



Can 'Made in Africa' Cigars Compete With Cuba?

By Reuters

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JOHANNESBURG — While drinking in a nightclub in Mozambique in 2015, Kamal Moukheiber had an idea: a luxury cigar made not in Cuba, but in southern Africa.

The Lebanese former banker glanced at a customer puffing at what looked like an imported cigar and thought: "What's wrong with Africa producing cigars?"

"Africa has been growing tobacco for 100 years," Moukheiber, 50, told Reuters. We have the land, we have the water, we have the skill set. So what's missing?"

His business, Bongani Cigars - it means "be grateful" in Zulu - was conceived as a small, fun project. Now it produces nearly 10,000 cigars a month, small numbers compared to the big producers. It sells in South Africa, Kenya and Mozambique, where some of its tobacco is grown.

Moukheiber said Bongani would launch in Nigeria this year and, he hoped, the United Kingdom, and aims to be the cigar of choice for African professionals who want to flaunt their wealth or success.

"A cigar is ... just like champagne, just like some wines. It's about the message," he said. "By smoking a Bongani you are communicating ... your African identity."

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He traveled to the Dominican Republic to recruit a head of production, Anthony Padilla Perez, and move him to Maputo, where he helped train a workforce in the precise art of rolling by hand. Bongani now employs five rollers.

Becoming a household name won't be easy: Moukheiber admits luxury markets are difficult to crack, and Bongani, which sold its first cigar in 2016, can't boast 30-year-aged tobacco like some rivals.

It prices its cigars around 10% less than the equivalent Cuban, with its standard smoke selling for around \$13. He says they appeal to those looking for an African "terroir" - the French term denoting taste imparted to wine by the environment in which it is produced.

"When I got my first ... big order from a distributor from South Africa I was almost in tears," Moukheiber recalls. "I had never produced anything in my life that someone would want to buy."

(Editing by Tim Cocks and Giles Elgood)

