

What is Perique? Perique is an offshoot of Burley that has become unique by being grown in an area of St. James Parish called the "Golden Triangle". Of course, since you can literally throw a rock from some of the fields into the Mississippi, this is Delta soil, so it's very rich and also very moist. The plants are started in a greenhouse in late winter and ready to transplant in the spring. The singular soil and climate cause it to become something quite different than regular Burley, and is ideal for the processing that lies ahead. The leaves are dried after harvesting, and are air-cured. The main stem, or rib, has to be removed to maintain quality. Just before the actual Perique processing begins, the tobacco is rehumidified, but it can't be done too far in advance or it can become moldy very quickly.

The leaves are bunched together and packed into large whiskey barrels. A plate is placed on top of the packed barrel, which is then positioned under a massive beam. A railroad jack is used to compress the tobacco for a short time, after which a jackscrew takes its place and pressure is reapplied. The tobacco is compressed, and the juices are pushed out of the leaf. With this kind of pressure comes a natural increase in temperature, which causes the juices to ferment. During active fermentation, carbon dioxide bubbles are visible at the top of the barrel. Skilled laborers monitor the barrels to see when the tobacco needs to be turned. The barrel is emptied, the bunches are repositioned and pressure is applied again. This is repeated based upon the condition as it's checked. Some barrels will only need a couple of fermentations, while others may need more, but in all, it usually takes about a year to complete the process.

Because of the environment, Perique is a fairly fragile crop. Diseases, pests, heavy rain or drought can wipe out an entire year's crop, and can do so very quickly. So, many decades ago, some of the farmers began hedging their bet by buying high-grade dark air-cured tobacco from other regions and processing it in the same manner as Perique. This would then be combined with the

real thing to extend the available Perique. This tobacco is referred to as Acadian Perique, versus St. James Perique, which is only made of the actual leaf grown in the region. Due to the high cost, and the very good quality of the Acadian Perique, virtually no one uses straight St. James for blending anymore.

About ten years or so ago, L.A. Poche tried a very interesting experiment by bringing in dark-fired Kentucky and processing it in the same manner as Perique, creating a new blending component which is now known as Acadian Black. This has some of the deep sweetness of Perique, along with nice spice, but it also has a smoky element that makes it completely different.

Despite Perique's reputation for strength, it really isn't all that high in nicotine. What causes people to feel the effects more strongly is that the other elements allow the body to absorb the nicotine more effectively.

Because Perique is naturally moist, it tends to burn quite slowly, which makes it a perfect partner for Virginias, which can tend to burn hot and fast. That's also why it has to be used carefully in Latakia blends. They tend to burn slowly to begin with, and the addition of too much Perique could cause the need for relights.

Isn't the stuff made with the air-cured tobacco "faux-Perique"? The term "faux-Perique" applies to tobaccos that have had a flavoring added to tobacco to simulate Perique, but it definitely doesn't taste the same, and isn't processed using the same method. What very few people are aware of is that almost no straight St. James Perique has been sold for more than 40 years. The processors learned decades ago that it was necessary to blend the tobaccos together to be able to meet demand, and to maintain a product that would be of consistently high quality from one year to the next.