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# TOBACCONIST

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## Ashes to Ashes

Vintino's Cigars

## End of an Era

McClelland Tobacco

## Joya de Nicaragua

Celebrating 50 years



Photos courtesy of Avanti Cigar Company

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*The seal (animal) featured on the Avanti Cigars logo was the result of a misunderstanding caused by a language barrier that led graphic designers in the early 1900s to believe the company required a seal rather than a business seal.*



# Avanti Cigar Company

BY BILLY LIGGETT

*L*eaves that reach more than 40 inches in length. Superior elasticity and thickness. An effulgent shine, rich resins and essential oils that produce a full-bodied taste.

There are several unique qualities of the Kentucky tobacco found in Avanti cigars, but the true distinction comes after the harvest: the “dry cure” process that involves exposing the leaf to oak and hickory smoke from carefully chosen logs, smoldering on the floor of a barn. The slow and carefully controlled process lasts a month, and only then is it ready for fermentation, a natural organic process that transforms and balances the flavor profile for a better taste and a decrease in nicotine. →

*The flavors blend and synergize during a final dry curing process. Over time, the cigar and wrapper sweat oils to develop a richer flavor and shine color.*

This description—as carefully crafted and poetic as the process itself—are the words of Luciano Simeone, the Italian-born chief operating officer of Avanti Cigar Company, headquartered in Dunmore, Pennsylvania. The 117-year-old company—founded by three Italian brothers (Dominic, Anthony and Frank Suraci) who immigrated to New York in the early 1900s—is the only producer of cigars with tobacco grown and dry cured in the United States. And three years removed from being purchased by Manifatture Sigaro Toscano, a company that produces the Toscano cigars that inspired the Suraci brothers all those years ago, Avanti is positioned for continued growth at a time of uncertainty in the cigar industry.

“We have ambitious goals, and we know we have unique cigars,” says Simeone. “Although our brands have been available in the U.S. for over a century, we feel strongly that there is continued opportunity to introduce and broaden the appeal of our brands to cigar smokers.”

Toscano cigars—small, handrolled cigars made in Italy—were the benchmark for the Suraci brothers when they left their small Italian village in Calabria in 1901 and launched their business in New York City. The Suracis saw an opportunity to capitalize on their love of these popular cigars in a place where the Italian population was booming.

Their company, The Slate Leaf Company, found success, and in 1925, it grew when the brothers purchased a factory in Jersey City, New Jersey, from a leading competitor, the Parodi family (Parodi would become the primary brand name). In the 1940s, after World War II, they bought out another key competitor, De Nobili Cigar Company on Long Island.

By 1952, the Suracis owned 75 percent of the market for Italian-style cigars in the U.S. Two years later, to meet demand, the company ceased handrolling its cigars and began mass-producing them. In 1963, they purchased their only remaining U.S. competitor, the West Coast-based Petri Cigar Company.

Now in control of 100 percent of the Italian-style cigar market in the United States, the next generation





of the Suraci family produced its signature Avanti cigar in 1970, a flavored cigar with an anisette tip. The Avanti quickly became the company's premier brand, and the style was so successful the company reorganized and became the Avanti Cigar Company.

Avanti's 2015 acquisition by Manifatture Sigaro Toscano, based in Rome, has been seen as a "win-win" for both companies, according to Simeone, who joined Manifatture Sigaro Toscano a year earlier. He says the company's 200 years of experience in cigar making means a larger production scale and a wider experience in consumer understanding for Avanti.

"The improvements span across all functional areas, from logistics and quality control to consumer research and production tracking, and from tobacco buying to flavoring techniques and production efficiency," Simeone says. "The American company will also gain international experience from the already international Toscano brand. We see new markets that could be opened for the American brands like Parodi or Avanti."

2018 is already proving to be a "milestone year" for those brands, Simeone says. The company is planning a full brand relaunch of the two best-selling cigars in May, when a new package design will hit the market, the result of two years of planning and research.

"We are planning a new image ... proven to deliver higher portfolio clarity based on consumer research and a more premium and superior quality positioning to both

*Frank Sinatra once said of Avanti Cigars' De Nobili brand, "I'd rather be around three De Nobili cigars blowing in my face all night" than to take in fresh air.*

brands," Simeone says. "The product and the prices will not change at all."

Avanti Cigars will also be more active in trade shows and select consumer events along the East Coast, where current and prospective retailers and consumers will have a chance to experience the brands. The company also has plans this year for a "full rethinking of our digital experience, including e-commerce," according to Simeone.

Simeone emits the same passion while describing the manufacturing of Avanti cigars that he used describing the dry curing process. Technically, he says, the cigars are machine-made, but there is an important "human touch" involved in the process.

"The machines simulate the hands of the cigar maker. No binder is required," he says. "We roll 16 cigars per hour; our employees control each cigar before starting the drying phase. The human touch is present and relevant to our products—from hand-picking the finest tobacco leaves to our master blender, who in order to achieve the perfect blend leads the process of using

tobacco from at least three different crop years in every cigar we make."

Simeone entered the tobacco industry in 2001, joining an Italian cigarette company after working for years for an Italian wine company. He then moved on to British American Tobacco, where he joined the Manifatture Sigaro Toscano sales team in 2014.

He quickly saw similarities between the cigar and wine industries that he didn't experience in the cigarette world.

"Cigars, just like wine, are a pleasure to be discovered, trained and enjoyed," he says. "It is not something you have to do, but more something you want to do. A finer thing in life."

After the acquisition, Simeone was chosen to run the Avanti Cigar Company in Pennsylvania. His new position meant a lot of traveling but also the opportunity to meet "a great number of people."

"The challenge of bringing our traditional cigars, with their deep, rich history, back to the right consideration they deserve makes my daily work really fulfilling," he says. ■





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