Steve Mann:
The Mind Behind Stogie Hub and The Burn and Learn Podcast

When you listen to Burn & Learn: The Cigar Lifestyle Podcast, it's not just smoke and chatter; it's culture, connection, and a deep love for the leaf. Behind the mic sits Steve Mann, a man whose story bridges the polished world of corporate finance with the soulful ritual of cigars. As the founder of Stogie Hub, Mann has taken his business acumen and turned it into a movement that connects cigar enthusiasts, lounge owners, and accessory lovers under one digital roof.

We caught up with Steve to talk about the spark that started it all, the evolution of cigar culture, and how he's using his platforms to keep the community both grounded and growing.

The Cigar Society Inc (TCSI): Steve, take us back to that first spark, you've said your cigar journey began with a Davidoff cigar in 1996. What was it about that moment or that cigar that pulled you into the culture for good?

Steve Mann (SM): It's actually a very interesting story. I wasn't immediately drawn to the cigar aficionado lifestyle. In fact, I pushed back against it. As a young finance major coming out of undergraduate studies, I joined a corporate lending program at a bank based in downtown Baltimore. During my time there, I was paired with a senior banker on the team. As my first official mentor, he introduced me to many things, including the art of building meaningful personal and professional relationships, negotiating with clients, bourbon and cigars. I also credit him with my love of BMW vehicles.

Thirty years later, he and I are still friends, and we laugh about how I initially had no interest in bourbon or cigars.

This story is just a testament to the fact that you never know the twists and turns that your life is going to take, but you should always be ready to embrace and enjoy them.

By Benn Pryor,
For The Cigar Society Inc

TCSI: You came from corporate lending and private equity before stepping into cigars full-time. What lessons from that world shaped how you built StogieHub and Burn & Learn?

SM: I owe so much to the people that invested in my development during my career. Although there are too many people to list, I'm grateful for each of them supporting me along the way. The one true lesson that I learned from my career in financial services is to always communicate your intentions very clearly, good news or bad. If you're not able to investment in a transaction, be very clear with the prospective client as to why or why not. I recall some of the most challenging conversations that I've had professionally were ones where it would have been much better to say no to a transaction early, rather than try for months to put a deal together but ultimately pass on a deal. If the roles were reversed, I would much rather have a quick no, than to proceed down the road for months and ultimately not close the deal.

However, clear and concise communication can also be a detriment. After 20+ years in financial services, I pivoted to tech for the last 10 years of my corporate career. I found out quickly that blunt and clear communication in the tech sector was not necessarily embraced. In building StogieHub and Burn & Learn, my mantra is very simple. Treat people as I wish to be treated and always be truthful and honest, even if it requires you to lean into having difficult conversations.

TCSI: Burn & Learn has this beautiful blend of lounge talk and life lessons. What's your secret to capturing authentic conversations that feel like you're sitting right there in the smoke with your guests?

SM: In developing Burn & Learn, I knew from the start that I wanted to create something different. Personally, my focus is on using the cigar experience to bring people together to have meaningful conversations about things that impact our daily lives. It's no coincidence that given my professional experience, I spend a lot of time combining a great cigar with an engaging discussion about business growth with an entrepreneur.

In creating the show, the Burn & Learn title is meaningful. Essentially, the Burn part is bringing guests together to enjoy a great cigar over a meaningful conversation. The Learn part is drawing from the guest their particular area of expertise and sharing that perspective with the viewers. From the beginning, I've never intended for the cigar to be the conversation. There are others that are already doing that, probably better than I ever could.

Regarding my ability to comfortably engage in conversations, that comes from my experience presenting at conferences and board rooms. Although initially not easy to do, I am now very comfortable engaging in conversations at large gatherings, as well as in smaller settings.

TCSI: Let's talk about Stogie Hub. You saw a gap in the market for cigar accessories. What inspired the idea of creating a community-driven marketplace, and what's been the hardest part about building it?

SM: I love the Stogie Hub concept! As best I can tell, StogieHub is the first and only consumer-to-consumer e-commerce platform solely dedicated to cigar aficionados. With this great opportunity comes significant responsibility.

The idea was borne out of my own personal experience. As an avid cigar aficionado, I've collected so many cigar accoutrements over the past several years. As such, my focus in launching StogieHub was twofold: build a word-class e-commerce platform for cigar aficionados to buy and sell cigar accessories amongst each other, while building a community look and feel consistent with the feel of walking into your local cigar lounge.

There is also an educational element to building out StogieHub. I would hope that in providing a platform for new aficionado to view, browse and buy a wide assortment of accessories, more experienced cigar smokers are teaching and educating new cigar smokers. The same concept is woven into the fabric of Burn & Learn.

Of utmost importance to me is the reliability of the website for secure and honest transactions, coupled with close to 100% website uptime.

As with all new ventures, the primary issue stunting growth is market awareness. I believe that as the team builds market awareness, new StogieHub users will enjoy the experience and will recommend it to others.

TCSI: There's this quiet revolution happening in cigar culture, more young professionals, women, and diverse voices joining the lounge scene. How does your podcast help reflect and amplify that shift?

SM: It's important that Burn & Learn reflects everyone that enjoys the cigar aficionado lifestyle. If you've spent some time perusing the episodes, you'll see a very diverse group of guests, including women, men, former CEOs, doctors, professional athletes, professional football coaches, a gold Olympic medalist, entrepreneurs, cigar accessories manufacturers and boutique cigar manufacturers.

One of our best episodes is the fifth show, where we spent time walking a GenZer, Maddie Casanova, through the cigar ritual. It was Maddie's fist cigar. She enjoyed the experience and now feels empowered to walk into her local cigar lounge, ask the right questions of the tobacconist and enjoy a cigar at the lounge. I look forward to having her back on Burn & Learn to discuss her cigar lounge experiences since being on the show.

TCSI: With your business background, what do you think most cigar lounges overlook when it comes to scaling their brand or connecting with modern smokers?

SM: Setting aside cigar lounges for a moment, in my experience of providing over $500 million in debt and equity capital to hundreds of companies, I believe leadership teams lose sight of the fact that, at the end of the day, the only thing that matters is financial performance. Having new and innovative technology is awesome, but that will only carry you so far. Cash flow and margins are the only things that matter. They are truly the lifeline of a company and are the primary factors in determining market share and longevity. I always look forward to the passionate conversations that I have with business owners and technologists about this topic.

To sum it all up, for cigar lounge owners, it's important to focus on top notch customer service, coupled with a well maintained and well stocked humidor, but keep in mind that cash is king!
It is also important to understand your customers' evolving needs. For instance, ten years ago, 24-hour cigar lounges were almost non-existent. Today, you see these lounges springing up in markets that can support such offerings.

TCSI: What's one guest or moment on Burn & Learn that genuinely changed how you see the cigar community?

SM: In a recently released episode of Burn & Learn, I asked an entrepreneur why he decided to open his own practice. I will never forget his response: "If you're going to bet on someone, always bet on yourself…" What great advice! How many times during our careers have we invested everything we have into something with the hope that someone else will be able to execute it on our behalf? Not a great situation to be in.

TCSI: You've built a brand on authenticity and community, what advice would you give to someone trying to turn their love of cigars into a business without losing that soul?

SM: I like to keep things simple. Always choose right over wrong, always treat someone the way you want to be treated and always give 100% to anything you do. I also learned in one of my undergraduate finance courses the Japanese concept of kaizen – consistent and gradual improvement. Things don't have to be perfect, as long as each day is a little better than yesterday.

My last bit of advice, always be your authentic self. No one benefits from you, overpromising and under delivering.

TCSI: Burn & Learn blends cigar culture with lifestyle and mentorship. How do you see cigars as a teaching tool, not just for business, but for patience, networking, and mindset?

SM: For me, a group of like-minded people coming together to enjoy a fine cigar isn't the end game, it's only the beginning. What can I take away from that conversation? More importantly, what have I shared with the group that will be helpful?

One of my best friends wrote a book about mentorship and networking. I walked away with two key points from his book. First, true networking is about how I can help others.

The thought is that if I consistently focus on little ways that I can help others, they will seek to repay me in ways that I haven't even considered.

Second, networking should be done routinely and consistently. If I wait until I need help from others, it's too late to try to build and rely upon a professional network at that point.

TCSI: Cigar culture has always been rooted in tradition. How do you balance respecting the old ways while still pushing innovation and new voices into the space?

SM: The cigar industry, like everything else, continues to evolve as markets, sectors, demands and trends shift. The truly innovative market participants are those that lean into those changes and look for ways to take advantage of new opportunities. At the same time, one must respect to traditions of the industry's founders.

However, it can be challenging being a new entrant into a market with such long-standing traditions. To be successful, in my opinion, one must honor existing traditions, while gently introducing and socializing new creative and innovative concepts. It is indeed a delicate balance.

TCSI: Social media has become a huge part of the cigar experience, from ash shots to lounge selfies. What's your take on how social media has helped or hurt the cigar community.

SM: I am a strong proponent of social media to increase market awareness. StogieHub and Burn & Learn are perfect examples of that. A year ago, neither entity was formed or launched. However, I've been able to create and nurture key industry relationships through my social media platforms, primarily LinkedIn and Instagram. I like the combination of Instagram and LinkedIn, as I rely on Instagram to build market awareness and LinkedIn as a way to establish legitimacy and credibility with new companies and people. In my opinion, many of the other social media platforms are simply noise to me.

TCSI: Every cigar smoker has a "ritual" a way they prepare their smoke. What's yours? Walk us through your setup from cut to first draw.

SM: As an aficionado that enjoys cigar accessories as much as cigars, I put significant energy into my cigar ritual. Most of my cigar smoking occurs away from home, so selecting the accessories prior to departure is key to me. Prior to departing, I've selected the perfect and often matching set that includes 2-3 cigars, a cigar case, a cutter, a lighter and a travel case.

Once at the lounge, the ritual is always the same - a careful cut with a punch, followed by a cold draw from my cigar, then a careful and deliberate lighting, usually with a Davidoff or DuPont soft flame or torch.

TCSI: If Burn & Learn could leave behind one legacy message for the next generation of cigar lovers, what would you want it to be?

SM: The message I would want to leave behind is that cigar smoking is an opportunity for people to come together to learn and grow. As such, spend a few minutes helping a new cigar smoker cut his or her cigar if you see them struggling to execute that perfect cut.

Similarly, in a more general sense, always seek to take a few minutes to help anyone in need if you're able to do so.

TCSI: Finally, Steve, when the cameras are off, the mics are quiet, and it's just you and a stick, what are you smoking… and what are you thinking about?

SM: This is a great question! For me, the answer is easy. At the end of the day, when it's just me and my favorite cigar, I'm typically thinking about whether I fulfilled the promises I made to myself that morning. If the answer is yes, then the cigar is a celebration. If the answer is no, the smoking session becomes a strategy session, as I'll be pondering ways to make certain that I accomplish the goal tomorrow.

What will I be smoking? Those that know me well already know the answer. You can typically find me smoking either Davidoff, Liga Privada or Plasencia.

STOGIE HUB™

ELEVATE YOUR CIGAR GAME