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**FINE TOBACCOS**

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## TRIAL BY FIRE

by William Serad and Tad Gage

### Introduction

Some of us, those perhaps calendar-challenged and endowed with years, remember the Wilke Pipe Shop. It was founded in 1872 in New York by the Wilke sisters and was well-known and highly regarded by all who ventured to the Big Apple. I came to know the shop in the early 1970s when it had a satellite, strangely enough, in John Wanamaker's department store in Philadelphia. Wanamaker's, at the time, was very much like Harrod's in London: huge, elegant and possessing of quite a pipe department (and still possessing the world's largest pipe organ), which just happened to be Wilke's. This was managed by Steve Johnson, a noted pipemaker in his own right, who pointed me in so many right directions, I cannot even recall them all now. I still have my Wilke pipes, small and well-used at this point but among my favorites. They were sweet-smoking from day one, and I urge you to explore the remaining store that Pipeworks and Wilke have because they don't make 'em anymore (they're 50 years old or more at this point! Algerian briar, many, so what are you waiting for?). Note that Wilke didn't much subscribe to the modern obsessions (360-degree straight grain, etc.). They were merely engineered and lovingly made to deliver as perfect a smoke as possible every time.

But we are here to talk of the leaf, and what leaf they have! If you are a Burley fan, these blends exemplify the expert use of that leaf. I think this is where they shine. Latakia abounds as well. There are some straight Virginias, but you will have to explore those on your own, as we are not treating them here. Perique fans will be disappointed, for there is precious little of that precious condiment found in the Wilke catalog. They are no slouches in the aromatic department, and many feel that their aromatics are their crowning achievements. You judge, but there is something for almost all tastes. --William Serad

This venerable pipe shop has been making tobacco blends for a very long time and has developed some intriguing and different mixtures. Several of the blends date back to the 1800s. While not new by any means, Pipeworks blends may be new to many smokers, as they were to me.

The ingredients used are of overall high quality, and the blends are obviously created with great care and considerable thought. Many of the Wilke blends incorporate Burley tobacco, often in creative ways. Pipeworks must have access to some of the best Burley around. Pipeworks' Burley is not just a lightly nutty binder but a key flavor component. It appears that Pipeworks employs a couple of different types of Burley leaf, judging from the varying leaf color and character. Several of the blends incorporate Burley cube.

Pipeworks also employs what I consider to be one of the finest toasted Black Cavendish tobaccos I've encountered. It's present in many of the mixtures. Even if you don't like Cavendish, this nonaromatic version of the tobacco will be an eye-opener.

One thing common to all Pipeworks mixtures, English or aromatic, is that some type of unflavored humectant seems to be used to maintain moisture content. The tobacco doesn't dry out but sticks together when pinched firmly between the fingers. The humectant is probably a plus in keeping the blends fresh for an extended period of time, since Pipeworks tobaccos are sold loose, rather than in tins. While worth mentioning the apparent presence of a humectant, I would say that in the end, it seems to have no impact on the taste or smoking characteristics of the blends. --Tad Gage

### **Bestmake**

*Serad:* A recipe from their beginnings, Bestmake is blended from Virginia, Burleys, unflavored black Cavendish and quite a hit of Latakia. I would call this an American blend because of the Burley, not an English mixture. This is very chunky and broad cut, with a variety of colors tending toward the darker end. The pouch aroma is heady and makes you want to sniff for a while, and there may be some light casing, but that is not apparent at the match. It lights easily and burns exceptionally well, as one may expect from the fine Burleys employed. I would characterize the smoke as typically Burley with varying accompaniment. Cool, rich and classically American, I would highly recommend Bestmake. I liked it best in a larger pipe.

*Gage:* This blend takes the usual English mixture and turns it on its head to create a mixture that's familiar, yet different. Visually, the light and dark flecks are typical of an English blend and the aroma in the pouch is rich with Latakia. However, if your expectations at this point were for a typical English smoke, you'd be wrong. Instead of Oriental or Turkish tobaccos and Virginia, Bestmake uses high-quality Burley. The flavor reflects the dry and earthy quality of Burley, rather than the tangy pungency of Turkish leaf. The mixture appears to have at least two different types of Burley--possibly a brighter flue-cured and a darker, more aged leaf. To supplement the Latakia, an uncased (nonaromatic) Black Cavendish is used. It's very rare to find a blend that employs natural, unflavored Black Cavendish. This was a subtle condiment, and it added a dark, almost leathery character. The blend was complex and satisfying from first lighting to last puff. It was very good in both meerschaum and briar, although briar brought out the blend's best. The subtle differences in flavor by including these unusual ingredients make this a mixture worth seeking out for any fancier of English-style blends.

### **High Hat**

*Serad:* Another treasure from the 1870s, High Hat consists of Syrian Latakia, Kentucky Burley, Perique and golden Virginia. The cut is both short and fine, making for an interesting and easy-to-pack texture. The pouch aroma is arrestingly rich, nearly pungent. At the match, it is a bit spicy, cool and exceptionally rich, round and complex. There are notes of sweetness that come and go. There is really not too much Latakia, and as Syrian goes, this was not very Syrian to me, which would make it more woody and smoky. It didn't seem to matter what size or shape bowl, it always performed admirably, though as I age, I prefer smaller pipes. This was so tasty that every time I had a bowl, I immediately wanted another. Highly recommended.

*Gage:* This is an attractive-looking English mixture ranging in color from lemon yellow Virginia to black Latakia. Typical of Pipeworks blends, it features a mix of ribbon-cut

leaf and slightly chunkier cuts that facilitate smooth and even burning. The slightly varied flavor bursts caused by these different sizes of leaf add a great deal of taste interest to many Pipeworks blends. Formulated in the 1870s, this mixture uses Burley and Perique in addition to the bright Virginia and Latakia. On lighting, it has a definite flue-cured Virginia twang that tweaks the sinuses. I found it best to establish the charring light, take a few puffs, then let the pipe rest for five or ten minutes. This seemed to give the Virginia a chance to calm down. Even with the high sugar content of bright Virginia, there was no sweetness. It produced a generous smoke volume with a slight and very pleasant olive oil undertone, which was not due to smoking the blend in oil-cured pipes! The Virginia ribbon gets hot very quickly, so this blend requires slow and judicious smoking. As with Bestmake, the use of fine Burley tobacco makes this an attractive adventure for anyone who enjoys English blends.

### **Pipemaker's Choice**

*Serad:* This is a blend developed by Elliott Nachwalter for his pipe shop. Noteworthy Virginias are bolstered by a blend of Cavendishes and finished with not a little Latakia. There are no Orientals (other than the Latakia), so this is not a Scottish-type blend. I thought this a very fine blend for a wide audience of tastes. It is cool, despite ingredients that could make it incendiary, and flavorful, with a constant line of sweetness enhancing the Latakia. The absence of Burley in its usual presentation makes this lighter in character than most of the other blends herein reviewed. I think that one could enjoy this at various times of the day, from first pipe to last. This may sound like Dunhill's 965 to some degree, but the absence of Orientals and a lighter hand with the Latakia make it something quite different. Very pleasing and recommended.

*Gage:* This is basically a lightly aromatic version of a classic Balkan blend. It delivers a combination of mild Latakia flavor and moderately cased Black Cavendish. Unlike some of the Danish versions of aromatic English mixtures, the saucing does not overpower the predominantly English character of the blend. Pipemaker's Choice smokes smooth. The aromatic quality counters the usual pungent room aroma of Latakia, making it a good way to enjoy an English blend around those who don't appreciate the full power of a typical Latakia mixture.

### **Royal Scott**

*Serad:* Dare I use the overused term *ÒniqueÓ* to describe this? This blend is more than 100 years old, and it is an aromatic in the ancient sense of the word. Unlike modern aromatics, which are generally black, leaving residue on your fingers after packing, pleasing to those around you but not your palate and of poor underlying leaf, this is imbued with biological aromatic agents along the same lines as the Lake District flakes but with that American twist. They are not so overwhelming here, rather delicate in fact, and the leaf is plugged Virginia, North Carolina and Burley in a middling cut and length. The leaf presents itself as a *mZlange* while puffing, nothing poking out at any given moment, and tastes like a lightly cased example of the leaf itself. That is to say, it tastes like good tobacco. The room note is very pleasing indeed, though don't expect compliments these days. I fear that this is one of those love-it-or-hate-it blends, but it falls into the must-try category. It really is unique and very suitable for blending with a number of objectives in mind. As such, I recommend it.

*Gage:* This Burley-based aromatic blend is touted by Pipeworks as a 100-year-old formula with a secret flavoring ingredient. In addition to Burley, it features some Virginia tobaccos, although I found them to be almost unnoticeable. The mixture seemed overly moist in the pouch yet burned pretty well during several bowlfuls. I

couldn't identify the secret ingredient, but it added a spicy characteristic. I could see this being enjoyed by someone who really enjoys aromatics, but I found little about it to interest me.

### **Vermont Maple Cavendish**

*Serad:* A fermented black Cavendish base is enhanced with Virginias and Carolina leaf, then topped with Vermont maple syrup. Don't think that this is yet another same old thing. The flavor is sweet, needless to say, but the flavoring is unusual and not deep or low, like most maple things. Rather, the sugars of the maple come through, and there are lots of high notes. Undeniably maple, the room note is wonderful, but it is not hot as I anticipated it would be. It burns fairly cleanly in the pipe and is thoroughly enjoyable with no real negatives. Recommended to the aromatic smoker, but I liked the 191 better.

*Gage:* If ever a company had the right to use maple syrup in a tobacco blend, it would be Vermont-based Pipeworks. This is a visually enticing blend, with lots of color coming from excellent base tobaccos, such as bright yellow Virginia leaf and dark Cavendish. Upon lighting, it's quickly apparent that the Cavendish is of an extremely high grade. It's not goopy, nor is it bitter or cloying. The pronounced maple syrup aroma in the pouch is very apparent in the smoking as well. This natural flavoring is used carefully, delivering sweetness and flavor without overpowering the excellent leaf. An ingredient with such a high sugar content as maple syrup could burn hot, but this mixture is very cool and slow-burning. Even so, slow smoking avoids heating up the pipe and brings out the maximum amount of maple flavor. This blend puts to shame any other so-called maple-flavored aromatic I've tried over the years. If you enjoy the occasional aromatic blend but are fussy about quality, this is one to add to the list.

### **Wilke No. 191 (Honey-vanilla)**

*Serad:* This is Wilke's best-selling blend, and for good reason. Unlike most of those gelatinous black vanillas on the market, this is black Cavendish with Burley and Virginia, giving it significant body and a silky draw. Natural honey and vanilla are added, a mixture in other blends close to napalm, but here just sweet, fragrant and delicious. It reminds me of the first black Cavendish-based blends I tried before they started taking over the market 25 years ago. There is a singular flavor of excellent leaf under the sweetness and flavorings that has gone by the wayside in many similar products found today. If you like aromatics you will love this. This may very well be tied for first place with Mac Baren's Vanilla Cream for first in class. Highly recommended.

*Gage:* In the pouch, this blend, which incorporates natural flavoring from honey and vanilla beans, has a cloying molasses scent. However, when smoked, you do indeed taste a light resonance of both flavoring ingredients. Once again, Wilke's light touch in using these potentially overwhelming ingredients makes this an appealing aromatic. I liked the shaggy cut of Black Cavendish combined with finer ribbons of Virginia and matured Burley. Once again, these fine base tobaccos are enhanced, not overwhelmed, by the natural flavorings. Another fine aromatic choice.

### **Wilke No. 196**

*Serad:* A very simple blend--and simplicity has its merits to me--196 consists of

toasted black Cavendish and natural Virginias. There are many blends like this, but the superiority of the leaf makes this noteworthy. It packs well, but took a few lights every time to get going regardless of the pipe. This may have had to do with the moisture level, and drying might have helped. The flavor is uncomplicated, with the Cavendish sweetness enveloping the Virginia tobacco-y sweetness to great effect. All in all, this one could go the distance, and the aroma produces no complaints. Recommended.

*Gage*: One of the shop's original blends, created for a particular customer, No. 196 is a simple mixture with very light caramel overtones. Clean-burning and very smooth, the blend doesn't knock your socks off but is subtly appealing. A fine choice for someone who enjoys aromatic mixtures. **P&T**

*For the rest of this article, please refer to the pages of P&T magazine, available in tobacco shops and by [subscription](#).*