

Basic Pipe Tobacco Blending

So, you want to try your hand at pipe tobacco blending. This article is all about how to blend your own unique pipe tobacco mixtures. It's not only fun, but educational. I have provided a step-by-step process and detailed information about the component tobaccos you can use.

English Blends

English blends are the oldest and most pure type of pipe tobaccos. These blends originated in England and Scotland centuries ago and they have been characterized by the use of primarily Virginia tobacco as their base, and the minimal use of flavoring agents. Different mixtures are arrived at from the use of “condimental” tobaccos such as the different strains of **Oriental** tobacco and **Latakia**, (which is a processed form of oriental leaf) rather than artificial flavors. English blends have a fuller body and stronger flavor and aroma than aromatic blends.

Aromatic Blends

These blends are “fragrant” or “sweetened” and are cased with sugars and flavorings. Aromatics use a heavy base of **Burley**, often in the form of **Cavendish** tobaccos. **Virginia** tobaccos are used less for this type of tobacco due to higher costs. Aromatics are often smoked by the guys (and gals) new to pipe smoking. They produce flavors and aromas like cherry, chocolate, caramel, walnut, peach and vanilla, which many people enjoy.

Constituent Tobaccos and How Do They Work?

Virginia: Virginia tobaccos form an excellent “base” for a blend. Depending on the type of blend, they may or may not represent the highest percentage. Although there's a wide range of Virginia's to choose from including bright Virginia, Red Virginia, matured Virginia, and stoved Virginia, in general the lighter the color the zester the taste, with the darker Virginia 's lending a deep, rich note to the blend. Unprocessed Virginia tobacco tends to produce tongue bite, and stoved Virginia's tend to bite much less. Virginia tobaccos are naturally high in sugars and range from 2.5% to 5.0% nicotine.

Because of the high amount of natural sugar in Virginia leaf, blends high in Virginia content will age extremely well, becoming sweeter and mellower with the passage of time. Fresh made blends that seem “sharp” will mature and change significantly, especially if tinned or sealed in a jar.

Burley: Much like Virginia, Burley is a good base tobacco. It has very little sugar of its own, and is relatively bite-free. It should never come to the forefront, but be used sparingly. The "Burley Curse" refers to the habit this tobacco has of overpowering a blend. Burley has a distinct nutty taste, but because of its somewhat featureless character profile, it is often flavored. Burley is

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renowned for its ability to absorb flavorings and consequently is used widely in the production of Aromatic type tobaccos. The nicotine content ranges between 2.9% to 3.0%.

Cavendish: This term is a misnomer....it generally refers to a form of processing a tobacco, rather than a type. Simply, it's a blend of various tobaccos that have been sweetened, stoved, and pressed. Unflavored black Cavendish, for instance is made from Kentucky Green River Burley, which is sugared, steamed and toasted, yielding a distinct caramel flavor. In a blend, Cavendish can be used sparingly, to add body or flavor, or become the base, yielding a sweeter tobacco. Unflavored Cavendish blends goes particularly well with Latakia.

Perique: Perique is a "spice tobacco", with a distinct peppery flavor. Produced only in one place in the world, St. James Parish in Louisiana from various base tobaccos, and cured in its own juices. This not only adds spice to a Virginia blend, but also softens the bite that is typical of Virginia tobaccos. When not part of a straight Virginia /Perique blend, it should only be added to the point that it becomes barely noticeable. In a Virginia /Perique blend, it can represent a higher percentage, though 10% is often enough. However, there are some mixtures that use as much as 30% Perique....packed with flavor and spice! The nicotine content of Perique can be overwhelming, range from 3.5% to as much as 8.0%.

Latakia: Latakia is a variety of Turkish tobacco cured with smoke of different plants. Do you notice a "pine" type scent when smoking Latakia? This results from the type of plants, herbs, etc, used to dry and flavor the Turkish tobaccos to create Latakia. Syrian Latakia is strong and bright (currently difficult to find), while Cyprian Latakia has a deeper, mellower flavor. Latakia is a "spice" tobacco and needs a base tobacco to keep it from overpowering the blend. Fifty percent Latakia would be considered a "heavy Latakia blend". However, there are some commercial and shop blends that use as much as 70% Latakia in some of their English blends. Since Syrian Latakia is nearly impossible to obtain, Cyprian Latakia is really the only choice. Latakia has a smoky, earthy or leathery flavor profile.

Oriental: Oriental tobaccos are spice tobaccos produced in the Eastern Mediterranean (countries such as Turkey or Greece). These tobaccos range from spicy and sweet, to sour. Most oriental tobacco is sold as a blend. Turkish is often used to fill out the general impression of a Latakia mix. Again, by itself, 50% would be considered a "heavy Oriental". However, it can be smoked alone. Some of the best known types of Oriental tobaccos are Izmir, Samsun, Yenidje, Cavella, and Bursa. However, many of these are unavailable. A common flavor characteristic is a dusty, dry and sometimes slightly sour or bitter taste and aroma. The nicotine content of the "normal" Oriental is around 1.0%.

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What is a Basic Procedure for Blending?

The first thing to do is smoke a little of each individual component, to get a sense of the flavor profile of each tobacco. When putting your components together, it's a good idea to work in 2 oz. increments not just because it makes proportions easier, but because working in units of an ounce, a finished blend of 16 ounces will be well balanced. A small food or digital postage scale works well.

The second step is to decide on a base. Generally use only one type of Burley, but when using Virginia's, mixing varieties is often necessary to create the required flavor. Brighter Virginia's are used to create a top-note to the mix, but should be balanced by darker, more bottom-noted leaf. Finding a blend that cuts down on tongue bite is important, though Burley can be brought in for that purpose.

The next step is to add the spice tobaccos. Latakia and Oriental work well in combination. Latakia and Perique also combine really well to produce a deep, full bodied mixture. While using only one type of spice tobacco is common practice, some of the most interesting blends use a combination.

Various tobaccos are processed differently and have dissimilar types of cut. Constituents of radically different sized cuts will tend to separate. In general, finer cuts encourage consistency and pack easily, but tend to burn hot, which takes away from the flavor. Coarser cuts burn slower, don't pack as well and should be incorporated into a blend. Balance is the key.

Taking notes throughout this whole process is **critical**. If possible, use percentages, which can then be converted in ounces for easy blending. Use a spreadsheet to keep track of your blends by percentage and weight. As you make subtle changes to the blend, you are able to track the progress and keep track of what worked and what didn't.

A typical percentage for spice tobacco use would be somewhere between 10-30% (maybe more) and the percentage for a base tobacco could be 50% or higher. Also remember that a blend that tastes good at first may taste radically different over time, as the blend ages and marries. Make up your blend, taste a bowl or two and wrap it up tight in a Ziploc bag or Mason jar and let it sit for a week and try again. You'll find by trial and error a blend you can really enjoy that you custom blended! Have fun and enjoy!

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