

Pipe Tobacco Blending

What are the constituent tobaccos, and how do they work?

Virginias usually represent the highest percentage in a blend. Although there's a wide range of Virginias to choose from, including bright VA's, matured VA's, and stoved VA's, in general the lighter the color the tangier the taste, with the darker VA's lending a deep, rich note to the blend. Unprocessed VA's tend to produce tongue bite, and stoved VA's tend to bite much less.

Burley, like VA, is a good base tobacco. It has no sugar of its own, but 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 bland character, is often flavored.

Cavendish generally refers to 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 sweet tobacco. It goes particularly well with Latakia.

Perique is a "spice tobacco", with a distinct peppery flavor. Produced mostly in Louisiana from various base tobaccos, and cured in its own juices, this not only adds spice to a VA blend, but also mitigates a lot of the bite that comes with it. When not part of a straight VA/Perique blend, it should only be added to the point that it becomes noticeable. In a regular VA/Perique blend, it can represent a higher percentage, though 10% is often enough.

Latakia is Turkish tobacco flavored with smoke. Syrian Latakia is strong and bright, while Cyprian Latakia has a deeper, mellower flavor. This is another spice tobacco, and needs a base tobacco to keep it in check. Fifty percent Latakia would be considered a "heavy Latakia blend". It's generally wise to use less Syrian than Cyprian.

Oriental is spice tobacco from the Eastern Mediterranean (countries such as Turkey or Greece). Somewhat akin to Latakia, this is spicy and sweet. Most oriental tobacco is a blend. Even a label that refers to it as one distinct type (such as basma), is usually referring to its main component. Turkish is often used to fill out the general impression of a Latakia. Again, on its own, 50% would be considered a "heavy Oriental".

Maryland and **Carolina** can be thought of as "filler" tobaccos, used mainly to flesh out the taste of a VA or Burley base. Not terribly distinctive, these can be used to mitigate tongue bite.

What is a basic procedure for blending?

The first thing to do is smoke a little of each individual component, to get a feel for how it will work in the blend. When putting your components together, it's a good idea to work in 16ths, not just because it makes proportions easier, but because working in units of a gram, a finished blend of 16 grams would easily translate to 16 ounces (a pound) later on. A small food scale is important at this stage.

The second step has already been mentioned: to decide on a base. One generally only needs one type of Burley, but with VA, mixing is often required. Brighter VA's are needed for a top-note, but should be balanced by darker, more bottom-noted leaf. Finding a blend that cuts down on tongue bite is important, though burley (or perhaps Maryland or Carolina) can be brought in for that purpose. One technique is to use a finished VA blend as a base, though this takes away from the uniqueness of your own blend.

The next step is to add the spice tobaccos. Latakia and Oriental work well in combination; Latakia and Perique are a much less-used combination. In such a case, one of the two has to dominate. Of course, using only one type of spice tobacco is common practice. With a Latakia blend, it's important to balance the Syrian or Cyprian, or choose between them.

Care should be taken with the cut of the various tobaccos. 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, and should be incorporated into a blend. As always, balance is the key.

Taking notes throughout this whole process is crucial. If possible, use percentages. A typical percentage for a spice tobacco would be somewhere between 10-20%, while a 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.

How can I process my new blend?

There are basically two things you can do at home: stoving and pressing.

To stove your tobacco, you need to add some moisture to it, and then either put it in the oven, or, preferably, in a crock pot at the lowest setting. A crock pot is less hands-on, and can be put outside, which is good, since the tobacco will give off a foul smell. Constant stirring is important in either case. This process will help take the bite out of a VA, and generally meld and deepen the flavors of a blend.

To press your tobacco, you'll need either a shop press (which most don't have), or a C-clamp and two blocks of wood. If you wrap some of your blend in wax paper and clamp it in between blocks with your C-clamp, after a couple of days you'll have pressed tobacco. This process helps marry the flavors, and can lend richness to your tobacco. Aromatics should never be pressed, though, as the casing would turn your experiment into goop.

Storing your blend should be done with either bale-top jars with rubber O-rings, or canning jars. A blend should age at least a couple of months, in order for the flavors to marry and settle.

What are the characteristics of oriental tobacco?

Oriental, or Turkish, is a spice tobacco known for its nutty, somewhat "sweet and sour" flavor. It's a main component in English blends, along with Latakia (which is itself an Oriental that's been flavored with smoke).

This tobacco derives its name from the area in which it's grown: the Eastern Mediterranean. Each of the varieties, in fact, are named after the towns or regions they come from. Thus Yenidje and Smyrna are Greek, Samsun and Izmir are Turkish, Drama is Macedonian, and Xanthe is from the region of Thrace, which is mostly in Greece. For all intents and purposes this is all one region, united for many years under Turkish rule (hence the interchangeable terms "Oriental" and "Turkish".)

Oriental tobacco plants characteristically have a great deal of small leaves. The finished product ranges in color from yellow to brown, and is strongly aromatic. Its smell is reminiscent of used horse bedding, which could possibly explain why it's often mixed with Latakia.

What are the characteristics of Perique?

Perique is a spice tobacco, usually used in Virginia blends. It has a dark, oily appearance, and a taste of pepper and figs. Its flavor is very strong, so it isn't usually found in high percentages in a blend. It can be smoked straight, but isn't intended to be.

Its role as a complement to VA's is not just because of its flavor. Being highly acidic, it tends to alleviate alkaline tongue bite, which is so often a problem with Virginia tobacco.

What is the history of Perique?

The process by which this tobacco is produced pre-dates Columbus. The Choctaw Indians of (what would later be) Louisiana would make it by pressing it into hollow logs with a long pole, and securing it with weights.

After the Acadians (Cajuns) settled the area in the mid-1700's, the Choctaws taught this process to a French colonist by the name of Pierre Chenet. The finished product was referred to as Perique, a Cajun variation on the word "prick". This referred either to the phallic shape of the carottes (the tight bundles of market-ready Perique), or Chenet himself, as it was his nickname!

Where is Perique grown?

The only place in the world Perique can be grown is in a small section of Louisiana called St. James Parish. Inside St. James Parish, the best location for growing (and the only place it's grown now) is a very small area called Grande Pointe Ridge, which can be found in the town of Paulina. This is due to both the climate, and the unusual soil of the area, which is referred to as "Magnolia" soil. Nourished by the swamps that surround Grande Pointe, Magnolia is a dark and highly fertile alluvial soil.

The actual strain of tobacco can vary, although tobacco that isn't native to the soils of Louisiana doesn't yield a good product. Supposedly the most common strain used with Perique is something called "red burley".

St. James Perique is extremely rare, so the tobacco is produced elsewhere to meet demands, though without the same results. Kentucky Green River Burley is most commonly used to make Perique. This particular version is the Perique that most pipe smokers are familiar with.

How is Perique made?

At harvest time, the wilted leaves of the tobacco are hung up to dry for two weeks, stripped of hard veins, and packed into bundles (called torquettes). These torquettes are put into barrels under extreme pressure, and allowed to cure in their own juices (which collect as run-off at the top of the barrels). Over the course of many months, these bundles are periodically "turned", and then placed again under pressure in the barrels. Without any air to interact with the tobacco, Perique ferments anaerobically, producing the distinctive taste.

Is Perique endangered?

There is only one farm left that produces this leaf full-time: Percy Martin Farms in Grande Pointe Ridge, Louisiana. After two bad crop years in the late 1990's, there was a distinct possibility that Percy Martin would stop producing it also. But a partnership was formed in 1999 between Martin and New Orleans company Nichols and Brown, bringing badly needed stability to this tiny market.

With interest from cigarette manufacturers, as well as from pipe tobacco companies, it's possible that other farmers in Grande Pointe Ridge will begin

growing Perique, though for the moment its future is uncertain. As a low-return, labor-intensive product, it doesn't appeal to most farmers.

What are the characteristics of Virginia tobacco?

VA's are complex and delicate. When smoked poorly, they can taste like hot air, but with good smoking technique they can span a range of tastes, and are usually sweet, tangy and fruit-like. VA's are more prone to cause tongue-bite than any other tobacco, so there are a number of reasons to practice good technique with these blends.

Unlike most tobaccos, VA's improve toward the bottom of the bowl. A slow smoke will stove the bottom layers of tobacco, deepening the flavors and reducing the chance of tongue bite.

What are the different varieties of Virginia?

Virginias are referred to in a number of different ways. A "bright" VA is named as such because it's taken from the top of the plant, where the highest quality leaf is.

VA's can also be referred to by their colors. The most common color grades are lemon, golden, and red. Ignoring a great many factors (such as climate, soil, and time of harvest), the color of a VA relates to its sugar content. Tobacco that is cured longer (and is thus darker in color) will be less sweet than a tobacco cured quickly.

Stoved VA's are also referred to separately. Stoving (the process of literally cooking the tobacco) darkens a tobacco and changes its taste, usually reducing tongue bite. Incidentally, VA's with the most sugar will darken the most.

Where is Virginia grown?

VA's are grown all over the world. In the United States, the various Virginia-producing regions are referred to as "Belts", but this tobacco can be found in countries like Canada, Brazil, India, China, and the African countries of Tanzania, Malawi, and especially Zimbabwe. This last country, in fact, accounts for much of the world's VA production.

As stated before, location (soil, climate, etc.) will greatly affect the flavor and character of any tobacco. It is not necessarily true, though, that the best VA's come from the United States, or from the state of Virginia.