



Radhames ("Ram")  
Rodriguez, CEO, El  
Artista

## El Artista Puro Ambar

*Rebirth of a Dominican Gem*



**IT IS POSSIBLE** that not every tobacco person knows this, but the Dominican Republic takes great pride in the gemstone-quality amber brought forth from mines that pockmark the nation's landscape. Amber from the Dominican Republic offers some of the best color and clarity of any amber specimens found in the world. There is even the Museo del Ambar (Amber Museum) in the northern coastal city Puerto Plata, where visitors can behold 20-million-year-old insects preserved within precious nuggets of this golden Dominican treasure.

It is from the beauty of Dominican amber that creative inspiration was

drawn for Puro Ambar, a cigar reformulated and re-released last year by Dominican tobacco giant Tabacalera El Artista S.R.L of Tamboril. Draped in a golden, natural wrapper leaf and evocative of the warm glow that an amber pebble reveals when held in sunlight, this Dominican puro is as pleasing to the eye as it is easy on the palate.

The reader may well ask why any reconstitution should have been necessary. After all, the Puro Ambar had been gaining loyal followers for years. In fact, annual sales of the original Puro Ambar crossed the 100,000 threshold in 2020, and a further 50 percent increase is anticipated in 2021. Interestingly enough, the line was proving especially popular among female cigar lovers. However, production of one of the core tobaccos of Puro Ambar was diminishing, and this came to present a threat to

continuance of the line.

Kevin Newman, El Artista's Director of Marketing & Sales, says, "It came to our attention that the availability of a certain tobacco used in Puro Ambar would not last beyond 2020." Last year El Artista cultivated some 3,300 acres of cigar tobacco on its own farms, making it one of the largest producers in the industry, and the largest on the island. But even with that largesse, not every leaf varietal can be made a permanent staple of the portfolio. The Puro Ambar experience again taught an old industry lesson: Unique or one-off tobaccos just can't be counted on to last forever. "So," says Newman, "instead of trying to substitute in lesser tobaccos to continue production of Puro Ambar, we took the risk to re-blend in a way that focuses on our emergent audience of female smokers."

Newman quickly adds: "To be



clear, we had not targeted female smokers. Rather, they came to us. We discovered the phenomenon, which was brought to our attention by our sales staff and, to a lesser extent, our experience at events. Women gravitate to Puro Ambar. The brand look, the ring gauges and the flavor profile all contribute. As you know, more and more women are trying cigar smoking for the first time, and more than ever are becoming endeared to the hobby. So in reblending, we sought to keep not only the Puro Ambar line, but the customer base it had attracted. Rather than kill the line, or make substitutes under the radar, we updated the blend with interesting tobaccos to make a reintroduction with a blend that embodies the spirit of the brand. The material

availability of the current recipe is stable and likely to last for a long time.”

In years past, flavored brands had catered to the female market segment, but this is now beginning to change. Flavored brands are shrinking these days because of regulation and market pressures. “And besides,” says Newman, “many female smokers have gotten beyond introduced flavors. What they want is *flavorful tobacco blends*.” He adds, “We saw this as an opportunity. Through research we discovered that experienced female smokers have developed a sophisticated palate, nuanced in ways different from male smokers, and the Puro Ambar blend just happened to resonate with a particular palate preference. So when we made the re-blend

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we sought to amplify that resonance, and it has started to pay off. We selected a few base blends, each with a distinct flavor profile that matched the concept of a cigar reminiscent of key attributes of island life. And we worked with a panel of smokers, which in this case was dominated by female smokers, to select a final blend which we then placed into production.”

Radhames (“Ram”) Rodriguez, 31-year-old scion of El Artista’s controlling family and now CEO of the tobacco giant, says his primary goal in the reformulation was just settling on a winning blend for which the company knew it could reliably obtain leaf. “To get T-13 wrapper is not that easy,” he says, “so instead we replaced it with habano seed wrapper grown on our farms and moved the T-13 to



filler instead. The new Puro Ambar was blended by me, my father [Osvaldo Rodriguez, now entering semi-retirement], and our production manager Juan Almonte. The wrapper is Corojo habano grown on our farms in the northwest of the island, Sumatra Dominicano from San Victor, Moca, and the fillers include hybrid T-13 ligero. So, just as with the original Puro Ambar, this new version keeps to a 100 percent Dominican blend.”

A 2013 industrial engineering graduate of Pontificia Universidad Catolica Madre y Maestra, Ram Rodriguez takes a special interest in the technical aspects of making his business go. He had already been learning the cigar business at his father’s side from boyhood, but Rodriguez says his college years changed his perspective. “Education helped me to see our business operation from another angle. It helped teach me to work in a proactive way, to be open to challenges from a problem-solving perspective,” he says.

One of the recent technical challenges with which Rodriguez has had to grapple is the COVID pandemic. “Our operations were severely affected at first,” he says. “When the pandemic started, our country was locked down. Since we are a Free Trade Zone country, we were officially permitted to continue operations, but we were not ready. With the fact that we are responsible for more than 900 people working in our company, we decided voluntarily to close our operations for two months to institute new measures to guarantee staff safety. Nowadays, demand for cigars is very high—our sales in premium cigars increased



around 25 percent in 2020—so to keep production going we moved some of our operations around in order to maintain proper distance among staff. We hired a new manager of industrial health and safety, and we are constantly doing random COVID testing in all of our departments.”

The company’s exertions certainly appear to have paid off. The factory is going gangbusters. Newman points out: “Our U.S. business includes our finished brands such as Puro Ambar, Buffalo TEN, Big Papi and so forth. But the El Artista cigar brand amounts to only a small portion of the company’s total output. Annual production at Tabacalera El Artista is up

to about 8 million finished cigars now, with only about 10 percent of that dedicated to EAC brands.”

El Artista’s customer representation is reportedly on its game, too. Ed Santamaria, vice president of operations and buyer with Two Guys Smoke Shop in Nashua, New Hampshire, says: “El Artista is a great company to deal with. They have always been very responsive to our needs, and the people there are fantastic—really on top of things. They rise above and beyond every time.” John Aprim, owner of Cigar Club with locations in Sacramento and Modesto, California, says, “In my shop the most popular El Artista line

is the Buffalo TEN Maduro, but the Puro Ambar does well, too. Really, the whole El Artista brand does very well here. Their prices are competitive, easily beating comparable brands, and the Puro Ambar’s price point just keeps it moving all day long. I’m very happy getting the company into my humidor.”

Rodriguez is looking forward to a return to the blessings of more normal times. Before the pandemic, he was accustomed to traveling to the U.S. at least once a month, with a couple of trips to Europe and South America thrown in as well. “Now with COVID,” he says, “I have not left my country since March of last year.” Even so, Rodriguez is finding ways to make the best of a demanding situation. “Staying closer to home is actually not that bad since I’ve been able to organize some things better and blend some future projects.” He adds, “I think one main reason for the current increase in sales in premium cigars goes to the lockdowns and the work-at-home trend. People today are freer than ever to enjoy a cigar while they work. And hey, there is nothing better than checking emails on your laptop while enjoying a cup of coffee in one’s own kitchen, smoking a great cigar.”

Puro Ambar is available in 20-count boxes. Suggested retail prices are as follows:

- Corona (5 1/2 x 42)  
\$6 single / \$120 box
- Robusto (5 x 50)  
\$6.80 single / \$136 box
- Toro (6 x 54)  
\$7 single / \$140 box

Merchants wishing to open an account with El Artista can email Kevin Newman at [sales@elartistacigars.com](mailto:sales@elartistacigars.com), or call the company’s Miami office at 800.638.0283 and request samples and a price sheet.



## El Artista Puro Ambar

**Size:** Robusto 5 x 50

**Wrapper:** Dominican habano wrapper

**Binder:** Dominican T-13

**Filler:** Dominican T-13

**MSRP:** \$6.80 single / \$136 box

**Smoke time:** 1 hour, 24 minutes



**T**he Puro Ambar Robusto makes a handsome showing of itself in the cellophane, with its white band featuring amber-gold lettering and wavy amber-gold borders. The fragrance out of the cellophane is, frankly, mouth-watering: leathery and earthy. The cigar is draped in a fine, natural wrapper leaf, which shows only a couple unobtrusive veins and all-but-invisible seams. The double-capped, firmly packed cigar bears the coloration of milk chocolate. After a punch cut, the cold draw delivers perfect resistance and the slightest note of sweet chili pepper.

☉ At light-up, I must say this cigar is exceptionally easy on the senses. I am detecting the indisputable signature of a creamy Dominican puro, right from the first puff. There is not even a sinus tickle with the retrohale—just a lingering, buttery finish. Thick clouds of smoke wreath me, but do not overpower.

☉ Twenty minutes in, I am finding no transition evident in flavors. Just velvety Dominican tobacco. The cigar is sporting a fine one-inch ash, and it is maintaining a straight burn line. Also, I notice the cigar is forgiving in

still another way: It allows the attention to wander without demanding any relight. I get lost in the duties of some urgent email, but when I return, the Puro Ambar is still burning splendidly. Mild cigars can sometimes encourage a gluttonous smoker to over-heat the stick, but here the mildness is in part offset and supported by the persistence of the smooth, abiding aftertaste, which offers notes of unsweetened baker's chocolate and cedar. Indeed, it is the ample finish that helps sustain and unify the experience from puff to puff.

☉ There is never any flaking of the ash whatsoever ... and only the slightest waviness shows up on the burn line at 30 minutes. (The cigar never requires any touch up, from start to finish.) There is more than 1 ½ inches of slate-gray ash still hanging on a half-hour in; and at this point, just to be on the safe side, I finally plop the ash off the compact, well-formed cherry. Without difficulty, I remove the band.

☉ One hour in, the flavors have remained consistent throughout. They are just slowly rising. The flavor profile fits the prototype of a mild-mannered Dominican puro. Cream and cedar slowly amplify for the duration,

with a gradually emerging hum of dark chocolate-hazelnut in the far background.

☉ The Puro Ambar is a thoroughly beguiling and satisfying smoke, with perfect burn qualities. Smoking this cigar reminds me of ... sunshine, if I can be forgiven the poetic license. This cigar could conjure thoughts of a happy, sunny, warm day even if it's snowing outside. To my palate the Puro Ambar is definitely toward the milder end of the spectrum, both in terms of body and nicotine delivery. But this cigar is not insipid. And its long smoking duration—after all, 84 minutes is pretty good for a robusto—adds further to the value. Indeed, it rates as the finest \$7 cigar I've smoked in a fairly long time.

☉ The Puro Ambar would make an excellent early-day or afternoon smoke, and I cannot imagine a better introduction to fine cigars for any neophyte you may wish to introduce to the hobby. It played amicably with a double-shot cappuccino flavored with a splash of Kahlúa; and given its quality and burn time, I'd say, to me, it's worth twice the asking price. *Sample provided by Tobacco & Cigar Distribution Corp. of Doral, Florida.* 🐾