

Cuban cigars and Chinese ducks

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

Yes, it's true. I smoked a Cuban cigar once upon a time.

I was smoking an illegal Cuban cigar back in the 1970s. An American national reporter I knew slipped me the Cuban cigar, but truthfully, I can't remember his name or who he worked for in those years. He did know a thing or two about cigars.

He had been to Cuba reporting some Cold War story when Fidel Castro was still fully in charge. And in truth, the reporter's cigars may even have been legal, if his traveling was considered useful to government leaders.

Legal or not, that American reporter bought a few cigars for his friends and he kindly included me in that gesture. He told me he had found it hard to believe at first that Cuban cigars actually could be as exceptional as tobacco mythology would cause the world believe. But he and I both were dazzled by the Cuban product.

That reminds me that proud products of most cities and nations aren't nearly as exceptional as their boasting might indicate. But superior aspects of some food, art, music and sports actually do outshine much of the world.

On the other hand, what use is it if England's best shot is steak and kidney pie? Granted, nobody cooks steak and kidney pie as well as the English, but that's not good enough. Why would any sane person want them to do that?

But there are several places in the world that have mastered a few outrageously delightful products. For instance, that Cuban cigar was the most mellow and flavorful cigar I ever smoked. If Castro ever tried to explain it in English, he would have called it awesome.

Of course, on rare occasions in my life when I tried ordinary cigars, they almost all smelled like scorched fish manure. They tasted like autumn leaves flavored with petroleum. And those cigars felt in my mouth like the skin of a dead frog.

On the other hand, that Cuban cigar smelled like fresh oregano, it tasted like autumn leaves flavored with bacon and felt like the skin of the woman I love.

Occasionally, a few nations and cities will create pleasurable achievements that soar above the competition throughout the world. And on rare occasion, a nation will succeed in one product after failing at first in another. For instance, that disaster of England trying to make a food star out of its steak and kidney pie. The same country has the best hot tea you will ever pour down your gullet. A cup of English tea washing over your tonsils is so soothing it has become a liquid tranquilizer.

Another national triumph that fully lives up to its boasting is Peking or Beijing duck. It is a duck that, over two days, is flavored inside and out with a dark brown toasting and is blown up like a balloon at one point in the process of drying out the inflated bird.

China's duck is an international classic. That tasty bird is loved for turning dried duck skin into a crunchy crackle that is also made into several other dishes.

How good is it?

A few bites and you feel like you shouldn't be tasting flavors so erotic in front of decent people.

The one time in my life I ever tasted it at its best was while visiting members of our family who were working in China. Peking duck is more than one dish. It is a meal of separate dishes including that flavored skin, plus a soup and a helping of meat. Everybody eagerly ate it all.

Many other countries have their specialties. They have developed dishes over decades that outshine all others and live up to their well-deserved wows.

In my opinion, as high as the quality of Cuban cigars is, I would rather put a southern fried chicken in my appreciative lunch hole rather than a cigar.

But if you're looking for foods that stand out best of all, it's simple; just scan almost everything on the menus of Italy.

In addition, I know a towering achievement in food right here in Idaho where I live. I speak, of course, of giant Idaho Russet baking potatoes. Every time I eat one, I feel sorry for Fidel Castro that all he has is a cigar.

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