

By Bob Tate

I normally use the term 'Latakia Blend(s)' and not 'English Blend(s)' when I am talking about a blend that contains Latakia tobacco. The reason why I don't like to use the term English Blend when associating it with Latakia is because the addition of Latakia into a blend does not make it an English blend. I have no idea where that connection started from and most people that I have talked with whom are from Great Britain do not understand it either.

I believe that the term 'English Blend' started being used in the American pipe tobacco market. Maybe they began using it to distinguish between English blends of the day that were manufactured under the tobacco purity laws of Great Britain and the blends that were made in America. It is also possible that it may have started off as a marketing gimmick that caught fire and spiraled out of control. Regardless of how it started, it is erroneous to refer to all blends that contain Latakia as 'English Blends'.

Have you noticed that most every English pipe tobacco manufacturer uses the word Latakia and not the word English on their blend names and descriptions?

English blends were originally called English blends because they were made in Great Britain and also because of the old, now repealed, Tobacco Purity Laws that had to be adhered to in Great Britain at the time. Because of the purity laws, all additives to tobacco blends were very restricted and very limited. You could not add much, if any, flavorings to the tobacco; and additives such as preservatives, humectants, etc. were not allowed. Therefore all of the English blends back then were considered pure tobacco blends. All blends that were produced in Britain at that time had to fit within the parameters of the purity laws and were all considered English blends.

This means that all blends that were made in Great Britain under the purity laws, whether or not they contained any Latakia, were known as English Blends.

Did they use Turkish and Oriental tobaccos as well as Latakia in some of the blends produced there? Of course they did. And they used a lot more of those types of tobacco than American blenders of the time period did. They used those types because they are naturally more aromatic and flavorful than most types of other tobacco without the use of

many, if any, additives. But keep in mind, not all blends that were made back then contained some of these types of tobacco. Unfortunately, the two words 'English' and 'Latakia' have now become synonymous with each other when talking about pipe tobacco.

A straight Virginia or Burley blend that was made under the purity laws was considered an English Blend as opposed to a blend that was made in America where they did not have to work under the confinements of the purity laws. That is where the distinction between 'American Blends' and 'English Blends' began. It is just so happens that at that time, Americans preferred to add flavorings to their pipe tobacco.

British tobacco companies also used quite a bit of Perique in their blends to add flavor and aroma without the use of additives.

[1] So why do people call blends that contain Latakia 'English Blends' but they do not call Virginia/Perique blends 'English Blends'? I'm sure that Virginia/Perique blends were more popular in Great Britain long before they became popular in America.

In my opinion, it seems that the current distinction that American Blends tend to be sweet and highly flavored and that English Blends always contain Latakia is a widely spread and accepted misconception. At one time, American blends mainly consisted of Burley tobacco and were sweetened and flavored. I understand where the term 'American Blend(s)' came to be used, but that is hardly the case anymore. There are hundreds of blends that are currently made in America that do not contain Burley tobacco or flavorings.

Another term that has been, and is still being, used incorrectly is 'English Style Blend'. This term is being used to describe the same thing as an 'English Blend'; a blend that contains Latakia. With that being said, the term 'English Style Blend' can be a relative term if it is used correctly. Since there was a distinct way and style that English blends were made during the times of the tobacco purity laws, this term can be used to describe blends that are now being made in that tradition. But that tradition is not solely the use of Latakia; it is the use of no additives.

This term could also be applied to blends that were once made in Britain, but are now made somewhere else; such as Dunhill pipe tobacco. Dunhill pipe tobacco is now made in Denmark, but since it is supposedly made to the specifications of the old English recipes, it could be considered as an English Style Blend because it is made in that style.

I think that the commonly used definitions of these terms should be discarded. As most pipe smokers know, not all blends that are made in America are sweet and flavored and there are more than a few blends that are made in the UK that contain flavorings and vice versa. Times have changed and we must change with them.

It seems to me that these terms should have more up to date definitions that are also easier to understand and less complicated. There are so many terms that have been applied to pipe tobacco blends over the last 30 years that it can make your head swim. Why do we feel the need to have a million genres and sub-genres of tobacco blends and make things more complicated than they really are or need to be?

To give you an example of what I mean, here is a list of simplified terms that I use and how I define them:

- English Blend – Blends that are made in the UK.
- American Blend – Blends that are made in the U.S.A.
- Latakia & Balkan Blends – Blends that contain a noticeable amount of Latakia. **[2]**
- Oriental Blend – Blends that contain a large amount of Oriental tobaccos.
- Virginia/Perique Blend (VA/Per) – Blends that contain Virginia tobaccos and Perique.
- Virginia/Oriental Blend – Blends that contain a larger portion of Virginia than Oriental.
- Aromatic Blend – Blends that contain added flavorings that are not natural to the tobacco.

So in conclusion and back to the original question, which is also the title of this article:

English Blends and Latakia Blends - One in the Same? The answer is; No, they are not the same.

Notes

1. British tobacco manufacturers still use Perique. They are just not confined to the purity laws any longer.
2. Is there a difference between Latakia blends and Balkan blends? This is addressed in my article: **The Mystery of Balkan Blends, below**

Balkan Blend. That term is very mysterious.

Is there really such a thing?

If there is, what is it?

What distinguishes a blend as a Balkan Blend?

These and many other questions arise from the mysterious term of Balkan Blend. This is one of the most debated and discussed subjects amongst pipe smokers when talking about blend genres. This is a subject that can seem very confusing because there doesn't seem to be any real, clear cut, definitive definition for Balkan Blends. It seems to me that the definition for Balkan Blend is based solely on conjecture and personal opinion.

Some years back when I started the change in my pipe smoking to where it was becoming an enjoyable hobby to me instead of a pastime, I started learning as much as I could about pipes and pipe tobacco. This includes all of the terminology that is associated with it.

Before I started the switch from pastime to hobby, I just called English and Balkan blends Latakia blends because they both contain a good portion of it in their recipes. But then as I learned more about what the majority of pipe smokers call them, I started to use the terms English and Balkan. I at least understood what the perceived definition of an English blend is, but I never really understood, or could find a definitive answer to what a Balkan blend is and what the difference between the two types of blends are.

After more research, I came to the conclusion that those two terms were used incorrectly and decided to just go back to calling them both Latakia blends and I never gave the subject anymore thought. ^[1]

Then I read G.L. Pease's inaugural article for our site - **What is a Balkan Blend?**

There is a lot of great information in his article that I will not re-hash in this one and I highly suggest that if you haven't read it yet, that you do so as soon as possible. After reading his article, it once again sparked my interest in trying to find out exactly what a Balkan Blend really is. Like before, during my research, I found it extremely difficult to find any information on the subject and it seems to me that the only classification for a Balkan Blend would be the addition of Oriental tobacco leaf varieties that are used in making up that style of blend.

Although the tobacco varieties are called Oriental tobaccos, they are not from Asia. They are actually from the Mediterranean region

where the Balkans are located. The Balkans are also referred to as The Balkan Peninsula and most, but not all, of the Oriental tobacco varieties come from the Balkans. Greece, Macedonia, and Thrace are all located within the Balkan Peninsula with Turkey, Syria, and Cyprus located to the east, and outside, of the Balkans. So while all tobaccos that are grown within all of these regions are called Oriental tobaccos, only the ones grown within the Balkans are Balkan tobaccos. Does this information clear some things up or does it make it more complicated? For me, it complicates the matter even more.

Based off of that information it would seem that Balkan Blends should contain not just any Orientals, but Orientals from the Balkan region. But somehow the term Balkan Blend has come to be known as a blend that contains a good quantity of Latakia and any Oriental tobaccos. It has become common perception that a Balkan Blend contains Latakia, but most Latakia is actually made from Turkish tobacco. While Turkish tobaccos are also Oriental tobaccos, they are not from tobaccos from within the Balkans.

As most of you may already know, and as G.L. Pease states in his article, the term Balkan Blend started being widely used because of Balkan Sobranie. Balkan Sobranie might also explain where the presumption came from that the inclusion of Latakia is necessary in a Balkan Blend.

But if the term Balkan Blend is used in the way that it probably should be, which is the use of Oriental tobaccos from the Balkan region, couldn't all blends that contain them also be considered Balkan Blends whether or not the addition of Latakia is present? Take for example the Grand Orientals line from McClelland Tobacco. There are a few different blends within that line that do not contain any Latakia, but they do contain large quantities of Oriental tobaccos from the Balkan region. Based off of the information that I have obtained, would they not also be considered Balkan Blends?

Once again, the more research that is done, the muddier the waters get and the more questions that are raised about this subject. It seems to me that the definition of what truly is a Balkan Blend is left to individual interpretation. Since I can not find any definitive proof or definition as to what makes a Balkan Blend a Balkan Blend, and it seems that it relies on

personal opinion and individual interpretation, I decided to contact a few blenders and manufacturers to find out their opinions on the subject to see if I could come to some sort of consensus on what constitutes a Balkan Blend.

Here are the people that I have contacted to get their opinions on this matter:

Mary McNeil of **McClelland Tobacco**

Russ Ouellette of **Pipesandcigars.com**

G.L. Pease of **G.L. Pease Tobacco**

Craig Tarler of **Cornell & Diehl Tobacco**

PipesMagazine.com: If you had to, how would you describe what makes a Balkan Blend a Balkan Blend?

Mary: The term 'Balkan Blend' is a loosely used term referring to any blend that contains Balkan tobaccos. Generally speaking, we tend to define it as a Balkan blend if it has a pretty good amount of Balkan tobaccos in it.

Russ: Over the years it has come to mean, to me, a Latakia blend in which Orientals are the secondary note. So that means that after the main influence of Latakia, the next thing that you notice is the influence of the Oriental and Turkish tobaccos. That then, to me, fulfills the kind of antiquated description of Balkan.

GLP: I can't answer that question because, as I said in my article - *What is a Balkan Blend?*, I think the term is pretty much meaningless. But it does bring up some interesting points for discussion.

Craig: Our description of a Balkan Blend is as follows: Latakia and Orientals are added to a base of Virginias. English blends may or may not have a percentage of Orientals but Balkans will always have a percentage of Orientals.

PM: What would you say are the primary tobaccos used in a Balkan Blend?

Mary: Orientals from the Balkans are the primary tobaccos. Other types of tobaccos such as Virginia, Burley, Latakia, etc. can be used in the blend to complete it, but it has to have Balkan Orientals as the primary tobaccos.

Russ: Latakia, Oriental, Turkish ^[2] tobaccos. Virginias may be used and

sometimes there may be some Perique as well.

GLP: Latakia, Oriental, and Virginia tobaccos.

Craig: Latakia, Oriental, and Virginia tobaccos.

PM: **Would you say that the inclusion of Latakia is necessary in order for a blend to be called a Balkan Blend?**

Mary: No. It just needs a good portion of Balkan Oriental tobaccos.

Russ: Yes.

GLP: Yes.

Craig: Yes.

PM: **How would you place in order of importance the types of tobaccos used in a Balkan Blend?**

Mary: Orientals from the Balkan region have to be the dominate feature. There are a variety of other tobaccos that can be used to make up the blend, but the Balkan Orientals have to be the main focus.

Russ: Latakia is the main focus with Orientals being the secondary note and there may very well be Virginia tobaccos.

GLP: Latakia is dominate, a sturdy backbone of Virginia, and a seasoning with Orientals.

Craig: I don't think that this is a valid question because it all depends on what the blender is trying to do with the blend. Sometimes you may want a heavier Latakia content and sometimes you may want a lighter amount of Latakia.

Once again, while some really good information, opinions, and discussions have been obtained, there still doesn't seem to be a clear cut definition for what a Balkan Blend really is. There does seem to be a general agreement as to what makes one, but it is not a unanimous agreement. It seems that the definition of a Balkan Blend is still left to interpretation and opinion. While some questions may have been answered, new questions have been raised. The term Balkan Blend is still shrouded in mystery.

As for the answer to the question; **What exactly is a Balkan Blend? The world may never know.**

Notes

1. You can read why, in my opinion, that the term English Blend is used incorrectly in my article: **English Blends and Latakia Blends - One and the Same?**
2. Turkish tobaccos are in fact Oriental tobaccos, but are sometimes referred to on their own to distinguish them.

So, again, what is a Balkan Blend?

By G. L. Pease

In the on-line pipe communities, there is often passionate conversation about the classification of blend types, and in these discussions, the most impenetrable clouds of mystery seem to swirl around those blends containing Latakia. What is an "English" mixture, and how can one be distinguished from a "Balkan" style blend? The problem is that both of these terms, despite broad usage, are somewhat ambiguous, at best, and, worse, the commonly held notions of what they mean is just plain backwards. And, yes, I'll admit up front to being one of the early champions of this wrong-headedness. What? Read on.

It seems fairly clear that the term "Balkan" as a blend descriptor derives from the legendary *Balkan Sobranie*, and came into common usage as a way to describe tobaccos that are similar in character. That's not really a problem, but, subsequent discussion of what this term might mean has led us down an entirely wrong path. A "Balkan" blend simply isn't what it's often said to be.

First, some background. Ernst Voges, in the *Tobacco Encyclopedia*, makes no reference at all to a "Balkan" style blend, but does define an English mixture as, "Pipe tobaccos with a distinctly spicy taste, produced by the addition of aromatic tobaccos (e.g. Latakia and Perique) to a base of best quality Virginia." (123) Unfortunately, this is not much help in reaching towards any sort of disambiguation. Under "English pipe tobaccos," we find " Pipe tobaccos blended to the British taste, and based on flue- and fire-cured Virginia or Kentucky , sometimes also incorporating small amounts of Latakia, Louisiana or Perique, in which case they are commonly known as mixtures." (123)

Voges goes on to discuss mixtures as, "Name given to coarse

cut, shredded tobacco blends used in pipe smoking. To be distinguished from plug and bar tobaccos, which are sold in pieces, and shag and flake." (204)

At least some parts of these definitions have traceable historical antecedents. In Dunhill's literature, for instance, the term "Mixture" was used as early as 1910 to describe those blends which contained Virginia and oriental tobaccos. (Importantly, in manufacturers' early catalogues and pamphlets, Latakia was often lumped in with other oriental tobaccos in blend descriptions. That the noble leaf was not always specifically mentioned as a separate component does not necessarily indicate that it wasn't included in a mixture's formulation.)

This gives us a reasonable working notion of what a mixture is. But, until relatively recently, our British brethren wouldn't likely have much of a clue of what we were on about if someone mentioned an "English" blend, and discussion with friends across the puddle have verified this. The term doesn't seem to gain any international currency until Richard Carleton Hacker's publication of *The Ultimate Pipe Book* in 1984, though earlier, Carl Ehwa makes some allusion to differences between English and American mixtures in his book, *Pipes & Tobacco* (183-184), and Milton Sherman presents similar discussions in *All About Tobacco*. (45-49)

So, while we might argue that "mixture" has some useful meaning, the term "English tobacco" would only denote, at least historically, any blend produced without artificial additives, chemical flavorings or humectants. Straight Virginias, plugs, slices, mixtures would all fall under this banner, if made according to the now defunct purity laws that once governed tobacco production in Britain. And, indeed, in the 1940s and before, even purveyors in North America seemed to be satisfied with that loose description. Companies like Wally Frank produced such blends as "English Plug Cut," a pure tobacco comprising Virginias and traditionally steamed Cavendish leaf.

By the 1960s, there seems to be some commonly held distinction between "American" and "English" mixtures, the former containing burleys and flavored tobaccos, the latter adhering to the purity laws. Over the past thirty years or so, however, pipesters have come to nearly universally accept the notion that an "English mixture" is a pure tobacco mixture comprising virginias, orientals, latakia and perhaps perique. It's as good a starting point as any.

But, what about these so-called "Balkan blends?" In my

searching, I have found nothing in the literature to give this term any thrust. Though there are plenty of references to "Balkan tobaccos" in various catalogues and pamphlets, both British and American, the term has always been used to describe a component, not the mixture itself. Returning to Voges, we find, "Balkan - Bulgarian term for Djebel[1] tobaccos, i.e. those oriental tobaccos coming from mountain areas." (25)

In fact, it wasn't until some time in the 1990s when the neologism, "Balkan blend," rose up from the murky waters as pipesters sought to differentiate Latakia blends that seemed more oriental-forward than English mixtures, but produced from similar components. The earliest uses of the term were found in on-line forums and chat groups on the internet. Up to that point, we had Balkan tobaccos, and we had *Balkan Sobranie*, a specific blend containing these tobaccos, and somewhere along the way, the name was abducted and held for ransom. Here's where things get more challenging.

Most smokers of Latakia blends, when asked, would probably hold up that *Sobranie* stuff as the prototypical "Balkan blend," and this certainly makes some sense. On the other side of the Balkan/English coin, Dunhill's *London Mixture*, first created in 1928, would serve as well as the classic exemplar of an English mixture. Unfortunately, this is troublesome in any attempt to solidify our definitions, since the two blends are precisely the opposites of what we would think of them as being, given the connotations of these terms in our currently fashionable parlance; *London Mixture* contains relatively little virginia leaf in its makeup, and *Balkan Sobranie*, quite a lot!

Confused? Me, too. For years, I've also adhered to the popular notion that the term "Balkan" might have some meaning when referring to a type of tobacco; some way of differentiating one blending style from another, but, if things are backwards in our modern interpretations, does it really mean anything? If the quintessential "English" mixture is actually a "Balkan," by our terms, and the "Balkan" is "English," should we really even be using the terms?

Of course, I'm being more than a little finicky, but if the connotations of these terms are topside-down, which they clearly are, don't they darken our understanding of what the blends they are used to describe are? Since it's unlikely that we can easily change the way we have come to interpret them, maybe they should simply go away, or at least be accepted as interchangeable, if not completely nebulous.

For my part, I've decided to simply adopt the less descriptive, but

more precise "Latakia mixture" in all future discussions, but, no, I'm not going to rewrite my labels.

Now that I've used my inaugural column to dive into the waters of controversy, all I can do is hope that I haven't bored the readership completely to tears, and that my byline will appear again in the next issue. I'll try not to be so pedantic in the future.

Cheers, -glp

Since 1999, Gregory L. Pease has been the principal alchemist behind the blends of G.L. Pease Artisanal Tobaccos.

NOTES:

1. Voges, 113; Djebel Tobacco - 1) Name given to those oriental tobaccos grown in mountain districts, as opposed to those planted on the lower slopes of foothills or on the plains. ... They are always superior in quality to the lowland tobaccos, having a better colour and finer aroma. The Basma-type Djebel tobaccos from Greek Thrace and the Greek and Bulgarian parts of Macedonia are particularly famous.

WORKS CITED:

Carl Ewha, Jr., Pipes & Tobacco - undated

Voges Tobacco Encyclopedia - © Mainzer Verlagsanstalt und Druckerei Will und Rothe GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Pressehaus, 1984

Milton M. Sherman - All About Tobacco, © 1970, Sherman National Corp.