

SNUFF?S THE STUFF

More popular hundreds of years ago than today, nasal snuff has become an alternative to smoking for many as smoking restrictions tighten

by Chase Parker Turner and Charles Dull

In the United States and the remaining developed world, there is an ever-increasing war against the public use of smoking tobacco. Whether enjoying a cigar, pipe or cigarette, you have probably been ostracized for practicing your adult right to smoke. With crippling monetary settlements and mounting taxes, smoking tobaccos have been placed in the cross hairs of the sociopolitical left, forcing the smoker to pay higher costs for his choice to partake. If the squeeze of higher-smoking tobacco costs has affected your purse strings, your psyche or your lifestyle, then you may want to consider picking up nasal snuff as an occasional alternative to the pipe. Not to be confused with oral tobaccos, nasal snuff (light pinches of finely ground tobacco inhaled through the nostrils) has its own rich and diverse history.

Produced by grinding tobacco leaf into a fine powder, nasal snuff is the most economical form of tobacco consumption today, and for that matter, the most efficient form created since the first recording of tobacco consumption. First recorded in accounts of Columbus' adventures to the New World, the practice of taking snuff was etched into history more than 500 years ago. Nasal snuff has remained on the tobacco market the entire time, while other practices such as 'tobacco tea' have fallen out of favor.

Globally, millions of snuff consumers can be found taking the fine-ground 'flour' in a scented or unscented form. Snuff is currently produced in, but not exclusive to, both continents of the Americas, the European countries of England, Germany, France and Portugal, and India. The two major European imported snuffs are Pöschl from Germany (offering six flavors) and Wilsons of Sharrow from England (offering 27 flavors). Both meet various consumer desires. The Pöschl snuff tends to be thicker-milled flour, moistened by a secret oil substance, and mentholated. The Wilsons of Sharrow snuff is generally fine-milled and drier, and uses only water and natural essences in its blends, with flavors ranging from unscented to floral, fruit and mentholated. Many manufacturers and consumers from many nationalities have added their tile to the mosaic of nasal snuff's rich history.

Nasal snuffs' forms or varieties vary as greatly as the varieties of pipe tobaccos on today's market. As with pipe tobaccos, snuff has various textures, moistures, flavors and qualities to answer the vast spectrum of palates. There are three distinct varieties of snuff size which are known by their French names'fin, demi gros and gros.

Fin is the finer, typically drier, snuff. Fin varieties reveal the more subtle aspects of snuff because they can cover more of the nasal passageways and facilitate faster transfer of the powder's scent and taste into the membranes of the nose. This powder can turn the initiate into a sneezing machine because it's easy to oversnuff, which occurs when you take the snuff with too much effort, leaving it in the back of your throat and upper sinuses. While these are perhaps the hardest snuffs to master, they are well worth it, so sniff gently.

The next size is the medium-flour snuff, demi gros. Neither too light nor too coarse, this size comprises the majority of snuff on the market today. Demi gros is much easier to take than fin and is the perfect balance of size and scent for the initiate as well as the experienced snuff user. The moisture content of this size varies, but most are slightly moist.

The last size, gros, has lost popularity through the years. A name synonymous with this size is that of Rappee, which (among other things) was the name for the coarse-flour snuff that people ground themselves using their own snuff grinders. Most gros snuffs were made from darker tobaccos and were typically left unscented; however, the professionally made gros snuffs of today are scented. These tend to provide the longest amount of scent duration in the nose because of stalk that's added to the blend. Stalk is very porous and initially holds flavor but will cause the snuff to dry out prematurely.

Color is not necessarily an indication of the quality of snuff. Snuff colors range from light golden brown to dark maroon or black. Color can be an indication of the manufacturing and curing process that was used with the tobacco. In general, it's best not to think of color as an indication of quality or strength.

You can find snuff in any color and in any flour size; that said, snuff can be broken down into two main types: scented and unscented. Flavorings come in many forms, such as peppermint, menthol, attar of roses, whiskey, apple, citrus, and floral varieties too numerous to mention. Most snuff manufactured today is scented. Unlike pipe tobacco, what you smell is what you get. There is no degradation in the flavor of the snuff before you take a pinch, unlike the more aromatic pipe tobaccos that invoke such sweet smells as chocolate and cherry but deliver a taste that is different once consumed by fire.

On the other hand, there are natural, or unscented, snuffs. One of the most popular varieties (meaning general recipes that are not always the same from manufacturer to manufacturer) is High Dry Toast. High Dry Toast snuff blends use tobaccos that have been toasted, or fired, and generally have no scent whatsoever. You owe it to yourself to try the scented and unscented varieties, as they both present equally refreshing ranges of scents and tastes.

All of these are characteristics that may help you discern the differences in snuff and help to form your preferences. Keep these qualities in mind when trying a new snuff in order to better educate your palate and discern which snuff is the one for you.

In order to preserve snuff, it's imperative to keep it in an airtight container located in a cool, dry place. Snuff's worst enemy is air, which relieves the snuff of its moisture

and oils that comprise the scent. After taking snuff for a short time, you will be able to detect the degradation in flavor if the snuff has not been properly preserved.

Snuff requires accouterments; a handkerchief is perhaps the most vital. As the saying goes, "What goes up must come down." The handkerchief, ideally dark in color, can help to dust snuff from your fingertips and nose, as well as help keep the nose in order. You will need a snuffbox if you decide to take snuff out with you. The only requirement for a snuffbox is that it keeps out unnecessary air and that it doesn't allow the snuff to spill into your pocket. Also, it's important to keep only as much snuff as you need for a day's supply, so as not to damage the snuff by overexposure to air. In order to keep snuff at home, many fine purveyors sell jars that are airtight and are specifically designed for this purpose.

There are many methods of taking snuff. All of them are correct because they get the snuff to the nose. To that end, the most traditional method of taking snuff is by gently grabbing a pinch between the thumb and forefinger and gently sniffing the powder into each nostril. Some prefer to take the snuff off the back of the hand where the thumb and forefinger meet (also known as the "poor man's snuffbox") while others prefer to use a small spoon to lift the powder to the nose. Just remember to take a light sniff in order to appreciate the full taste and aroma of the snuff and to avoid oversnuffing. Again, all of these work, and in time you will find the method that works best for you.

Although this is just a brief description of the history, variety and methodology of nasal snuff, it's enough to get you to try the most discreet and non-offensive form of enjoying tobacco. In today's anti-tobacco environment, it's best to remember Wilson's of Sharrow's motto, "Smoke when you can, snuff when you can't." Happy snuffing, and bless you and your first snuff-induced sneeze. P&T