

LETTER: DOWN WITH REDUCTIONISM

By Rick Newcombe

Rich Esserman was exactly right when he said that we judge a restaurant by a dozen factors and that it would be wrong to try to reduce it to only one. Of course, he was refuting Fred Hanna's provocative theory that "it's all in the briar" (and in your head) rather than in the brand of pipe. He also was challenging Erwin Van Hove's reductionist theory that seemed to posit that it's all in the curing of the briar rather than in the wood itself.

We could apply Esserman's logic to almost any item we purchase, and it holds up; e.g., when I buy a suit from Brooks Brothers, I expect a standard of quality--in the cloth, in the tailoring, in the fit, in the comfort, etc., etc.--and it is not any one item that makes the suit desirable for me. The same is true when we buy a car. Of course, there is always the possibility of trusting a brand name car and then buying a lemon of that brand. But that is the exception, and because it might happen one time out of 10,000, it does not mean that we can't rely on a brand name.

When I buy a Starbucks house blend coffee, I know exactly what I am getting, and I invariably enjoy it. It would be silly for me to try to say that it's all in the beans, or in the service, or in the water, or in the brewing, or

in any one thing. It is not. There is always the possibility that the coffee could be made bitter by being left in the pot too long, but I have never had that experience at Starbucks.

After trying hundreds of pipe brands over a period of decades, I know without the slightest doubt whatsoever that, if I pull out a broken-in S. Bang apple or pot that has been opened the way that I like, I will get a fantastic smoke--every time, without exception. How do I know this? From experience. Have I ever smoked an S. Bang apple/pot opened the way that I like that was not a good smoker? No. Not once. Not ever. They are ALWAYS great smokers.

Is it because of the briar? Yes. The way the pipes are made? Yes. The drilling that I like after the pipes have been opened to my specifications? Yes. Is it because I know and like the two Bang pipe makers, Ulf Noltensmeier and Per Hansen? Yes. Is it because of the beautiful stains on their pipes? Yes. Is it because I have heard S. Bang pipes praised by Bo Nordh, Lars Ivarsson, Jess Chonowitsch and Rainer Barbi? Yes. Is it because Ulf and Per know precisely how to capture the grain on a bowl? Yes. Is it because their mouthpieces have the feel of soft rubber? Yes. Is it because their pipes are

always drilled dead-center? Yes.

Is it also partly psychological on my part? Yes, of course it is, and I have no doubt there are dozens of other reasons why these are among my all-time favorite pipes. But the point is--it would be preposterous for me to try to reduce my enjoyment of these pipes to any one variable.

Now let me say that I like and admire Fred Hanna, Erwin Van Hove, Regis McCafferty, and all the other collectors who spark lively debates among pipe collectors. They are obviously very intelligent, and controversy can be fun. There are few things in life I enjoy more than reading their articles. But this new reductionism in pipe collecting, where they try to boil it down to one and only one factor, is ridiculous.

Having said that, I hope we can all remain friends. Another way to put it is, I hope they enjoy rebutting Rich Esserman's and my arguments as much as we enjoy challenging theirs. It is interesting that Rich and I have had our disagreements over the years and still remained friends, and on this issue, in my opinion, he hit a bull's eye.

