

EL ARTISTA CIGARS
THE LAST HIDDEN GEM





El Artista Cigars may be the last hidden gem in the cigar industry. Nestled in the Cibao region of Dominican Republic the third-generation family-owned factory known as Tabacalera El Artista (TEA) has been growing tobacco and rolling cigars for nearly 65 years. TEA is a massive operation: 3,500 acres of tobacco on more than 60 farms in Dominican Republic and Ecuador. Additionally, the company owns several warehouses, five tobacco sorting and fermentation facilities, and one cigar factory in Tambóril, DR. Even though TEA is a top producer in the Caribbean, cigar consumers in the US are forgiven for not knowing them as a juggernaut in the industry.

“Our primary business is growing and selling tobacco leaf” states Radhames “Ram” Rodriguez, “but I also have this little side project selling cigars”. Ram is the 31-year-old grandson of TEA’s founder Ramón “Pulita” Rodriguez. He oversees the cigar factory for his family and is the president of the factory’s consumer brand, El Artista Cigars (Artista). 83% of the leaf grown by TEA is sold to other manufacturers. The factory uses the rest to produce 10 million cigars annually, of which, nearly 900,000 cigars is reserved for Ram’s ‘little’ Artista project.



Artista is a relatively new addition to TEA, and it almost didn't happen. "When I was just 22 years old, I made a case to my father that we could make our own cigar brand in the USA," reminisces Ram, "he was not convinced and offered me no money to start; but I did it anyway using money I earned at the Factory to buy cigars at full cost from my father." Ram continues, "We started humbly in 2013 with just 7,500 cigars sold in the first year." The growth of Artista since 2013 is impressive, they are on-track to realize a major industry milestone of 1-million cigars by 2023. Artista markets seven distinct brands which include Big Papi & The Slugger, a collaboration with the retired Boston Red Sox player David Ortiz, as well FUGLY Cheroots, Pulita 60 Aniversario, and the break-out hit Buffalo TEN.

Buffalo TEN, (\$5.00 US) comprises the majority of Artista's reserved production at the factory. The brand, known colloquially as "Bio", is a premium, all long-fill box pressed cigar available in three different top-grade wrappers: San Andres Maduro, Ecuadorian Habano Natural, and Ecuadorian Connecticut Shade.

"Buffalo TEN demonstrates the strengths of Tabacalera El Artista" says Kevin Newman, Director of Marketing & Sales for Artista. "Bio is all about quality leaf at a great price." Newman joined the team in 2016 to develop brand awareness and build a sales team for Artista. The creative mind behind Buffalo TEN, Newman admits, "I had everything ready for Bio, from a marketing and sales standpoint but I didn't yet have a blend. At the end of my brand concept presentation to the Factory, I made an impossible request: 'I need a five-dollar cigar that smokes like a ten-dollar cigar'."





“We almost showed him the door” jokes Ram, “the truth is we knew it was possible for a short run, but difficult to pull off at scale.” In order to make Buffalo TEN a \$5.00 reality the factory needed to source tobaccos with enough inventory to maintain consistency in the event it was a success.

“The only way we could do it right was to source our own tobaccos for the majority of the blend,” explains Ram. The first release launched in 2019, the Buffalo TEN Maduro, features two exclusive TEA tobaccos: T-13 and Negrito. T-13 is a hybrid of the San Vicente species. “San Vicente has blueberry notes,” states Newman, “but in the T-13 hybrid the overtones are more earthy and rich like a dried apricot.” According to Artista, the other factory exclusive tobacco, Negrito, balances the blend with hints of dark cocoa and leather.

The quality and consistency Newman speaks of has certainly made an impression on the cigar industry. Buffalo TEN has been recognized within the cigar industry media with placements in several annual “best of” lists and has earned its place on the shelves of hundreds of top cigar shops across the US.

“Bio put us on the map with cigar consumers and retailers,” States Ram, “we still have a lot of work for Artista to be a household name. After almost ten years we have only just begun.”

