

## The Myth of Brand and Maker in Pipesmoking

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Do specific brands of briar pipes provide correspondingly specific flavors? Does a Dunhill pipe, a Charatan, or a Chonowitsch, have a unique taste that separates that brand from all other briar pipes? Does an expensive brand, such as Castello, provide a superior level of smoking experience that is unattainable by more pedestrian brands such as Chacom or Stanwell? There are many pipe smokers and collectors who firmly believe that the answer to these questions is yes. Others only partially subscribe. I refer to the above beliefs as part of the "brand myth" in pipe smoking. The point of this article is that brand is largely based on illusion and I hope to expose both the nature and origin of that illusion.

In an earlier article in the Pipe Collector, I pointed out several ways in which wine tasting can inform the tasting of tobaccos, and explored a few of the lessons that can be learned from that discipline. A major purpose of that article was to show how remarkably imprecise and ambiguous pipe tobacco tasting is by comparison to wine tasting. The exposure of the brand myth is another lesson that the practice of careful and observant wine and tobacco tasting can teach us. I have pondered this issue on and off since 1975. My challenge to the reader is to transcend traditional categories of thinking, to venture beyond brand and maker to examine our beloved briar itself, and to suspend allegiance or loyalty to favorite companies or carvers, if only for a moment.

As for my own qualifications to do this analysis, in addition to many years of wine and tobacco tasting experience and study, I have been extensively trained in phenomenological and other research methods as part of my work. Phenomenology, in the context of behavioral science research, is the examination of human experience and how our perceptions are influenced and altered by our preconceptions, assumptions, and prior education concerning a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon in question for this article is that of the briar pipe and the qualities and character it imparts to tobacco smoke. With all of that said, there is nothing in this article that is meant to be authoritative, final, or carved in stone. This discussion is provided for amusement, entertainment, and reflective thought, as is the nature of our hobby. The article is divided into three parts; an analysis of the brand myth, an alternative exploration of what makes a pipe smoke great, and a brief discussion of mind, perception, and pipe elitism.

### **The Brand Myth**

Several pipe brands are believed to have specific character or qualities. Each of the major high-grade brands seems to have its champions. For example, many collectors of the ultra high grade Chonowitsch pipes claim that these smoke better than any other brand. Dunhill is another example of a brand that is claimed to have a superior character. Rich Esserman, a very knowledgeable collector, has mentioned several times in his fine reports, that he believes his Dunhill pipes are more suited to full orientals with less latakia, while Castello pipes "dull down" that flavor of heavy latakia. Rich also stated that "the brand of pipe does have a significant influence on the taste of the tobacco." Thus, the smoking character of the Dunhill is a great place to begin our analysis. I will attempt to show that there is so much ambiguity around the character of a Dunhill and other brands that claims about brand specificity just do not wash.

Dunhill is famous for its oil curing techniques and this is believed to be a source of its peculiar and particular taste and flavor characteristics. On the surface this sounds quite neat and tidy. But just a bit of analysis immediately makes such claims quite suspect. Does every Dunhill have that same character? I

could find no evidence for this in the tastings that I have done with Dunhills. One vital question concerns when a particular Dunhill pipe was made. Bill Taylor of Ashton pipe fame has remarked that during all the twenty plus years that he worked for Dunhill, that he never observed any oil applied to a Dunhill bowl. David Field told me on two occasions that he is convinced that oil curing stopped after 1968, and after that Dunhill pipes were quite different. Thus, Dunhills after the mid 1960s do not appear to have been oil cured at all and, on top of that, their bowls seem to have come from different suppliers.

Several Dunhill collectors have told me in no uncertain terms that the old patent Dunhills (before 1955) smoke decidedly better than the later models. So, which time frame owns the peculiar Dunhill character? This adds considerable ambiguity to the great taste of a Dunhill. Does oil curing make the difference? Probably not if Dunhill pipes have not been oil cured for perhaps 33 years, and Bill Taylor implies that after a while oil curing is not a factor anyway. Taylor, who oil cures his own Ashton pipes, has stated that the effects of oil curing can no longer be discerned in a pipe after 30 or so bowls of tobacco. In other words, after a sufficient cake has formed and the pipe is well broken-in, the influence of the bowl treatment or curing method becomes negligible. Now where, I ask, is that unique Dunhill character? The cake and the wood itself probably have more influence on taste than the curing method after many, many, smokes.

I know many collectors who have told me personally that some of their Dunhills smoke great, while some do not smoke so well. I personally have owned a few Dunhills that were poor smokers and others that were fantastic. I have also owned several Dunhills that were great smokers with heavy latakia blends and others that have mostly neutral taste characteristics. Rich Esserman recently wrote of a Dunhill collector who does not keep Dunhills that do not smoke well. Do Dunhill pipes that do not smoke well still have that great Dunhill flavor or character? Would Dunhill collectors be able to identify and pick out both poor and great smoking Dunhill pipes in a blind tasting that included many other brands? I have conducted many blind tastings in the wine business and my experience leads me to doubt this very seriously. I once owned a smooth Dunhill dublin that smoked simply fantastic. It was an old inertube from 1914. I owned three of these at the time and got them all together from the same owner around 1978 but that one dublin stood out as the best by far. It smoked as well as my best Charatans and Castelllos. The other two, for reasons we will discuss later, were good but not great smokers, but all three were fine with heavy English blends, because that is all I ever smoked back then (Sobranie #759 & Bengal Slices). So let's pose the question. Is there a central thread of evidence that provides insight into the nature of this elusive Dunhill character? Not that I can see. Although I chose Dunhill as an example, this applies to virtually all brands, from any country of origin. When it comes to a specific brand taste in a well broken-in, well made pipe with well cured briar, we are, in all likelihood, dealing with what amounts to little more than myth. It is a matter of briar not brand.

Let us now move to Castello pipes. As in the case of Dunhill, many Castello collectors rave about the superior smoking quality of this brand. I have owned my share of Castello high grades and I am quite fond of them. Like Dunhills, they are fine pipes. Do they smoke better than all other pipe brands? Of course not. I once had a brand new, beautiful Castello Collection Greatline 4K with a briar extension that would now retail for \$1,150. It smoked miserably, whether with English or Virginia tobacco. It was harsh and acidic from the first smoke and never improved no matter what I did. Other Castelllos I have owned smoked like a dream, still others were very good. Like people, each pipe's smoking quality and taste is different and unique in its own way, while each also simultaneously bears a generic resemblance to all other fine smoking pipes. Many Castelllos are great with English tobaccos, others seem better suited to Virginias. This is a matter of briar not brand. But Castello pipes as a group are by no means unique in their flavor and taste characteristics. I have owned Don Carlos, Caminetto, and Charatan pipes that were

indistinguishable from Castello pipes in taste and quality of smoke. It is probably true that, like Ashton oil curing, Castello air curing also loses its characteristics after about 30 bowls. At some point, the cake of the pipe takes over as a major influence on taste, as well as the briar itself.

A diametric opposite example of the "dulling down" quality that Rich speaks of with regard to Castellors was offered to me by Neil MacGregor, the owner of Port Royal Pipe and Tobacco shops in Toledo and Columbus, Ohio. A highly experienced collector and smoker of high grades for over 30 years, Neil told me of a Castello Sea Rock that he once owned that had a simply amazing quality. It intensified the taste of any tobacco that he put in it, even aromatics. It added a rich, full flavor that was unlike any other pipe he had ever owned, of any brand. He loved the pipe so much that he couldn't part with it, even though he broke the shank three times. Finally it was lost, and he recently told me he misses it still. This was a matter of briar and not brand. I once had a magnificent smoking Charatan Selected that had an effect somewhat similar to Neil's Sea Rock. One does not forget the flavor of certain pipes but, once again, it seems to be a matter of briar and not brand.

Well, what about the great Danish pipes made by renowned makers such as Jess Chonowitsch, Lars Ivarsson, and the two carvers (Ulf and Per) of S. Bang? Once we put aside their tremendous beauty, design, carving precision, and very high prices, we seem to end up with the same result. I have had at least two conversations with a well known collector of ultra high grade Danish pipes. He has owned Bo Nordh, Chonowitsch, Lars Ivarsson, S. Bang, Poul Rasmussen, and Poul Ilsted pipes, and also owns nearly a dozen Sixten Ivarsson pipes, as well as many others. When I asked him to be frankly honest about their relative smoking characteristics, he smiled and said, "They smoke the same as my Ben Wades." As for me, I love the pipe designs and remarkable craftsmanship of Poul Ilsted pipes. Like Dunhill, Charatan, and Castello, they smoke great but are not superior to all others. Each is different. I once smoked a Chonowitsch, loaned to me by my good friend Tony Soderman. It was a beautiful pipe, impeccably well made. It smoked great, every bit as good as the great smoking old Comoy's or Barlings. In terms of smoking, it smoked like all great briar should.

Most revealing was a set of conversations I once had with three sales persons at Uptown's. I will not give names for reasons that will become obvious, but each of these persons were, at the time, involved with the sales of ultra high grades. In separate conversations held with these three men, they told me that they had smoked nearly all of the ultra high grade Danish pipes mentioned above, as well as Vesz pipes, although none had smoked a Bo Nordh. I then asked if these brands, or if any one of the brands, was superior in terms of smoking quality. Each smiled and said that although the workmanship was clearly superior, they could not determine a difference in smoking quality between those ultra high grades and other less expensive but well made brands. Is there a lesson here?

I once owned a lowly Peterson second that was a first rate smoker (as so many of them are), equal to any high grades. I also owned a cheap Stanwell many years ago that I bought new as a knock around. It obviously did not know that it was supposed to be of low status. It possessed the same great smoking quality of any of the finest Charatans, Dunhills, or Castellors I ever owned, and it had three fills. I have owned old Comoy and Sasieni pipes that put some Dunhills and Castellors to shame. I love Charatan straightgrains but I have no illusions. A few Charatans have not been good smokers for me, no matter the era or decade from which they originated. Other Charatans I have owned were simply marvellous, but the point is that all of them are different, and I have probably owned two hundred of them at one time or another. All my Castellors are similarly different. Each pipe within any brand is different in its own way, and once fully broken-in, the brand just does not seem to be apparent. When I asked David Field for his view on this latter point, he wholeheartedly agreed. A friend of mine, and former shop owner,

who had many high grade Charatan Supremes and Selecteds in his collection, remarked to me almost in a whisper that he had a humble Comoy Tradition square shanked pot that was the equal of any of his exalted high grade Charatans. Yet another friend and pipe store manager has one old Custombilt Rhodesian that he says smokes as well as any of his high grade Ashtons, Upshalls, Ser Jacopos, and Dunhills. Some collectors tend to look down on French pipes, but Bob Paige, who has written several excellent articles on pipes and pipe smoking in France, told me that his relatively inexpensive Genod and other pipes from France are easily the equal of his Dunhills. Pipesmokers don't smoke nomenclature. They smoke briar. But whoever the maker, the briar must be well cured and the pipe well made.

If one considers the brand myth deeply enough one begins to look beyond nomenclature, country, and carver. We collect pipes of various grades, shapes, size, prices, and nomenclature, but it is the briar that we smoke. There is something about the briar itself that provides the smoking magic. It is precisely this point that deserves our focus not brand. In the last issue of the Pipe Collector, Rich Esserman, a person for whom I have great respect, reported an "experiment" through which he justified the brand myth saying the brand does indeed make a difference. He smoked Garfinkel's #15 tobacco in three magnum sized pipes, a Dunhill, an S. Bang, and an Amorelli. He found that in "each pipe, the tobacco tasted completely different." Of course they would. Like Rich, I have done the same experiment several times and came to the same conclusion. Unfortunately, such an experiment lends no support to the brand myth, because one pipe does not and cannot represent an entire brand. Each pipe smokes differently whether compared to others of the same or different brands. Using only one pipe for a basis of brand comparison is poor research design, and in fairness to Rich, I am sure that he never meant his experiment to be anything other than casual. If one were to line up 5 each, of fully broken-in pipes of many brands--Dunhills, S. Bangs, Don Carlos, Stanwells, Castelllos, Preben Holms, Charatans, or what have you--and taste them all blind, one would then have a worthy experiment. One would likely find that it would be extremely difficult to identify the brand of each of the pipes.

Any valid tasting experiment of this type must be done blind so that the taster has no idea of the brand or shape of the pipe. At the very least, the brand and shape of the pipe must be hidden so that the taster is not influenced, even if the taster is aware of the style or brand of the tobacco. And the bits should be covered with soft rubber tips so that the brand cannot be identified by the mouthfeel of the stem. Several other controls would also need to be established but this is simply a matter of proper research design. Blind tasting has almost never been done in the pipe smoking world, and there are no established parameters of which I am aware. In the over 50 blind tastings of high quality French and California wines that I conducted, I often heard intelligent, well educated, highly experienced wine tasters predict that they would be able to pinpoint and identify which wines were from various vineyards and chateaux. They sounded highly convincing. Over and over again these "experts" were mistaken when it came down to just them and the wine and no label or nomenclature to guide or influence their thinking. Only occasionally were they were correct. But as I carefully outlined in a previous article, wine tasting is much easier and far less ambiguous than tobacco tasting. In the case of tasting pipes and tobaccos, it is the brand myth that dictates our expectations, prepares our taste buds, and constructs the tasting experience, while we honestly though naively believe we are being objective and impartial. But the brand myth only taints our perception if we subscribe to it. If all this is indeed true, our line of inquiry leads to the emergence of an essential, often posed but seldom answered question.

## Why do Some Chunks of Briar Smoke Better than Others?

This is a perennial question among pipe smokers and collectors and I would like to address it, not to achieve a final answer but to suggest a new avenue of approach. First of all, let us assume in this discussion that the briar pipes in question have proper drilling and correct engineering, and the briar itself is well cured, whether by oil, air, or kiln drying. With that out of the way, the question has often been asked if smoking quality is at all related to the geographical origin of the briar itself.

Let us consider geographical origin for a moment. Most serious pipe collectors have owned and smoked pipes made from briar that comes from Algeria, Greece, Corsica, Sardinia, Liguria, Tuscany, Calabria, and other lesser known regions. Is there a taste difference based on region or country? There is none that I can determine. Let us return to Dunhill for a basis of comparison. Dunhill provided information on origins several decades back. As I recall, shells were alleged to be made of Algerian briar, tanshells were made of Sardinian briar, and roots were made of Calabrian briar. But I personally know of no collectors who say that either shells or roots have a flavor superior to the other. It does appear to be true; however, that briar from certain regions has different physical qualities. For example, Algerian tends to be softer and Calabrian seems to be harder. But this does not seem to be related to taste and smoking potential. Over the years, the geographical line of inquiry has not provided a satisfactory answer to our question of why some pipes smoke so great. As Tom Eltang said, "The origin is not so important. You can get good briar, as well as poor, from most Mediterranean countries." Perhaps it is time to consider an alternate avenue of inquiry.

In the world of wine, the French have gone to great expense to hire scientists to analyze the best soil content suitable for making a particular wine. The pinot noir grape is perhaps the best example of this. Pinot noir is the sole grape used in making the fabulous red wines of Burgundy in Eastern France, and they are, drop for drop, the most expensive wines in the world. Scientific analysis of the great vineyard regions in Burgundy revealed a particular kind of limestone soil there that seems ideally suited for this grape varietal. Sufficient exposure to the sun and ideal positioning on a hillside are also important factors (as in all grape growing) but soil composition is considered crucial. Curiously, similar soil analyses of the more ordinary Burgundian wine growing regions not known for stellar quality revealed that those important soil characteristics were lacking.

Could it be possible that there is a similar effect of soil composition on briar? Perhaps that great tasting and smoking chunk of briar is a product of a particular set of soil characteristics and sufficient exposure to the sun, as well as proper weather and environmental conditions. If so, a person could choose the briar likely to produce the best pipe based on soil and growing information as well as the age of the plant, size of the burl, and other better known factors. Those roots sit in that soil for decades. Botanists would tell us that the burls soak up the minerals in that soil as part of the process of the plant taking in nutrients. Briar is a root, of course. It is very likely that the constant exposure to and feeding from that soil would affect taste of the briar just as various soils affect vines and their grapes that are made into wines. The question is which kind of soil makes for the ideal taste of briar.

There are various soil types, such as clay, limestone, chalk, and sand. Each may impart and cause specific, corresponding taste and smoking characteristics of which we have little idea, at this time. Perhaps some pipe makers know this but if so, none seem to be talking. This could be a fruitful line of research into the mystery of the magnificent smoking pipe. The point, in any case, is that soil and sun may be a more significant and important factor than geographical region, brand, carver, or curing method. After all, a single geographical region, such as Greece, is likely to have several types of soil, just

like in Burgundy, so analysis only by region would not control for soil type. The irony here is that the best tasting and smoking briar may be due more to soil and sun than whether the pipe is labeled Castello Collection Greatline Fiammata, Dunhill DRH, or Charatan Crown Achievement. This may also explain the wonderful smoking character of my pedestrian Stanwell with no status and three fills. There is one question. What if one brand used briar exclusively from a specific type of soil and environmental conditions? Then the concept of brand would attain a degree of meaning. But even then, it is the briar and not the brand. However, we do not know at this time if a specific soil would provide the ideal taste for the majority of pipe smokers. Only proper research could tell us that.

### **Beliefs, Perception, and Elitism**

Albert Einstein once remarked to the brilliant physicist, Werner Heisenberg, "It is the theory which decides what we can observe." The context in which he made this statement was that our conceptual categories influence what we are observing; even when we honestly believe we are being impartial, neutral, or "objective." Cognitive psychology has produced a large body of research that demonstrates that our raw perceptions are unknowingly modified, filtered, and altered by our beliefs and preconceptions. Most pipe smokers who become enamored with better smoking pipes are eventually introduced to the brand myth. Most never bother to question it. I firmly believed it for a couple of years myself, and I respect those who are hesitant to part with it. Many of us, however, eventually look beyond appearances and beneath the surface. Applying the lesson from Einstein, if I thoroughly subscribe to and presuppose the brand myth in pipes, then any observations I make about pipes are biased by the preconceptions imposed by the myth. If I view all pipes in terms of their brand, I will begin to use those brand categories to organize various observations about pipesmoking in terms of who made the pipes, and not the pipes themselves. In addition, contemplating a great smoke while gazing at the nomenclature, grain, quality of sandblast, shape, price, or design of the pipe, leads to a psychological association of the smoking experience with that brand or carver. Even though nomenclature is extraneous to the quality of the smoke itself, it becomes inextricably bound to it in our minds through memory and thought connections. On the other hand, if a smoker views all pipes only according to how well they smoke, nomenclature will mean little, shape becomes secondary, and the smoker will likely possess a wide collection of pipes of varying grades, all of which probably smoke great.

I want to end this rather long essay with one final point. I have visited alt.smokers.pipes (ASP) on the internet several times and I have read posts where contributors talk about their favorite pipes but long to have that ultimate smoking experience with a Dunhill or a Chonowitsch or some other pipes that are deemed to be out of their reach. This is quite unfortunate and shows how the brand myth can harm our hobby. It can lead to a condition of elitism if we are not careful. In other words, the brand myth runs the risk of having us believe that only the wealthy collectors of high and ultra high grade pipes can enjoy the truly sublime, superlative smoking experience. This is drivel and rubbish, and I am sure that none of us desire such a scenario. Anyone who is educated enough to buy a reasonably well made pipe with well cured briar has a great chance of finding a pipe whose smoking quality reaches the status of legend, even though the nomenclature is considered boring and mediocre from a collecting standpoint. Pipes are not like cars. A Chevy cannot drive like a Mercedes, but the lowly Stanwell can smoke like the lofty Chonowitsch, even though the latter far exceeds the Stanwell in beauty, grain, and craftsmanship. It is the briar and not the brand. There is no place for elitism among pipesmokers.