

# TOBACCONIST



Official Publication of the IPCPR since 1990

April 2013

**Procigar 2013**

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## Front and center

### Central Cigars thrives in the midst of downtown St. Petersburg's revival

By Stephen A. Ross

It wasn't too long ago that St. Petersburg, Fla., was derisively known as "God's waiting room." The city across the bay from Tampa was primarily known as a popular retirement destination due to its reputation of having sunshine nearly the entire year. While the spring break crowds came to enjoy the area's beaches and others flocked to the vicinity for spring training baseball in February and March, bringing some vibrancy to the city, it was a pretty sleepy place the rest of the year.

That reputation began to change in the late '90s. Major League Baseball awarded the Tampa Bay area a professional baseball expansion team in 1998—The Tampa Bay Devil Rays (the team would later shorten its name to the Tampa Bay Rays)—which made St. Petersburg's Tropicana Field, just a few blocks from downtown, its home stadium. The resulting 81 home dates per year made the area more attractive for bars and restaurants to sprout up, which strengthened St. Pete's downtown attractions. In 2005, the Izod IndyCar Series joined the growing list of downtown-area events, accelerating the area's revival. In the midst of it all has been Central Cigars, a cigar bar located on trendy Central Avenue, just a few blocks from the waterfront.

Opened in 1997, Central Cigars was among the first wave of businesses to participate in downtown St. Pete's revival. The owner, Greg Haddad, was a sales rep for Nike, handling the major accounts in the area, including Champs Sports and Dillard's. A cigar smoker since his high school days, Haddad envied a friend's brother, who opened a cigar store in Winter Park, Fla. After a conversation with the man, Haddad had all the motivation he needed—borrowing from Nike's motivational phrase, "Just Do It," Haddad decided to open his own store.

"At the time, there really wasn't a cigar place downtown at all," the 40-something Haddad comments. "The closest cigar places were over in Tampa, which isn't that convenient to get to from here. The city announced that baseball was coming





Greg Haddad

to St. Pete, so it was the perfect time and it made sense to open a cigar store here.”

Haddad rented a building on the corner of Central Avenue and North 3rd Street and opened Central Cigars strictly as a cigar shop, with just a few chairs for patrons to sit and enjoy their premium cigars. But as time went on, and the surrounding area drew more people, Central Cigars slowly adapted.

First, Haddad knocked down a wall to put in couches and more chairs and served coffee. Not too long after that, beer and wine became available at Central Cigars. And then full liquor. Central Cigars had transformed from cigar shop to cigar bar.

“We let the customers dictate the growth,” Haddad explains. “They started asking for places to sit. Then they said that coffee was great, but we ought to serve beer and wine. Then they wanted cognac and scotch. Enough people ask you for something, then you have

to make the change. Now this is the only place in downtown St. Petersburg where you can enjoy a smoke and a drink. We’ve kept growing, and now the location houses two bars, which wasn’t my intention when I first opened the business.”

In addition to Central Cigars, Haddad opened Ruby’s Elixir, a jazz club, in an adjacent space that





Haddad had used as a cigar lounge. With 2,500 square feet, both bars can accommodate a total of 125 people. Three patios provide seating for another 60 guests. Customers may easily enjoy both bars by simply walking through a very small corridor that connects them.

The bars are quite different. Central Cigars is more like what one would expect from a cigar bar. Cabinet humidors containing premium cigars from boutique manufacturers and Central Cigars' own private-label brand are arranged along one side of the store. Where the cabinet humidors end, the lounge begins, with several chairs, couches and tables lining the rest of that side of the store. Opposite the cabinet humidors and the lounge is a long wooden bar, perhaps made of oak, which runs approximately 40 feet down the store and includes the register area at the store's front. In front of the bar are approximately 20 stools. Behind that bar are taps for kegs and shelves holding various liquors. High-definition televisions are placed above the bar so customers can keep track of their favorite teams. The atmosphere is quiet and relaxed, and customers may have conversations without needing to shout. It's a proper cigar bar.

Ruby's Elixir is contained in a square room with minimalist décor, which lends to its gritty, speakeasy, jazz-and-blues-club atmosphere. A jazz

quartet playing in one corner of the room entertains Ruby's Elixir's guests. A smaller bar opposite the stage offers libations.

"Ruby's Elixir is the only jazz-and-blues club on this side of town where you can also smoke cigars," Haddad explains. "It's kind of like a throwback with a speakeasy feel. We do specialty drinks and old-style drinks, and seven nights a week we have music. Ruby's Elixir has its own customer base that is separate from the customer base at Central Cigars. There is a little bit of a mixture of cigar smokers and people who are just enjoying the bar. After we got full liquor, we had to ease up on our restrictions on cigarette smoking, which we didn't originally allow. That part evolved, too. Even so, 85 percent of our customer base is cigar-friendly. I didn't want to lose the roots of being a cigar place. There have been many opportunities that have opened up around here to be just a bar and slam out the vodka and tequila drinks, but I didn't want to lose the feeling of being a cigar lover's playhouse. The same guy who enjoys cigars also enjoys a cocktail and music, so it's been a natural evolution."

Changes in the downtown area that have drawn more people out also resulted in Haddad making more changes. "In the last year or so, there have probably been 50 bars and restaurants [opening] up around here," he said. "It's crazy. We have the Grand Prix, the baseball team and so many different events. It seems like every weekend something is going on."

Employing 12 people—four cigar clerks and eight bartenders—Central Cigars opens at 10 a.m. daily and stays open until 2 a.m. Sunday through Thursday and closes at 3 a.m. Friday and Saturday. Central Cigars' bar is open all day, but doesn't get a lot of activity until mid-afternoon. Ruby's Elixir doesn't open until 6 p.m. every day, but Haddad says he will change it to better accommodate his cigar customers.

In addition to the holiday season, spring is the peak time of year for both Central Cigars and Ruby's Elixir. There's spring training baseball and the Honda Grand Prix of St. Petersburg. The slowest months are August and September, though Haddad reports that business is pretty steady throughout the year. Mondays and Tuesdays are typically slower than the rest of the week. And with all the events, celebrations and festivals happening during the weekends, Fridays and Saturdays are hopping.

"Downtown is now definitely a destination location," Haddad says. "People come in for weekend baseball games or other events and then stick around downtown. We do some local advertising in newspapers, but we're big into Facebook and Twitter as well. We've been here for so long that people know us and we get a lot





of word-of-mouth advertising. Now that Ruby's Elixir has its own identity, we see a lot of new faces. Word gets out. We get a lot of people from the beaches that come here, too. We get a lot of walk-by business. There is baseball down the street. There is a neighborhood here, so we get residential business. Then we have office workers since we're downtown. Business has been crazy, but in a good way."

With Central Cigars' metamorphosis from cigar shop to cigar bar, and the addition of Ruby's Elixir, Haddad's attention has mainly been drawn to the bar side of the business. "We used to carry 70 brands, but over the years I recognized that we didn't need so many," Haddad comments. "Now we base it purely on customer demand. If there's enough consumer demand, we'll bring a brand in and give it a try. If it does well, we'll keep it. We get a lot of people from out of town, but we also have our regulars who ask us

to bring a brand in. This area is pretty conservative, and they like to go with the known brands. The tourists like to try the different brands, but our core customers like the basic brands. I brought in the boutique brands in the past and they've done OK. We sell to the tourists, but our regulars are pretty steady and know what they like. This has





been such a cigar-friendly area for so long. We get the seasoned cigar [smokers] who [know] what they like, and they support local businesses and the old brands. That makes my job easier.”

The private-label brand still does very well, but Haddad states that Arturo Fuente is Central Cigars’ best-selling brand. Diamond Crown, Padron, Ashton, Macanudo and Partagas always sell well, as does Rocky Patel. Avo and Zino are doing well, too. Haddad recently brought in Gurkha and is extremely pleased with its performance. And then there have been some brands that inevitably don’t do so well.

“We’ve brought in some great cigars that I loved, and that the guys who work here loved, that just sat,” Haddad explains. “For the last 15 years I’ve pared it down to a narrower but deeper selection. It’s like the 80/20 rule—20 percent of your brands make up 80 percent of your volume. I learned that the hard way over the years. It’s a costly lesson. You don’t want to mark brands down—it’s not good for them or you.”

With a renewed commitment to the cigar side of the business, Haddad plans to host more cigar events. Every quarter, he hopes to give customers a small sample of both Central Cigars and Ruby’s Elixir by pairing a cigar with a spirit and jazz.

“We had 150 people for the last one we did,” he says. “For example, we’ll have a

rum tasting on one side and cigars on the other side. Every Thursday, we have a jazz jam session. Though they’re officially scheduled to last only two hours, events can last a long time. People tend to stay and decide if they want to listen to jazz or be on the other side and watch TV or talk in relative quiet. With Arturo Fuente, J.C. Newman and Davidoff in my backyard, I hope we can do more neat things with them that will promote their brands and please my customers.”

Making the two halves of his business more closely united is Haddad’s ultimate goal. As

downtown St. Pete has changed, Haddad has had to adjust his business model to best profit from the changing demographics. With more people coming downtown, he’s had to make the business more appealing to a wider audience. But through it all, cigars have always been the centerpiece.

“As we’ve evolved, we haven’t lost our roots,” he explains. “The manufacturers and the customers have stuck with us through all the changes. I have a passion for cigars and I love the history of the industry. I love the customer interaction and I enjoy being a business owner in my hometown. We’re not too stodgy and we’re not too wild. I really want my business to be known as the place to go for someone who enjoys cigars, music and cocktails.”

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