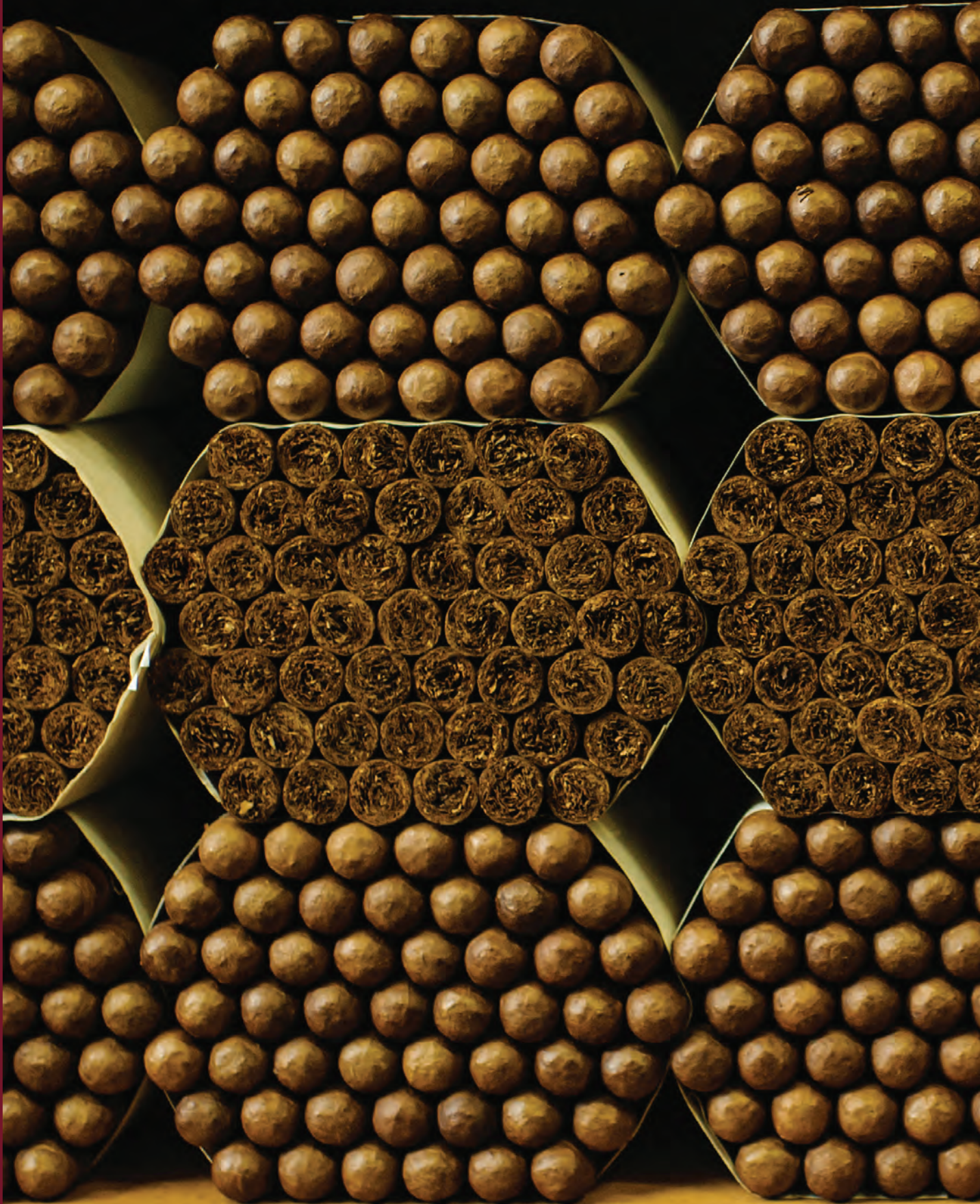
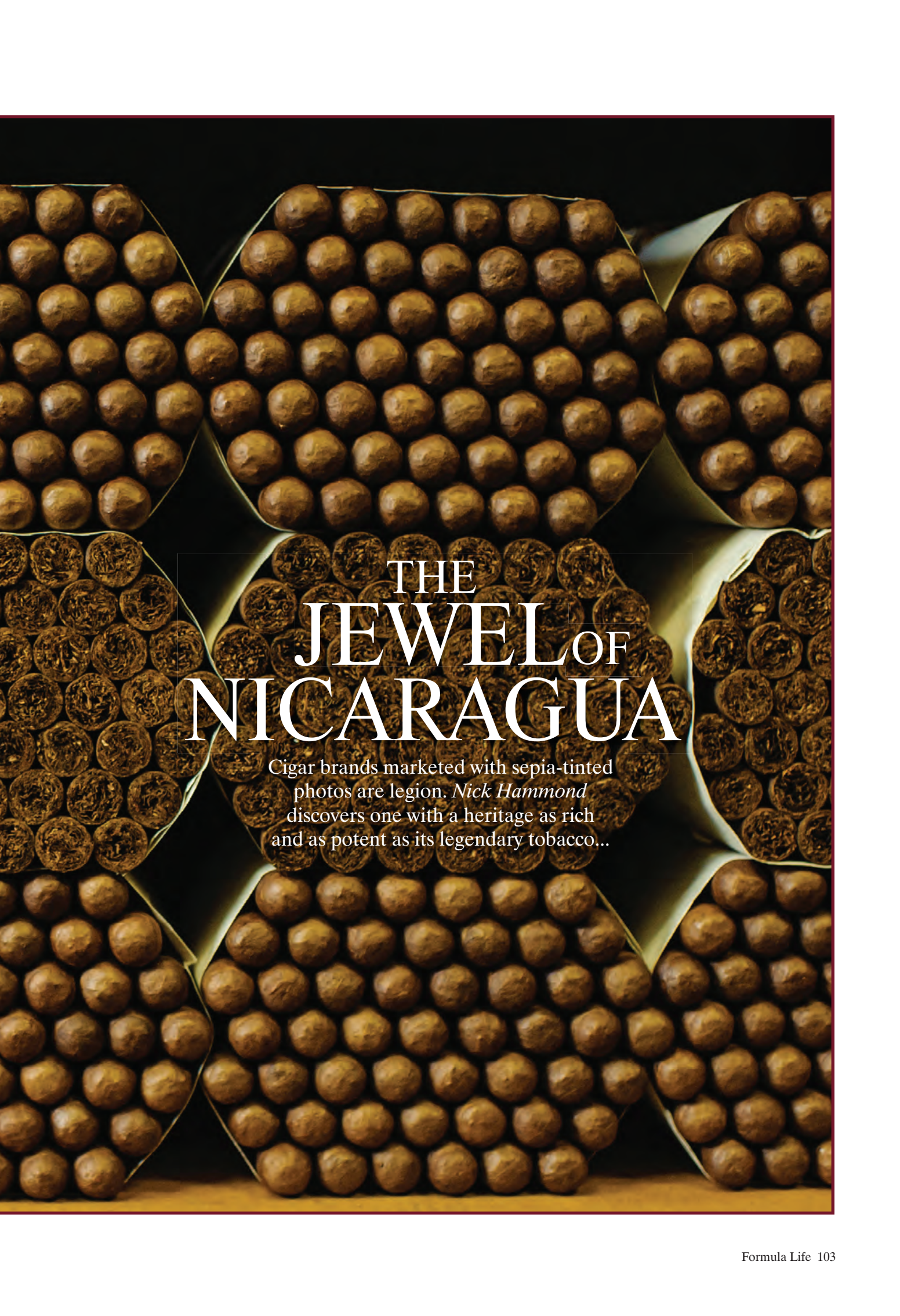


Inside one of the 'Escaparate' rooms. Here, cigars rest for up to 90 days, allowing the humidity to level down properly and the flavours to marry together





THE JEWEL OF NICARAGUA

Cigar brands marketed with sepia-tinted photos are legion. *Nick Hammond* discovers one with a heritage as rich and as potent as its legendary tobacco...

If you visit the great rolling gallery at Joya de Nicaragua and stop a moment to soak up the atmosphere of contented industry that pervades its walls, you would have little idea of the struggle that this company has gone through in order to simply survive.

It's not until you are shown the blackened and scarred floor of the factory in one section - and learn that it was bombed during the brutal civil war of the late 1970s - that you realise that the history here is real, not fabricated. You can

literally feel it all around you.

"Did you know we were the official cigar of the White House?" Juan Martinez asks me.

"Nixon loved us," he continues, chuckling around a Joya Cabinetta, a wondrously-ballsy smoke making full use of Nicaragua's earthy, potent, rich tobacco.

Martinez is Executive Vice President of this famous old cigar brand - indeed, the country's oldest. His father, Dr. Alejandro Ernesto Martinez Cuenca, bought the organisation in 1994.

"This company was originally founded in 1968. And it has fought through thick and thin to stay true to its heart and its tobacco."

"Nicaraguan tobacco has undergone an explosion in popularity in the last decade. It exports as many cigars as Cuba and is popular with a new wave of smokers"

Below: In the factory, cigars are manufactured by couples. A male *bunchero*, who bunches the filler tobacco leaves together, rolls the binder and puts them in the press. Then, the female *rolera* adds the final touch with the wrapper leave and cap





The oldest photo of the production floor from the early '70s. The young lady overlooking (left side, first table) is Martha Gutierrez, a founding worker who started off as a *rolera* and is today the head of human resources at Joya De Nicaragua



Riddled with bullets and actually bombed by plane during the fierce fighting between forces loyal to the dictator Somoza and those fighting for the Sandinista uprising, Joya has always somehow battled on.

When President Reagan slapped an embargo on Nicaraguan products (sound familiar?) the country was driven to its knees. In-fighting, continuing civil unrest, a weakening economy and the fact that most of the male population had to leave their homes to fight, all left a deeply unsettling outlook for the Central American country.

But Joya de Nicaragua kept itself afloat by training women and children to carry on essential daily tasks. And after 10 long years, the embargo was lifted and in the ensuing period, Joya has made its way back to the top. Its cigars are now sold throughout Europe and in the US through Drew Estate.

Nicaraguan tobacco has undergone an explosion in popularity in the last decade. It now exports nearly as many cigars as Cuba (we estimate, as Cuba won't release actual numbers) and is popular with a new wave of cigar smokers keen to try an alternative to the Habanos. It has quickly caught up with, and then overtaken, other New World tobacco havens, such as Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

This tobacco is renowned for being rich and strong; the main growing areas being Esteli, Jalapa, Condega and in the foothills of the mighty smouldering Ometepe volcano. The volcano is perched atop its eponymous island in the massive Lake Nicaragua - such an ancient lake, incidentally, that freshwater sharks have been found here, so long have they been cut off from the ocean. And tobacco grown on the rich, fertile soil, fed by countless eons of eruptions, is some of the most unique on the planet.

Each growing area has its own characteristics, leading to Nicaragua being one of the lucky cigar tobacco countries; so rich and varied is its leaf that excellent *puros* – cigars made of tobacco from a single country of origin – can be made here, *a la* Cuba. Other countries have to supplement their tobacco types with those brought in from elsewhere.

New cigars from Joya, like the wonderfully light, charming Joya Red and the deep and complex Cuatro Cinco are bringing more and more cigar lovers to this venerable brand.

It really is a joy to watch the success of Joya. It's a brand I've grown to love.

www.joyacigars.com





Left: The oldest photo of Joya De Nicaragua's facade versus the current facade. This was created as a before and after image for the 45th anniversary of the factory