

Light 'em up

By BRET SCHULTE
Senior Reporter

Claudia Schiffer is smokin'.

Cigars, that is. And, it seems, so is everyone else.

Schiffer's appearance on the cover of the July issue of *Cigar Aficionado* represented yet another celebrity endorsement (along with the beaming mugs of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Pierce Brosnan and James Woods) supporting a trend that is quickly hooking men and women from all generations: Everybody's pulling up to a stogie.

In Lincoln, tobacco dealers have noticed the increased interest in cigars on a local level, especially among college-aged males and females.

Ted Wright, owner of Ted's Tobacco in the Gateway Shopping Center, opened a second store at 111 S. 66th St. a year ago to meet the local demand for quality cigars.

Wright's son, Mike, who also serves as a store manager, said the focus on cigars has changed over the years, encouraging the growth of the fine-cigar market.

"You have more of a premium cigar market now as compared to the Swisher Sweets and Dutchmasters," Mike Wright said.

His father confirmed the change in cigar smoking.

"In the '70s — the old days — guys smoked cigars every day," he said. "They would run through cigars like George Burns, but they weren't quality cigars."

In a day when people yell "Fire!" at the faintest whiff of someone lighting up, the cigar industry is thriving partly because of the haze of negative press surrounding cigarettes.

While the general populace seems to regard cigarette smoking as filthy and harmful, cigars have managed a more affluent, tasteful and classy image.

The cigar campaign waged by so many celebrity figures has probably played a major role in cigar smoking among young people, with screen idols like Denzel Washington, Danny DeVito and David Letterman commonly toking their favorite cigars during publicity photos and celebrity events.

The celebrity endorsement is not lost on cigar smokers, a fact not always appreciated.

"I've been smoking cigars since 1952," said salesman Russ Langley. "They are relaxing and enjoyable, (but) I think it's more or less a fad. Celebs have started pushing cigars now — Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rush Limbaugh, Letterman — that's when they started going sky-high."

The cost for a quality cigar can be staggering: ranging from \$3 to more than \$20. Like any fad, it is constantly evolving and while Macanudo cigars reigned as popular favorites a year ago, Arturo Fuente from the Dominican Republic currently seems to be the most popular brand, Ted Wright said.

"They are very hard to get and there is a short supply," he said. "It seems to be the favorite of everybody."

Mike Wright said opting for a cigar rather than a cigarette can be a habit of maturity.

"It's kind of being a role of getting older, becoming an adult," he said. "Once the college guys experience a cigar they realize it's different than just a fix from a cigarette."

Although cigarettes continue to face fire for health hazards and addictive properties, cigars have capitalized on the damage done to their smoking-industry brethren, oftentimes serving as its alternative.

Langley, a customer at Ted's Tobacco, said his occupation as a salesman prompted his conversion to cigars.

"I stopped smoking cigarettes years ago because of all the mess," he said. "It makes people uncomfortable, (and) you're always looking for an ashtray."

"There is a stigma attached to cigarettes, now. And they are worse for you."

In addition to the proliferation of tobacco shops, the cigar craze has donned yet a new face, the cigar bar.

Libations, 317 S. 11th St., has earned itself a local reputation for its martinis and single-malt scotch menu as well 19 brands of cigars, from Arturo Fuente to Punch.

"Because of the cigar bar people like to come here," bartender Rod Aldred said. "They come in here, have a scotch or martini and a cigar or two — even the ladies."

John Maes, a local businessman and patron of Libations, said he often takes clients to the bar to relax.

"It's far better tobacco than cigarettes," he said. "I love the aroma and sense of leisure that comes with quality."

"And women love a man with a cigar," piped in his companion, as she ashed her cigarette.

He agreed.

"They are relaxing and enjoyable, (but) I think it's more or less a fad."

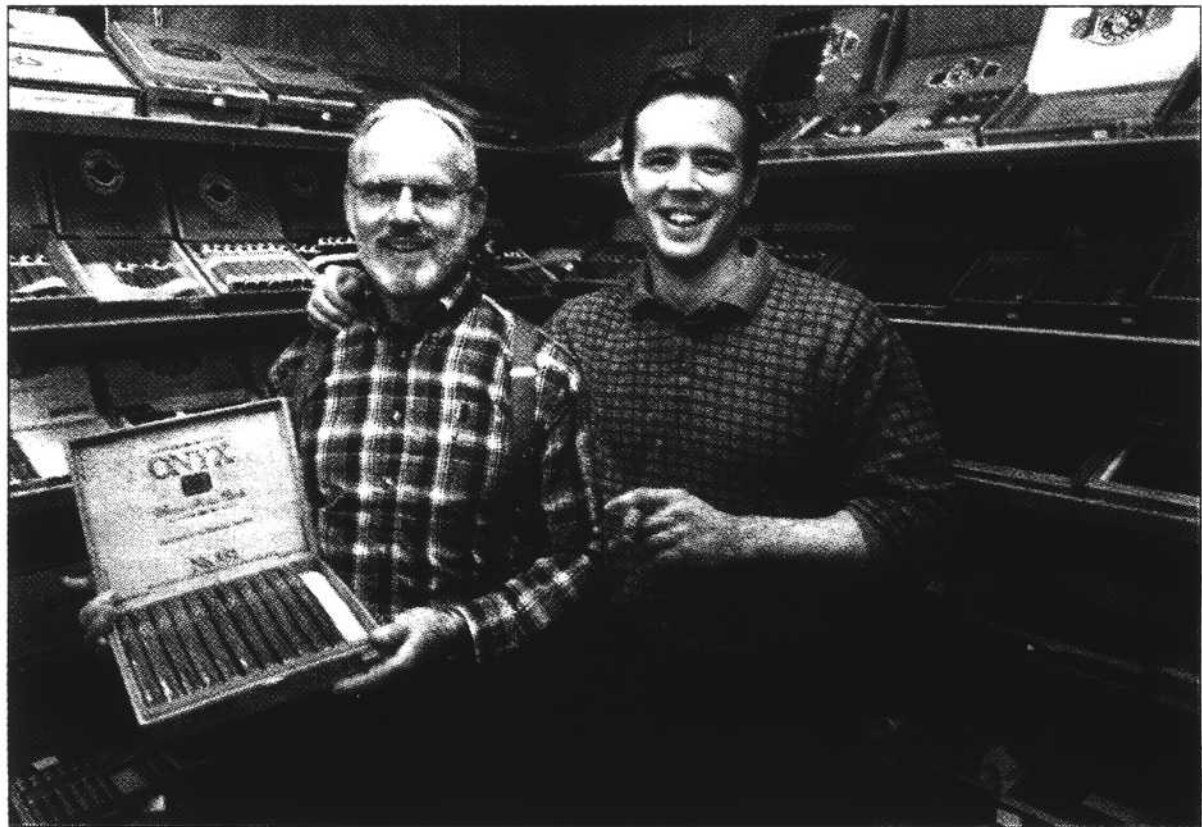
RUSS LANGLEY

salesman



Photos by
Scott McClurg

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION



ABOVE: TED WRIGHT (left), owner of Ted's Tobacco, 111 S. 66th St., and manager Mike Wright have helped provide Lincoln with premium cigars for more than 20 years. Ted's two tobacco shops stock more than 170 brands of premium hand-made cigars.



LEFT: CIGARS CAN BE FOUND in hundreds of unique shapes and sizes, ranging from 4 inches to well over 10 inches in length.