



BY TAD GAGE AND JOE HARB

# Trial by FIRE

## McClelland Tobacco Co. Club Selections

We complete our reviews of McClelland Tobacco Co.'s "Club Blend" reintroduction with the final nine mixtures in the series. This lineup reflects the cumulative fruits of two of the finest tobacco purveyors: Barry Levin and his Personal Reserve Series and Bob Hamlin with his Pipe Collector's Club of America (PCCA) blends. McClelland is the common thread. As in the last issue, we have classified these blends by the original maker, date introduced and the club name under which they have been reintroduced and that will receive some proceeds of sales. Proceeds from tin sales will be shared with the Chicagoland Pipe Collectors Club (CPCC), Greater Kansas City Pipe Club (GKCPC) and Conclave of Richmond Pipe Smokers (CORPS). We listed the original marketer and introduction date (when appropriate) and the club associated with each blend.

### Nocturne (Levin—1993—GKCPC)

**GAGE:** This full English blend, laden with Latakia, should please those who want maximum Balkan mixture flavor with a minimal intrusion of fruity or sugary Virginia leaf. The tin aroma is soft and remarkably neutral, given the large amount of Latakia clearly obvious in this dark mix brindled with gold and tan Oriental and Virginia leaf. Yes, it contains Virginias, but they serve primarily to round out the blend. You won't pick up any obvious dried fruit, sweetness or bright citrus flavors.

The mixture delivers woody flavors of loam, campfire smoke and vegetation. There's a hint of sweetness from the addition of Oriental Drama and Basma as well as the Virginias. This cool-smoking blend works well in any size bowl. It's a good choice for outdoor smoking because it resists overheating even in windy conditions. For this reason, it's also a good choice if you feel inclined to puff more vigorously or simply don't want to coddle a mixture that demands slow smoking and frequent rests.

**HARB:** McClelland describes this blend as rich, profoundly flavorful, mysterious and intriguing. I have to agree with that. The tin aroma is delicate and rich in aromas, sweet, tangy and smoky, with hints of Latakia and pungent Oriental leaf. The blend is presented as a mix of medium to dark brown and black tobaccos with Cavendish and ribbon cuts represented. In the pipe, the Latakia and Orientals work in harmony to produce a broad array of flavors and a deep complexity. The extra maturing makes the blend smoke smooth and lets it burn cool from top to bottom. As the burning leaf flavors the underlying tobacco, the richness and depth increase. If you try this blend, and I suggest that you do, collect the clues if you want and try to solve the mystery of the blend. Better yet, just enjoy it and savor the experience.

### Quantum (PCCA—1996—CORPS)

**GAGE:** The fruity tin aroma is like sparring with a quick-handed ban-

tanweight boxer—not overpowering but just enough to make you want to dance and interact with it. The medium ribbon cut provides a fairly even balance of several aged Virginia varieties ranging in color from deep reddish brown to deep gold. With perfect moisture content right from the tin, the blend lights easily and starts delivering pure Virginia pleasure.

There is less intense fruit in the smoking than you might expect based on the aroma, but all the complexity you might expect from the visual inspection. It's a fine candidate for a short smoke and smaller bowls because it settles in immediately and starts delivering mellow flavor. The different Virginia varieties mingle to generate interest, with flavor similar to the reintroduced Epitome flake from McClelland. Unlike Epitome, there's no flue-cured leaf in this blend. If you like to tinker with combining different mixtures, adding a small amount of bright Virginia leaf adds an appealing hint of lemon, or you can mix this with an intensely stoved Virginia blend or a dash of Burley for different taste experiences.

**HARB:** Originally introduced in 1996, Quantum is an aged blend of orange, red and lemon Virginias that is similar in appearance to McClelland's bulk Red Cake, with more of a reddish hue and a slightly finer cut. The tin moisture was suitable for immediate use. Still, I aired it for a few minutes, which I prefer, before loading it into a pipe. The tin aroma is sweet and tangy and rich with

Virginia character. I tried it first in a pipe with a smaller-than-average bowl. Once stoked to embers, there was a good level of tang provided by the lemon and orange Virginias. The red Virginia added a medium depth of flavor and a sweet and mellow richness with a hint of a plumlike flavor. The blend was quite smooth, indicating a good balance between the Virginias chosen for the blend and the effect of aging the tobaccos both before and after tinning. In a larger-bowled pipe, there was a bit more flavor, a brighter tang and similar sweetness and mellowness. This is a blend that will reward the smoker who maintains a slow and smooth rhythm to keep the high sugar content Virginia tobacco cool. Quantum is a straight Virginia blend that is worthy of adding to your “to try” list if you fancy the medium Virginias that have been matured and aged.

### Rich Virginia Ribbon (PCCA—1994—CPCC)

**GAGE:** This mixture provides a rare study in orange: yes, orange. The predominant color of this ribbon-cut mixture is the deep, mellow orange of aged Virginia dappled with a bit of gold bright leaf. It’s an appealing treasure chest of color and an unusually generous use of orange Virginia leaf. The lightly fruity nose is reminiscent of orange peel and zest.

The blend has a vegetal, earthy character. The tobaccos stand at that middle ground of Virginia processing: aged enough to tone down the bright sugars of flue-cured leaf but without the pronounced stewed fruit character of stoved leaf. The flavor is the same orange peel delivered in the tin aroma—tangy and slightly bitter, citrusy but not sweet. The mixture works particularly well in a larger pipe because the flavor develops sugar and increases in complexity the more it’s smoked. This is a well-loved and fondly remembered blend that is a bit spicy for my taste.

**HARB:** Originally introduced in 1994, Rich Virginia Ribbon features a combination of orange and red Virginias that are first caked and then spun into thin ribbons that pack easily. The

moisture level in the tin is just right without need for drying. The aroma is sweet and tangy with a hint of caramel. The composition is medium tan to reddish to dark brown tobaccos, which gives the blend an overall mahogany hue. At first light, the flavor was moderate in depth, sweet and tangy, with the orange Virginia lending a delicate citrus zest. As I progressed down the bowl, the flavors deepened and the blend became more complex, which suggested that some of the Virginia had been slow stoved. I tried this blend in a variety of pipe sizes and enjoyed it more in a medium-small bowl because, for me, it smoked very smooth and sweet, with a tang on the palate and with the deeper notes more delicate at the beginning of the bowl, and then developing more intensity through the bowl. This is a blend that will yield a different smoking experience with different bowl sizes and different levels of moisture and would be a definite recommendation for the “to-try” list.

### Ringlow Syrian Reserve (Levin—1994—CORPS)

**GAGE:** It was a pretty exciting development back in the early 1990s when McClelland first identified a source for Syrian Latakia, which hadn’t been available for a couple of decades. For a short time, a limited amount was available and Ringlow was born. Then the supply dried up and that was that. Today, a small number of blends feature Syrian leaf, but when the current stockpile is gone, it may be gone for good because growers no longer want to go to the time or trouble to grow and process it. This blend has stood the test of time and remains one of the premier Syrian Latakia mixtures available.

Latakia doesn’t overwhelm the tin aroma but instead complements some lightly honey and citrus scents of sweet Orientals, including sugary Drama leaf and aged Virginias. Well-humidified and easy to light, Ringlow immediately delivers a distinct two-layered experience. The smoky fruit of the Latakia generates the highlights, while the Orientals and Virginias form the base of the flavor. This is the oppo-



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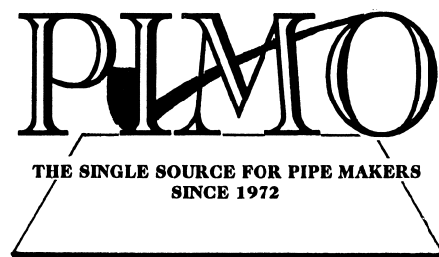
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site of many Latakia blends, where the smoky leaf provides the base, accented by Virginias and Orientals. This is not a shy or retiring Latakia blend, but there is enough balance to allow flavors of caramel and hazelnut to come through from the Orientals. The Virginias don't add a pronounced character other than sweetness and very light fruit. Ringlow smokes cool and smooth to the end, sweeter at the start and with some interesting grilled beef flavors toward the end.

**HARB:** Described as an extra matured Oriental blend, Syrian Reserve includes vintage Virginias and Syrian Latakia that has been aged for several years. The aroma in the tin is delicate, with deep spicy notes from the Orientals and a light, sweet tang from the Virginias. The expected smokiness of Latakia is, at best, light. The blend is presented as a fine ribbon cut with mostly medium brown and dark brown tobaccos. For the first trial, I loaded a medium-sized bowl. Once lit, I was surprised by the depth and stoutness of the flavor that emerged. It was very sweet, smooth and mel-

low, with the Virginias supporting the pungent and spicy Orientals. As I progressed, the flavors continued to build and intensify on the palate and in the sinuses, with the depth and complexity of the blend continuing to emerge down the bowl. By mid-bowl, the Oriental character was dominant. In a larger bowl, the flavor of the Orientals was not as stout, but the blend was still smooth and mellow. I found the blend could easily be stoked to overheat unless I moderated the temperature with a slow and even rhythm, and this is the way I would suggest the blend be approached to get the full richness of the exceptional tobaccos that the blend contains.

### Samovar (PCCA—1995—CPCC)

**GAGE:** One of the toughest challenges is to identify and describe the taste and character of Oriental tobaccos in pipe tobacco mixtures. Despite dozens of varieties and grades, it all pretty much looks the same when cured and cut into ribbons. Individual types of Oriental have definite and distinct flavors, but once incorporated into a blend, picking it apart is a challenge.

However, there is a particular type of high-grade Basma that's pretty easy to identify, and Samovar delivers it in spades.

There is a particular sweet, cum-inlike quality with a hint of musky barnyard that's reminiscent of the highest-grade all-Turkish cigarettes of old. This leaf is tough to find and is featured in very few mixtures. A medium ribbon cut, Samovar's Turkish, Virginia and Latakia mixture presents the dense aroma of dark, smoky chocolate with hints of leather and a faint fruity aroma. Perfect moisture content makes lighting easy, and the rich, musky character immediately comes through. Despite the assertive flavor, room aroma is modest and it leaves a velvety aftertaste. Indeed, this is the kind of tobacco that goes well with strong Russian tea (although you don't need a samovar), strong coffee or a rich hot chocolate on a chilly winter day. This is truly an unusual tobacco I could smoke time and again and never tire of the subtle interplay of flavors. The only comparable blend I can think of is Exotique from Smoker's Haven. If you like a complex and Oriental-forward mixture, I'd recommend stockpiling Samovar because this flavor profile doesn't often come along.

**HARB:** Samovar was first introduced in 1995 and reintroduced in 2010 in the Pipe Collectors Club Series. It is described as a full Oriental mixture that has just enough Syrian Latakia to satisfy without overwhelming. In the tin, the smoky, slightly earthy Latakia is obvious and dominates the aroma but still allows the fruity and sweet pungency of an array of different Orientals to announce their presence in the blend. At the first light, it was the smooth, fruity, rich and sweet character of these Orientals that first emerged. As all the tobaccos in the blend were enticed to contribute, it was apparent that this is a sublimely complex blend. The Virginias and more delicate Orientals lent light fruity and sweet tones to the smoke, and the more full-flavored Orientals and the Syrian Latakia combined to provide a robust complexity. In a larger-bowled

  
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pipe it was the Latakia that was more prominent in the beginning, with the fuller Orientals providing complexity, but in a smaller-bowled pipe, the more delicate Orientals contributed more to the complexity and overall character of the smoke. Samovar is one of the more compelling blends to come along in a while and is easily recommendable to both lovers of Oriental and English blends. It simply has it all.

### **Scottish Woods (Levin—1990—CPCC)**

**GAGE:** The only thing about a “Scottish” blend is that nobody can define what it is. Since Scottish blends over the decades have included (or excluded) just about every tobacco variety known to man, I’m just going to say a Scottish blend is anything a Scotsman might enjoy. Barry Levin and I had several amusing conversations about this blend when it first appeared, since I thought it had too much Latakia to be called a Scottish blend. I tend to consider a Scottish blend as being predominantly Virginia with a hint of Latakia.

Regardless of how you define a Scottish mixture, this was and is a blend a Scotsman and everyone else can enjoy. Latakia is quite pronounced in the tin aroma, with a small contribution from the Orientals and nothing from the Virginia. The medium ribbon packs and lights easily, with Cyprian Latakia delivering plenty of leather and wood smoke flavors. The mixture shows good complexity throughout and nice balance with the Oriental leaf. The Virginia in this mixture simply provides support and roundness—no dried fruit or citrus. The profile is a classic medium Balkan blend. With tin aging, the Virginia might develop and become more prominent.

**HARB:** McClelland describes Scottish Woods as a classic full Scottish mixture that is full bodied and deeply flavored. The component tobaccos include spicy Orientals, Cyprian Latakia and matured and stoved Virginias. The aroma of the Latakia is prominent in the tin, with an underlying sweetness and spiciness. The

moisture level is good without drying. I felt the flavor level was medium at first light, and it was sweet, spicy and lightly pungent. As the blend was stoked to embers, the pungency blossomed more and there was a good interplay between the smoky Latakia and the Orientals that became more complex and deeper as I progressed down the bowl. The amount of Latakia used in the blend adds to the flavor profile without overwhelming the delicate spiciness of the Orientals and the sweetness and mellowness of the Virginias. By mid-bowl, the Orientals developed a bitterness and sweetness, which is a characteristic I most like from this type of tobacco. Scottish Woods is so rich and smooth that it would be suitable at any time during the day, but I preferred it as an after-dinner treat.

### **Sophisticate (PCCA—1993—CORPS)**

**GAGE:** When this tobacco was first introduced, it was something of a mad-scientist experiment that actually ended up working. Like some crazy duet featuring a tuba and piccolo, this black and gold bumblebee blend combines sugary, bright yellow flue-cured Virginia and the same Virginia leaf stoved to inky blackness—and almost nothing in between. This is only a mixture that can work with superb leaf and careful processing.

The slightly chunky stoved product makes lighting a little tricky, but it’s fine once it gets going. The dark Virginia is deep and smoky flavored, somewhat resembling a dark-fired Kentucky burley in character and complexity but with more sweetness. It’s campfire smoky, lightly chocolaty, and reminiscent of ruby port wine and prunes. The flue-cured is citrusy, with an underlying grassy quality. You absolutely must smoke this slowly to keep the combustion temperature low. Fast puffing will not only ruin the subtlety but will also deliver a world of tongue bite. This off-the-wall blend is great straight from the can but should also age well, although the flue-cured ribbon will lose some brightness as it marries with the stoved leaf.

**HARB:** This all-Virginia blend combines the light delicate notes of sweet bright Virginia with the darker fruity notes of stoved Virginia in a well-balanced presentation. The aroma in the tin is zesty and fruity sweet, with hints of dark chocolate and plum pudding. The composition is perhaps 40 percent bright and 60 percent stoved Virginias. At first light, the blend is sweet and smooth and the deeper flavors of the slow-stoved Virginia come through quickly and continue to develop down the bowl. The different types of Virginias work well together, the flavors of each complement the other nicely, and the ratios of each one used are in good harmony. This one should age nicely and mellow over the years. Originally introduced in 1993, I can only say “welcome back” to Sophisticate.

### **Syrian Star (PCCA—1997—GKCPC)**

**GAGE:** Although the sweet tin aroma announces a respectable amount of Virginia and Oriental tobacco, when all is said and smoked, this blend is about the Latakia. A balanced combination of Cyprian and Syrian Latakia is cake-pressed with the Virginias and a bit of Basma and then spun out and cut into a medium ribbon. Lighting easily and burning evenly, the mixture in many ways smokes like straight Latakia. I know that isn’t true because I’ve smoked plenty of Latakia straight up, but the Virginias and Orientals do such a good job showcasing the Latakia that you don’t pay attention to them.

The yeasty, plumlike flavor of Syrian and the sweetness and depth of Cyprian bring to mind a very dark and complex stout or porter beer, with peaty and lightly sweet hints of one of the smokier single-malt scotches. It’s a little spicy in the sinuses, probably owing to a small amount of bright Virginia, but that’s no problem if you sip and savor this blend. The sweetness of the Basma and Virginias intensifies in the final third of the bowl, and this is a tobacco you want to smoke to the very end. An outstanding symphony of Latakia joy from start to finish. ►

**HARB:** Although named for the Syrian Latakia in this blend, Syrian Star is not an English blend, per se. Rather, it is a blend rich in aged Virginias that are delicately seasoned with Syrian Latakia and the fragrant Oriental Basma. In the tin, there is only a faint hint of the Syrian Latakia in combination with sweet matured Virginias that give off a chocolate aroma. Composed of orange and matured red Virginias that are laced with lemon Virginia, the blend has a lot of dark tobaccos, with about 15 percent medium and dark brown ribbons making up the balance. Once stoked to embers, Syrian Star delivers a sweet and lightly pungent smoke that is smooth, zesty and spicy. The Syrian Latakia and Oriental Basma are at condimental levels to add depth without overwhelming the Virginias. I would rate the flavor level as medium owing to the aging of the tobaccos and the depth and complexity. By mid-bowl, the flavor deepens and becomes more pungent, I think more from the Basma than from the Syrian. Overall, the blend smoked very smooth, cool and dry and left a

soft gray ash. If you're looking for a change of pace from the all-Virginia blends and want to experience quality leaf at the peak of flavor, this one may satisfy your quest.

#### **Vanilla Ice (New)**

**GAGE:** This beautifully brindled mixture of black Cavendish and golden aged Virginias, exuding the buttery aroma of fresh pastry, reminded me of old Captain Black when Herman Lane was at the helm of Lane Limited. Aromatic, yes, but there was no stinting on quality tobaccos. So, if you are able to pull yourself away from gratefully inhaling the tin and actually pack your pipe, you'll experience a moist but not gummy aromatic that packs nicely and burns like an English blend.

I'd have to say that the browned butter character of the Cavendish, rather than vanilla, was the primary aromatic flavor that came through. However, the generous use of aged Virginia and some bright lemon Virginia combined to lend plenty of natural sweetness. In a world of goopy aromatic blends with harsh

base tobaccos, this is a treat for the connoisseur of aromatics.

**HARB:** Vanilla Ice is another new blend by McClelland that features black Cavendish and lemon Virginia tobacco that is delicately flavored with vanilla extract. The aroma is pleasant, with a sweet, buttery vanilla caramel character. The blend is composed about 60 percent of black chunks that are interlaced with medium brown thin ribbons. It was a bit moist for my preference, so I let it air until it was slightly crinkly. In the pipe, the flavor of the vanilla was less than expected from the aroma. The blend was smooth from the charring light and burned cool as long as I kept the puffing tempo slow and even. Once stoked, the vanilla flavor began to subside a bit, allowing the character of the Virginia to blossom. By mid-bowl, the flavor of the vanilla was more in the background. Lovers of aromatic blends who are looking for a solid vanilla-flavored blend should like McClelland's Vanilla Ice. P&T

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