

About Aromatics

Aromatic pipe tobaccos comprise one of the most contentious topics among pipe smokers. Among enthusiasts, they're almost universally derided for a variety of reasons. But this is still, far and away, the largest-selling segment of pipe tobaccos, especially if you include the OTC semi-aromatics in the group. When you look at the all-day pipe smoker, this group of blends dominates. If someone buys 5 lbs. of McClelland's 5100, they're probably cellaring, but if someone buys 5 lbs. of 1-Q, that's probably what they'll be smoking for a couple of months or more.

I don't generally smoke aromatics but by the nature of my job, I have to try new ones and have to develop aromatic blends regularly, so I have more than a passing familiarity with them. Part of the reasons I'm writing this is to address some of the issues that many people have with the genre, so here we go...

Aromatics are created to cover up poor quality tobacco. I'd like to say that this is categorically untrue, but that would be a lie. There certainly are heavily top-dressed blends that are a means to making use of lower quality leaf. But there are a number of aromatics that use top-shelf tobacco, and you can generally figure out which ones are, because they tend to be more delicately flavored to allow the top-dressing to enhance, not mask, the underlying leaf.

Aromatics are overly moist and will gunk up your pipes. Again, this is certainly true of some blends, but there are many that don't fall into this group. My own Hearth & Home Signature Series Berry Nice is a very aromatic black Cavendish with a lot of berry flavor, but it is actually dry to the touch. This is because no humectant (a moistening agent) is added to it. Humectants, not flavorings, are usually the culprit with overly-moist tobaccos.

Many people say that they don't smoke cased tobaccos at all. You may think that this is a true statement when in actuality it's probably not. Almost

all Virginias and Burleys have some kind of casing added to make them more palatable. What you may really mean is that you don't smoke tobaccos that have been *top-dressed*. This is an area of confusion for many, if not most pipe smokers. Casing has a subtle influence on flavor, and usually very little influence on aroma. Casings are applied early on in processing, and the tobacco is dried back to a normal level using heat. Top-dressings are applied at the end, and use alcohol or some other carrier to infuse the tobacco, which is then allowed to dry naturally. Top-dressings don't impact flavor very much at all, but they are what you smell when someone is smoking an aromatic.

Aromatics are heavily chemical-laden. Again, this is not always true, but it can be. The thing is, there are a number of non-flavored or minimally-flavored blends that contain some additives. Humectants are often added to keep tobaccos moist, regardless of whether they're flavored or not. Most tobacco is treated with an antifungal or antimicrobial to keep mold from forming, and as I mentioned before, most Virginias and Burleys are cased, regardless of whether the blend is an aromatic or not. In any case, all of the additives used are tested and considered safe for the purpose, or they wouldn't be used. Where some of the confusion comes from is the laundry list of additives used in cigarettes, but pipe tobacco is a far different story.

Flavorings contribute to tongue bite. This has more to do with the individual and how he or she smokes than the casings and top-dressings. In fact, one of the reasons to use a casing is to help *minimize* bite. Some top dressings may cause discomfort for certain people based on body chemistry and the way they smoke, while others won't be affected at all. If the statement were absolutely true, then there are blends that no one would smoke, but a lot of the tobaccos that have a reputation for bite are enjoyed by a wide audience.

People only smoke aromatics to please the people around them. There are plenty of pipe smokers who rarely smoke around anyone else, and the majority of them still smoke aromatics. The truth of the matter is that

aromatics are best for people who enjoy a mild flavor but who smoke too hard or fast to be Virginia fans. Those who like sweetness but puff fast or hard would never get away with regular Virginias.