Tabacalera El Artista's entry into the premium cigar market, he demurs from becoming the face of the brand. It's not just one person who can claim the success but the entire team. El Artista means "the artist" in Spanish. Ram insists that the true artist at Tabacalera El Artista is the entire organization and the processes it has in place to ensure that the quality and consistency of its tobacco and its cigars are unsurpassed.

"For me, the protagonist in the story isn't me but El Artista," Ram concludes. "I'm just an instrument in the craftsman's toolbox. I want people to admire the whole factory and the entire process. I'm not the artist. The artist here is the process that puts everything together, and the masterpieces are the cigars." **TB**

Creating the Cigar Worthy of a Hall of Famer



Shortly after the end of game two of Major League Baseball's 2019 American League Championship Series, which the Houston Astros won over the New York Yankees, Fox Sports baseball analyst David Ortiz lit up a cigar during the network's post-game coverage. When told that Minute Maid Park, home to the Astros, was a smoke-free building, Ortiz replied, "I'm not planning on coming back," and he continued to enjoy his cigar, which literally was *his own cigar*.

Known as "Big Papi," Ortiz played 20 years in Major League Baseball for the Minnesota Twins and the Boston Red Sox. His baseball career ended after the 2016 season, and he is most assuredly a future inductee into baseball's hall of fame in Cooperstown, New York, with a career batting average of .286 and having smacked 541 home runs and compiled 1,768 runs batted in. Ortiz truly is one of the best players of his generation.

A native of the Dominican Republic, Ortiz loves cigars, and he had his own blend made by Tabacalera El Artista. Every few months he would call and order several hundred cigars to distribute to his friends and also to enjoy himself. As word of his retirement became public, Radhames "Ram" Rodriguez contacted Ortiz and proposed that they create a brand for the cigar and distribute it nationwide. Ortiz agreed, adding that he couldn't do it until his baseball career came to an end at the end of 2016.

"We provided what he was looking for," Ram comments. "The blend was done in collaboration with him. He decided on the artwork. Everything else we do in-house. We distribute and market it, and it's the cigar for which we are best known."

Big Papi cigars debuted in the summer of 2016 at that year's International Premium Cigar & Pipe Retailers Association trade show and convention in Las Vegas. Despite being warned that they wouldn't get the cigars until after Ortiz had retired at the end of the year, a good many retailers ordered it—after all, the Major League Baseball season would be completed by the end of October, so the cigars would arrive just in time for the holiday sales rush. Ram, who had become a big baseball fan through his relationship with Ortiz, was torn—he wanted the Red Sox to do well, but he wanted the cigars to be released as soon as possible. When Boston was eliminated from playoff contention, Tabacalera El Artista released Big Papi cigars.

"We did a launch event in New York at the last minute," Ram recalls. "We got a call from his manager, who told us the season had finished and it was time to start selling the cigars. How about doing an event next week? They already had the venue planned. It was ironic that a Boston Red Sox player launched his cigars in New York City—home to his former team's bitter rivals, the Yankees. It was the Big Papi cigar that made people aware that El Artista existed. It has done a lot for us and boosted our presence in the American market."

Big Papi by David Ortiz cigars are available in just one size—a 6 x 54 Toro—and feature an Ecuadorean Habano claro wrapper, Criollo '98 binder, and Dominican and Nicaraguan filler tobaccos to create a cigar blend that offers a medium-bodied smoke with pepper, chestnut and creamy notes. Last year, Ortiz and Tabacalera El Artista announced an extension of their partnership with the release of The Slugger by David Ortiz. The Slugger is made from a Mexican San Andres maduro wrapper, a Dominican Negrito binder and a filler tobacco blend of Nicaraguan, Dominican and American tobaccos. Made in only the Gordo XL size (7 x 60), The Slugger by David Ortiz offers smokers a flavorful full-bodied blend with notes of leather and spice. Both Big Papi by David Ortiz and The Slugger by David Ortiz are packaged in 20-count boxes.

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