

Pipe Missive: 03/02/17.

I keep being asked what makes a great smoking pipe. In essence the answer is simple, great wood. Sounds simple but it isn't. Briar comes from a few countries around the Mediterranean. Once the sources of briar were varied and known, Italy, Greece, France, Algerian and some from Morocco. Today it all comes from a few briar mills in Italy that source from Greece or Italy and almost nowhere else. The pipe maker generally doesn't know which country it originates from.

Assuming that the engineering of the pipe is correct, great smoking qualities will be effected by how long the briar is aged. The only alternative to aging is oil curing. Only two makers do oil curing Ashton & Ferndown. Most pipe makers age their wood at least three year and a few age longer. Ideally aging should be 10 or more years, but it is very expensive to have wood and sit on it for 10 years or more. It ties up the money. Castello and Bonfiglioli are known as great smokers because they have aged their wood a minimum of 10 years and in some cases 25 years. I have been told that Voprati also ages his wood for longer than the norm of 3 years and a few other Italians do.

Ignoring that each briar block will vary somewhat due to age of the root, how it is cut and the infinite other variables of any organic substance; smoking quality will be mainly affected by the amount of aging. An inexpensive pipe will have very little aging on it, if any; it is just not economic for a maker to age wood for a low-end pipe.

Funnily as it may seem, often a pre smoked estate pipe in the lower end will smoke far better than a new equivalent. This because the heat of smoking a pipe will often have a similar effect to aging, destroying the various residues in the organic block and curing it.

Simply the longer the wood has been aged the more expensive the pipe will be. If you want to be reasonably assured of a great smoke then pipe makers who age the wood longer is your best guarantee.