



## A Conversation with Rolando Reyes, Sr.

Few of the men who run cigar companies are great cigar rollers. Rolando Reyes Sr. is the exception. His talented hands have worked cigar tobacco since he was a child in Cuba. After he learned how to roll simple parejos, or round cigars, his tutors recognized his potential and taught him how to craft figurados, the complex shaped cigars that are the most challenging to create. In 1975, he left Cuba, taking his skills to the United States and, later, to Honduras, creating the Cuba Aliados and Puros Indios brands. Many credit him with bringing the

diadema shape to the American cigar market.

Cuba Aliados was a hot brand, but a lawsuit between Reyes and his distributor, Cigars by Santa Clara N.A. kept it off the market for most of the cigar boom. A recent settlement returned the brand to Reyes.

The 82-year-old Reyes recently sat down with senior editor David Savona for a comprehensive discussion about cigars, tobacco and restoring Cuba Aliados to its former stature. His grandson, Alex Diez, translated.

**David Savona:** Let's discuss how you got started in this business. How old were you when you came to the United States?

**Rolando Reyes Sr.:** I was 51. I came 30 years ago.

**Q:** Did you open a cigar factory right away?

**A:** In Union City [New Jersey]. It's still there. It's still open. We have a retail store. That's a part of me I don't want to part with. I was working there, but it wasn't enough production for the demand, so I came to Miami. And in Miami there wasn't enough either, so I went to Honduras.

**Q:** Tell me about Cuba Aliados—didn't the name originate from an old bus company in Cuba?

**A:** It's the same name—the bus line used to be called Aliados, and I named the company Aliados. It means “allied.”

**Q:** When did you first start making cigars?

**A:** In Cuba. I was nine years old.

**Q:** Were you working at home?

**A:** I worked in a small factory, where I wasn't only being taught how to roll cigars, but how to handle everything you had to do. They taught me everything, so I could learn how to start rolling.

**Q:** Where in Cuba was this?

**A:** Zulueta. From there I went to a factory in Remedios called Aguilar and then I went to Havana to work in José Piedra. And from there, I went to H. Upmann. The boss at H. Upmann was a friend.

**Q:** Were you known as a very good roller in those days?

**A:** Yes.



“I work every day of the year—even on my birthday. I get sick when I don't have anything to do. I'll retire when I'm dead.”

**Q:** What type of cigars did you roll at H. Upmann?

**A:** I started with parejos, then I went to [José] Gener, where I started learning how to roll the piramides and figurados.

**Q:** When you say “figurado,” do you mean cigars that look like the Cuba Aliados Diademas you make now?

**A:** Yes. I'm the one who brought from Cuba the figurado.

**Q:** Let's talk about your figurados. I've always been intrigued by them, because they looked very much unlike any other cigar on the market. You make those shaped cigars without molds, right?

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** Is that the way they were done in Cuba?

**A:** It's done completely by hand.

**Q:** But wouldn't it be easier with a mold?

**A:** It is easier, but for me, it was very easy to work without the molds. For new people, the mold is very important.

**Q:** Is it very difficult to teach people to make that type of a cigar?

**A:** It's not easy.

**Q:** What was the reaction in the United States when you first started selling your diademas?

**A:** People would say, “I've never seen anything like that.” They didn't know which end to put in their mouth. (Laughs.)

**Q:** I remember you once told me that you don't use tobacco from Honduras, even though you work in Honduras. Do you still not use it?

**A:** The government gives me free entry; I can use leaf from anywhere in the world.

**Q:** Don't you use something from Honduras?

**A:** No, nothing from Honduras. Never.

**Q:** Why don't you like Honduran tobacco?

**A:** I just don't like it. I never worked with it. I feel that it doesn't have what I'm looking for. There's really not that much tobacco grown in Honduras.

**Q:** I know you're very fond of Ecuador Sumatra wrapper. What is it about that tobacco that's so special?

**A:** The taste is sweet, it burns well and it has a great aroma. And it has beautiful color.

**Q:** And how do you think the Nicaraguan corojo, that new wrapper leaf you're using, compares to Ecuador Sumatra?

**A:** I like it very much. I like it better than Sumatra. Each one has its own beauty.

**Q:** Is Sumatra thinner than corojo?

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** Is the corojo stronger?

**A:** A bit. It depends on how you treat it. The strength comes from how you treat it.

**Q:** You mentioned treating tobacco. Can you talk about that?

**A:** I process it according to the quality of the cigars. Nothing chemical, it's just natural.

**Q:** Don't you dip your tobacco in something? A bethune?

**A:** I touch the tobacco up with a secret recipe.

**Q:** Do you still run your factory the way you

used to? You are known for sleeping during the day, and looking over the work at night when everyone has gone home.

**A:** (Laughs.) I start at 10 at night, and I'm done at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. I am quality control. There is only one person who does quality control [in the factory], and that's me. I like to work at night, because there's no one to bother me, and I can concentrate better in detail on what's wrong with a cigar. When I'm working on something during the day, they'll call me for something else.

**Q:** You like being in the factory alone? No one bothering you?

**A:** You have to concentrate. I like to inspect every cigar.

**Q:** You personally check every cigar that's made in your factory?

**A:** One by one.

**Q:** But how many do you make a day?

**A:** We do 30,000 to 40,000 a day.

**Q:** You check every one?

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** How?

**A:** I pick up a bunch of 50, and I can see if it's short an ounce or over an ounce. When I start during the night, I start with the smaller cigars and work up to the bigger cigars—that way I go from the lighter cigars to the heavier cigars.

**Q:** Do you have to drink a lot of coffee during the night?

**A:** (Laughs.) I just have a lot of energy.

**Q:** I heard a story—I don't know if it's true—but I heard that when you were inspecting the work one night, you found something you didn't like and you turned the roller's chair upside down for him to see the next day. Is that true?

**A:** If it's a small problem, I write them a little note. If it's a big problem, I will dock them for the work, and I will turn over the table and leave a note. The note says "ojo," which in Spanish means "eye." I'm watching you. I'll put up with one problem, or two mistakes. The third? You're out.

**Q:** Are you a tough boss?

**A:** I have to be. Sometimes they might come

in a little drunk or with problems. I don't want to hear about that. You have to be straight.

**Q:** Especially if they know you're not there until the evening.

**A:** No, I'm there in the morning, too. I work during the night. When I wake up in the morning, I walk up and down the factory, picking cigars from here, from there, and then I know what to look for at night.

**Q:** Do you still have a lector, someone who reads to the workers?

**A:** I have the lector, and sometimes I leave him notes, and I tell him to read aloud what I'm expecting from the workers that day. And sometimes when someone isn't doing a

**A:** Anywhere from 300 to 350. It's a big factory.

**Q:** Do you miss Cuba?

**A:** I'm used to being away from Cuba. I'm an American citizen, and I've made Honduras my home.

**Q:** Have you smoked any Cuban cigars recently?

**A:** They bring Cuban cigars to the factory sometimes.

**Q:** And what do you think about Cuban cigars?

**A:** I think they're not blended well. I don't think they take pride in what they do. They have very little incentive.



While Rolando Reyes oversees production of Cuba Aliados and Puros Indios cigars in the Honduras factory, his grandsons Carlos, left, and Alex Diez, right, make sure that operations run smoothly in Miami.

good job, I give the lector the person's name, and he says so-and-so, ojo, I'm looking at you. Mine is the only factory [outside] of Cuba that has a lector. He does international news, local news, he reads soap operas. I don't allow music. When the man is reading, nobody can talk.

**Q:** Do you still raise animals and have your farm?

**A:** I have a very large farm. I have everything—any animal you want. The workers really can't afford to eat meat, so I give them some. All the mothers get free milk for their kids. More than half of my workers, I give them food from my farms.

**Q:** How many workers do you have now?

**Q:** So what's next?

**A:** Right now I have full concentration on Cuba Aliados. I'm putting everything I've got into the new Cuba Aliados. It's very close to my heart. It's a brand I brought from Cuba, and I was unable to handle it for a very long time. Now that it's back with my family, I want to make sure that I'm remembered for a long time. I lost it once. I don't want to lose it again.

**Q:** The other brands aren't going away, right?

**A:** No, but I'm focused right now on Cuba Aliados. I want it to get back to where it used to be. I work every day of the year—even on my birthday. I get sick when I don't have anything to do. I'll retire when I'm dead. ❖