

Carlos Diez and
Rolando Reyes Sr.



Reyes Family Cigars

The company formerly known as Puros Indios Cigars jumps ahead with a new identity and a new Miami boutique factory, putting its family name first. >BY DALE SCOTT

How can a cigar company with a 75-year history spent under the guidance of one of the industry's most respected *tabaqueros* have an identity problem? As odd as it seems, that is precisely what happened to the family-owned company formerly known as Puros Indios Cigars.

Company founder and Cuban expatriate Don Rolando Reyes, Sr. has worked in dark tobacco since the age of nine, beginning in the tobacco fields in 1933 and moving on to the legendary Havana factories of H. Upmann, Partagas, and others in the '40s. As a 20-year-old employee at the Cuba Aliados ("Unified Cuba") factory in Havana, he managed the entire company for the widow of the late owner. In gratitude for his assistance, she awarded him

legal rights to the Cuba Aliados name.

Don Rolando remained in Cuba until 1972. Emigrating to New Jersey, he began making Cuba Aliados cigars at home, building the business until the late 1980s, at which time his cigars came to the attention of Lew Rothman of JR Cigars. An exclusive distributorship resulted, and the business soared. A legal controversy halted production on Cuba Aliados in the 1990s, but by 2004, the matter was resolved and Don Ronaldo resumed production with worldwide distribution rights for Don Rolando's oldest "child," as he calls his cigars.

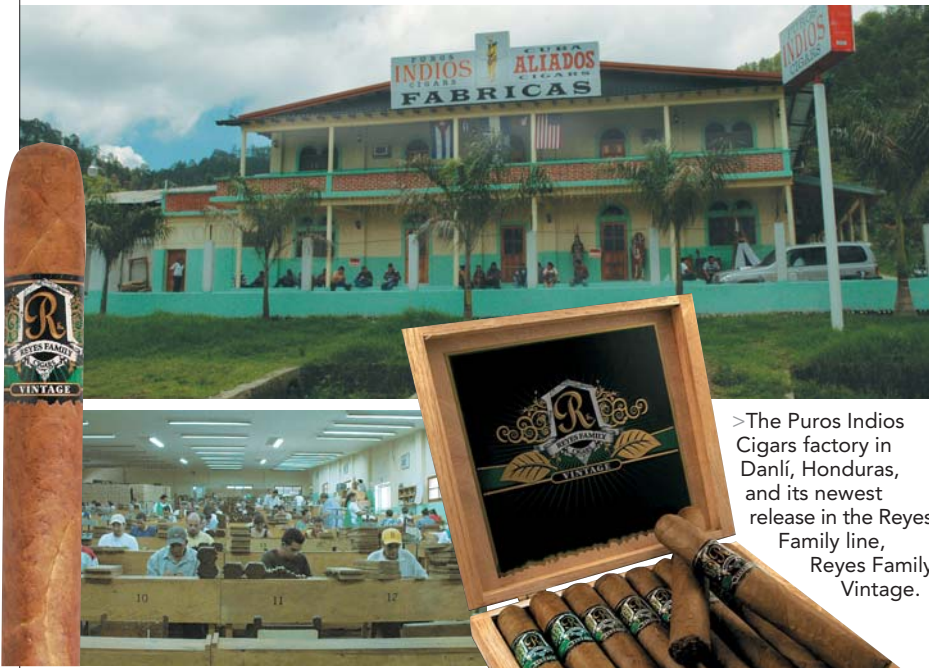
However long-term damage in sales and market recognition caused Don Rolando to realize his beloved Cuba Aliados brand was in trouble—and just as the cigar boom was peaking. Due to

being off the market for years, it was fading into obscurity. Don Rolando re-trenched, renaming the company Puros Indios Cigars. He created an entirely new Puros Indios line along with the immensely popular Roly Bundles, periodically adding other top-rated lines.

In 2002, Don Rolando built an expansive new factory in Danlí, Honduras. For years, he had been manufacturing cigars in a 12-room motel he had purchased there until the business outgrew it. That decrepit motel is now the company's box factory, which he also manages. "It gives us independence from the unreliability of box vendors," explains Frank Santos, the company's director of marketing. "Don Rolando's work is monumental; last year, the company produced five million cigars, and virtually all passed through his hands nightly, as he ensures their quality under his comprehensive gimlet-eyed testing." The factory employs 400 people, with 100 teams of rollers and bunchers. In addition to their own brands, the company makes cigars for four major retailers: Cigars International, Famous Smoke Shop, Holt's Cigars, and Thompson Cigars.

The growth and success of Puros Indios Cigars continued into early 2008, at which point a new transformation was unveiled. Don Rolando's maternal grandson, Carlos Diez, who has worked for the company since the age of 15, was named president of Puros Indios Cigars. His mother Oneida, father Enrique, and brother Alex have also been 100 percent involved in the company for years. Carlos rose to director of marketing, remaining in that position until early 2008. Don Rolando had told him, "When you learn everything you need to know from me, I will let you take the family and company name forward." This must have been challenging for both, as Don Rolando is a perfectionist. "Don Rolando is a jack of all trades, and master of all," says Santos. "He runs the cigar factory, the box factory, his 25-acre producing farm; the tobacco purchasing, sales, and marketing; even graphic design for the brands. But a year ago, Carlos turned 30, and Don Rolando saw he was ready."

Diez made two epochal changes immediately, not without some resistance



>The Puros Indios Cigars factory in Danlí, Honduras, and its newest release in the Reyes Family line, Reyes Family Vintage.

from Don Rolando. As he says, “We faced the marketplace confusion of having Cuba Aliados, Puros Indios, and Roly Bundles, as well as Viejo and Cienfuegos lines. People didn’t know they were made by the same family, much less who that family was. I needed to unite all our brands under one name.

“In honor of our family—one of the few surviving family-owned and operated cigar businesses—I renamed our company Reyes Family Cigars,” says Diez. “I wanted people to know we’re the Reyes Family, we’ve been in the business of making Cuba Aliados and Puros Indios cigars for years and we intend to continue to make a top-value product—high quality at a reasonable price. Even with other Reyes families in the industry—none connected with our company—I don’t think people will be confused by who we are and what cigars we make. We will continue to use the existing brand names, but under the umbrella of the Reyes Family Cigars. We’re proud of the history and reputation our family has earned since my grandfather began rolling cigars in the early 1940s.” Slight revisions are under consideration for the existing Cuba Aliados and Puros Indios packaging, perhaps the addition of a small flag, to call attention that the cigars are now made by the Reyes family.

Next, the venerable packaging for Cuba Aliados and Puros Indios cigars, which Don Rolando created years ago, came under scrutiny. Diez felt it was too

staid for contemporary smokers, who are drawn to more modern presentations. So, he proposed leaving the earlier brands’ (slightly modified) presentations alone. For the new products and presentations, he has added a tiny factory and cigar lounge to the existing storefront sales outlet in Miami’s Little Havana district. It is attached to the company offices and 10,000 square-foot warehouse, and employs just six rollers.

“One of several reasons for the new Miami factory,” explains Diez, “is to introduce new blends, to capture the younger smokers who make up the majority of our market. They will all have my grandfather’s touch, but are more powerful than the mild-to-medium Cuba Aliados and Puros Indios blends. Smokers want more power, and we are able to produce them here, since they will be small-batch offerings, which won’t overtax our small operation. Secondly, the finish and wrapper quality will surpass that of the Danlí factory. We are limiting our rollers to only 100 cigars a day, in order to get the best attention to detail.”

Diez also envisions being able to do custom, limited production, and experimental work. “We can try different blends and rolling techniques which

don’t fit into the high-volume Danlí factory’s operation,” explains Diez. “We also found it was too costly and time-consuming to travel back and forth to Honduras to work on new blends and other projects. So, we’re doing the blending here.

“We are also able to learn the craft firsthand from the Miami rollers. In fact, we end almost every working day by learning the craft alongside the workers. And, the lounge enhances the market’s awareness of our presence in Little Havana, which is coming to life after several years of decline as a cigar-making Mecca. All in all, the Miami operation will be kept simple.”

Santos adds, “Puros Indios Cigars has sustained a ten percent growth rate through the years. We introduced several well-received, top-rated cigar lines. In addition to the original Cuba Aliados, Puros Indios and Roly Bundles, we also brought the Puros Indios-era Cienfuegos and Viejo brands under the Reyes Family Cigars banner.”

The company’s web site provides details on all of the company’s current cigars produced in both Danlí and (soon) Miami, including the company’s two newest entries: The Reyes Family Classic and Premier. The Reyes Family Classic features a Sumatra wrapper over a Puros Indios blend that Diez modified slightly. Many think its dark EMS wrapper is a maduro, but it lacks the extra fermentation. Its four shapes come in 40-count cedar boxes. Prices range from \$4.50 (robusto) to \$6 (6 x 56 Piramide).



Premier, the second new product, is a variant on the Cuba Aliados blend, with a maduro Sumatra wrapper. Santos says, "The Cuba Aliados theme is definitely there, but Carlos has added a little 'secret leaf' so smokers will know it's not the original Cuba Aliados, just renamed." The cigars, in the 20-count cedar boxes, run a little more than the Classic, at \$6-7.

The company's new presentations are aimed well at the modern smoker. The contemporary box and band art is as tastefully iconic as the two pillars upon which Don Rolando built the company. "Presentation" applies equally to the selection of shapes. They are almost pugnacious, with eight of the nine being 50 ring or more, topping out at 60. The fat (56-ring), belly-banded Premier perfecto looks irresistibly menacing. These brawny shapes will draw lots of testosterone-laden thrill-seekers, I'm sure.

Other product news out of the Reyes family features three cigars. The Cienfuegos had a bold promotional slant to it featuring "heat" themed shape-names

like Engine #7, Blaze, and Hot Shot. The second Puros Indies holdover, the Viejo, soon to be renamed Vintage, is noteworthy for its eight-year aging and limited releases (45,000 cigars annually). Two years ago, Don Rolando introduced its six-year-aged Cuba Aliados Anniversary, another special edition cigar.

As far as future releases are concerned, Santos says the company is preparing to debut the Cuba Aliados Miami and Reyes Family Miami. Only two shapes will be available: robusto and Toro. Crowned heads with triple caps are standard features on both. The Miami factory's production limitation—rollers are held to 600 cigars daily total—is certain to make the cigars collectible the day they hit the street. The entire Cuba Aliados Miami and Reyes Family Miami releases (12,000 cigars in each brand) will go exclusively to the top 200 Reyes Family retailers. Pricing is in the \$8-9 range, with packaging details at press time.

The Roly Bundles continue to be a runaway success. "We get one or two

20-foot containers a month, and they're immediately empty," says Santos. "They were the invention of Don Rolando, back during the boom, when they were sold out of Cuba Aliados cigars. He came up with this mixed-fill value-priced cigar, made from remnants of first, Cuba Aliados; and now, Puros Indios cigars. The wrapper is rustic, but with great flavor. Bundles of 25 still retail for \$30-45, depending on shape. I believe every cigar smoker has smoked Rolys, and the tag line on their site says it all: 'America's #1 Bundle.'"

Don Rolando, once he gave Diez his wings, has proven a good enough leader to give his grandson authority to make decisions, not just responsibility. With a new name, new president, and new marketing and products for today's smokers, we can expect continued great things from Reyes Family Cigars. **S**

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