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NASSAU, BAHAMAS--The world's most famous cigar roller lives quietly in the historic Graycliff hotel, nestled on a hilltop overlooking downtown Nassau. Avelino Lara created the Cohiba cigar in Cuba and rolled it personally for Fidel Castro between 1968 and 1984.

Graycliff owner Enrico Garzaroli brought Lara from Havana to Nassau in 1997 to open Nassau's only cigar factory. The cigar rolling room is adjacent to the hotel's Chairman's Club Bar & Lounge and Humidor Restaurant off of West Hill Street.

You might run into familiar faces such as Mike Ditka and Michael Jordan in the cool, dimly lit lounge. They are loyal fans of the Graycliff cigars. The Graycliff created the the smooth Mike Ditka Super Bowl XX Series cigars for Ditka's restaurant in Chicago.

The Graycliff is a 14-room mansion built in 1742. The cozy property includes three separate pools, a gym and spa. Notable guests include The Beatles, Frank Sinatra and Winston Churchill, who stayed in the Pool Cottage. I can only imagine Churchill in a speedo.

Lara remains a humble cigar roller among high rollers.

He is 81. He was born in Cuba. Lara is a diminutive man who takes slow, precious steps around the Graycliff grounds. He is in the winter of his life in the land of endless summers.

Lara supervises the rolling room, whose workers include his son Abel Lara Almora, 22. The room is hushed and orderly with the exception of the static from a tiny short wave radio that picks up a Cuban station. All the 15 workers in the rolling room are from Cuba. Almora's wife, Judy, sits next to him, as close as a tropical kiss.

Through translation, Lara explains the Graycliff rolling room is similar to the one he left in Havana.

"Same characteristics as this," he says from behind a rolling table in the hotel lobby. Lara brought the rolling table with him from Cuba. He looks around and says, "A villa. A building. Another building. In the main building (in Cuba) I had the rolling room. It was never a big factory. It was tiny.

"The idea was not to produce millions of cigars, it was to produce special cigars that Fidel Castro used for himself and for gifts to the heads of states." Castro came up with the idea of an exclusively Cuban cigar company. He chose the name "Cohiba," the name that Cuban aborigines gave to the cigar.

Lara began his career in the cigar industry in 1934 in Santa Clara, Cuba. He was picked to run the El Laguito cigar factory in Havana, where in 1969 he created the Trinidad cigar made strictly for Castro (who has since given up cigar smoking due to health reasons). "The Trinidad is a very special cigar," Lara says. "In the length of the fermentation. The leaves were specially selected. They came from Pinar del Rio."

All of Lara's Cuban cigars were born in the fertile Pinar del Rio region, 100 miles west of Havana. He explains, "Pinar Del Rio has a different soil from all the other soils I have seen throughout the world. It is a very close similarity to wine regions, with good drainage. It even effects the way you get up in the morning."

Pinar del Rio has been an overshadowed area of Cuba. Before the 1959 revolution, the region was virtually ignored by the Havana-dominated central government. There are no harvesting machines. Each tobacco plot is picked at least five times a season by workers who select only a few leaves at a time.

I tell Lara I am a Cuban baseball fan. Ex-Minnesota Twin great Tony Oliva is from Pinar Del Rio, as is current day Cuban superstar Omar Linares. Lara smiles and says, "I am a New York Yankees fan. Going back to 1940."

The great American baseball scout "Papa" Joe Cambria endeared himself to the Cuban people by smoking huge Cuban cigars. Cambria met Castro in 1942 and allegedly offered him a contract to pitch in the Washington Senators system. Castro was a right-handed pitcher in high school. Lara says Cambria smoked the H. Upmann Cigar, created by a German. During the 1940s Lara worked as a specialist for the Upmann cigar company in Havana.

Lara cannot use Cuban products in his cigars today. Cuba does not sell leaves to make cigars and the Graycliff cannot use Cuban tobacco because they sell to the United States. "So the great challenge is to make a cigar that competes with the Cuban market," Lara says.

His son helps sort the tobacco leaves. By sight, Almora can identify where the leaves come from: Domingo, Nicaragua, Ecuador or Honduras. Almora also looks for any leaf damage. He meticulously sorts through 20 leaves a day.

The leaves are then dried for a couple of days before being placed in bundles for the rollers. In line with old world Cuba, the rollings are bunched and pressed manually. Wrappers are placed around them before the finished products are shipped to a distribution center in Boca Raton, Fla.

Michael Jordan is a fan of the Graycliff Pirate, Lara's most acclaimed cigar. When Jordan recently played at a golf tournament in Nassau, the Graycliff sent six boxes of the Pirates to Jordan. The Pirate is the one cigar Lara still rolls himself. The Pirate has a medium-to-mild flavor with a clean finish. It is known for its elastic

draw. The cigar is not cheap. The Pirate sells for \$435 for a box of 25 pieces. A single cigar is \$19.

Garzaroli has a gregarious nature. He is yin to Lara's yang. Garzaroli reminds me of an Italian John Goodman. He was born in Italy and graduated from the Hotel Catering School of Stresa. His father Luigi ran an Italian factory that made ladies stockings.

Garzaroli arrived in Nassau in 1974, just as most English were leaving the island. Bahamians won control of the government in 1967 and independence in 1973. Previous Graycliff owner Lady Dudley offered Garzaroli a deal he could not refuse on the colonial residence because she, too, was departing.

The rich and famous quickly flocked to the Graycliff for its personal service, fine cuisine and a wine cellar which has grown to 250,000 bottles--the largest quality cellar in the Caribbean.

"Ringo Starr and his wife were staying in the Pool Cottage the night before John Lennon died," Garzaroli says. "We have a guest book. He signed, 'Ringo Starr.' Where it says 'address,' he wrote, 'The World.' He checked out the next day to fly to New York."

And don't get Garzaroli started about Nicholas Cage recently bringing Lisa Marie Presley to the Graycliff for dinner. He grimaces. "She was a pain in the ass," he says. "She goes around with this medium, you know? Scientology, whatever. The waiter brings her some food. She first hands it to the medium. And then she sends the food back. The waiter brings more food. She gives it to the medium. And they send the food back. She cost me \$20,000. Nicholas Cage was getting so upset."

Garzaroli is as proud of his food and wine cellar as he is with his cigars. The Graycliff restaurant is the only five-star restaurant in Nassau.

"I am unbeatable with ports and by far the best of the best of the cognacs," he says. A few years ago one customer paid \$12,000 for 4 ounces of Clos du Giffier cognac from 1787.

"He was from America," Garzaroli recalls. "He had dinner. After dinner he sat down quietly. Nobody around. The fellow wanted to open the bottle. I have never tasted it, but I say, 'OK, it is \$3,000 an ounce.'" Garzaroli rolls his eyes back and says, "Four ounces gone. Boom."

An avid cigar smoker, Garzaroli has been traveling to Cuba long before the cigar boom of the 1990s. "I know where to look," he says. "I look for cigar rollers who are used to working by hand only to ensure quality construction. They are all over the country. Some are in Santiago. One time I heard about a roller, but it took me so long to find him, by the time I got there he died." Garzaroli tosses out a hearty laugh.

Lara is Garzaroli's biggest discovery. In 1992 Garzaroli went to Havana with two writers who were profiling Lara for the first issue of Cigar Aficionado magazine. Lara had retired. Garzaroli and Lara quickly became friends. In 1993 Garzaroli invited Lara to his hotel to conduct cigar rolling demonstrations in the restaurant. By 1997 they opened the cigar factory together.

"Fidel Castro got pissed with me," Garzaroli says with a proud smile.

Lara is grateful his son has joined him at the Graycliff. Almora relocated to Nassau in 1998. "The best thing is I did not push him to be a tobacco cigar roller," Lara says. "And I did not force him to come. It was him who had this idea. He has a better future. He will carry on the tradition."

It is this kind of covenant that makes the world's greatest cigar roller happy. His dreams will not go up in smoke.