

Confidenciaal

How a French restaurateur's passion for cigars evolved into Confidenciaal, a brand redefining luxury through sustainability and affordability.

by Zack Mitchers

After three decades navigating the cigar industry, from establishing distribution networks across Asia to consulting with Cuban and New World manufacturers, Eric Piras has distilled his expertise into something deeply personal. Confidenciaal Cigars, born from anonymous tastings in his Hong Kong cigar lounge, challenges conventional luxury with recyclable packaging and accessible pricing. In this conversation, Piras reveals how a scuba diving instructor became one of Asia's most influential figures in premium tobacco, and why he believes the future of cigars lies in sustainable everyday indulgence rather than ostentatious presentation.



Hello Eric! Who was Eric Piras before getting into the tobacco business, and how did you get into it?

Straight out of university, I went to work as a scuba diving instructor in the Bahamas. I wanted to explore the world and didn't really have a career plan, so this was a perfect first job for me. Spending time underwater and on the Club Med beaches of this beautiful island was wonderful and led me to work as a diving instructor on private yachts and at other nice places. After a few years, though, I thought I should have a more 'serious' life and went to Paris, where I found a job as a waiter and worked my way up to being a restaurant director a few years later. Entrepreneurship kicked in, and I opened my first restaurant in Paris, which earned a 1-Michelin-star rating within 1 year. It was quite exceptional. I also worked at a few other restaurants and served as an F&B consultant on several projects for interesting clients, including President Mobutu in Zaire.

Around that time, I started getting interested in cigars, though I never expected it would later become my area of expertise. A project to open a hotel led me to Hong Kong, where I met Sir David Tang, who offered me the role of Business Development for The Pacific Cigar Co. (exclusive Habanos distributor) in 1996, and this is how the adventure began. Cigar was booming, and I set up PCC's network in Asian countries and Canada; I am proud to say that some of the team I employed at the time are still in place! In 1999, I became Vice-President for Altadis, opening their Asia-Pacific office and markets. It was my first deep connection with New World cigars, and this position allowed me to expand my network and experience towards both ends of the cigar business. I spent a lot of time in cigar factories developing new products for international markets, benefiting from the experience of true masters such as George Gershel and Jose Seijas.

Meanwhile, I also travelled the world to set the international distribution of Altadis brands, strengthening existing markets and opening many new ones, appointing distributors and creating new distribution networks. 2014 was the time to move on to the next chapter of my professional life. I opened my own company: Cigraal Ltd. Capitalising on my wide network and experience, Cigraal specialises in the distribution, marketing and promotion of cigar brands, and we're proud to count some nice names in our portfolio, such as Arturo Fuente, Ashton, Casa 1910, Eiroa, Flor de Selva, Joya de Nicaragua & Matilde. We also have direct contact with end consumers through Bertie cigar lounges in Hong Kong (opened in 2019) and Phnom Penh, Cambodia (opened in 2024). As a natural development, I launched Totem in 2019 (cigar acces-



sories; the designs are a tribute to Native Americans), and then my cigar line, Confidenciaal, in 2022!

You have over 25 years of experience in the industry. What was the defining moment that led you to create your own cigar brand?

In the last 30 years, I have had privileged access to cigar blending and manufacturing, spending a lot of time on tasting committees where we try cigars in the morning when your palate is fresh, comparing and improving tobacco blends. After all these years of tasting and helping create limited editions for large brands, it was tempting to have a cigar line tailored to my own taste. I decided to 'jump' and create my own cigars in 2019, but they were not initially destined to become an actual brand. The production was intended solely for me, my family, and my close friends.

When I opened Bertie Hong Kong, I kept these cigars in my own private locker and naturally started sharing them with the lounge's regular clients, who really seemed to enjoy the blend. But I didn't want to rush into selling them; if my name was going to be on these cigars, they had to be vouched for by a large number of people who didn't know where the cigars were coming from, so that their comments could be totally genuine. For 3 years, we had these cigars in Bertie, tried and tasted by dozens of cigar passionados and passionadas, and the comments were always positive.

What inspired you to take the next step, but keep the cigars mysterious yet approachable?

Word started to spread in the Bertie Cigar Lounge that I had my own cigars, and they were very good. At the time, there was no cigar ring, no brand name. So clients were asking the team in Bertie for 'your boss' cigars' or 'the cigars with no name', and very quickly they became known as 'the secret cigars'. After 3 years of the clients' 'blind smoking' and positive comments, we thought we could take a chance and launch these cigars as an actual brand. The name 'Confidenciaal' did sound obvious, given the genesis of the brand. We spell it with 2 "A" s as a reference to the French word 'graal', which means the Holy Grail; it is also used in my company name, Cigraal. In line with the secret concept, we initially launched Confidenciaal without a cigar ring and without disclosing its origin. Because some markets' regulations impose a cigar ring, and also because the secret is now in the open, we added a cigar ring last year. Yet the ring carries the brand name only on the inside. Similarly, we are now announcing Honduras as the manufacturing country;



however, this is only the manufacturing country. Confidenciaal is a blend of the best aged tobaccos. Still, the secret of the tobacco itself is very well kept: only the master blender, Antoine Riberet (Cigraal's General Manager) and I know the exact origin of the tobaccos in Confidenciaal cigars!

The term "Luxury Bundles" is a bold redefinition in the cigar world. What does it mean to you, and how does it reflect Confidenciaal's ethos?

My main point when creating Confidenciaal was that I wanted a cigar that was "cuban-esque" in style (after all, when you create your brand, it's initially based on your own taste). Since I smoke a lot of cigars a day, it also made sense to create a brand that would be affordable. We all love the beautiful packaging of the best cigar brands. Still, when you smoke a lot of cigars, you can't help but be aware that it actually means a lot of material waste, in addition to being an essential part of the cigar's final price. Our idea was to create minimal packaging that would be easy to recycle and would not significantly increase the cost of the cigars. And since I spent a lot of time on the tobacco selection, I wanted the cigars to be visible through the packaging. Calamansi Designs (my wife Agnès Caër-Piras' design agency, which handles our branding, marketing & events) conceptualised a packaging design that is minimal while utilising high-quality paper and finishes. The concept? You buy a luxury product, but you can just throw the paper of the bundle once

you've finished it, and you don't have to feel guilty about it. We first launched 'real' bundles with only a sleeve, but we quickly realised that it wasn't practical for retailers, so we've now remodelled them as half-boxes, which are easier to use in shops. Even the 20-cigar boxes are fully made from the same FSC paper; it took a long time to develop the right process, but I am proud to say they can be shipped and displayed with no squashing issues. When the box is empty, it can just be thrown into the recycling bin; even the window is made of PET, the most recyclable and recycled plastic. Since we're quite proud of our CSR, we have added a message at the bottom of the packaging so clients are aware they're purchasing a product made with the environment in mind, to be enjoyed daily with relish and no guilt!

Where do you see Confidenciaal Cigars in the future?

2026 will be an exciting year for Confidenciaal: we are now in 30 countries, and expansion continues: the brand has been in Germany since last year and has arrived in Switzerland. We're also expanding into Middle Eastern countries and selected African markets, as well as travel retail, and we're planning a foray into the US market this year. We aim to maintain the consistently impeccable construction and quality of the cigars, the affordable price, and the environmentally friendly concept of our packaging, so that everyone can enjoy the 'everyday luxury' that is a Confidenciaal cigar!