



BEHIND THE LEAF

TABACALERA EL ARTISTA'S RADHAMES "RAM" RODRIGUEZ FAMILY, VISION AND BIG PAPI

by Joe Bosso and Randy Mastronicola

ANY MAN WHO STEPS INTO A FAMILY-RUN BUSINESS usually knows he has big shoes to fill. However, in the case of Radhames "Ram" Rodriguez, he had a couple of pairs of them. In the early 1950s, his grandfather, Ramon "Pulita" Rodriguez, started selling cigars out of a hut in the Dominican Republic province known as Tamboril. By 1956, Ramon's cigars were so successful that he was able to establish a small factory and called his company Puros Cibao.



>> The Buffalo Ten 5-pack



>> The Big Papi Slugger



>> El Artista's Cimarron



By the time Ramon's son, Osvaldo, took over management of the organization in the 1980s, Puros Cibao—now rechristened Tabacalera El Artista—was a dominant force throughout the country and had gained a strong foothold in both Europe and the United States. Not only that, but Osvaldo had also established Tabacalera El Artista as one of the leading sellers of tobacco to other manufacturers.

Radhames—affectionately known as “Ram”—originally had little interest in carrying on the family tradition. Although his family had instilled a strong work ethic in him and put him to work doing odd jobs in the factory, throughout his childhood Ram harbored dreams of being a doctor or going into the IT field. That all changed in 2007 when he attended his first International Premium Cigar & Pipe Retailers Association (The organization is now known as PCA, the Premium Cigar Association.) It was at that trade show where Ram fully internalized his deep respect and admiration for the business his family had started and realized that he had what it took to carry it forward. After completing his formal education—he studied industrial engineering in the Dominican Republic as well as business administration in the United States—he started working for Tabacalera El Artista in 2011 at the age of 21.

“When I stepped in, I realized that I had a long trajectory and this was my turn to go to the next level,” says Ram, now 30. “One of my main goals is to have El Artista on the map as one of the best cigar makers in the Dominican Republic. At the same time, my father is still on the tobacco side, so basically what we do now is, I take care of the factory and the cigar making, and he works on growing the tobacco, doing the fermentation and reselling the tobacco.”

Now CEO of Tabacalera El Artista, Ram oversees a growing empire that produces over 4.5 million pounds of tobacco each year and has seen the company's own cigar lines—brands like Pulita, Puro Ambar, Got Your 6, Exactus, Cimarron, Buffalo Ten, as well as two entries in association with Major League Baseball star David Ortiz, the Big Papi and the Slugger—account for sales of approximately 7.5 million sticks per year.

Ram sat down with *Cigar & Spirits Magazine* to talk about his plans for the future, new products, his relationship with David Ortiz, and how he carries on the family tradition by treating the company as “one big family.”

In the length of time that you've been doing this, you've already achieved a substantial amount of success. What would you say are the biggest obstacles you face in your growth?

The problem we have is the fact that the tobacco market in the Dominican Republic nowadays is so crazy; even for us, it's a little complicated to guarantee an amount of tobacco that was noted at the forecast. Because basically the way we're operating on the tobacco side of the business is, all the tobacco on the farms is already being sold even before we do the fermentation. There's way too much demand right now.

We kind of play two different games here, and we need to be very cautious because we make cigars, but we also sell tobacco to a lot of cigar manufacturers here in Central America and in Europe.

Are there any new releases you'll be introducing in the near future?

We actually have a couple of projects. We're going to be rebranding the Puro Ambar upper line. There will be some small changes in the presentation—new band, a new fresh box. We're making some changes to the cigar as well, the main reason being to comply with all the FDA regulations. Instead of a 21 count per box, it'll be a 20 count. Also, the line will feature 100 percent Dominican tobacco.

Other than that, there's a new line for the Buffalo Ten. The truth with that cigar is that the first blend was so good that I need to be 100 percent sure that the new one is the same or better. It's been quite a challenge considering the price point, because in order to continue the trajectory of that brand, we also need to guarantee that the price point is going to be very close to the original blend.

“WE GROW OUR TOBACCO. WE DO OUR OWN FERMENTATION AND SORTING. WE MAKE OUR OWN CIGARS, AND WE ALSO DISTRIBUTE IN THE UNITED STATES BY OURSELVES.”



>> El Artista's premium tobacco about ready to roll.



>> The art of hand-rolling is in full force at the factory.



>> Expert hands at work.

There's a quality control issue, but you also have to consider consumers who have gotten used to that price point. I would imagine that's a fine line to walk.

Yes. The goal with Buffalo Ten is to be able to achieve that price point, and still make sure we have a perfect blend. Most of the feedback that I get from Buffalo Ten smokers is that this is already such a good cigar, so we want to maintain the quality at an affordable price. We need to make sure that any line extension has the same balance, but of course we want to be profitable at the same time. There's a lot of pieces we need to work with, but we're getting there.

Anything else you're working on that you can discuss?

We're also working on a new bundle product that will be the lowest price point out of our catalog. It's going to be a medium cigar, but it's coming with something very special. I'm actually working with one of my grandfather's brands that we use to do around 10 years ago. That cigar, in particular, is very, very good. A lot of value for the price.

Not a lot of people like to pay attention to bundle projects like this one, but we're basically treating it as a premium product. We want to make sure people can perceive the El Artista quality on a lower-end product as well and a value product.

That's an interesting approach to a bundle—you're starting with your grandfather's blend but you're targeting a more sophisticated smoker. Yet at the same time, from a production side, it has to be cost effective.

We're a vertically integrated company. We have a lot of ways to play with the prices because we cut out a lot of people in the middle. We grow our tobacco. We do our own fermentation and sorting. We make our own cigars, and we also distribute in the United States by ourselves. That's actually one of the main reasons why all of our products are usually reasonable price-wise compared to the average. With this one, we want to offer as much value as we can out of our bundle in a way that most companies can't.

So those are the main items for you right now – the rebranding of Puro Ambar, a new Buffalo Ten and a new bundled product.

We also have it in mind to do something else with David Ortiz. The last cigar we did with him, the Slugger, is really, really good. People love the cigar, but there are a lot of consumers that would rather have a smaller cigar.



>> The Pulita line is an El Artista fan favorite.

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>> Ram Rodriguez carries the torch of pride and product at Tabacalera El Artista.

You’ve enjoyed a very strong relationship with David Ortiz. How would you say your association with him has enhanced your brand?

Our association with David has really helped us to get a little bit more exposure. A lot of people focus on his name and they forget about the cigar. I always tell him, “David, it’s your responsibility to put the first cigar in people’s mouths. After that, if they don’t re-buy, that’s on me.” The Big Papi cigar that we did with him was voted Boutique Cigar of the Year by Cigar Business; it was ranked number three in their Top 25. So the cigar stands on its own.

David’s support has meant a lot to us. Here in the Dominican, we have softball leagues from all the cigar factories—we all play against each other. Last time David was here, it was during the season and we made an El Artista softball jersey for him. He put it on and said, “Let’s make a video to send a message to our team.” He was supporting them like, “Oh, I wish I could play with you guys.” That kind of thing tells me that he really identifies with the factory. He loves cigars, and we love the cigars we make for him.

Let’s talk a bit about the legacy of the company and how you’re carrying it forward. On the one side, you have to honor what happened before you in terms of tradition, but you also have to be a visionary in terms of where you want to take this.

Definitely. It’s not as easy as it sounds, because there are so many factors in the middle that I need to consider all the time. I feel as if I have a long road that I need to continue running, but it’s a dream that one day will come true. For me, one of the most important things is to always keep the old values that my father learned from my grandfather. Our company is like a very big family.

We actually have a lot of people that have been working here since the ‘70s and ‘80s. It’s generational, and I feel very proud when they retire. New people come and we try to treat them the same way as my grandfather did. My grandfather used to throw a lot of parties. In his day, there were 50 employees in the factory; nowadays, it’s about 800, so it’s not as easy as it was before. But on special days—Labor Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Christmas—we always have some special activities for them. When school starts, we always provide them with books and notepads to give to their children. Those little things that we have been doing our whole time, I’ll try to continue them.

New Jersey native Joe Bosso is obsessed with movies of the ‘70s, music of the ‘60s and cigars of any vintage. A graduate of NYU film school, Joe has written for TV shows you definitely know (like The Sopranos) and a few you might have missed. He spent 10 years in the record business and actually got to see a rock star trash a hotel room (identity withheld because, well, you know...).

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