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Cuba launches new cigar for women

By Carlos Batista

HAVANA: Gripped between the teeth of Fidel Castro, Winston Churchill, a Cuban peasant or a Western businessman, the cigar has long been a male preserve.

Now however Cuba hopes to woo the opposite sex with a new model for women, the "Julieta".

Short, slim and light in colour, the Julieta is designed, its maker says, to be "enjoyed quickly, following the life rhythms of today's sophisticated active women". The Cuban-Spanish company Habanos SA, which promotes all brands of handmade Cuban cigars – considered the finest in the world – launched the subtle-flavoured Julieta at the 12th Havana cigar festival this month.

"It's a homage to women," says Habanos vice-president Javier Terres.

At 12 centimetres (five inches) long and a slender 1.3 centimetres (half an inch) wide, it's designed to be held by a feminine hand.

Torres noted that women play a key role in making this new luxury product – 90 per cent of the 300 workers at Havana's El Laguito factory are women – and said many already smoked cigars.

"I enjoy smoking very much. A woman does not lose her femininity just because she smokes, quite the opposite," says 60-year-old Miriam Obelin, clouds of smoke blurring her face as she puffs away.

For 14 years, Norma Fernandez made the long Cohiba Lanceros cigars so famously enjoyed by Castro, the father of the Cuban Revolution and former president.

When Castro, now 83, gave up smoking in 1986, Fernandez quit her job as a "torcedora", or cigar-roller.

"I met him (Castro) two or three times. He told me I made good cigars," says the 57-year-old Fernandez who is now in charge of quality con-

trol for the world's most expensive cigar, the 375-euro (500-dollar) Cohiba Behike.

These days women in Cuba do not just roll cigars, they are also playing a growing role in tobacco production. But in a Latin country known for its male chauvinism, cigar-smoking women – whether workers or businesswomen – are still sometimes looked down upon by men.

"Women are beautiful. Smoking cigars does not go well with this," says 65-year-old builder Jose Torres.

Habanos SA clearly does not agree, with its new campaign to change attitudes and develop a market that has long been neglected. Currently only 10 per cent of the world's cigar-lovers are women, according to industry sources.

While Cuban authorities routinely add warnings about the dangers of smoking on packets of cigarettes, this is not the case for cigars which are viewed in Havana as less damaging to the health.

Under pressure from global economic crisis, which led to a fall in tourism in Cuba, and with the trend in some Western countries banning smoking in bars and restaurants, sales of Cuban cigars fell in 2009 by eight per cent, or 360 million dollars.

A trail of fragrant smoke drifts behind 22-year-old cigar-roller Yelena Vento.

"My boyfriend loves the smell of tobacco, he doesn't mind it at all. A woman who smokes is beautiful and elegant," she says.

Her colleague Adonis Velasco, 32, who says he "feels particularly good" when he sees a woman smoking a cigar, does not disagree.

For many in Cuba, where average wages are around 20 dollars a month, being able to smoke a fine cigar – which can cost about five dollars – is not a matter of gender, but of money.—AFP