

TOBACCONIST

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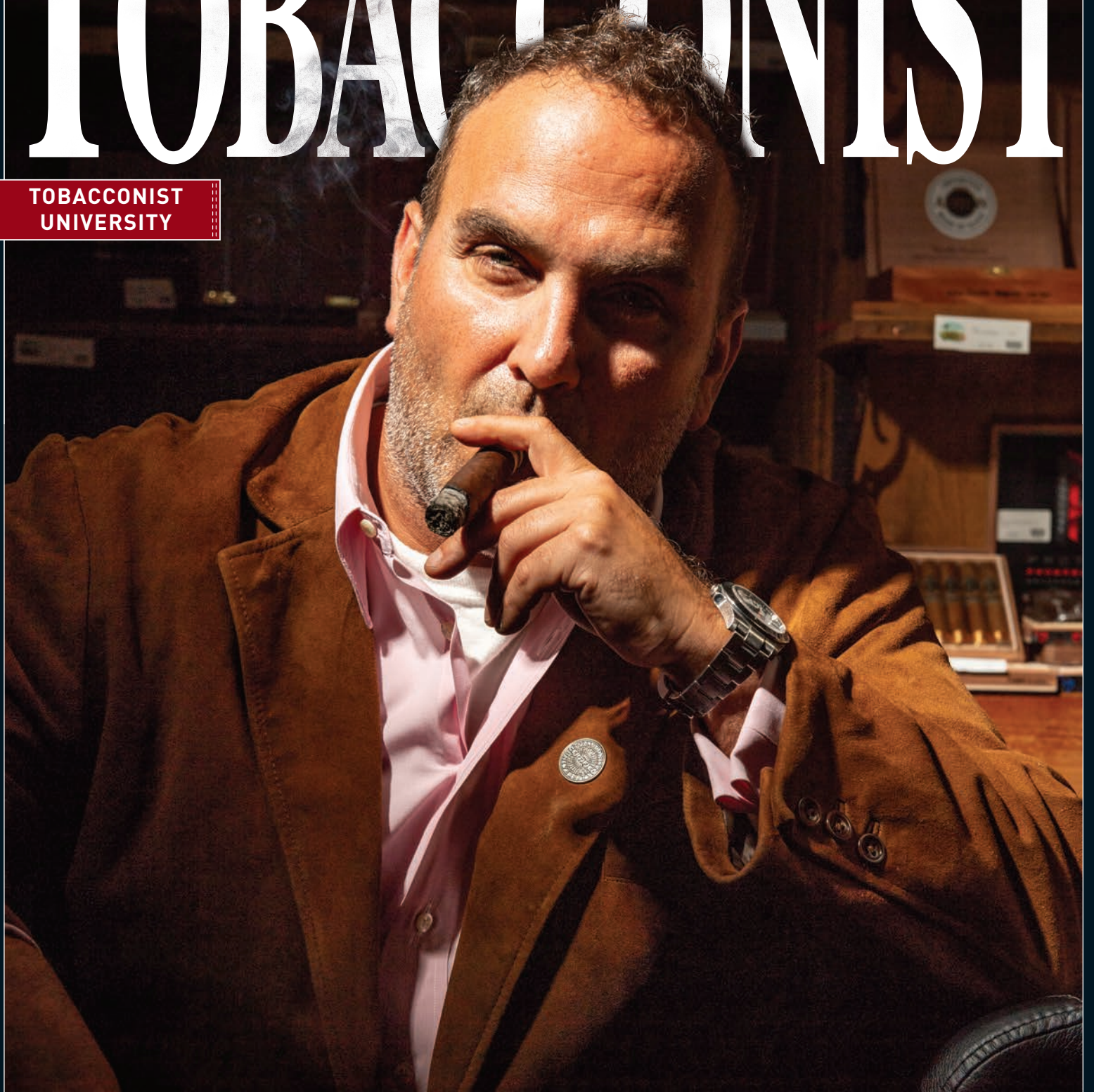


Photo by Dariusz Kobajlo

Cigar reviews are an important part of the cigar industry, and with **Tobacconist University's Certified Cigar Reviews platform, the review process could become easier and more accessible than ever.**

Certified Cigar Reviews Continued

Nothing can help make or break a premium cigar like a review. Google “cigar reviews” and you’ll be presented with about 58,700,000 different results carried out by various cigar magazines and media platforms. While reviews are abundant, the review process and criteria can be confusing and oftentimes influenced by personal preferences, experience with the brand and its employees, and, in the most extreme cases, by advertising decisions. Still, cigar reviews are important, so much so that Jorge Armenteros of Tobacconist University has set out to bring some uniformity and structure to the process for retailers.

Tobacconist University has launched Certified Cigar Reviews (CCR), an online platform geared toward helping retailers and consumers create their own cigar reviews. The website is free for all Tobacconist University-certified tobacconists. It is also free for all others to view, share, search and print reviews. Consumers that want to use the CCR platform can do so either by becoming a certified consumer tobacconist (CCT), which will give them free access, or they can pay a \$29.95 fee to review cigars on the site.

“For consumers, it is a way for them to journal and share their experiences,” explains Armenteros. “For professionals, it is a way to educate and promote themselves on the products in their stores.”

For Armenteros, a tobacconist with over 26 years of experience and who founded Tobacconist University in 1996 in an effort to bring some formal training to tobacco retailers across the nation, the CCR platform is a dream that started more than a decade ago. For more than 10 years, Armenteros studied cigar reviews in magazines and on the internet. During that time, he and his staff focused on making sure Tobacconist University’s academic curriculum and glossary were as accurate and comprehensive as possible. Using feedback from retail tobacconists and consumers, Tobacconist University was able to add some structure and substance to the Certified Cigar Reviews website and began building the site and working on its programming in 2018, with a majority of the work taking place in 2019. The CCR platform serves as an extension of Tobacconist University—it’s fully integrated with the academic curriculum and includes images and videos from the Tobacconist University website, blog and YouTube channel. By working through a review, the users get firsthand experience learning the different components of a cigar review, helping to educate retailers and consumers about the products they purchase and smoke and also bringing more structure and clarity to the cigar reviewing process.

In the interview that follows, Armenteros takes us through the CCR platform and explains how retailers, in particular, will benefit from using this new tool both personally and within their businesses.

Tobacco Business: Reviews have been part of the cigar industry for years. In your opinion, why are cigar reviews important to tobacco businesses today?

JORGE ARMENTEROS: As noted in the Tobacconist University Academic Curriculum, as an industry we owe a debt of gratitude to Marvin Shanken [the publisher of *Cigar Aficionado* and *Wine Spectator*] for pioneering cigar and wine reviews. I believe *Cigar Aficionado* was the impetus for the Cigar Boom of the 1990s and that all contemporary reviewers exist because of that pioneering spirit. I know that I wouldn’t be in the cigar industry if the boom hadn’t given me the confidence to open my first retail tobacconist

Photos courtesy of Tobacconist University

store in 1995. Good reviews make cigars approachable and understandable because you can’t discern any of their substantive qualities by looking at them. Most beginner cigar smokers are too afraid to ask questions, so they buy the band that is attractive to them. Having the ability to look up cigar reviews online empowers consumers to go out and shop without feeling insecure about their experience level. Certified Cigar Reviews will bring substance and credibility to the cigar review marketplace.

Cigar reviews are typically done by members of the media. Why did you feel it was necessary to make them part of Tobacconist University curriculum? I would have to somewhat disagree with the statement that cigar reviews are typically done by members of the media. In fact, tobacconists do cigar reviews every day with every customer they engage with. We are reviewing cigars with our customers every time we are talking about cigars, so the CCR platform gives tobacconists and consumers a way to document and share their reviews in different ways. Certified Cigar Reviews have “legs,” so they can be printed as shelf talkers, disseminated on social media and emails, or printed as spec sheets to create a journal or dossier.

With regard to magazine and blogger reviews, these are powerful communication tools used to get eyeballs, create impressions and sell advertising. It is my understanding that many of the end-of-the-year top cigar lists are the most lucrative “products” for magazines and the blogosphere. While there may be many good reviews/reviewers in ➤

Certified Cigar Reviews Continued

the marketplace, nobody does it better than the professionals whose job it is to sell cigars face to face in a retail environment. Above all, I want to empower professional tobacconists and consumers to express themselves, learn and enhance their appreciation for cigars in the process.

With that said, there will always be room for media-driven cigar reviews. Many reviewers have a unique style or palate that speaks to their readers. But there are also many problems with uncredentialed reviewers who don't know the proper definition of words or facts. You can easily look up three different reviews of the same cigar and see that each reviewer is defining words like "strength," "flavor" or "body" differently. This is a travesty because words and language matter. Opinions are not facts, and just because you scream and repeat something on the internet doesn't mean it is true—substance matters!

Most reviews in the media are on a 100-point grading scale while the reviews on the CCR platform are done on a 10-point scale. Why did you choose this scale over the rating scale that most people are accustomed to seeing in major publications? That's a great question, and it took us years to come up with our own answer. We know that many cigar and wine reviewers use the 100-point scale, and companies like Amazon and others use a five-star rating system. The problem with the 100-point scale is that you get like 60-plus points just for being a "cigar" or "wine," so this seems nonsensical. It is a feel-good scale because once you get into the 90s, you're close to 100, and that seems great, but it is still a subjective system. The five-star scale is graphically appealing, but it feels a little limited. Simply put, the 10-point scale is very relatable, and all people have been using it in many facets of their lives forever. A 10-point scale is not too big and not too small. Furthermore, a rating like a five or six is not bad; it is simply middle of the road. So, if a cigar gets an overall rating of six and the price is \$4, then that is a pretty good value proposition. People understand the 10-point scale, and it is not superficial or elitist—it just works. We're not trying to reinvent the wheel, just communicate well.

Take us through the different parts of a CCR cigar review.

Certified Cigar Reviews are organized by cigar specs, component data, pre-smoke, smoke and post-smoke. Reviewers rate the objective and subjective criteria of a cigar, including aesthetics, construction, flavor (taste and aroma), spice, strength, body and smoking conditions. Facts, sensations, impressions and opinions are documented, aggregated, evaluated, processed and displayed on a graphically rich webpage, which can also be shared, printed and/or saved by anyone in the world.

Cigar specs and component data are the objective criteria of cigars, which we are currently working on benchmarking. Pre-smoke qualities, like appearance, draw and flavor, are rated by the reviewer. Smoke qualities, like taste, complexity, spice, strength and finish, are also rated by the reviewer. In addition, reviewers can select from myriad flavor and sensation descriptors, which will also be displayed with their review. They can make their review as complex or simple as they like, so if they don't taste "nougat" or "mineral," they don't have to select anything. In the post-smoke section, reviewers give an overall rating and can add beverage, food or pairing notes, along with any other commentary they would like to add. ➤

TOBACCONIST UNIVERSITY
Certified Cigar Reviews

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Welcome to the world's first and only interactive platform for cigar reviews.

Search Enter Keyword Select Type: [Advanced Search](#)

ALL SAINTS CIGARS | DEDICACION
• Berkey • 5.50" X 50rg • Colorado Maduro • Nicaragua
• Review Date: 05/20/2020 • Age: /2019
• Wrapper: Mexico • Binder: Nicaragua • Filler: Nicaragua
• Descriptors: Cherry, Paprika, White Pepper, Brown Sugar..... • Beverage Pairing: Crianza Tempranillo
• Food Pairing:

Spice: 8.00
Strength: 7.50
Body: 9.00
Overall Rating: **9.0**
[Click here for the complete Certified Cigar Review](#)

Reviewer

LAURA ROBERTS
[See All Reviews](#)

MOMBACHO | LIGA MAESTRO
• Pequeno • 4.50" X 44rg • Colorado • Nicaragua
• Review Date: 05/09/2020 • Age: 07/2015
• Wrapper: Nicaragua • Binder: Nicaragua • Filler: Nicaragua
• Descriptors: Black Currant, Citrus, Bittersweet, Bitter Chocolate..... • Beverage Pairing: Wine - Red
• Food Pairing:

Spice: 7.50
Strength: 6.75
Body: 8.00
Overall Rating: **8.0**
[Click here for the complete Certified Cigar Review](#)

Reviewer

LAURA ROBERTS
[See All Reviews](#)

R&D CIGARS | BRAZILIAN COROJO CAPA ESPECIAL | SERIE 1 | ORANGE
• Corona Extra • 5.50" X 46rg • Colorado • Honduras
• Review Date: 05/06/2020 • Age: 02/2014
• Wrapper: Brazil • Binder: • Filler: Nicaragua, Honduras
• Descriptors: Dried Fruit, Prune, Cardamom, Turners..... • Beverage Pairing: Rum • Food Pairing:

Spice: 8.00
Strength: 8.00
Body: 7.25
Overall Rating: **9.3**
[Click here for the complete Certified Cigar Review](#)

Reviewer

LAURA ROBERTS
[See All Reviews](#)

AVO | IMPROVISATION | LIMITED EDITION
• Toro • 6.00" X 52rg • Colorado • Dominican Republic
• Review Date: 04/23/2020 • Age: /2019
• Wrapper: Ecuador • Binder: Dominican Republic • Filler: Dominican Republic
• Descriptors: Black Pepper, Hibiscus, Toffee, Barnyard..... • Beverage Pairing: Rum • Food Pairing:

Spice: 10.00
Strength: 9.00
Body: 10.00
Overall Rating: **10.0**
[Click here for the complete Certified Cigar Review](#)

CRT Reviewer

MARSHALL MORGAN, CRT
The Black Horse Cigar Shop
(Turnersville NJ)
3101 Nj-42
Turnersville, NJ - United States
(856) 336-6123
[See All Reviews](#)

ALEC BRADLEY | PRENSADO
• Robusto • 5.00" X 50rg • Colorado • Honduras
• Review Date: 04/16/2020 • Age: /2018
• Wrapper: Honduras • Binder: Nicaragua • Filler: Honduras, Nicaragua
• Descriptors: Bittersweet, Black Pepper, Nutmeg, Dark Chocolate..... • Beverage Pairing: • Food Pairing:

Spice: 7.00
Strength: 5.00
Body: 5.00
Overall Rating: **9.5**
[Click here for the complete Certified Cigar Review](#)

CRT Reviewer

BRENT BOND, CRT
Dandys Tobacco Shop (Tobacco Shop)
2109 ross clark cir. ste. #7
Dothan, AL - United States
(334) 790-3939

How are retailers able to use their own reviews generated from the CCR platform to improve their own business? As a retail tobacconist, one of my favorite features is the ability to create shelf talkers. Every CCR shelf talker promotes the Certified Retail Tobacconist (CRT) who created it and gives a snapshot of the cigar's qualities and rating. Shelf talkers are a powerful way to communicate with consumers who may be reluctant to ask questions, draw attention to specific products, and help tobacconists to develop a following and share their impressions. Lastly, now we don't have to wait or rely on manufacturers to provide us with shelf talkers. We can print our own and create a consistent and custom branded presentation in our humidor.

Spec sheets are also a great way to present the full cigar review. These can be placed in a notebook or dossier, as well as be included with gift purchases or mail orders. Providing a full-color spec sheet is a powerful value-added feature that many consumers will appreciate, and they promote the tobacconist and store who created it. Every CCR has a Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn sharing button, and every review promotes the reviewer and their company. Now, tobacconists have the ability to easily create compelling social media content and share it with the click of a button.

As a retailer, I can tell you that sometimes we struggle to find valuable content to communicate via social media—cigar selfies will only get you so far. Having the ability to share CCRs with the click of a button is a powerful way to constantly communicate and add value to our customers and community. Similarly, reviews can be linked in emails, so we can add more value to our communications. Lastly, the CCR platform exists to empower people, and I think the best ideas are yet to come, and they will be developed and pioneered by creative tobacconists and consumers. To that end, we must wait, see and learn what the market wants and needs and then be ready to provide that to enrich our culture and profession.

How can manufacturers take part in Tobacconist University's CCR program and what are the benefits that are offered by being a part of it? That is what we are currently focusing on. We have just finished the programming to benchmark cigars, which creates a user account for every manufacturer and distributor. This will allow us to welcome them into the CCR platform and add all of their products, including images. We want to make sure that our data is correct to honor all of the products that get reviewed. Ultimately, the CCR database must be carefully curated to ensure accuracy. When their cigars get reviewed, we expect manufacturers and salespeople will have the sense to share and promote their reviews, so they should receive a significant benefit from that process.

We will spend the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 communicating with manufacturers, setting up their benchmark user accounts and introducing them to the benefits of the CCR platform. It is also an exciting opportunity for Tobacconist University to do outreach with manufacturers in the industry. Because we do not sell advertising, we have never had a good system in place to bond with that level of the industry, so this will be the beginning of many new relationships and opportunities for all.

You can access the Certified Cigar Review (CCR) website at certifiedcigarreviews.com. For more information on Tobacconist University, visit tobacconistuniversity.org. **TB**

FIVE CCR UPGRADES

Jorge Armenteros, founder of Tobacconist University, is setting out to bring structure and organization to the cigar reviewing process through his Certified Cigar Reviews (CCR) platform. While the site is fully functional, there are already some enhancements planned for the future. Here some of the most exciting new features coming to CCR:

1.

AGGREGATE REVIEWS

There will be a tipping point where CCR will have enough reviews of a particular cigar, making it important to create "Aggregate Reviews" where the rating data is averaged together to create a crowd-sourced review. Armenteros expects CCR's Aggregate Reviews to be among the most substantive reviews in the world.

2.

IN-PART REVIEWS

Tobacconist University is working on developing the programming that will give the reviewer the option to review the cigar in parts: either halves or thirds. Many cigar smokers and reviewers like to break down the cigar into parts, making this an option Tobacconist University hopes to eventually provide to CCR users.

3.

INFERENCE ENGINE

Armenteros wants to offer retailers the ability to search CCR's data to produce suggestions based on customer likes and dislikes. Once CCR's database is large enough, Tobacconist University will be able to allow customers to search for cigars based on criteria they select.

4.

GIFT PACK SPEC SHEETS

Many tobacconists create gift packs with multiple varied cigars. Tobacconist University is working on distilling the review snapshots so tobacconists can print out a gift pack spec sheet: a single sheet of paper that will convey the substance of each review.

5.

IMAGE AND INFORMATION SCAN

Over time and with the use of artificial intelligence programming, Tobacconist University aims to integrate mobile phone cameras with CCR's image database to allow users to scan a cigar and generate a list of Certified Cigar Reviews. This is a long-term goal but one that is being planned for.