

SAFARI

CIGARS & LOUNGE

This Omaha lounge offers much for cigar fans—if only it is able to continue to do so.

BY RICK RHAY
PHOTOS COURTESY JEFF DOLL

For Jeff Doll, owner of Safari Cigars & Lounge in Omaha, Neb., owning a successful cigar lounge and bar is about more than fine cigars and premium spirits. It's about customers who have grown into an extended family, a labor of love, and a challenging though highly enjoyable second act for a retired businessman and life-long cigar lover.

Opening on April 1, 2013, in a fashionable shopping and dining area 20 minutes from downtown, Safari Cigar & Lounge has become the premier cigar lounge in the greater Omaha area.

DREAM BECOMES REALITY, AND A LOUNGE

Prior to opening Safari Cigars & Lounge, Doll was a successful wholesaler/distributor in the beverage industry who retired in 2006. In 2008, the state of Nebraska passed the Nebraska Clean Indoor Air Act, which was scheduled to take effect on June 1, 2009. The law banned all smoking in enclosed workplaces statewide, including bars and restaurants. As a life-long cigar lover, Doll went to work on behalf of cigar lounge operators across the state to advocate for an exemption to the law, permitting cigar lounges and bars to continue to allow smoking. With the help of local legislators and like-minded community members, the exemption was granted and cigar lounges were permitted to continue to allow smoking indoors.

In 2012, Doll decided to turn his life-

long passion for cigars into a second career. He purchased the storefront of what had been a failing cigar lounge, teamed up with long-time friend and consummate cigar connoisseur John Vanmeter, and began constructing a premier cigar lounge. The theme and décor of Safari Cigars & Lounge was inspired by a shared dream between Doll and a childhood friend. Meeting in the first grade, the friends swore a pact to one day travel to Africa on a safari. They held that dream over the years, through college and into separate lives as successful businessmen. More than 30 years later, the two friends fulfilled that dream, traveling to Africa and enjoying the safari they had always envisioned.

While staying at the stunning Victoria Falls Safari Lodge on the banks of the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe, enjoying cigars and fine spirits while overlooking the legendary Victoria Falls, Doll was inspired to create a cigar lounge that brought the look and feel of an authentic African safari lodge to a cigar lounge in the U.S. Safari Cigars & Lounge is the fulfillment of that vision.

The lounge is made up of three main seating areas, plus a bar area and a large humidor. To the left of the entryway is the centerpiece and principal icon of the lounge, a massive Cape buffalo mount, which Doll bagged himself in Africa, dropping the charging animal a few feet from impact. This area features an arrangement of comfortable leather chairs arranged in groups of five or six around



There's a cigar for every taste in the large humidor.

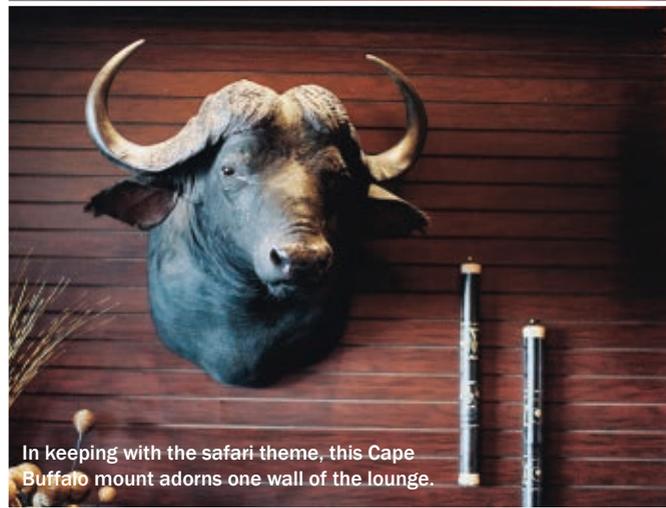




Safari Cigars & Lounge owner Jeff Doll.



A well-stocked bar provides excellent opportunities for cigar and spirit pairings.



In keeping with the safari theme, this Cape Buffalo mount adorns one wall of the lounge.





Customers are treated like family at Safari Cigars & Lounge.

low tables, ideally suited to quiet conversation and relaxation. The shelves are dotted with a selection of fine humidors, interspersed with artifacts from Doll's many trips around the world.

To the left of the entry is another, smaller seating area with leather sofas and chairs, and one of the lounge's flat-screen TVs. Adjacent to this is the massive walk-in humidor. The cigar selection features nearly 650 individual facings, in a wide, well-lit space, with teak wood accents and Spanish cedar shelves. Offerings include the classics from such brands as Montecristo, Cohiba, Arturo Fuente and Padron, along with a huge selection of small-batch and boutique cigars, including Camacho, Drew Estate, Aging Room and the Element line by Foundry Cigars. Doll emphasizes the importance of customer input in selecting new cigars to offer, but he also actively seeks out unique offerings and new blends to share.

Leaving the front of the lounge, customers enter the bar area, with more seating arranged in fours around intimate tables, and an adjoining sitting room area with big, leather chairs situated around a massive fireplace. The dark wood paneling and rich appointments achieve a level of sophistication and luxury rivaling the finest cigar lounges in the country.

STOP IN FOR SOME SPIRITS

The selection of spirits at Safari Cigars is a principal draw. Doll considers his lounge to be a spirits lover's destination, offering more than 60 individual Scotches, 50 different bourbons, a handsome selection of ryes, a range of premium aged rums, and a variety of other premium liquors and mixers. The lounge offers a modest selection of beers on a rotating basis, including a few staples and premium lagers, a selection of seasonal, local and regional craft brews, as well as a number of wines by the bottle or glass.

Safari Cigars & Lounge is open late every night, and the regular crowd enjoys fine cigars, premium spirits, lively conversation and entertainment and sports until midnight or later. Doll also hosts monthly vendor events featuring new cigar releases, partnered with liquor distributors, to offer special discounts and creative pairing opportunities. And, of course, Saturdays in the fall are reserved for Cornhusker football.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

As lively as the clientele is at Safari Cigars & Lounge, as fine as the spirits are, and as flavorful and relaxing as the cigars are, un-

fortunately, it may all soon come to an end. The Nebraska State Supreme Court ruled in August 2014 to overturn the exemption to the seven-year old Nebraska Clean Indoor Air Act that Doll and others worked so hard to secure. A deadline of October 31 was given as the final date that "cigar bars" could continue to operate within the state of Nebraska. When first contacted about this article, Doll was unsure if Safari Cigars & Lounge would still be open by the time this issue of *Cigar & Spirits* was published. The community of lounge owners and cigar lovers in Nebraska, however, was not going down without a fight.

Through a legal team funded with personal investments on behalf of the cigar lounge owners in Nebraska, a petition was filed through the State Attorney General's office to secure a review by the court of the newly rescinded exemption to the law. Surprisingly, the review was granted in the final few days of September, giving cigar lounge operators one more chance to argue their case. It also grants them a little more time, and while it doesn't guarantee the reinstatement of the cigar lounge exemption, at least the window remains open.

With the review in place, the Cigar Rights of America (CRA), the key lobbying force working to protect the rights of cigar smokers and retailers across the U.S., joined forces with the International Premium Cigar and Pipe Retailer, the trade association supporting cigar and pipe retailers around the world, to assist with the legal expenses and lobbying efforts necessary to combat this destructive legislation. Representatives from both organizations met with Doll and other Nebraska cigar lounge operators during the first week of October to discuss the challenges they will face in the coming months, and to formulate a plan to win the reinstatement of the exemption which would allow them to remain in business. Doll points out that they have a number of powerful allies in Nebraska's unicameral legislature, and hopes for sympathetic ears among the court to aid their cause. "This is hardly a settled matter," he said. "We've got a fight ahead, but we're optimistic that a reasonable decision will be made, and that we'll be able to remain in business."

At the time of this writing, the issue remains unresolved. These are the very front lines in the war against personal liberties. Many may ask, "What can we do?" For residents of Nebraska, there may be a great deal, not the least of which is calling and writing to their local legislators, and telling them that these anti-smoking laws are unnecessary, intrusive and destructive to jobs, tax revenue and the vitality of their community.

For those of us who don't live in Nebraska there is still a great deal we can do to help the cause being fought there and in dozens of other states across the country. The first step is to join the CRA (cigarrights.org) and get involved. The CRA's legislative Resource Center makes it easy to contact your own legislators to add your voice and support to the growing call to halt the advance of these ever-expanding anti-smoking laws.

It may not seem that one person can make much of a difference, but in truth, every voice matters. And the most important one is yours. 

Rick Rhay is a Southern California photographer and cigar lover, and occasional editor of the Cigar Sasquatch online journal at CigarSasquatch.com.

**SAFARI CIGARS & LOUNGE IS LOCATED AT
13110 BIRCH DR., STE. 108, OMAHA, NE 68164 .
FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL (402) 965-1460.**

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