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A TALE OF TWO FAMILIES

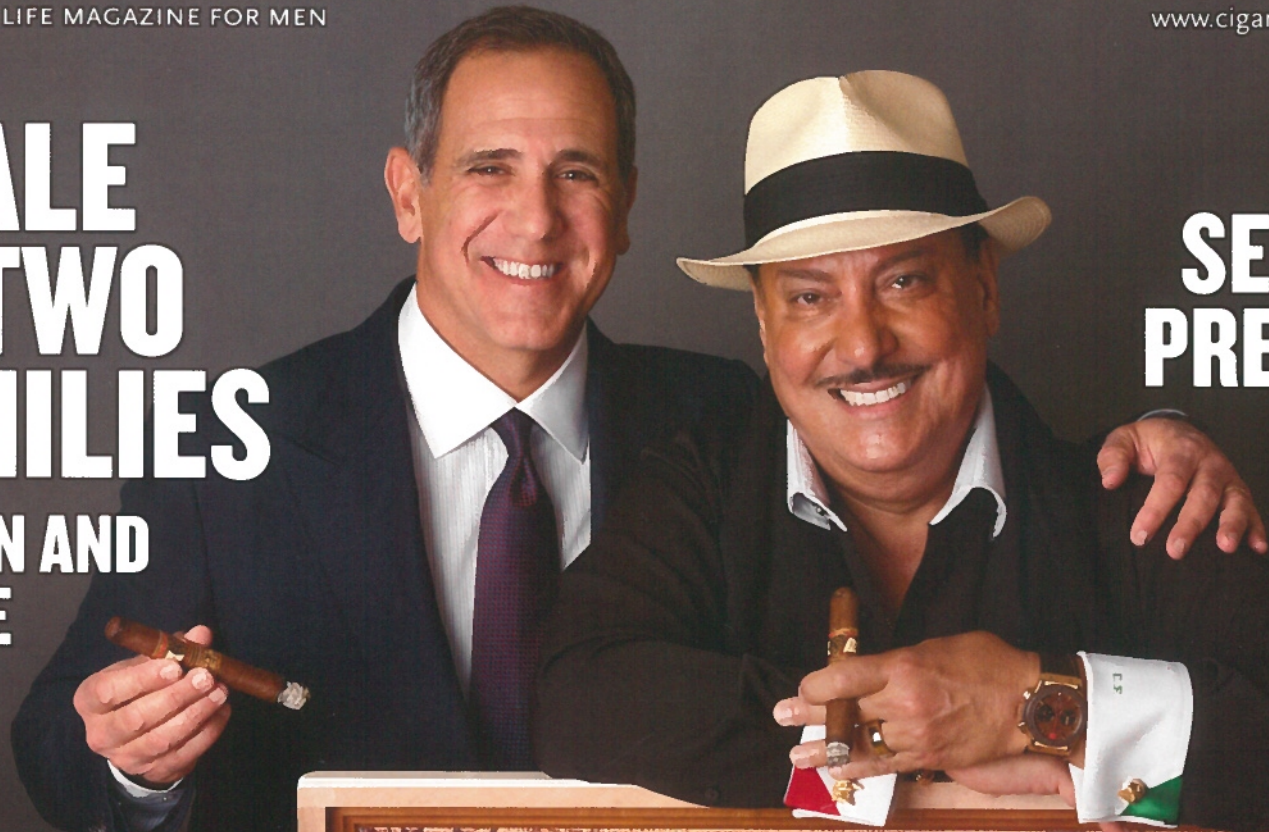
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Fuente and Padrón, two of the most
lauded cigar companies in the world,
have joined together on a special project

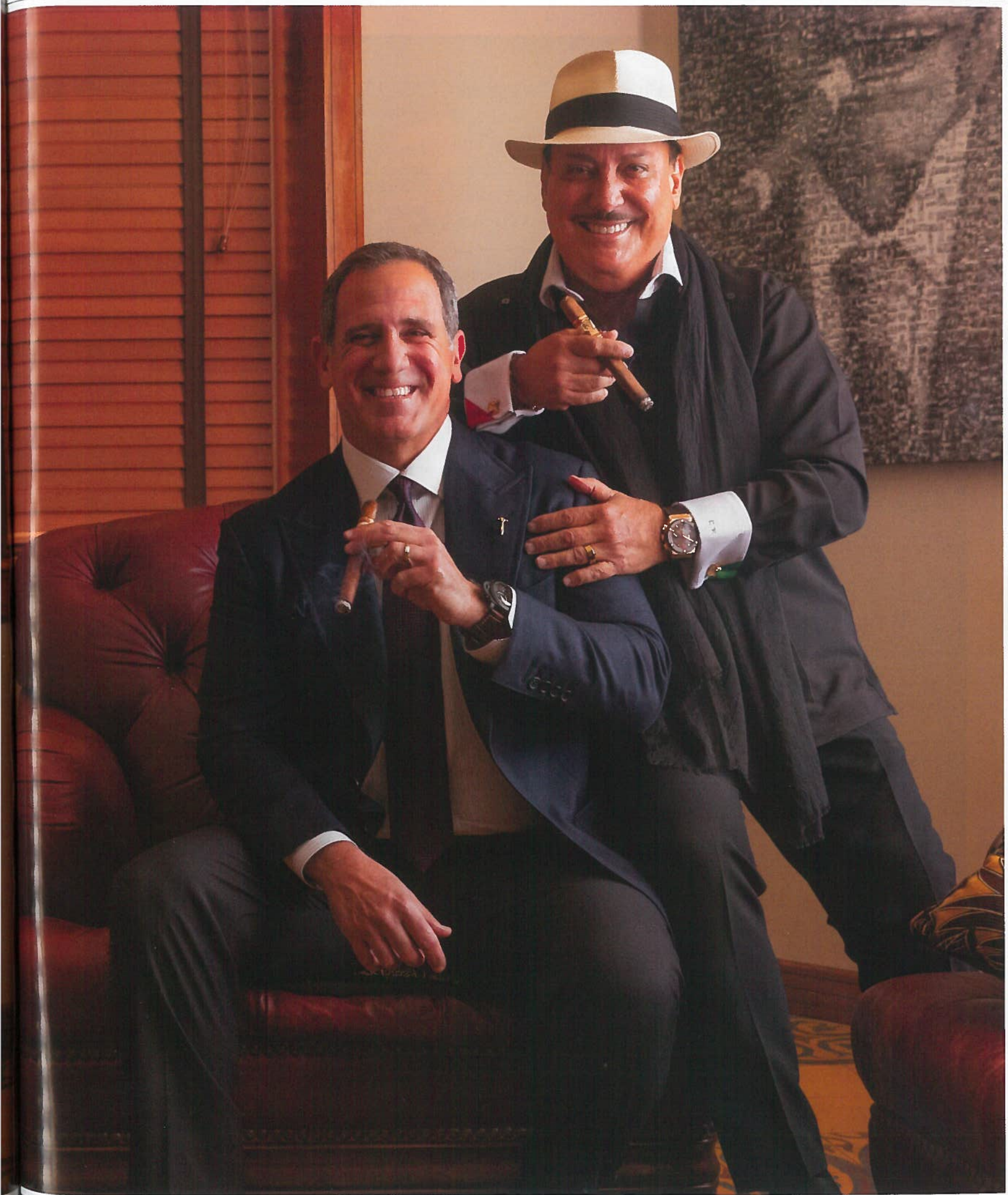
A TALE OF 2 CIGAR FAMILIES

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GROOMING BY STEVEN HOEPPNER





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ike so many great ideas, the plan to combine the cigarmaking talents of the Fuente and Padrón families began over whisky and cigars. Carlos Fuente Jr., the man who runs Arturo Fuente, was visiting the Miami office of Jorge Padrón, his friend and competitor.

It was early in 2020, and the two men lit up cigars. After the Scotch was poured, the two raised their glasses in honor of their fathers, men who had died not so long before, men who had run Fuente and Padrón before their sons.

As they spoke, an unusual idea was born: what if these two companies worked together to make cigars honoring their fathers, cigars that would be sold in the same box, the two names joined for the first time in history?

“We discussed Jorge blending a cigar in honor of my father, out of respect and gratitude,” says Fuente Jr. “And I was going to make a cigar that Mr. José Orlando Padrón would like.”

It was a curious move, two rival companies, each a leader in the world of fine cigars, working together on a project that would bear both of their names. Coke doesn’t share the stage with Pepsi;

Porsche and BMW don’t do joint projects; Rolex doesn’t make a watch with Patek Philippe.

“There’s not a lot of people I’d put my trust in to honor my father with a cigar,” says Jorge Padrón. “Everything we do revolves around maintaining the integrity of our families and our names. That’s the key.” He pauses. “Knowing Carlos as long as I have, I know that I’m in great hands. I’m in great hands, and I know my dad’s in great hands. We both understand the importance of respect in this business.”

The two men are the leaders of two of the most acclaimed cigar companies in the world. The first Fuentes were rolled 110 years ago, in 1912, and today the company makes some of the most sought-after cigars on the planet, including the super-premium Fuente Fuente OpusX brand. Padróns have been made since 1964, and the company has received four Cigar of the Year awards from this magazine, more than any other company. Fuente is larger, making more than 30 million cigars by hand, all of them (for now) in the Dominican Republic. Padrón is smaller and younger, 58 years old, with production in Nicaragua. Both companies routinely make cigars that score in the 90s.



Two cigar industry pioneers, captured in their earlier days. José Orlando Padrón (left) of Padrón Cigars and Carlos Fuente Sr. of Arturo Fuente.

Two generations of cigar excellence. Carlos Fuente Jr. (top left) and Jorge Padrón (top right) with their fathers José O. Padrón (bottom left) and Carlos Fuente Sr. in Miami in 2014.



Two and a half years after that initial meeting, on a blazing hot July afternoon in Las Vegas, their idea had its unveiling. Fuente Jr. and Padrón stood on a small stage assembled on the floor of the PCA trade show. In front of a crowd of retailers, they showed off their creation, called Fuente y Padrón Legends.

The cigars come in a huge cigar box, gleaming and glossy white, with the look of an elaborate humidor. On the top, are the images of Carlos Fuente Sr. and José Orlando Padrón, each flanking a majestic tree. The front of the box bears each man's

signature. Inside, the box (which was designed by artist Manny Iriarte, who does a considerable amount of work with Fuente) comes alive with artwork and photos of the men and their families from throughout the years. At the top, on a field of gold, are the words Fuente y Padrón. At the center is the tree once again, in golden silhouette, reminiscent of a banyan, its root system vast and spreading wide, almost bigger than the canopy. Inside are the cigars, 20 on the left side, 20 on the right. Half were made by Padrón to honor Fuente Sr., the other half made by Fuente to



Fuente y Padrón Legends contains cigars made by both of these award-winning cigar companies, in a box that is steeped in history.

honor Padrón. Neither one has disclosed the tobaccos they used, and the pricing has yet to be determined. All the profits will go to charity, and the cigars—which will be extremely limited in production—are expected to go on sale for the holidays.

Neither company needs the business: each is a phenomenal success, capable of selling more cigars than it makes. Both are firmly entrenched. So why work together?

“You’re talking about two companies that have an immense amount of pride—you have to be able to get past that, and say what are we going to do to honor and respect what Mr. Carlos Fuente Sr. and my father did for this industry,” says Jorge Padrón. “We’re talking about pillars—they were the ones forging the path for all of us, in their own way—people who were humble, never forgot where they came from, never gave up.”

“I would not consider doing this with anybody else,” says Fuente. “The love for our fathers is so great.”

In a back room away from the crowd after the reveal, Padrón and Fuente sat at a table surrounded by members of both of their families. The box was on the table, along with two bottles of Scotch. Padrón was drinking Pinch, the preferred whisky of his father; Fuente was sipping Chivas, his dad’s favorite brand. Each



man smoked the cigar made by the other man for the first time. “I put my father in his hands, and he put his father in my hands,” Jorge Padrón said. “This is a historic moment. It’s never been done before. There’s a lot of factors that go into putting a project like this together, and if you’re not in the right frame of mind to put this together it will never happen. You have to put egos aside.”

“We didn’t know what to expect,” said Fuente, puffing on the cigar and smiling as he recalled the warm and enthusiastic reaction from the packed crowd. “We said our fathers were going to be looking down on us.”

Padrón and Fuente Jr. have walked similar paths and have taken on the same heavy responsibility. Each man has become

"I would not consider doing this with anyone else." —Carlos Fuente Jr.

"I know my dad's in great hands." —Jorge Padrón



Cigar maestro José Orlando Padrón (center) surrounded by his wife, sons, daughter, grandchildren and many other relatives back in 2014.

leader of the family business relatively recently. Carlos Arturo Fuente (known as Carlos Fuente Sr.) died on August 5, 2016 at the age of 81. José Orlando Padrón died on December 5, 2017. He was 91 years old.

While Jorge Padrón and Carlos Fuente Jr. were both raised by powerful, influential men, they are extremely different in many ways. Fuente, 68, is an artist, and he looks the part. He's rarely seen without his grand Panama hat, nor the oversized French cuffs on his stylish guayabera often finished with heavy and ornate OpusX cuff links. He speaks in dramatic style, impassioned, pounding his fist on the table, eyes widening as he makes a point, his Cuban blood boiling.

Padrón, 54, is more conservative in style, often wearing a suit and tie, salt-and-pepper hair tightly cropped. He could take a seat at a Fortune 500 board meeting and look perfectly in place. He speaks in measured tones, typically pausing before delivering his full thoughts, working out the angles in his brain, moving like a chess player.

The two frequently appear together in Washington, fighting for the rights of cigar smokers. One of the few good things to come of the oppressive anti-cigar legislation that has forced many cigarmakers to spend time battling for their rights to sell a cigar is the close bond forged between many of the men who run

cigar companies. In the past, your fellow cigarmaker was your biggest threat. Today, a cigar company's greatest obstacle to succeeding at business is government regulations.

It's hard to imagine their fathers coming together in this fashion. "In the old days, they were fierce competitors," says Fuente Jr. "It was good competition; there was a lot of respect there," says Padrón. The two men shared a deep respect for one another, but it wasn't in the DNA of that generation to work together with a rival—let alone to allow someone else to make a cigar that would go into a box bearing your family name. The elders even eschewed smoking cigars made by the competition. "The flavor [of my cigars] is my secret—a secret I won't be sharing with anyone," José Orlando Padrón once told CIGAR AFICIONADO. "It has to remain in the family. That name has to be protected."

"I really don't have any interest in what anybody else does. I don't even smoke anybody else's cigars," said Carlos Fuente Sr. during a 1995 interview with the magazine. "I have a lot of friends in the industry, and I might be with one of them and they open a cigar and I'll smoke it. But I was never the type of person that would buy a cigar of anybody else's just to see what they are doing. My main goal is just to make the best cigars possible."

In the room at the trade show, Jorge Padrón smiled when he thought about what it would be like to have the two fathers

present to witness the unveiling of the project. "Could you imagine if both of our fathers were alive today, what they'd be saying to each other?" he said with a smile. "Oh, I think mine's better than yours!" He laughed heartily. Fuente joined in.

Many kids grew up having to rake the leaves or take out the trash. Carlos Fuente Sr. had to make cigars. His father, Arturo, emigrated to the United States from Güines, Cuba, and opened a cigar factory in West Tampa in 1912 called A. Fuente & Co. After a good start, the factory burned to the ground in 1924 and production of the Arturo Fuente brand ceased. In 1946, Arturo tried for a second time to make cigars, this time on a much smaller scale, and on a more personal level. He transformed the back porch of his home in Ybor City, Florida, into a cigar factory, and he rolled cigars with friends and family at night. When Carlos Fuente Sr. was young, he began doing a little rolling himself.

"I remember that the first chore when my brother and I came home from school was to roll 50 cigars before we could go out and play," he said during an interview with Marvin R. Shanken published in 1995. "I was always in the factory. I guess I had the feel for tobacco also, and that was my love. In my first trade, I was a baker. But even when I used to work in the bakery, I would still come home and work in the cigar factory."

Fuente Sr. would also sweep the floors and saw cigars everywhere, especially in the mouth of his father, Arturo. "I never saw my father without a cigar. He used to smoke about 25 cigars a day. He would go to sleep, and the cigar would fall, and my mother would put it next to the night table. My father would get up in the morning, pick up the cigar, and put it in his mouth."



Four members of the Fuente family celebrate the company's 100th anniversary in 2012 in Tampa. From right, Carlos Fuente Sr., Cynthia Fuente-Suarez, Carlos Fuente Jr. and Liana Fuente.

But Arturo Fuente, troubled by the initial loss of his business, never had the desire to make his company a big one. In the 1950s, every cigar that the tiny factory made was sold in the Tampa area, strictly for cash. "My father just wanted enough business to be comfortable," said Fuente Sr. In 1958, Fuente Sr. bought the company from his father for \$1. It had assets of \$1,161 with zero debt and was making only a few thousand cigars a year.

Fuente Sr. began expanding the business, breaking out of the Tampa market. As the years went by, production was moved several times, eventually settling in Santiago, Dominican Republic. The Fuentes got bigger and bigger over time, becoming a duo in the form of Fuente Sr. and Fuente Jr. The father ran the operations, and the son made the blends. The two were an impressive one-two punch, building a company that today makes more than 30 million cigars a year, all of them by hand.

Fuente Sr. was known for his rock-solid work ethic (he once worked for so many days straight in his cigar factory, his wife moved in with him) and his willingness to do things himself, from plumbing work to electrical work. His nightly post-work ritual was to sit down with a glass of Chivas and smoke three cigars before going to bed.

"After all these years I never dreamed I would be living when the company was 100 years old," he said in 2012, the year of his company's 100th anniversary. "If you want to be successful, you can't look back. You have to do something you love. And the cigar business is something I love."

José Orlando Padrón also grew up surrounded by tobacco and cigars. He was born in 1926 and raised on his family's tobacco farm in Piloto, part of Pinar del Río, the western region of Cuba where the nation's finest tobacco is grown. When he was seven, he would clean the seedbeds where young tobacco plants are prepared for the tobacco fields. His grandmother rolled cigars for the family. "Two things they were never without—wine and cigars," he told CIGAR AFICIONADO in 2014. "My grandfather every day would wake up, and every time I saw him he was looking at a cigar. Rolling it in his hand. Always touching tobacco."

In 1961, after the Revolution, José O. Padrón left Cuba, ultimately settling in the United States. He ironed shirts in New York City before leaving the cold for Miami, where he worked as a carpenter and mowed lawns to try to eke out a living. In 1964, eager to reclaim the taste of his youth, he opened a modest, one-roller cigar factory in Little Havana. The cigars sold for \$6 for a bundle of 25; a single cost a quarter.

Padrón would eventually begin working with Nicaraguan tobaccos and opened a factory in that Central American country. During his life, he built his Nicaraguan operations considerably. The company was never the largest in the nation (Padrón is



coy with details, and makes somewhere around eight million cigars a year, so they are a mid-sized producer), but it built a reputation for extreme quality. His sons Jorge and Orlando worked alongside him, along with many other family members.

“A brand and factory of cigars is like a child. It is born, it crawls, it takes small steps, it walks and finally it runs. Whoever tries to take one step without having completed the ones before it breaks his nose. That is why you have to take your time,” José Orlando Padrón told Marvin R. Shanken during a 1998 interview. “When I started my factory, I sold the 200 cigars we made each day at night. All I wanted to do was make a good cigar, and I’ve done that.”

Both Jorge Padrón and Carlos Fuente Jr. worked closely with their fathers for years, both were crushed when they died, and both worry about following in the big footsteps of such towering icons. No matter their individual achievements, each has some doubt about whether they are up to the task.

“There’s nothing that motivates us more. Fear—the fear to let your father down,” says Fuente Jr. “My dream is to fill my father’s footsteps. I can’t fill his shoes, he’s a giant of a man.” When Padrón was awarded Cigar of the Year for 2021—the company’s first time winning the award since the death of José Orlando Padrón—Jorge wept on stage as he spoke about the milestone.

“These men had a sense of responsibility. People like that, they’re more worried about taking care of other people than taking care of themselves,” says Jorge Padrón. “Most people would

work their asses off their whole life and then say I’m going to enjoy this, I’m going to retire. Not these guys—they welcomed more problems, they wanted to take on more headaches. For me it’s admirable.”

“My father’s generation, there were so many honorable men who competed fiercely, but they respected each other,” says Fuente Jr. “It doesn’t matter how many members you have in your family, our families are united as one through tradition, through respect and through admiration. And also because we feel, I feel, that we’re a breed that’s becoming more and more scarce. It’s important to nurture the next generation so these values go forward.”

Back in that room in Las Vegas, scented by the aroma of fine cigars being turned slowly into ash, Fuente Jr. and Padrón spoke. The next generation of Fuentes and Padróns was there—sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, cousins—and they were listening. When their fathers were alive, Carlos Jr. and Jorge would sit quietly, listening to their dads talk about tobacco, cigars, the secrets of fermentation and rolling, and learn. Today, the roles have changed, and the traditions of José Orlando and Carlos Arturo are now in the capable hands of Carlos Jr. and Jorge. As the years have gone by, these men have become the new patriarchs of their families. It is their turn to pass on the lessons, their turn to take center stage, their turn to ensure that the legacies each of them have sworn to protect live on for the next generation, to continue these cigar stories for more years to come. ❖