

Tasting Pipe Tobaccos: Should we Become more Disciplined about this? By Fred Hanna

Pipe tobacco-tasting reports can now be found on the web, in specialty newsletters and glossy pipe magazines. I greatly enjoy reading people's impressions of various tobaccos and how they choose to describe their taste experiences. Unfortunately, it must be concluded that almost none of these reviewers really understand what they are doing. It is, perhaps, time for pipe enthusiasts to become a bit more educated on the topic of tasting in general. Perhaps the best way to do this is by examining pipe tobacco tasting in the context of the discipline of wine tasting. I worked in the wine business for 10 years. No other discipline in human life has more rigorously studied or religiously compiled the various categories of a particular taste experience. I passionately studied wines, both intellectually and experientially, for 25 years and wrote a wine newsletter with tasting notes for seven years. I professionally conducted at least 50 wine tastings, most of them blind, in which none of the participants (and often myself) knew which wines we were tasting. I also studied and exchanged notes and observations with one of America's (at the time) seven Master Sommeliers, who is now a nationally known figure in the American wine scene.

Did all this make me a major player in the wine business? Hardly. In fact, not even vaguely. But it might qualify me to offer what may well be a much-needed perspective. What my experience with wine did provide was an immensely valuable education on the subtleties and complexities involved in the human sense of taste. Thus, when applying that experience and education to pipe tobaccos, I can come to one well-considered conclusion. Tasting pipe tobaccos is profoundly more complex, ambiguous, subjective, and challenging than wine tasting. Please allow me to explain.

The discipline of wine tasting is continuously threatened by problems of subjectivity and ambiguity, and it has taken great pains to address these real issues so that reports of taste impressions by a wine taster can achieve more validity and reliability for a wide variety of wine enthusiasts. But unlike pipe tobacco, wine is not tasted by stuffing it into a hot furnace that is lined with the residue of other wines. Wine is tasted cleanly and directly, but tasting pipe tobacco can never be so simple. In the latter case, the furnace is considered ineffective for proper tasting

until the residue from other tobaccos (the cake) is itself sufficiently developed. Furthermore, wine is not transformed by combustion and converted to smoke. It comes out of the bottle as a liquid and remains that way. The bouquet of a fine wine is readily apparent and wafting out of the glass. Ironically, in pipe smoking, one cannot even directly smell the aroma of one's own burning tobacco. It smells differently when that same tobacco is being smoked in the pipe of another. Wine is tasted for what it is, with as few modifications as possible. Pipe tobacco must necessarily be radically altered, alloyed, and destroyed, in order to be tasted and enjoyed. This is merely the tip of that iceberg of ambiguity.

Nevertheless, pipe smoking is, in my insignificant opinion, one of the world's most underrated pleasures. Something wonderful is going on here, and it needs to be better understood. We all have a pretty good idea of why some tobaccos are great and why others are to be eschewed, but can we ever get a deeper, clearer sense of why this is so? I write this article in the hope that someday we may indeed.

In my experience, the taste experience afforded by a great pipe accommodating a great tobacco relegates even the finest Cuban cigars to the status of ground chuck. There is no taste experience like it on earth, in my opinion at least. I have tasted some extraordinary wines, from the legendary 1929 Romanee Conti to the 1875 Chateau Mouton Rothschild and the 1959 Chateau Haut Brion. I have been overwhelmed by the flavors of Chateau Lafite and Latour. I have been charmed and seduced by the incomparable Le Musigny, La Tache, and Chambertin. However, after 25 years of reflection on this subject, I believe that, all in all, the experience of the finest pipes with my favorite tobaccos is slightly superior even to the enjoyment of fine wine. Like I said, it is merely an opinion.

Let us now embark upon a preliminary analysis of what factors influence this deeply pleasurable experience. It would seem that there are three groups of factors or variables that directly affect pipe tobacco tasting. These should be taken into account if pipe-tobacco tasting is ever to achieve any degree of validity and reliability. The three sets of variables are (1) the tobacco itself, (2) the pipe, and (3) the pipe smoker. Please bear in mind that there may be several variables that I have overlooked or have insufficiently considered. Also note that few of these variables are new, but they have seldom, if ever, been cataloged into a comprehensive list.

The Tobacco Variables

One of the most influential factors that affects the taste of pipe tobacco is the temperature of the burning tobacco. This is beyond whether the tobacco burns hot or cool. If the tobacco is burning at a higher temperature, it will often taste differently, even in the same pipe. I have noticed that when the temperature is low, a Virginia or English tobacco may display subtleties of taste and flavor that are not apparent when the puffing is more intense and the temperature is high. I have closely observed that those subtleties disappear at precisely the point where the temperature achieves a certain level. The net effect is that the same tobacco may seem boring and dull to one smoker and interesting and fascinating to another, depending on the temperature of the burning tobacco.

Another factor is moisture. Some tobaccos taste differently when smoked moist or dry. My friend Jeff Goldman insists that Virginias convey fuller flavor when slightly moist. More flavor is carried with the steam of that moisture. On the other hand, I have smoked many English mixtures that are richer and fuller when more on the dry side and have been aired for a while after the tin is cracked. As far as tasting is concerned, the same tobacco can have quite a different character depending on how moist it is, a factor that is irrelevant in the world of wine.

The volume of smoke of the burning tobacco may also have an effect on taste. Some tobaccos do not release huge volumes of smoke, and yet that is, needless to say, a crucial aspect of why people "smoke" at all. In my conversations with pipe smokers, it has been said many times that, if a tobacco does not give off much smoke, it may affect how the smoker regards it in terms of flavor and overall favorable experience. After all, smell does affect taste to some degree.

The age of tobacco is a quite a topic today, with certain old Dunhill and Sobranie unopened tobacco tins selling on eBay for hundreds of dollars. As far as tasting is concerned, however, sometimes even a two-year-old tin will be noticeably different from one that is new. I buy Dunhill Nightcap from a certain shop here in the Baltimore area and nowhere else in town. I know that these tins have been on the shelf for over two years. Upon popping the lid, it immediately smells richer and fuller than Nightcap tins at other shops more recently stocked. I believe it shows up slightly in the flavor as well.

The cut of the tobacco will heavily affect how well it burns. We all

know this, of course. However, if a tobacco has been half used and lying around in an opened tin for a while, it may tend to crumble a bit and, in effect, achieve a slightly different cut and therefore a slightly different set of burning and taste characteristics. Balkan Sobranie 759 was a good example of this phenomenon. A minor point but interesting nonetheless.

The "nose" or fragrance of pipe tobaccos is different from wines in that there is a "dual bouquet" with these tobaccos. They will have a characteristic fragrance in the tin and quite another when transformed into smoke. A few reviewers do mention this, but perhaps more time on this topic is needed. The fragrance of the tobacco in the tin is not always indicative of the taste of the tobacco. For example, I am quite fond of the taste of Hermit's Ten Russians but do not care for its bouquet in the tin. The fruit topping on Dunhill's Three Year Matured Virginia gives me a headache when I smoke it, even though that raspberry fragrance is fine in the tin.

The Pipe Factor

In this section, dedicated to examining the pipe's influence on tobacco taste, I should mention that the focus is the briar pipe. We know that meerschaum affects the flavor of a smoke in a different manner than briar. I look upon the difference in terms of wine once again. The very finest dry wines, red and white, are aged in oak barrels. The oak imparts structure and "backbone" to the taste of the wine and enhances the flavor of the wine by providing toasty or vanillin overtones. I believe that briar affects burning pipe tobacco in much the same way as oak affects wine, making the flavors deeper, more structured, and sweeter or nuttier. Conversely, when wine is stored in more neutral containers such as glass vats, a more fruity character develops that does not have the depth or complexity imparted by oak. Meerschaum, a more neutral substance, does not seem to have an influence on tobacco comparable to that of briar.

With that as a preamble, let's go on to specific aspects of the briar pipe that need to be considered when tasting pipe tobaccos.

The first prerequisite of tasting pipe tobaccos is to do so using a clean pipe. A dirty pipe should not be used for anything, and least of all to get an objective impression of a pipe tobacco. This is obvious to all, I would think, but, hey, I worked in the tobacco business and know that there are many pipe lovers out there who seldom clean their pipes.

The pipe used for tasting should be fully broken in, so that acidic or bitter flavors do not compromise the tobacco taste. In other words, the pipe should have sufficient cake built up on the chamber walls. Paradoxically, that same cake profoundly and unavoidably affects the taste of the tobacco. In fact, this probably has more influence on the taste of the tobacco than the brand of the pipe. When I discussed this topic with David Field, he emphatically agreed. To achieve any degree of validity and reliability of taste impressions, it may be necessary to smoke the tobacco several times in the same pipe. Not long ago, I smoked Butera's Pelican in a favorite Castello. It was remarkably good in the first bowl and was equally good, although different, in each of the next three. But tasting pipe tobacco using only one pipe is decidedly incomplete as well, as I will attempt to show below.

Some pipes smoke hotter than others. This is not a matter of the temperature of the exterior bowl walls but of the temperature of the smoke that directly contacts the tongue. I already mentioned that the temperature of the burning tobacco affects the taste. In this case, some pipes simply do not absorb and/or dissipate heat as well as others. It could be a matter of the curing of the briar, but it is probably far more than this. Thickness of the wall may have some effect here, but I have owned several thick-walled Charatans that tended to smoke hot. Whatever the case, the coolness of the pipe itself needs to be taken into account when evaluating pipe tobaccos as well.

The size of the bowl of the pipe may also be a factor. We often hear that a certain tobacco is best enjoyed in a small or large bowl. It is somewhat of a mystery as to why, but I have a theory. The bottom portion of a bowl of tobacco acts as a filter for the burning tars of the upper portion as the smoke winds its way toward the bottom of the bowl and out the shank. Thus, the shreds of the tobacco in the bottom portion of the bowl become altered--seasoned if you will--in that they now contain more tars and tobacco residue than did the tobacco in the upper portion. In a large bowl, there will be more buildup of these substances. This could lead to more intense, bitter, or complex flavors, as the case may be. Thus, if a tobacco begins to taste bitter toward the bottom, decent advice when reporting on the tobacco would be to confine its use to a smaller bowl. If a tobacco accumulates more and more flavor intensity, richness, and complexity, smoking it in a larger bowl would seem to be in order. Fortunately, many tasters do attend to this issue.

As for the shape of a bowl, whether it be U-shaped, V-shaped, or large or small in diameter (as in a pot or a stack), I have no clue as to how this affects taste. It certainly affects burning characteristics. However, I have heard some refer to this as a factor in taste. I simply do not know.

Another important consideration when evaluating a tobacco is to keep in mind the location in which the combustion in the bowl is occurring at the time of taking one's notes. The middle third of a bowl has been shown to smoke hotter in temperature, while the upper third and lower third of a bowl tend to smoke cooler. Thus, with some tobaccos, flavor elements can be lost in the middle of a bowl of burning tobacco that may be present in the beginning or that may pick up again toward the end. This should also be a factor when compiling tasting notes.

It can be a mistake to say that a tobacco smokes wet when the problem comes from an improperly bored mortise. When there is too much open space between the tip of the tenon and the bottom of the mortise, a considerable amount of moisture can accumulate. The pipe starts to gurgle, and one is compelled to run a pipe cleaner through the stem and shank. All too often, the moisture build up is not due to wet tobacco so much as this flaw in the workmanship of the pipe. This can lead to the mistaken conclusion that the tobacco leads to a wet smoke.

Influence of The Pipe Smoker

As if all the preceding variables were not complex enough, here is where things really get involved. Variables produced by the pipe smoker are of several types. They can be due to smoking habits, the expectations and mindset of the pipe smoker, and environmental factors. The most important point here is that the pipe-tobacco taster, in order to be as accurate as possible, needs to be aware of his or her own smoking habits and mindset relative to that of other pipe smokers and pipe smoking itself.

For example, how fast the pipe smoker puffs can profoundly affect the taste of the tobacco for reasons already discussed. Even experienced smokers can vary in their tendencies to puff deeper or with greater frequency than others. This directly affects the taste of the tobacco. In addition, if the taster tends toward being a wet smoker, reporting that a tobacco smokes wet may be at variance with how a more dry smoker might experience the same tobacco.

How tightly, or loosely, the pipe smoker packs the bowl can also be directly relevant to how the tobacco burns and how it tastes. As we know,

a loosely packed bowl will tend to smoke hotter, while a tightly packed bowl may smoke cooler but is harder to keep lit. Tasters might do well to keep in mind how they pack a bowl and how the same tobacco performs when packed loosely or tightly. Many do this as well.

The expectations of the pipe smoker can directly affect one's perception of taste. In the blind tastings that I have conducted, I routinely observed experienced wine tasters be convinced that a certain wine was a high quality Bordeaux Chateau and sing its praises, only to later discover that it was a modest California cabernet. Similarly, if one has been informed by a prestigious pipe-smoking author or a friend that a particular tobacco is wonderful, our minds may well construct the experience to match our high expectations. Conversely, if one is in a critical mood at the time of tasting, every little flaw in the taste of the tobacco may become amplified, with the net result of a biased impression.

Along these same lines, the mindset and preferences of the pipe smoker can deeply influence the evaluation of the pipe tobacco. I have often observed that the preference for a particular style of wine can cause some folks to be unable to evaluate styles contrary to their preference. However, a trained wine taster knows how to overcome his or her own preferences. He or she may not be fond of wines made from the mourvedre grape of the south of France, for example. Nevertheless, a competent taster will know how to determine when those wines are well made and of high quality in spite of that lack of interest. I have observed the preferences of many wine enthusiasts and have found that some do not care for complexity in a wine, preferring big, powerful, straightforward flavors. On the other hand, many others love complexity, elegance, and finesse in a wine and will consider a wine inferior when it does not possess these characteristics. Both sets of characteristics, when found together, are ideal, of course. But the question is, will a pipe-tobacco taster be able to properly evaluate a blend when it is well made but not at all desirable? It is a talent that needs to be developed.

The last point I want to make about wine and tobacco tasting is the question of tasting many different tobaccos. In wine tasting, bread and certain cheeses clear the palate, preparing one's taste buds to freshly experience the next wine. Some tasters can taste 20 or more wines at a sitting this way. No such luck with pipe tobaccos. Bread and cheese are simply not as effective, and there always seems to be a powerful residue left on the tongue from a bowl of tobacco that takes a while to clear (or to

be replaced by a new residue).

By examining the host of variables affecting tobacco tasting, I hope that I have been able to show that it is a far more intricate, challenging, and complicated an enterprise than wine tasting. Please understand that I am not saying that all pipe-tobacco tasters should now follow these particular guidelines. I only point out what an incredibly ambiguous and involved task they have undertaken. However, I do believe that the considerable array of descriptive terms used in tasting wines can be transferred to that of pipe tobaccos with great advantage. I have spoken on this topic with Bruce Kaiser and Greg Pease, both of whom are wine lovers, and they agreed.

In any case, the difficulty inherent in tasting pipe tobaccos demonstrates something highly positive. The pipe and tobacco are inextricably intertwined and interdependent. It is difficult to separate the experience of the one from the other. Together, they form a gestalt, an integrative relationship in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This article was originally published in The Pipe Collector, the North American Society of Pipe Collectors newsletter (NASPC). It's a great group--consider joining.