Marketing

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Tobacco, in the form of premium hand-rolled cigars with an aroma certain to mellow any mood, and cocoa beans processed into velvety chocolate guaranteed to liberate endorphins galore, are giving the Dominican Republic a new reputation.

Amid gently swaying royal palms and green rolling hills 80km northwest of Santo Domingo, at the Chateau de la Fuente hacienda, Carlos Fuente nurtures tobacco seedlings that will become the family business's top product: the Opus X cigar.
"The Opus X is the Ferrari among cigars. Smoking it is virtually a sexual experience and not really for beginners," says Mr Fuente, chief executive of the Arturo Fuente tobacco company and grandson of the founder, as he lights up, puffs and describes its peppery aroma and spicy flavours.

Originally from Cuba, the family expanded its business in the first half of the 20th century in Tampa. But, like many Florida cigar companies, it was forced by the US trade embargo on Cuba to search for alternative raw materials.

After being forced to leave Nicaragua as the Sandinista Revolution spread and then losing all in a fire at their factory in Honduras in 1979, the Fuentes laid down roots in the Dominican Republic in 1980.

Since then, the Fuente company, known in the trade as belonging to the "old guard" of producers, has become one of the top makers of hand-rolled premium cigars, producing 36m per year of various blends.

This year, Cigar Aficionado, the magazine dedicated to the product, selected the Opus X as "Cigar of the Year".

The good news for the local economy is that cigar making is labour intensive. A single cigar, from seedling to its packaging in fine wooden boxes, can pass through as many as 400 pairs of hands, and take up to 10 years.

In spite of increasingly restricitve anti-smoking legislation in the US and Europe, demand outstrips supply. Premium cigar sales grew 13 per cent in 2004, according to industry figures. Mr Fuente says, surprisingly, most of his US customers are medical doctors, as well as celebrities.

Today, Mr Fuente and his father are seen as celebrities for having placed the Dominican Republic on the world cigar map, in spite of the odds, and having successfully grown the elastic and oily type of tobacco leaf, or wrapper, that forms the outer casing.

"People said it was impossible to grow wrappers here. But we started it and it was a struggle,"

he says. “It still is, but now this is one of the most recognised tobacco plantations in the world.”

An aroma of a different kind is also making waves: that of chocolate. From an array of small and medium-sized cocoa plantations in the fertile regions of the Republic, the Nazario Rizek company processes cocoa pods into paste and fine chocolate for export.

Since its founding by a Palestinian immigrant family early last century, the company has become the country’s principal producer, processing 14,000 tonnes per year of cocoa beans.

But the recipe for export success, Héctor Rizek, the company’s vice-president, has found, is in catering for niche markets overseas. “We don’t sell a commodity. We sell a flavour, an aroma, a passion,” he says. “The gourmet chocolate boom began in 2000 and the tendency is for more organic cocoa.”

Export volume has been growing 15 per cent annually, and the company predicts its exports will reach $40m in 2006. Nazario Rizek processes 30 per cent of its cocoa into chocolate, the rest is sold as cocoa mass.

Fine chocolate makers such as Michel Cluizel of France, Lindt of Switzerland and Scharffen Berger of the US are among buyers. Organic cocoa requires more careful attention during cultivation. But one of the advantages is some varieties of cocoa fetch a premium of up to 40 per cent over ordinary West African cocoa.

The future looks sweet for Mr Rizek: “The same trend that took place in the wine and tobacco markets is now happening with gourmet chocolate.”