

Smoke Yourself Silly in Philly

So much to see, so many cigars to smoke, in Philly—still the city of brotherly love.

→ By Evan Dashevsky

Like the fictional homegrown hero, Rocky, who fought against all fictional odds to make it to the big fictional fight, Philly's real underdogs—cigar smokers and their humble proprietors—have had to learn to scrap and struggle in order to survive the onslaughts of the Apollo Creeds of the legislative world. In June of this year, Pennsylvania joined the company of 31 of its fellow states in passing a statewide public smoking ban. But the esteemed state legislators of Harrisburg would find themselves two years behind the curve of the little urban jewel in Pennsylvania's southeast corner, where a September 2006 ban is even tougher on the lowly puffer than that of the state.

But smoking bans may be the least of the city's problems. The last few years have seen this City of Brotherly Love hit with record murder rates (perfectly safe, by the way—just try not to be a crack dealer in North Philly at 3:00 in the morning, and you'll be fine), which have helped grease the pole for Philly's slide further down from its revolution-era throne atop the list of premiere American cities. But lately, a renaissance of sorts has started to take place. The city's many many colleges draw in young people from all over the country, but unlike past graduating classes, many of them are deciding to stay in Philly proper, bringing a youthful vitality to the city's cultural life (captured in pop culture terms by the popular FX show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*). In recent years, the city has even been dubbed (some may say patronizingly) by the New York press as "the sixth borough," meaning many professionals are opting to live cheaper in Pennsylvania and catching a weekday train ride to their Big Apple offices. And many artists and creative-field types, having found New York too expensive, are finding Philadelphia to be a welcome, and less expensive alternative. The city is starting to build a new culture on top of its constitutional history. Now if the city could only remember the parts of the constitution that allow for individual choice—including that age-old right for adults to enjoy smokable goods—we might be on to something.

H **Holt's** (1522 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102; Tel: 215-732-8500; www.holts.com) The *crème de la crème* of brotherly love cigar outlets, Holt's is a spot that lives up to its reputation.



Open since 1995 in its present Center City location, there has been a Holt's somewhere in a three-block radius of Philly's bustling center for over a century. Since the '50s, Holt's has been in the care of the Levin family, owner of Ashton, Philly's own hometown brand. Besides being known by every bellboy and bartender in the area, this premiere tobacco shop routinely draws in sports stars, politicians, and movie stars passing through town.

In addition to its Center City flagship, Holt's recently opened a larger Northeast Philly location complete with lounge, and offers a popular mail-order/web business via holts.com. The flagship location offers a large accessory section in the front (including an



→ Inside Holt's, one of Philly's premier cigar shops.

impressive collection of high-end pens for sale). There is a huge cave-like walk-in humidor with a bounty of cigars to match any pallet, including various Holt's-only exclusives such as Casa Royale and Old Henry by Jose "Pepin" Garcia and a Dominican bundle from Arturo Fuente. In the back is a lounge area with leather couches and cappuccino machine.

The store's most exciting new asset, though, might just be a New York export in the form of David Kitchens, former Manager of the Davidoff store on Madison Avenue in NYC. He notes that Holt's is the place you go to find those hard-to-find products. Centered in Philly's economic belly, many a patron could easily afford anything

in the store, but when they want 10 Opus X, they only get three—you'll never hear "we're out" in this part of town. Specializing in events, he sees big possibilities for the location—planning a joint Octoberfest venture with Davidoff's NYC location and organizing various joint events with local restaurants and businesses.

M **Mahogany on Walnut** (1524 Walnut Street, Second Floor, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102; Tel: 215-732-3982; www.phillycigarbar.com) Sitting on top of the world-famous Holt's is Mahogany on Walnut, one of the classiest cigar-friendly bars in the city—or anywhere. Still immune from the city's smoking laws because—in addition to a fully stocked bar (96 brands of whiskey strong) and "lite fare" kitchen—there's a legislative loophole that allows bars to allow smoking if they generate 20% of their revenue from cigars. The smokes are supplied by Holt's downstairs, even though patrons are invited to bring their own, and for the regulars, Mahogany offers humididor storage lockers.



Tom Piazza. Situated in Philly's exclusive Rittenhouse Row, near the city's business hub, Mahogany draws in a lot of business clients during the day, but it becomes the perfect date destination on Friday and Saturday nights.

B **Black Cat** (1518 Sansom Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102; Tel: 215-563-9850; www.blackcatcigars.com) Perhaps just as famous for its web-order business, Black Cat has its retail location in Center City, Philadelphia. While it may be somewhat overshadowed by Holt's a block away, owner Samuel Driban's Black Cat has built a steady reputation by keeping things less formal and by being able to offer "heavy discounts" on products due to the bulk-buying ability of Black Cat's catalogue business.

"We're a 'big small' company," comments Driban, who accounts



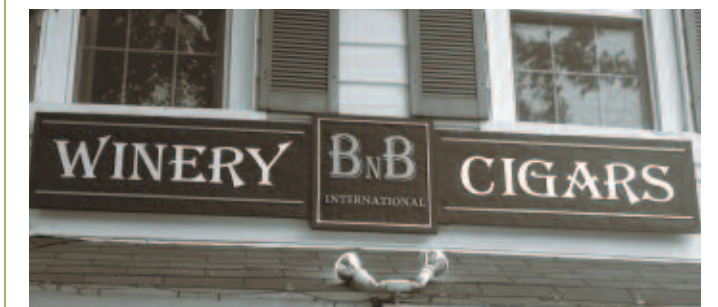
→ Samuel Driban, owner of Black Cat cigars.

for the retail outlet's success due to customer service. "We have great customer service. We know when our customers are getting married, we know when their kids are graduating. There's a great kinship of cigar smokers. It's always interesting to see regular guys looking to buy one or two sticks conversing about cigars with pharmaceutical CEOs buying boxes."

In addition to the catalogue and retail business, Black Cat will soon add a second store in nearby East Norriton which will feature wall-to-ceiling cigars, and a lounge that won't require any "snobby memberships."

B **B&B** (7920 Germantown Ave., Chestnut Hill, Pa. 19118; Tel: 215-242-6776; www.bnbicigars.com) Over in Philadelphia's picturesque upscale Chestnut Hill neighborhood, you'll find B&B International, a quintessential neighborhood tobacconist. Celebrating four years at this location, the quaint little shop draws in upwardly-mobile locals as well as tourists coming to take in the Chestnut Hill historic district, which happens to be surrounded by some of the city's best and most eclectic restaurants—a short walk past B&B will bring up Cuban, Persian, Thai, and Indian cuisine. B&B also shares its location with local Twin Brook Vineyard, which offers a full wine selection in the back with periodic tastings. On the side is a garden patio, the perfect place to enjoy a fine cigar and a fine wine. When stopping by, be sure to try one of the shop's own Flor de César cigars (named for amicable owner, Brian DeCesare).

During Sundays in Philadelphia, the city's churches—from historic to storefront—will be filled with worshippers, but come Fall,



that *other* devotion always comes out. The perennially on-the-cusp of greatness, but always loved, Philadelphia Eagles take the city's attention. And like many spots, even B&B shares its own Autumn Sunday tradition with Eagles pre-game get-togethers featuring coffee and smokes and a ticket raffle.

P **Philadelphia Cigar & Tobacco Company** (2417 Welsh Road, Philadelphia, Pa. 19114; Tel: 215-464-2222) A good half-hour drive away from the bustle of commerce and Birthplace-of-America tourism that define Philly's more famous Center City, lies the traditionally Irish (though rapidly diversifying) swath of Northeast Philadelphia. While Northeast Philly addresses rarely make their way into any tourist industry literature, it is home to at least one hidden gem, tucked away into a local strip mall, Mike Dixon's Philadelphia Cigar & Tobacco Company.

Come in and you'll be greeted by a gigantic black dog, the appropriately-named "Monster," and many-tattooed owner Dixon—both are far more welcoming than a first glance might suppose. The whole front of Philadelphia Cigar is built as a manly



Philadelphia Cigar & Tobacco Co.'s humididor boasts a wide cigar selection.

anyone else—I have ‘stations’ at each of my locations.” Levy says he draws business as far as the state capital, Harrisburg. The “SJ” stands for Smokin’ Java, when the shop originally offered coffee as well. There isn’t a lot of coffee at the current location, but you’ll also find a wide range of specialty cigarettes, pipes, accessories, and hookahs. “We brought Hookahs to Philly in 2000,” Yaniv explains. “We were the first ones to bring them here.”

But, of course, the main attraction is the store’s large selection of cigars. Most of his business comes after six when people return to their area homes after working in the city. One of the premiere spots in the vicinity, Yaniv explains that SJ delivers “everything that is smoke-related: best quality, best prices, best service, and convenient location.”



SJ Cigar’s Yaniv Levy, the hardest working man in Philly tobacco retail.

SJ doesn’t do a lot of in-store events, but periodically has a roller from the Dominican come up to each location to roll cigars for the customers. When stopping by the Montgomery Avenue location, be sure to hit up Aldar down the block, one of the best Mediterranean restaurants anywhere.

T **Tinder Box** (391 W. Lancaster Ave., Haverford, Pa. 19041; Tel: 610-896-4511; www.tinderboxhaverford.com; www.tinderboxinternational.com) The Philly suburbs play host to the flagship store of one of the country’s most prosperous cigar store chains. There are over 100 Tinder Box loca-



Customers lounging in Tinder Box’s flagship Haverford store.

retreat, complete with leather couches, large screen TV, and pool table. “Every Sunday is pizza and the Phillies,” says Mike, “and it’s the same deal with the Eagles, and BYOB every Sunday.”

Mike claims that the Philly smoking ban has not affected business, and his core of regulars still comes by—including his daytime crew of retirees from the neighborhood and his regular “Friday guys” who come in and buy five or six cigars for the weekend, and get a free beer or shot before heading out.

For his crew, Mike claims the hottest smoke is Pepin Garcia. “He’s a freight train leaving Seattle and no one can stop him.” And for newcomers, Dixon swears that “Arganese is coming out of the gates swinging. His cigars are going to compete, and now that he’s starting production in Nicaragua, that’s going to take him to another level—people are asking for him by name.”

With real estate somewhat cheaper than other segments of the area, Philly Cigar Company has been allowed some more floor-space than other shops in the region. And taking advantage, Mike hosts events that draw up to 125 people at a time, which he promotes with an e-mail list of 1,500. When away from the congestion of Center City, Philadelphia Cigar & Tobacco is a place to stop by and clear your mind.

S **SJ Cigars** (293 Montgomery Avenue, Bala Cynwyd, Pa. 19004; Tel: 610-668-2993; www.sjcigars.com) A short trek across City Line Avenue, the dividing line between West Philadelphia and the nearby suburbs (in an area known as “The Main Line” after the train service connecting the two) you will find SJ Cigars, one of three SJ locations owned by Israeli ex-pat Yaniv Levy, who explains, “I have more offices than

tions spanning 25 states. The spacious location is housed in front of an upscale stripmall across the street from the prestigious Haverford College. The spacious, classy layout seems to become magically filled with a dedicated local patronage as soon as the doors open.

Downstairs, you’ll find a cozy lounge area with big screen TV across the room from an impressive display of antique pipes. Customers can rent the downstairs lounge for gatherings or just settle-in when visiting. The lounge has become known as a meeting house for area powerbrokers and has played host to many Philly-area political elite (who, of course, on the record, never touched a cigar in their life). The downstairs lounge has also been the setting for everything from C-SPAN book events to Superbowl and big title fight parties, and even been known to have the occasional poker night.

When visiting, you can also take in some of Tinder Box’s own exclusive cigars, such as their new Vino Series made by Altadis, which comes in Cabernet, Chardonnay, and Pinot blends—these aren’t wine-flavored cigars, but rather a “designation” of character. Also their Private Stock line, which they boast as “America’s largest selling private brand of cigars.”

I **International Tobacco** (160 North Gulph Road, The Plaza at King of Prussia Mall, King of Prussia, Pa. 19406; Tel: 610-878-9190) In the belly of the King of Prussia Mall, one of the world’s largest monsters of consumer culture, lies Tom DiTonno’s International Tobacco, a home away from home for cigar smokers seeking an oasis from the air conditioned sea of commerce. Celebrating its 10 years, International



Pipes and loose tobacco at International Tobacco.

Tobacco is the place to visit when stopping by for that perfect gift. With a soda bar in the front, and lounge area in the back, DiTonno brings his 25 years of tobacconist experience to deliver the premier cigar shopping experience for his loyal customer base.

G **G&G Cigars** (118 North High Street, West Chester, Pa. 19380; Tel: 610-436-9999; www.ggcigar.com) A little further out from Philly proper lies the picturesque town of West Chester. A short 45-minute drive and you’ll find the little enclave drawing in area foodies to the town’s renowned collection of restaurants, as well as history buffs drawn to see the nearby historic Brandywine battlefield. Much of the traffic comes from

A requiem for smoking

Sullivan’s Steakhouse (700 W. Dekalb Pike, King of Prussia, Pa. 19406; Tel: 610-878-9025) The smoking ban does have real

casualties, such as the Philadelphia branch of the Sullivan’s Steakhouse empire. The bar section was once the meeting place for powerbrokers in the area, but, as soon as the Pennsylvania smoking ban goes into effect will have to shift things up a bit. The management is looking into possibly building an outdoor patio, but they are still waiting on the local bureaucracy for the okay to go forward. Sullivan’s bar was the place for a smoker to go who wasn’t allowed to smoke in their own house. Cigars were included on the menu and could be ordered alongside drinks and top-notch cuisine. Now, like so many other locations in the country, a good hearty meal and a good smoke will have to go elsewhere.



the local courthouses West Chester hosts as the local county seat, as well as some of the big pharmaceutical groups, and is even nearby to TV shopping giant QVC’s headquarters. Celebrating 10 years in its current location, G&G has become a local cigar institution.

In the back, you’ll find the cozy “Cigarden,” complete with wi-fi, large screen TV, and leather couches. G&G hosts monthly cigar tastings for its members, as well as various special events open to the public. G&G also offers a \$20/month cigar-of-the-month club. **S**



Salesman Tony is ready to help at G&G Cigars.