

## **Blending in**

### **With her specialty mixes of pipe tobacco, Carole Burns keeps a 134-year tradition alive**

By Michael Hardy, Globe Correspondent September 19, 2006

MONTPELIER — To make a 10-pound batch of her No. 13 "Magic Blend" pipe tobacco, Carole Burns starts by measuring out several scoops of cured Burley, a light-colored tobacco leaf grown primarily in Kentucky and Tennessee, into a metal bowl perhaps a foot deep and twice as wide.

Burns, who wears jeans, and a t-shirt, adds a few scoops of two different Virginia tobaccos, mixes them with the Burley, adds pitch-black Latakia to the top of the now highly aromatic heap, then mixes again. Latakia, a tobacco that gets its name from the Syrian port city where it was first grown, is the key ingredient in "English" tobaccos such as No. 13, and is quite strong. "You wouldn't want to smoke it alone," Burns says. Finally, she adds a certain quantity — the precise amount is a trade secret — of Royal Scot tobacco. "It's the magic in the Magic Blend," she says.

Now, Burns is ready to do the final mix. Leaning over the bowl, a flat, spatula-like implement in each hand, she tosses the tobacco like a salad. "If you want a good mix, you have to toss it until it's a uniform darkness all around."

Burns knows pipe tobacco. Her Pipeworks & Wilke Tobacco sells around 30 different blends, from the "Vermont Maple" she recommends to first-time pipe smokers to the "Wilke #400" that her advertisements warn is "not for the timid," to discriminating smokers the world around. The Wilke in Pipeworks & Wilke refers to E. Wilke (Burns calls him Edwin, but she's not sure if that's his real name), the man who founded New York's Wilke Tobacco in 1872. Burns and her ex-partner, the pipemaker Elliott Nachwalter, bought the Wilke brand in 1983, when it appeared the company might go out of business, and operated its famous Madison Avenue store until the early '90s, when the couple moved to Vermont and turned Pipeworks & Wilke into a mail-order business.

Today, Nachwalter sells his pipes in Manchester, VT., and Burns sells the time-tested Wilke blends — plus a few blends of her own making — from her home in Montpelier. She does her mixing in a workshop above her garage, where large bags of blending tobaccos sit on metal storage shelves. When she and Nachwalter bought Wilke, they got everything in the store, including hundreds of pipes (some of them are still available), the mahogany cabinets where Burns keeps her supplies, and the bowl she uses to mix the same tobacco recipes that were mixed there for decades. The bowl is older than she is.

“Wilke was such a tradition,” Burns says. “So many people bought their first pipe there. Even Elliott bought his first pipe there. We just couldn’t let that tradition die.”

### **Piping up**

In the middle decades of the 20th century, when, according to the American Heart Association, more than 40 percent of Americans smoked, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Herbert Hoover all smoked Wilke tobacco. When he played Sherlock Holmes in the movies, the British actor Basil Rathbone smoked a pipe filled with Wilke No. 515, a blend he helped create. You can still buy No. 515, a full rum-flavored blend. Burns keeps it in her workshop in a metal tin, to prevent the rum from evaporating.

Although she sells around 130 pounds of tobacco each month, Burns herself uses a pipe only to test the quality of a new tobacco shipment or try out a new blend.

“I’m not really a smoker,” she says. “I know, it’s ludicrous.”

Since the pipe was invented, pipe-smoking has been a mostly male preserve, although women have always smoked it, sometimes surreptitiously, according to Iain Gately’s “Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization.” Anna and Louisa Wilke, E. Wilke’s granddaughters, ran the Madison Avenue business for years (“Their Father Hadn’t Any Sons to Teach His Craft To, So He Taught His Daughters to Carve Fine Pipes,” was the headline of a 1937 New York World-Telegram newspaper article about the business) even though their clientele was nearly all-male. After thinking for a minute, Burns estimates that she has only 12 women among her 1,200-plus customers.

Even with that many customers, Burns knows many of the people who call her tollfree number (800-832-8309) or visit her website ([www.vtpipes.com](http://www.vtpipes.com)) by name.

“This is not a lucrative business – although there are good profit margins, the volume is low,” Burns says. “The reason it works is that I know my customers and they know my product. My customers are like my best friends. I know their voices. I know what they order.”

After a few orders from a new customer, Burns creates a mental profile of their tobacco likes and dislikes, and can start recommending new blends. If the customer wants to tweak a particular blend by adding more Latakia, for instance, or taking some out, Burns will write down the new recipe for future reference. If the customer is loyal, they might even get to name their blend.

Some customers inevitably ask Burns about the health risks of pipe smoking. She emphasizes the advantages of pipe tobacco, which is not inhaled, to cigarette tobacco, which is.

“My belief is that there are many factors contributing to people's health,” she says. “I think the enjoyment and stress reduction of pipe smoking greatly reduces any negative aspects .”

In today's anti-tobacco climate, which Burns compares to Prohibition, the once-respectable profession of tobacconist has seen its reputation suffer. When asked what she does, Burns has jokingly told people she's independently wealthy or that she's in the Witness Protection Program rather than deal with the inevitable reaction.

“When I tell people I'm a tobacconist, sometimes they look at me as if I said I sell child pornography,” she says.

Burns's tobacco career began with a serendipitous meeting. In 1976, Burns was studying to be a social worker in New Jersey when she drove up to Vermont to visit her sister. At a local bar in Stowe, she met Nachwalter, who, unbeknownst to her, was a world-class pipe-maker. They became fast friends, and he taught Burns how to finish the pipes he carved.

“You just watch where you go dancing and who you dance with,” Burns jokes.

In 1980, Burns and Nachwalter opened a store called Pipeworks on 55th Street off 5th Avenue in Manhattan, selling Nachwalter's hand made pipes and tobacco blends to smoking connoisseurs. After they bought the Wilke store they combined the stores at the Madison Avenue location, where a few years later they hung a sign announcing the birth of their daughter, Ali. They later moved to Vermont to raise Ali in a quieter environment, leaving their Manhattan store under their manager. The difficulties of absentee ownership became too great, however, and they ended up closing the store in 1995, that once supplied tobacco to presidents and movie stars.

### **Black-and-white difference**

In the Pipeworks & Wilke workshop, Burns mixes a batch of No. 72, a light English blend similar to No. 13, but without the latter's distinctive Royal Scot. When she finishes mixing the tobacco to an even hue, she spritzes it with water from a spray bottle.

“Dry tobacco burns fast and burns your tongue,” she says. “I always tell customers to spray water on the tobacco if it dries out.”

Burns says cigarette smokers and pipe smokers have different cultures. You can smoke a cigarette at the flick of a lighter. Pipes require time and patience; to pack the pipe, get it lit, sit back and enjoy the smoke. Well-heeled Elizabethan pipe smokers often had manservants dedicated solely to carrying their smoking paraphernalia.

Burns likes to put the difference in rather starker terms.

“If you remember the old black- and- white movies, the bad guys smoked cigarettes and the good guys smoked pipes,” she says.

What about Humphrey Bogart? He smoked cigarettes, right?

Burns grins mischievously.

“Well, sometimes you couldn't tell whether he was good or bad.”

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