

---

## JOSE BLANCO: "BETTER CIGARS ARE ON THE WAY"

Last Updated Saturday, 28 April 2007

Jose Blanco isn't satisfied.

The much-respected blender from the La Aurora factory and the man responsible for the Aurora Cien Anos anniversary cigar has his eyes on better cigars in the future.

"Last year's crop was supposed to be the 'crop of the crop,'" he said during an interview last week. "But this year's crop is as good as last year's . . . really!"

Blanco, with a lifetime in tobacco, is among the vanguard exploring just how good Dominican-grown wrapper can be. He's getting plenty of ideas from La Aurora's own farms comprising 760 acres in and around the Santiago area in the Dominican Republic.

"Our first experience was in 1988-99, which was an experimental year. Since 1999, we are continuing to grow wrapper, in the sun and under shade, every way we can.

"We grow Corojo wrapper that's absolutely authentic from seeds that came from a Corojo farm in Cuba [many years ago]. We also grow Corojo 98 for filler, Piloto Cubano for binder and filler and a lot more.

"The wrapper farms are all ours, but we also have other people under the control of our agronomist who grow for us. All of our tobacco is under contract, some from farmers who have grown for us for three generations, not only in Santiago, but also in La Canela, Jacagua and Navarette."

"I'm just as fanatical about what happens to the tobacco after it is grown, especially aging. "Most important to me is aging, not fermentation. Don't get me wrong, fermentation is important; if you just leave it at 135 degrees you'll disintegrate the tobacco and you'll only have a sheet of paper left with no oils and no flavor. You have to give it the right fermentation, but age is most important.

"Then, when you have leaves aged to where you want them, the blending takes over. You may have two really great tobaccos, but sometimes they don't harmonize. The market today is at medium-to-full body, but full flavor, so we have to try to find that combination.

&ldquo;Today there is a more educated crowd [of smokers] than ever before. We get 50-60,000 who visit our factory every year and they&rsquo;re also going to Honduras and Nicaragua. We&rsquo;re exporting 185 million cigars from the Dominican each year, but people are spending all their time looking for cigars [brands] that don&rsquo;t even sell one million in total. So there is a lot more that we can do.&rdquo;

So what is Blanco working on right now? &ldquo;I can&rsquo;t tell you, but it could be special. I hope we can show it to you this year at the RTDA show.&rdquo;

We&rsquo;ll be waiting!