

Around The World In Three Tobaccos

Many of us live, and think, as if "nature" and "culture" were separate things, kept apart by a porous but clear boundary. In fact, it's usually hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. (Think of the ways most of us encounter nature - we visit "forest preserves" created, and bounded, by an act of local government.) For a farther-reaching example, you could hardly do better than to examine the history of tobacco - a plant that sometimes assumes new characteristics depending on the soil where it's planted. Consider just one strain of this ubiquitous, lucrative crop: White Burley. The second-most-popular pipe tobacco now sold, White Burley arose solely because its ancestor, Red Burley tobacco, was just as popular and widely-used during the nineteenth-century. Cincinnati farmer George Webb found that a strange, whitish, slightly weaker-tasting strain of Red Burley was growing in his tobacco patch. He began selling it at local fairs and markets as a curiosity - like a two-headed calf at a state fair - but smokers found that they enjoyed this whitish mutant version of Red Burley more than the parent crop, leading to the widespread cultivation - and eventual dominance - of White Burley. Meanwhile, poor Red Burley went extinct because no one cultivated it anymore. You could call this "natural selection," but it's a clear result of cultural forces as well - the preference for a lighter, airier flavor of tobacco, good marketing, etc. Nature provides the raw material, culture adapts it, and the history of plant biology moves on. The history of this uniquely valuable crop goes back farther than we can trace; it may have been growing in the Americas eight thousand years ago, and archaeologists have found evidence (from engravings on vases and other items) that people have smoked it for, at least, the past four millennia. But tobacco smoking reached the rest of the world as a result of late-medieval/early-modern exploration - and of colonialism. Sailors on Columbus's expedition noticed it among indigenous natives of what would later become Cuba. Some of the finest tobacco has always, historically speaking, grown there, especially in the Pinar del Ra province. Explorers brought samples of tobacco all over the world. From the beginning of the modern era, then, tobacco's evolution was linked to its commercial possibilities. For example, tobacco smoking seems so much a part of the culture of the Middle East - travel to Egypt sometime, and you'll smell the richly aromatic strain known today as "oriental" tobacco (despite the political incorrectness of that word). Surprisingly, that smell wasn't always a feature of Arab culture - it wasn't always hanging in the air at the soukh (outdoor market) and the coffeehouse. Tobacco spread from Europe in the aftermath of Columbus's expedition/conquest, and set down roots in the Middle East very quickly - some of these cultures had already given a place to cannabis smoking in their rituals, so the concept wasn't new. This kind of tobacco, rich and almost fruity, is often used in the West in pipes and in cigarettes, but smoking it from a hookah is a special treat. Brightleaf tobacco - also known as "Virginia tobacco" despite it originating in North Carolina - is another instance. Early in the nineteenth century, smokers already clamored for a milder-flavored tobacco than what was generally grown in the South; the demand for another strain existed. In 1839, North Carolina farmer Abisha Slade sought to fulfill this demand by planting a gold-leaf tobacco plant in sandy soil. This, however, wasn't enough; the plants didn't seem usable, until a slave of Slade's, named Stephen, used charcoal to restart a curing fire that had gone out. The sudden heat turned the leaves yellow - and gave birth to the idea of heat-curing plants with charcoal. Stephen and Slade's discovery had dramatic consequences - not only did it fulfill a demand for a softer-tasting smoke, but it gave Virginia farmers a way to turn the infertile Appalachian piedmont region into a goldmine. The Civil War only increased the popularity of Brightleaf, since Union soldiers traveling through the area enjoyed the taste. Thus, despite its origins in North Carolina, this still-popular tobacco clearly deserves the name "Virginia."

About the Author

CigarFox provides you the opportunity to build your own sampler of the finest cigars. Choose from more than 1000 different brands! Other cigar products include cigar humidors, cigar boxes, and cigar accessories like Zippo Lighters. For more information, please visit <http://www.CigarFox.com>.

Source: <http://americanahost.com>