

We the people...
need a smoke and a cocktail!

Look across the Sound
freedom loving North Shoreians,
The Owl Shop in New Haven
has freedom to burn!

by
Douglas MacKaye Harrington

As we celebrate the anniversary of our independence this 4th of July, I wonder just how free our forefathers might actually think we are at this stage of the game. Obviously, the Emancipation Proclamation freeing African-Americans from slavery and the 19th Amendment granting voting rights to women were much needed improvements to their original version of freedom for all. However, during my lifetime I have seen our personal *social* freedoms legislated almost into oblivion. Land of the free, home of the brave? Well home of the brave for sure, particularly if you happen to be a smoker.

As a smoker, one feels as if one were an outcast in our now very PC America. Ironically, most of the Founding Fathers were smokers and many were actually tobacco farmers. I am by no means advocating smoking, particularly among young people, but how nice it would be to have a choice...you know freedom! The freedom to hold a martini in one hand and a cigarette or cigar in another without balancing an umbrella under my armpit in the rain on the street in front of my favorite saloon. The freedom of bar owners to decide on whether they would allow smoking in their *own* establishments was legislated away from them years ago in New York. Of course, there are great restaurants like Bliss, Pace's, The Country House, and Union Station that have comfortable decks and patios. There are also still great tobacco shops around the North Shore, like Smoke Signals in Port Jefferson, that allow smoking and a libation, but you

have to have a membership in the private club and the liquor you sip must be your own, no wall full of liquors to choose from and no smiling bartender to shake your Rob Roy.

Well, here is a *proper* improper suggestion for those revolutionary North Shoreians longing to actually sit at a handsome, well stocked bar, be served by a professional bartender and, yes, smoke! Go to New Haven, Connecticut and in this very gasoline expense economy, I suggest you get there as a walk-on to the Port Jefferson Ferry and a Metro North passenger once on the other side of the Sound. Hell, the trip from Bridgeport to New Haven takes only about twenty-five minutes and the round-trip train ticket is only five bucks. Why New Haven you ask? Read on my fellow freedom loving North Shoreian patriots.

“If I cannot smoke cigars in heaven, then I shall not go.” Mark Twain’s maxim is etched in glass above the entrance to the walk-in humidor at a cigar lounge, which is as close to smoking heaven as one can hope to find in the Northeast today. The Owl Shop in New Haven CT, is a beacon for those who still enjoy a fine cigar and a cocktail . . . indoors! The shop’s liquor license, which was grandfathered in following the 2003 Connecticut smoking ban, has allowed owner Glen Greenberg to transform this fabled tobacco shop into an oasis for smokers of all stripes.

Today, the Owl is hardly recognizable from the tobacco-only retailer it once was. After purchasing the Owl in 1998, Greenberg wisely applied for a liquor license and created a small, six-foot bar in a corner of the store. Until 2006, the bar did not sell more than the occasional beer or glass of port, but following the injection of hundreds of thousands of dollars in renovations the Owl Shop transformed the stale, if not dingy, layout into a warm, inviting *smoking lounge*. Prior to the recent wave of smoking bans, smoking lounges were rare, but the Owl’s legal status as a *tobacco bar* provided Greenberg will a unique opportunity.

Today, an elegant 20-foot bar and gourmet coffee station dominate the left side of the shop. In addition to the cigars and tobacco, customers enjoy a variety of top-shelf liquors, wines, and micro-brews, which are perfect compliments to the cigars on-site. Immediately, one notices the center, top shelf of the bar which boasts an impressive selection of whiskeys including MacCallan 25, Springbank, Lagavulin, and Johnny Walker Blue. Of course, for those who enjoy elegant sipping-tequilas, the Owl Shop offers Don Julio 42. Understated flat-panel televisions, leather chairs and footstools, a classic tin roof, and wide selection of cigar accoutrements help round-out the sensory experience.

The renovations successfully created a classic, comfortable ambiance reminiscent of the opulence of a time gone by. However, it is the actual history of the Owl that adds to its allure. Opened in 1934, the Owl Shop was owned and operated by an immigrant couple for sixty-four years until the widowed wife sold it to Greenberg. Joseph St. John and his wife Catherine, both Greek immigrants, were “inseparable” according to Joe Lentine, who is the resident cigar connoisseur and tobacco blender. Lentine, who started working at the Owl as a teenager in the 1960s, is not only a fount of knowledge on all things tobacco-related, but a witness to the shop’s extraordinary transformation.

Sitting down with Mr. Lentine, he traced the evolution of the store and its interaction with the world outside its walls. When he began the Owl was already one of the highest quality tobacconists in the country. However, after the Surgeon General declared cigarette smoking to be dangerous to one’s health there was a surge in the

demand for pipe tobacco. According to Lentine, “the 1960s and 1970s became the golden-era of pipe smoking,” and the Owl Shop was one of its epicenters. He explained how the shop’s inventory would expand as Yale professors would travel the world, experiment with exotic tobaccos, and return with their recommendations.

The Owl Shop is conveniently located across the street from the famed Shubert Theater, which was a soft opening location for Broadway shows during the heyday of American theater. The Owl quickly became a part of the Shubert’s theatrical tradition. Actors, directors, and playwrights would frequent the shop. It was not uncommon to see the likes of Edward G. Robinson, Vincent Price, Alec Guinness, or Helen Hayes purchasing their tobacco at the Owl. In fact, Lentine can remember when Arthur Miller would sit and smoke his Dunhill pipe tobacco during the production of his plays across the street! Rest assured the shop’s celebrity appeal remains strong as Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger popped in this spring to buy a handful of Davidoff Special Ts. Patrons claim to have heard the Governor say “Owl be back” upon leaving, a regrettable pun that ownership cannot confirm.

The inviting interior, fabled history and celebrity clientèle should not distract from the Owl Shop’s role as a purveyor of fine tobacco products. The staff is committed to educating their patrons and assisting everyone from the first-time smoker to the seasoned connoisseur to ensure an optimal smoking experience. The Owl boasts a selection of over sixty varieties of pipe tobacco and an endless selection of cigars that cross the spectrum of price ranges. According to the owner, among the most popular cigars brands are Davidoff White Label, AVO, and Ashton. For the owner’s money, Greenberg is especially fond of the Davidoff Special R and the new Davidoff Winston Churchill, which is a medium to full-bodied smoke with a cocoa finish and the only Davidoff brand to rely on pure Cuban seed. Mr. Greenberg’s personal preference should not surprise, as the Owl is one of only three official Davidoff retailers in the state of Connecticut.

Of course, the Owl is achieving a profitable renaissance during a period when fewer Americans smoke, and state and municipal smoking bans have negatively impacted bar owners’ bottom-lines. Greenberg is well aware of the unforeseen windfall position he found himself in – an effective monopoly on the market. However, with greater gross revenues derived from tobacco sales than alcohol, the Owl’s clientèle is clearly still coming to the bar for the tobacco itself. Furthermore, the Owl’s success is, in part, attributable to the revitalization of downtown New Haven that has occurred over the past decade. Citing the annual jazz festival, the culinary explosion, and the increase in theater and music options, the Owl’s owner believes that “New Haven has become a go-to city in Connecticut for entertaining.”

Despite the exogenous factors that have benefited the Owl, the cigar retail and distribution business is highly competitive. The 1990s saw the resurgence of cigar smoking in America, as cigars once again became *cool*. However, the cigar boom has tapered in recent years, or at least plateaued. In this climate, the Owl Shop has dedicated itself to quality control and the creation of an atmosphere where seasoned and nubile cigar smokers alike can grow in their taste for cigars. Creating the ideal space is critical. Following the 2006 renovations the Owl Shop saw a surge in its cigar sales. This is unsurprising, admits Greenberg, as local retailers find it harder to compete with online distributors who can offer significantly lower per cigar prices. However, Internet cigar

retailers cannot provide their customers with ambiance, which is why the Owl is a success.

Greenberg is not satisfied and has a series of further renovations planned. Eventually, the Owl will be offering private, built-in humidors that will provide regular customers a place to store their favorite selections for an annual fee. There are also plans to build a small stage to better accommodate live jazz. In spite of the positive outlook, the Owl, like similarly situated businesses, is concerned about the possible effects of increases in federal taxes on cigar sales. A recent bill designed to raise tobacco taxes to fund the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) was vetoed by President Bush; however, it proposed a 53% increase on cigar sales with a cap of \$3 per cigar. Greenberg believes that such a tax spike would price many consumers out of the market entirely.

Without implicating politics, policy, or business it is evident that inside the four walls of the Owl Shop no one wants to see consumers priced out of the market entirely. In some respects it is a version of *Cheers*, if Zino Davidoff were the bartender – an assortment of smiling faces coming around a single passion. Mr. Lentine summarized the driving ethos behind the Owl, "Tobacco is a great equalizer. People from all walks of life can sit around and become friends." Ahhh, the smoky smell of freedom!