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Mosi Oa Tunya's robustas with Java wrapper, medium flavor.

Credit: Mosi Oa Tunya Cigars Pvt. Ltd.

## Premium Cigars Dawn over Africa

*Already among the most important leaf suppliers, some southern African countries have recently seen the birth of premium cigar companies that may potentially dent Caribbean dominance.*

Sub-Saharan countries like Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa – and to a lesser extent Zambia and Mozambique – gained a considerable reputation for their excellent virginia and burley tobaccos. Merchants particularly from Zimbabwe and Malawi are now a fixture at industry exhibitions around the globe.

In the shadow of that industry a very surprising new business sector recently emerged: hand-rolled premium cigars. The ball got... well... rolling in the former Portuguese colony of Mozambique, when Bongani Cigars set up shop in the country's capital, Maputo, in 2016.

### Mozambique: Be Bongani!

"We spent the best part of 2016 preparing for business, working out all aspects of it, such as assembling the team, developing the blend, the packaging, the branding and everything else that was needed until, in December 2016, we were ready to sell our first cigar," the firm's c.e.o. Kamal Moukheiber, told *Tobacco Asia*. This not only makes Bongani the sole cigar company in Mozambique to-date, but also the first indigenous premium cigar manufacturer in the whole of Africa. "Bongani" means 'to be grateful' in the Zulu language -- and for us that means being grateful for Africa, her people and resources... and for what we have achieved," Moukheiber mused.

While sizeable amounts of tobacco are grown in Mozambique by companies like BAT and Universal Group-owned Mozambique Leaf Tobacco, the crop largely is only suitable for cigarettes. However, Moukheiber pointed out that "niche high-quality cigar tobacco" is now increasingly grown as well. However, at least for the time being, Bongani resorts to purchasing leaf "from around Africa and the world," looking for top quality to manufacture its luscious and well-balanced products (*see product table*). "Our cigars are medium bodied with a rich aroma, as they are aged in strongly-scented cedar wood containers imported from Ghana," Moukheiber explained.

By Thomas Schmid

### Bongani Cigars - Product Overview

Product Name	Format/s	Notes
Robusto	50 gauge, 12.5cm	Mild-medium bodied / sweet cream followed by a hint of cedar, with coffee and cocoa through the finish
458 Short – Toro	58 gauge, 10.5 cm	Full-bodied / raw bouquet of cocoa, coffee beans, cedar, and wood
458 Long – Gran Toro	58 gauge, 14.5 cm	Full-bodied / raw bouquet of cocoa, coffee beans, cedar, and wood

The idea of establishing a premium cigar business did not materialize completely out of the blue, of course. Moukheiber recognized that there existed a strong interest for premium, high-quality African luxury products both on the continent itself and abroad. “So it made a lot of sense to us to launch an African cigar brand, especially under the exciting aspect of being absolute pioneers.” He added that more and more cigar smokers enjoyed trying cigars from various global origins. “It’s very much like what one finds in the wine world,” Moukheiber said. “In fact, one of our role models [for launching Bongani] was Roberto Mondavi, who is credited with starting the wine industry in [California] States from scratch.”

Of course it’s one thing to aspire to a role model and another to produce a flawless cigar. To achieve the latter, Bongani hired as head of production a master roller from the Dominican Republic. “He trained our manufacturing staff to the same level as they would in his home country and he remains with us until this very day, his expertise having proven invaluable.” Moukheiber’s initial hunch and his careful further planning paid out beautifully. “Our robusto and the 458 short both are in high demand, while the Bongani 458 short offers a quicker smoke and, therefore, has become popular among busy executives.”



Kamal Moukheiber, c.e.o., Bongani Cigars.



Rolling the perfect cigar requires a lot of concentration (pictured: Bongani Cigars’ Eugenia).

Credit: Highbury Mozambique Lda – Bongani Cigars

Credit: Highbury Mozambique Lda – Bongani Cigars

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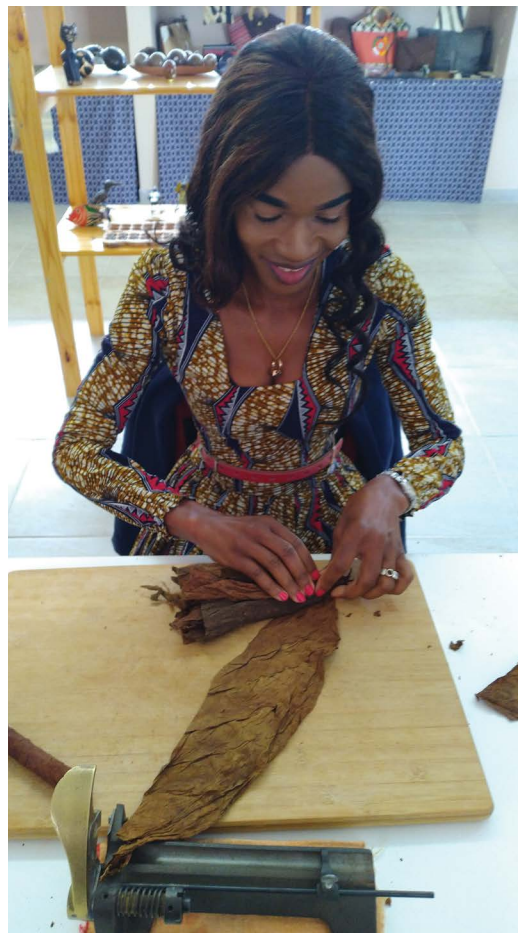
Bongani cigars are also retailed in glass tubes.

Bongani's present main markets are South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Botswana, and of course Mozambique. "It is natural for us to first expand our presence within Africa, but since very recently we also have begun trading in the United States," said Moukheiber. Asia, on the other hand, is not on the immediate target market roster just yet. "We have no representative anywhere in Asia, but I'm happy to discuss possibilities with interested parties," he said, adding that the company continued building a community of enthusiastic cigar lovers. "People relate strongly to our African identity and engage a lot with us on social media. It's been an amazing ride so far under our motto, 'Be Bongani!'"

## Namibia: Cigars for Outdoors Living

Largely arid and with a population of only a little over two million people, Namibia is best known among adventure and nature tourists for her stark yet extraordinarily beautiful landscapes and amazing assortment of rare wildlife. But premium cigars? The country doesn't even grow tobacco on any commercial scale worth mentioning.

Enter Brian Padwick. In 2013, the long-time cigar aficionado opened a cigar importing and retailing business in the picturesque southwestern coastal town of Lüderitz. Some three years later, he came down with an epiphany: "After I already had cigar wrappers unraveling from the foot or head on multiple previous occasions, I enjoyed an 'Hoyo des Dieux' that day which literally split open about one third through the smoke," he recounted. This latest mishap convinced him that a "Namibian cigar" had to be designed that was



Largely self-tutored, Premium Namibian Cigars' Paulina Padwick has become an expert cigar roller.

better suited for the country's extremely dry climate and the outdoors lifestyle of its inhabitants.

Brian teamed up with his charming wife Paulina, being taught the ropes of cigar rolling by an experienced family friend. "We immediately fell in love with the touch, the smells, the technique per se," Brian recalled, adding that it took the couple four years to perfect their methods through trial and error. "We lost quite a few customers during our first year," he admitted. But the hard work and eager enthusiasm bore fruit. Today Brian's aptly named two-person company, Namibian Premium Cigars, is able to offer finely crafted products which can comfortably compete with their Caribbean and Central American counterparts – and yet are distinctly, unmistakably Namibian.

"Our first marketable cigar was called the 'Gran Corajo', manufactured according to the Cuban 'entubado' technique, with a triple cap finish," Brian elaborated. But the defining "Namibian" difference is that the cigar's flag cover extends to about 5mm over the cigar head, substantially more than the standard 2mm. This, said Brian, brings the advantage that it is almost impossible to clip off too much, potentially causing the wrapper to

### Namibian Premium Cigars – Product Overview

Product Name	Format	Notes
Kapps	Churchill	Olor and Sumatra tobaccos / nut & cocoa notes
Die Suide	Churchill	Corojo and Sumatra tobaccos / spice & cedar notes
Diaz	Robusto	Criollo and Sumatra tobaccos / cinnamon & cocoa notes
Sharx Island	Lonsdale	Habano and Sumatra tobaccos / earth & coffee notes
Buchter	Petit Corona	Piloto Cubano and Habano tobaccos / cocoa, earth & wood notes

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A colorful parade of Namibian Premium Cigars.



Premium Namibian Cigars' Paulina and Brian Padwick showcase the fruits of their labors.

### The World's Best Wrappers

When compared with countries like Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, Cameroon has not exactly been high on the global radar as an important tobacco supplier. But, in recent years an increasing number of industry articles have extolled the nation's excellent cigar wrapper. Trade journalists even went so far as hailing them as "some of the best in the world." How did this happen? Well, the main kudos for the rising reputation certainly must go to Switzerland-headquartered company, M. Meerapfel & Söhne AG. The family business through its decades-long engagement in Cameroon succeeded in gradually cultivating a leaf that is indeed so outstanding in its aroma and silky texture that it easily holds up to its Caribbean and Mesoamerican counterparts. The firm's commendable efforts prompted cigar aficionado website "Ministry of Cigars" to claim in a 2019 editorial that "without the Meerapfel family, African Cameroon [leaf] would be a thing from the past."

unravel. The method also makes the cigar sturdier in case it is dropped. "It was modifications such as these that made us realize that we were in fact designing a 'Namibian' cigar," Brian explained. But he also pointed out the downside "that [because of these modifications] our cigars may be slightly less visually aesthetic than other premium cigar brands."

Since those baby steps, Brian has developed a range of eight "original Namibian" cigars, having bestowed practically all of them with brand names that are tied to Lüderitz and its surrounding landscape (*see product table*). For instance, the "Diaz" was christened after a historical stone cross erected by 15th century Portuguese explorer Bartolomeou Diaz on an oceanside cliff just south of town. The "Griffith" refers to a popular bay nearby; "Shark Island" is named after a former offshore islet that has since been joined to the mainland by a causeway; and "Buchter" is the nickname given to the local inhabitants of Lüderitz.

Although Brian currently relies on leaf imported from the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Ecuador, he is contemplating to gradually shift the focus towards African tobaccos. "Namibia being probably the hardest place to grow tobacco, I would like to meet and work with tobacco growers in Zimbabwe or Zambia, for example," he disclosed. "This is the road forward as far as our [future] supply chain is concerned," he ascertained, but declined to make any concrete time commitment. "Our immediate aim is to continue serving the Namibian market, although we also have occasional international customers whose orders we gladly fulfill." Yet, at this stage there are no plans to expand beyond the Southern African Customs Union and fan out into the world market. But who knows what the future might bring? Business already appears to be so brisk for the Padwicks that the couple is considering hiring professional cigar rollers for their company.

### Mosi Oa Tunya – Product Overview

Product Name	Format/s	Notes
Toro	54 gauge, 15.5cm	Available in mild/medium/strong
Torpedo	52 gauge, 15.0cm	Available in mild/medium/strong
Robusto	60 gauge, 15.0cm	Available in mild/medium/strong
Mini Cigars	26 gauge, 10.5cm	Light



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Ladies busily rolling cigars in Mosi Oa Tunya's workshop.

## Zimbabwe: Cigars with a Thundering Smoke

Mosi Oa Tunya, or “the smoke that thunders”. Referring to the thick clouds of water spray rising into the skies, this is the indigenous name for the awe-inspiring Victoria Falls, one of the world's grandest natural wonders, straddling the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia.

It is also the name of Africa's latest premium cigar manufacturer. Based in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, Mosi Oa Tunya Cigars Pvt Limited was founded in 2019 by local entrepreneur Shepherd Mafundikwa after he got inspired during trips to Cuba and the Dominican Republic. “The venture is grounded in my desire to contribute something very novel to the country of my birth. I'm not a smoker, but I recognized a global demand for quality cigars. And with [Zimbabwe's] world-renowned tobacco basically at my doorstep, the rest was organic,” explained Mafundikwa, noting that Mosi Oa Tunya is Zimbabwe's very first cigar company.

Hand-rolling cigars is as much an art as it is an acquired skill. “It requires maximum concentration and it can take up to nine months or longer for a roller to be proficient,” Mafundikwa observed. To train Mosi Oa Tunya's all-female rolling staff (*see side bar*), he hired the services of Dominican master roller Elias Lopez. “The recruitment process was no easy task due to the language barrier. However, once we met Elias we knew right away that we had the right person,” Mafundikwa said. “He has more than 30 years of cigar-rolling experience under his belt. Thanks to him, our rollers have learned quickly and have now attained a skill level where they can produce quality cigars with minimum supervision.”

Not all tobaccos used in the firm's range of cigars (*see product table*) are sourced locally, though. While the binders and fillers are Zimbabwe-grown burley, Mafundikwa readily admitted that wrappers are imported either from Indonesia (Java leaf), Ecuador (Sumatra), or the Dominican Republic (Habano). Local leaf currently is purchased from growers directly, but for the future Mafundikwa already plans to contract out farmers so the company can attain more control over its supply situation. Since Cameroon leaf have been gaining a reputation of being “some of the world's best cigar wrapper” (*see our side bar*), Mafundikwa, in his capacity as Mosi Oa Tunya's c.e.o., is contemplating to perhaps begin using them, too. “We have ordered samples from Cameroon and are really looking forward to trying them out and checking out the buzz that surrounds them,” he said. Further plans include adding “organically flavored” cigars to the portfolio. Still being very young, the company has not yet established clear markets. But Asia is a big target, according to Mafundikwa. ➡



Shepherd Mafundikwa, c.e.o., Mosi Oa Tunya Cigars.

### Female Empowerment at Mosi Oa Tunya

Mosi Oa Tunya's decision to exclusively train and employ female cigar rollers was foremost a matter of promoting female empowerment, according to company c.e.o. Shepherd Mafundikwa. “From day one, when the idea of setting up Zimbabwe's first premium cigar manufacturer was conceived, we knew that we would only employ women,” he said. This was not just to create employment but also a matter of giving the women a life skill which they otherwise probably never would have achieved. “Beyond the certificates and skills transfer, we are giving families a livelihood and, thus, contribute to growing the economy of our country,” Mafundikwa explained, adding that the company will eventually also support further women projects beyond the cigar rolling scope. While there are currently only eight women gracing Mosi Oa Tunya's rolling floor, Mafundikwa is already set to hire and train more. “Based on business projections I am confident that we will have 20 rollers on the team by next year.”