
Tamptation

The contemplative ritual of preparing and smoking a pipe may be the next retro trend.

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Pipe smoking: the next retro indulgence? Now that we've seen cigars, martinis and lounge music make comebacks, the teeny and almost hidden ranks of pipe faithfuls say we may soon witness a renaissance of the Fred MacMurray look.

Pipe sales have perked up recently, say some local smoke shops, and a band of pipe aficionados recently started the first pipe club seen in the Twin Cities for years. Just in time, apparently. Like old soldier and pipe devotee Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur, pipe smoking has almost faded away.

A generation ago, pipes were a common affectation of college men, a handy prop for those trying to ape such pipe-smoking intellectuals as Albert Einstein or J. Robert Oppenheimer, or conjure the swinging sophistication of such suave stem-chompers as Hugh Hefner. "It was very popular back in the 1960s. When I went off to college, everyone had to smoke a pipe," said Tony Soderman, local lawyer and co-founder of the new Great Northern Pipe Club. Nationwide, about 14 percent of American men smoked a pipe in 1970, puffing away about 70 million pounds of tobacco a year.



Bob James of St. Paul puffed away on his Italian made SerJacopo pipe. James has six pipes all made by SerJacopo, and in the past has owned at least 150 different pipes, all of which he has sold. Photo: Scott Takushi

Local pipe users say the Twin Cities was a particularly smoky place at that time with active clubs and smoking contests. "In the 1970s, this town was a mecca for pipe smokers," said Jon Werner, another Great Northern Pipe club co-founder. "I was reading about this just as I was getting into pipes, and I thought, 'Geez, why isn't this happening now?' Pipe paradise lost."

Lost because as the baby boomers came of age, pipe smoking came to be identified with the establishment, a symbol of conformity, the antithesis of hip, said David Beahrs, owner of the Jonathon Robert Fielding and Co. tobacco shops. As the nation roiled from the Vietnam War to Watergate, the face of pipe smoking became that of Nixon's dour and disgraced attorney general, John Mitchell. "Anything of the more relaxed esoteric vein vanished," Beahrs said. "It was overcome by trendiness." "A pipe is sitting on a rocking chair with a pair of slippers," said Gerald Celente, director of the Trends Research Institute of Rhinebeck, N.Y. Increasing pipe prices also put people off, said Roger Bell, a long-time tobacco retail worker. "The average guy couldn't afford them anymore," he said.

In the past few decades, tobacco shops closed, clubs disbanded and smokers went into hiding. By 1991, pipe smokers were mainly middle-aged or older, made up only 2 percent of American men and smoked less than 20 million pounds of tobacco a year. A miniscule number of women smoke pipes -- less than 0.05 percent. "I call it the dark ages. It looked like the lights were going to go out completely," Werner said. But government and industry statistics indicate the decline in pipe smoking may be coming to an end even as the cigar craze of the 1990s levels off.

After seeing double-digit increases earlier in the decade, cigar consumption was up only about 2 percent in 1999, according to U.S. Agriculture Department estimates.

Meanwhile, consumption of loose smoking tobacco rebounded by an estimated 27 percent in 1999. Tom Capehart, USDA senior economist, said most of that increase was due to more people rolling their own cigarettes in the face of steep pack-cigarette price increases.

The Pipe Tobacco Council estimates that pipe tobacco sales were down about 1.5 percent through September 1999 compared with the year before. But that's compared with a 12.6 percent decrease between 1998 and 1997.

"It seems like pipe tobacco, while still declining, is bottoming out," said Norm Sharp, Pipe Tobacco Council president.

Werner and his compatriots hope their club will get more people to stick it in a pipe and smoke it. At a recent meeting, about 15 members filled a Brooklyn Center office building conference room with smoke and discussion.

Quinton Glass of Minneapolis said Jesuits got him hooked on pipes when he was a teen-ager. They taught and smoked at his high school. "I liked the smell and started experimenting with it," he said.

Dave Jordan, a University of Minnesota student, said he's seen an increased interest at the college level.

Wally Loucks said his grandfather and father smoked pipes all their lives and lived into their 90s. "Pipe smoking is contentment. You're very contented smoking a pipe," he said. "You don't have to inhale to enjoy it."

Health officials say that pipe smokers do increase their risk of lung cancer because of inadvertent smoke inhalation, as well as mouth and tongue cancer. An estimated 1,095 deaths were attributed to pipe smoking in the United States in 1991, mainly due to lung cancer, according to a 1996 study published in Preventive Medicine. That's small compared to the more than 400,000 deaths attributed to cigarettes each year, but more than the number of male deaths in 1991 in the United States from Hodgkin's disease, bone cancer or tuberculosis.

'Slow down and consider'

Despite the proven risks, Rick Brown of Woodbury said he thinks pipe smokers live longer than cigarette smokers, not only because they don't inhale, but because they're more relaxed.

Pipes have to be loaded, tamped, coaxed into lighting, nurtured into staying lit, cleaned and rotated.

"You just can't pick up a pipe and know how to smoke it, like you can with a cigar. There's a kind of learning curve," Glass said.

Pipes require users to "slow down and consider," Beahrs said. "If some world leaders had been pipe smokers, the world would be a different place. I think if Hitler had been a pipe smoker, he would have stayed an artist. He wouldn't have gone into politics."

The patience needed for pipe smoking means it will never see the fadlike, celebrity-driven revival that cigars have enjoyed recently, pipe fans say.

"The increase in pipe smoking is very slow and deliberate," Beahrs said. "This is something the disco trendies don't get into."

But some of the revived interest in pipe smoking may be a spillover from the cigar craze. Pipe smoking can be more rewarding and economical than cigar smoking, say pipe smokers.

A nice pipe may cost \$200 dollars, but a pound of tobacco, enough for a month, is only another \$25. You could cough up a couple of hundred dollars for a box of high-quality cigars, but after the smoke clears, all that is left of the cigars is a cardboard box. The pipe smoker still has a nice pipe.

Werner said after the first \$100 spent on a pipe, the pipe buyer is mainly paying for aesthetics. But some smokers are willing to pay a lot for what they regard as miniature sculptures in briar wood or meerschaum.

At the Great Northern club meeting, Brown showed off part of his collection, a seven-pipe set made by Charatan, a renowned English pipe company. Sold in an alligator case, the set originally cost about \$10,000 in the 1960s, he said.

“Pipes are like a fine woman,” Loucks said. “It’s got to fit just right, feel just right. I think I’ll stop there.”