



The World's Newest Habanosommelier Champion

SAMUEL SPURR DISCUSSES THE HABANOSOMMELIER COMPETITION WITH DARIUS NAMDAR,
THE RECENTLY CROWNED CHAMPION.

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DARIUS NAMDAR, THE DIRECTOR of Mayfair's Mark's Club and group cigar sommelier, beat sommeliers from Cuba, Russia, and Italy to claim the crown in his first appearance at the international competition, which forms part of the annual Habanos Festival in late February.

In 2017, Darius worked through the UK competition that naturally mirrors the format and rules of the world sommelier contest. "Last year it was only those who passed the Higher Certificate by Hunters and Frankau (known as Masters of Cigars) who were invited to participate. The field in the UK was cut down to four with several drop outs just prior to the contest," said the 31-year-old Namdar. Claiming that title, Darius was then up against an international field in Havana where he was tested on everything from the blind identification of spirits and cigars, the presentation of a cigar and spirit pairing, and his interaction and cigar-recommendation with a 'guest'.

Although surrounded by the world of Cuban music and cigars by his father growing up, and a career spent in hospitality, it wasn't until two years ago that Darius became much more interested in learning everything he could about cigars. "I like to be challenged, I love the product and the culture, because together it's a nostalgia I like to visit. I love the cigar world because of the people within it," said Namdar.

Upon landing in Havana, Darius notes he was relaxed and felt very happy to be back since his last visit a couple of years prior. "The weather was great which helped knowing there was a snow storm on the way in the UK. Nerves were of course high during the week, especially when I learnt my opposition in the final was Cuban contestant Mabel Durran," Namdar shares. With four days between two rounds of competition, Darius admits it was quite difficult to relax waiting for the final day to come around, but his spirits were lifted by good friends and other experts in Havana.

CIGAR AND SPIRIT PAIRING

Habanosommelier competition sessions include blind tasting Habanos cigars and a selection of drinks, as well as being judged in a mock scenario where cigar service, presentation, and knowledge is thoroughly tested and scrutinised. A cigar and spirit pairing presentation by each competitor is followed keenly, as it demonstrates each contestant's understanding of the interplay between cigars and drinks.



Darius paired the El Rey Del Mundo Choix Supreme with Grand Marnier Cuvée du Centenaire. A 25-year-old cognac and orange liquor, the Grand Marnier Cuvee du Centenaire impressed the international panel of judges. According to Darius, the spirit is reminiscent of English marmalade with clementine and complexity.

Complementing his cigar and spirit pairing, the judges were captivated by Darius' presentation of a four-tiered combination of black tea, cigar, spirit, and Panettone. Known to Mark's Club members as the Havanian Afternoon Tea experience, Darius created the experience after repeated requests from club members for a suitable cigar and drink pairing during or following afternoon tea. A Himalayan Imperial Black tea from London's Lalani and Co acts as a palate cleanser, while the unique made-to-order Panettone further melds the flavours of his cigar and spirit pairing.

"The El Rey Del Mundo Choix Supreme and Gran Marnier Cuvee de Centenaire came together in a really well-rounded and interesting combination to reveal the taste of Panettone, which I served as the finish-

ing touch. Countless run-throughs of this pairing and the story that goes with it was necessary to ensure as I went through the

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motions of cutting and lighting the guest's cigar with a cedar spill, I would not be thrown by distraction."





pressure was challenging of course, but some brands have obvious hallmarks."

The training before any such global competition is a massive investment undertaken by competitors. Darius notes that a huge amount of work went in to learning what was needed so it became instinctive. "There are a number of great books to take note and cross reference for the theoretical aspect of the contest, but the blind tasting of course involved hours of training on flavour identification. Also understanding how certain spirits were originally made, and the process they go through now, is key." Darius would often collect unknown cigars from Davidoff on St James' in the lead up to the contest and sit on the terrace

at Mark's Club trying to discern what they could be. "Hunters and Frankau training days with head of communications and training Jimmy McGhee, and the overall support from Hunters and Frankau were the foundations I built my training upon." Said

Namdar. He notes Hunters and Frankau are very supportive of those who have passed the Higher Certificate, with a training week held each year in Havana where the Masters go out and visit plantations and factories with their team.



CURLY QUESTIONS

With all his expertise and senses being called upon during the gruelling competition, the judges ensured he still had to think on his feet with Habanos trivia featuring heavily in bonus questions. A bonus question asked of him after his pairing component was if he knew the former name and origin of the Partagas Lusitania.

Answering correctly that the former name and slightly different shape was the Partagas 109 up until the 1976 release of the Partagas Lusitania we now know, set him apart from his competition. "Also knowing that Lusitania as a name either derives from the ancient



Roman province were Portugal is now, or after the sunken passenger cruise liner, didn't add to my overall score but perhaps showed I had done my homework." Despite two rigorous days being tested and quizzed on his cigar knowledge, Darius did get a chance to enjoy the Habanos Festival's amazing events and Hunters and Frankau's private tours, tastings and general get togethers.

What does the future hold for the current world champion Habanosommelier? As well as maintaining his role at Mark's Club as the Director, Annabel's Cigar Shop, which opened in March within the relaunched Annabel's on Berkeley Square will take a share of his attention.

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