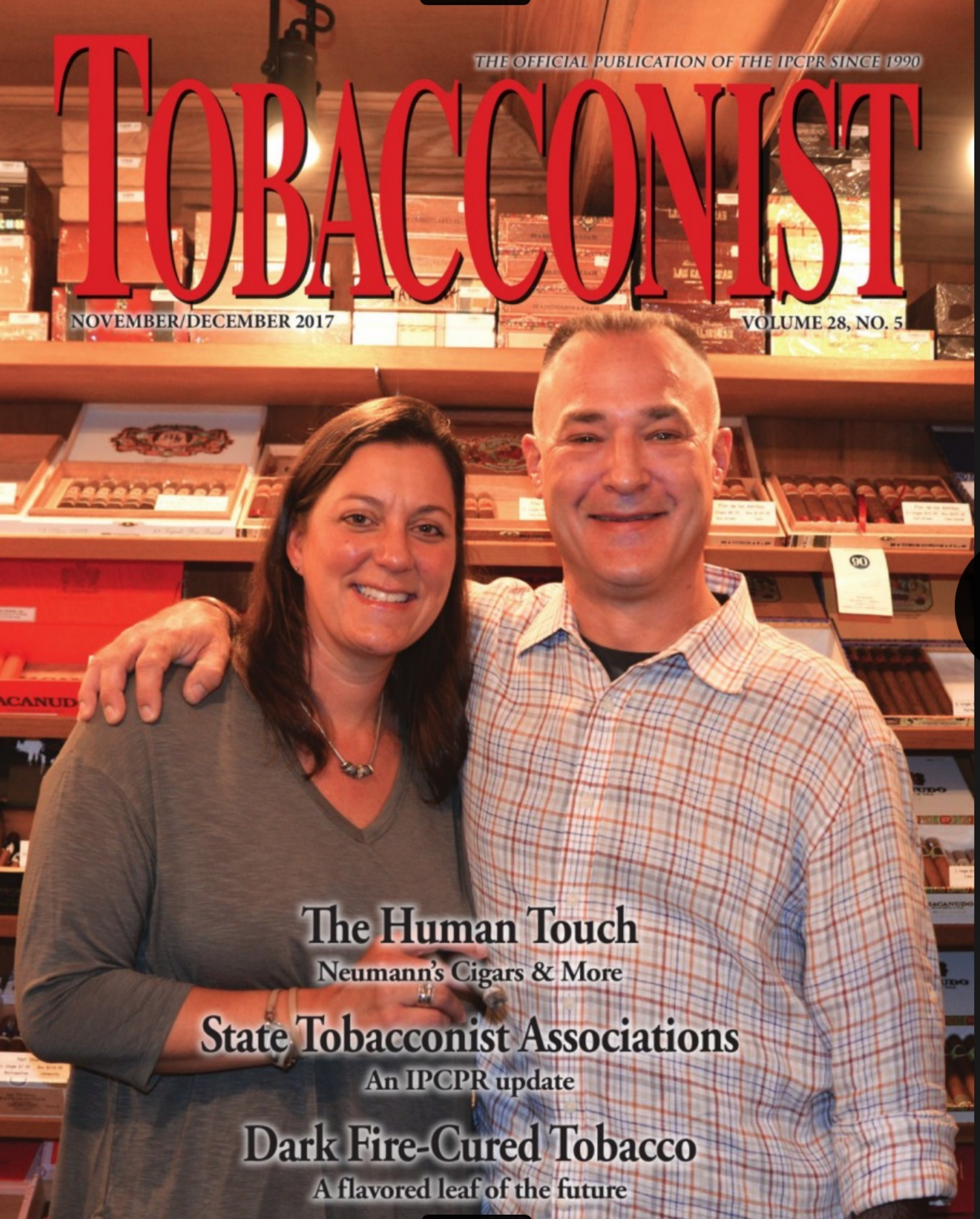


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FORTUNATE ONE

Mike Bellody builds MLB Cigar Ventures with patience and builds alliances with some of the industry's best-known cigar makers

BY STEPHEN A. ROSS

You might excuse Mike Bellody for sometimes pinching himself. After all, the owner of MLB Cigar Ventures, which makes Imperia and David P. Ehrlich cigars, knows he is an extremely blessed man. The 45-year-old is in the midst of starting a second career after a long and successful tenure in finance. He's exchanging his trading in stocks and bonds to hit the road to sell his Churchills and Belicosos. And he's doing it with the help of some of the industry's best-known and most-loved cigar makers, having blended cigars with the likes of Jose "Pepin" Garcia, Manuel Quesada and Ernesto Perez-Carrillo.

Just a few years after it started, MLB Cigar Ventures—a mainly regional brand available mostly in New England—is branching out, having inked a deal with Quesada Cigars for national distribution. Bellody, who supports his brand by committing to making numerous in-store appearances with retailers who agree to carry his cigars, knows his schedule is likely to get a lot more hectic—but he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I feel blessed to be in this industry," Bellody says. "I never get up in the morning and think, 'God, I've got to go to work today.' I love cigars, and I love talking to people. If I can get enough of a market share to make this a company that sustains itself and I can do this for the rest of my life, I'll be very happy. Right now, the trajectory that it's on looks very promising."

MLB Cigar Ventures' trajectory is one that began with what Bellody describes as an accident. He had secured his first job out of college and was working in Boston's financial district. His boss was a stock broker who enjoyed cigars. He used to hand the then 24-year-old Bellody some cash and tell him to go to the David P. Ehrlich store nearby to buy him some cigars, and he also encouraged Bellody to buy something for himself. Previously, whenever Bellody wanted to enjoy a cigar, he would very occasionally buy a five-pack of machine-made cigars from a local pharmacy or convenience store, but with his boss's approval he picked up an Ashton Classic Churchill.

"When I smoked my first premium cigar, I realized right away that there was a huge difference between what I had been getting at the convenience store and a premium



cigar,” Bellody recalls. “The Ashton Classic was probably the perfect choice for me as a first premium cigar because it’s very mild and balanced. It’s not overpowering. I have since gravitated toward stronger cigars. None of the blends I have are mild; they’re medium-bodied or stronger.

But I can still appreciate a good mild cigar as well. That Ashton Classic is what ultimately drew me into the industry almost 20 years later.”

While he pursued a successful career in finance, working for such companies as Prudential, Merrill

Lynch, Mellon Financial and Fisher Investments, Bellody became more fascinated with cigars. His newfound passion led him to research as much as he could about cigars and how they are made. He most loved the fact that the art of cigar making has remained largely unchanged through the centuries. While traveling on business, he would stop in the local cigar shops, looking for brands he hadn’t yet tried and learning the business from the retailers and their consumers.

By 2011, wanting to get involved in the business he appreciated so much, Bellody became a partner in Tiant Cigar Group, a New England-based company that sold two cigar brands—El Tiente Habano Rosado and El Tiente Habano Oscuro. Both cigars were made by the father and son team of Jose “Pepin” Garcia and Jaime Garcia. While the partnership in Tiant Cigar Group gave Bellody his first experience of being a cigar maker, the agreement ultimately didn’t work out. By 2013, Bellody had established MLB Cigar Ventures and was committed to creating cigars with some of the best cigar makers available. MLB Cigar Ventures’ first cigar was Imperia, a blend that Bellody developed with the help of Manuel Quesada, the patriarch of Quesada Cigars.

“I’m really lucky,” Bellody says. “I worked with Pepin and Jaime in my first cigar company, and with my second cigar venture I’m meeting right away with Manolo [Quesada], another legend in the industry, and we’re blending a cigar. I call the Imperia the ‘blue label’ cigar. It has a blue label on the box to differentiate it from the later Imperia lines that I’ve done. It took almost two years to create Imperia so that the flavor profile would be unlike any other premium cigar. It’s medium-bodied and uses mostly Dominican tobacco, with some Nicaraguan tobacco in the filler. It’s got a high-priming Dominican HVA wrapper. In terms of strength and body, it would be a five on a scale of one to 10.”

While still working full time in finance, Bellody began marketing Imperia to retailers in New England and a few



retailers in New York. He didn't have the time to devote to selling cigars further afield, and he already had established relationships with the area's retailers. As word grew about Imperia, however, consumers from other parts of the country began asking for the cigars. MLB Cigar Ventures was set to grow.

"I decided to attend the 2015 IPCPR show in New Orleans, not so much to sell cigars but to get the name out to more people nationally and look for sales reps," Bellody explains. "I took on a sales rep based out of Atlanta and got another one based out of Baltimore."

No longer a New England-area exclusive, MLB Cigar Ventures' Imperia began to gain traction in Atlanta and Baltimore. Seeking to support his brand as much as possible, Bellody began traveling to the two cities every four to six weeks, meeting with retailers and doing in-store events. He became a co-sponsor of Smooth Draws Radio Show, based in Atlanta, and the brand really took off in the area. At the 2016 IPCPR show, Bellody hired a rep for the Texas market, and he experienced similar success.

With retailers in New England, the mid-Atlantic, Atlanta and Texas, MLB Cigar Ventures needed to expand its offerings. In 2016, the company released Imperia Islero, also made by Quesada Cigars. Named for a famous fighting bull in Spain, Islero is strong but refined, offering full flavor commingled with sweetness, thanks to the blend of Ecuadorean wrapper, Dominican binder and a filler blend featuring Dominican tobaccos and Pennsylvania broadleaf.

"Islero is probably the strongest cigar that I make," Bellody explains. "It's deceptively strong. A lot of smokers equate pepper and spice with strength, and that's not necessarily true. It's very low on the spice, and it's naturally sweet. It gets its strength from a healthy dose of Pennsylvania broadleaf ligero in the filler. That is a very strong but naturally sweet earthy tobacco."

At the 2017 IPCPR show, Bellody released yet another Quesada-made Imperia line, Aventador. Also named for a famous Spanish fighting bull, Aventador is slightly less full-bodied but more complex than Islero. Made with an Ecuadorean wrapper, Dominican binder, and Dominican and Pennsylvania broadleaf filler tobaccos, the Imperia Aventador offers more spice and pepper than the other Imperia cigars.

The 2015 IPCPR show was something of a turning point for Bellody and his company. Not only had he hired his first sales reps to expand the company's offerings outside of New England, but he also hired Barry Macdonald to serve as his national sales manager. Right after the show, Bellody met with another famous cigar maker, Ernesto Perez-Carrillo. The two would begin work on a cigar that was named for and inspired by the legendary Boston tobacco shop David P. Ehrlich, which had been owned by Macdonald's family.

"David P. Ehrlich was the store where I bought my first premium cigar," Bellody explains. "It was one of the first



stores to carry La Gloria Cubana when Ernesto introduced it in the early 1990s. The store was one of those legendary places that had been in business since 1868. Unfortunately, it had to close due to Boston smoking laws, but the store was very dear to me. Barry and I had a vision for a cigar utilizing this historic brand, and it made perfect sense for us to work with Ernesto on this project. We approached Ernesto with the idea at the IPCPR show in 2015. Given his very fond memories of his relationship with the Macdonalds and the Ehrlich store, he was eager to get the project going. So we created a really special blend and introduced this cigar to honor the legacy of the David P. Ehrlich store." →





Introduced at the 2016 IPCPR show, David P. Ehrlich Tremont cigars feature an Ecuadorean wrapper, Nicaraguan binder, and Nicaraguan and Dominican filler tobaccos. Medium-to-full bodied, full-strength and full-flavored, the David P. Ehrlich Tremont is named for the street on which the famous cigar shop sat for much of its storied history. Like Imperia, which has three variations, other offerings of David P. Ehrlich cigars are planned for the future.

Those future releases and the existing MLB Cigar Ventures portfolio now have the backing of Quesada Cigars' national distribution team and are available to cigar shops everywhere. Initially, the growth of Bellody's company was delayed by his full-time financial career and his insistence that he avoid selling cigars to shops in territories that didn't have an MLB Cigar Ventures sales rep. Now, however, his company has grown to the point that he has left finance behind to give MLB Cigar Ventures his full attention. Retailers who bring Imperia or David P. Ehrlich cigars into their stores can expect plenty of support from Bellody.

"I'm not in the business of selling cigars; I'm in the business of building my brands," Bellody explains. "I don't

want the quick buck. You need support on the ground to build the brand, especially as you enter new geographic markets. Otherwise you run an increased risk of slow initial sales in that area and can get labeled as having cigars that don't sell. When I enter a new market, I can't rely on customers walking into a store asking for my cigars. I need to remove that risk for my retailers by having great sales representatives and by being there personally, giving them and their customers personal attention. Then the retailer will see my cigars become a very solid seller within their humidor. I don't know any other way to build my brand within a region or specific store. I need to make a connection with them personally. I have a formula that works everywhere I've tried it. In the past, I've been reluctant to sell cigars to a retailer until I had a sales rep in the area and I was able to travel to that territory myself. I think a lot of retailers respect that. Now that I have sales reps pretty much everywhere with the Quesada distribution agreement, that will change. I can and will build out more territories, and I'm ready to spend the necessary time to strengthen them like I want."

In addition to signing the national distribution agreement with Quesada Cigars, Bellody has also added to his own sales force by hiring Alexandria Kling as vice president of branding and inside sales. Kling had started an independent inside sales brokerage representing several boutique companies, including MLB Cigar Ventures, but since June she has been working exclusively for Bellody.

"Alexandria allows us to be proactive regarding our sales and support," Bellody comments. "She's a huge asset to the company. She provides me with appointments and appearances, and she's available to make appearances representing MLB Cigar Ventures as well. She truly understands the vision I have for my company and is a perfect fit for us."

With the addition of Kling and the alliance with Quesada, Bellody hopes that his company will grow to include retailers in all areas of the country. The perfect scenario Bellody envisions for his company's growth is that whenever a new retailer places an order, the company's local sales rep would introduce his cigars by doing an informal cut-and-light event four to six weeks later with promotional giveaways. A short time later, Bellody would attend a larger event that's advertised on social media and other channels to attract attention.

"It's important to me to get to know the owners, but it's equally important for me to get to know their regular customers," Bellody says. "After I have done those events, I will visit the shop every once in a while and simply hang out for a few hours. Retailers and consumers like that because there is no sales pressure at all. We're just hanging out having a good time. When you build a relationship with the store owners and the customers, the cigar sales take a life of their own within that store, and ultimately in that market."

The foundation for MLB Cigar Ventures' success in the past four years has been built on Bellody's insistence on

tirelessly supporting his brands. As the company grows, that support is only likely to get stronger. The success has also been established through Bellody's close relationships with great cigar makers—people who are well-respected and much-loved for their passion and ability. While Bellody works hard to grow his company, he also realizes that he's a lucky man.

"I simply want to make great cigars that people like and build my company to a point where it can be financially successful and allow me to finish out my working years doing a job that I love," he concludes. "I'm very blessed and fortunate that I have a family who supports my dream and allows me to travel so much. I'm also lucky to learn from three of the most legendary tobacco people ever. Although I'll never know nearly as much as they do about tobacco, each of them has taught me a lot, and I respect each of them tremendously. They gave me the foundation from which we could make some really incredible cigars." **T**



Mike Bellody enjoying a recent MLB Cigar Ventures event with a fan