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Greater Cincinnati's 'cigar boom' brings the smoke, and new clientele



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- Cigar bars in the Cincinnati area are experiencing a renaissance with modern, upscale lounges.
- The clientele is becoming younger and more diverse, including more women and young professionals.

- New and existing cigar businesses are expanding to meet growing demand and competition.

NEWPORT, Ky. – In a new cigar bar just across the river from downtown Cincinnati, a crowd of middle-aged men, young professionals and entrepreneurs settle into leather chairs in a space that feels more like an upscale cocktail lounge than a dark, traditional smoking room.

A bartender stirs smoked old-fashioneds while a group of women in business attire laugh over [imported Dominican cigars](#).

It's a scene playing out across Greater Cincinnati, where cigar bars and lounges are not only undergoing a renaissance but a reinvention.

The clientele is changing, with younger professionals, women and racially diverse patrons reshaping the culture around cigar smoking into something more social, experiential and inclusive.

"I don't know what I expected when I started here, but the crowd is definitely younger and more diverse than I expected," said Kimberly Watson, a bartender at [Cigars International Superstore at Newport on the Levee](#). "We get people in here from all walks of life who all seem to have a good time together, relaxing with their drinks and cigars."



Inside the cigar boom

The cigar lounge rebirth has been driven by a sharp rise in premium cigar demand and a sustained increase in U.S. imports, signaling renewed consumer interest in elevated social smoking experiences.

According to the [Cigar Association of America](#), cigar imports surged to 464 million in 2022 before moderating to 430 million in 2024 as post-pandemic consumers embraced at-home leisure rituals centered on premium cigars and bourbon.

A new generation of cigar lounges

Against that backdrop, a cadre of new-generation cigar lounges has opened in the Cincinnati area over the past five years with Instagram-ready interiors, curated drink menus and a focus on atmosphere as much as tobacco.

In addition to Cigars International, the list includes [Blaze Cigar Lounge](#) in Newport, which is planning a new location in Union, Kentucky; [Leaf to Ash Cigar Lounge](#) in Anderson Township; [The Jester Bar & Cigar Patio](#) in St. Bernard; and [Creekside Cigar Co.](#) in Maineville.

The list doesn't include dozens of bars, restaurants, liquor stores and other establishments that have recently opened designated areas on their properties for cigar smoking with many of the same amenities as cigar lounges.

One key difference is that cigar lounges in Ohio typically operate as BYOB establishments, while Kentucky allows businesses to sell both tobacco and alcohol, provided they obtain the required licenses for each.

Cigar bars thrive on in-person connection, and today's modern cigar lounges are equal parts sanctuary and social hub.



Charee Partee, an executive assistant at a local hospital who works part-time at Cigars International, said cigars help her relax, and today's modern cigar bars offer her an upscale environment where she can unwind and socialize.

"It's just a great vibe," Partee said. "And I'm not the only woman who enjoys it. It's just a fad for some people, but there are a lot of women smoking cigars now. It's nice that the crowds aren't so male-dominated."

Don't get it twisted. Cigar bars still tend to be male-dominated spaces, though the culture has evolved beyond the traditional "good ol' boys" image.

On a recent Friday, Rodrico Epps, who owns [Bodied by Rico](#) personal training studio Downtown; Sgt. Anthony Mitchell, a spokesman for the Cincinnati Police Department; and Matt Cuff, founder and owner of the popular [Just Q'in](#) barbecue restaurant in College Hill, all met up at Cigars International after work to enjoy a smoke.

All three are successful Black men who say they value cigar smoking as a social ritual that fosters camaraderie, conversation, and shared connection.

"There's just nothing else like it," said Epps as the group's conversation bounced from sports to work to family to sharing old memories.



In addition to enjoying the social scene, Partee works as a sales associate helping Cigars International customers pick out the cigars best suited for their tastes.

Partee, who said she prefers medium-blend cigars from such makers as [Arturo Fuente](#) and [Romeo y Julieta](#), got started smoking cigars about 15 years ago when a friend took her to House of Cigar in Sharonville and let her try one for the first time.

At the time, [House of Cigar](#) was one of the few established cigar lounges in the Cincinnati area.

Partee said finding someplace decent to smoke was a challenge for a while, but she said the cigar smoking scene has changed dramatically.

On a recent Thursday night, Partee and some friends visited [Liberty Collective](#) for a special cigar and bourbon event held on the outdoor patio of the 18,000-square-foot, indoor/outdoor entertainment complex and food hall that opened in Liberty Township in September 2025.

The event was hosted by [Bell's House of Tobacco](#) in Symmes Township, which has long been a fixture in Cincinnati's cigar scene, drawing smokers from across the region for the past 25 years.

From pastime to passion

David Jollis, a firefighter with the [Little Miami fire department](#) who's been working at Bell's for the past several months, was on hand to give advice and pass out free samples from a giant bag of cigars he typically carries with him.



“I find I’m never lost for company when I have my cigars with me,” joked Jollis, who found his way into cigars the way many habits take hold — quietly, over time, in the company of colleagues after a long day.

About a decade ago, the 47-year-old began smoking with fellow firefighters behind the Little Miami fire station, unwinding after calls and trading stories from their shifts. The routine stuck.

“We’d sit out back, talk about the day and just relax,” Jollis said. “I’ve got ADHD with the best of them, and this forces me to sit down for an hour or 45 minutes and just relax.”

But what started as a way to decompress grew into a deeper pursuit. Over the years, Jollis has sampled hundreds of cigars, building a practiced understanding of flavor profiles, construction and craftsmanship across brands, regions and blends.

Now he’s putting that knowledge to use at Bells, just as interest in cigars appears to be surging.

“We’re basically in a cigar boom right now,” Jollis said. “You’re seeing dozens of new brands on the market, and people have questions.”

Everyone from boutique cigar makers to established, heritage brands are also rolling out new and updated lines aimed at modern tastes, expanding options for both seasoned smokers and newcomers.

New smokers, new expectations

At the same time, a younger crowd is stepping into humidors for the first time. Jollis said he’s seeing a growing number of customers in their mid-20s, often young professionals looking to navigate cigar culture as part of business networking and social outings.

“They’re going out on the golf course with clients, and they want to know what pairs well with what they’re eating and drinking,” he said. “It’s a new world for them, and I try to help them out the best I can.”

After years of facing little competition, cigar shops like Bell’s are being forced to expand to keep up with modern trends.

When Bell’s opened in 1999, the shop’s only major competitor was [Jungle Jim’s International Market](#), which sold imported, hand-rolled cigars from its location about 25 miles away in Fairfield, according to owner Bhavik Shah, who bought Bell’s from founder John Bell in 2023.



But the local cigar market has changed rapidly in recent years.

Competition heats up

“Even when I bought the store, we didn’t have much competition, but the competition has heated up dramatically in the past couple of years,” Shah said. “We had to expand to stay competitive and stay ahead of the game.”

To meet growing demand, Shah recently doubled the size of the store’s walk-in humidor: “We didn’t have the room for all the new cigars coming out.”

The expansion, Shah said, was designed with quality in mind. The new humidor is lined entirely in cedar, a material prized in the cigar industry for helping maintain proper humidity and temperature levels.

“We definitely take pride in the quality of our cigars, which have to be kept at a certain humidity level and certain temperature,” Shah said. “To do it right, you gotta have a humidor that’s 100% cedar. That makes a big difference.”

Shah declined to disclose the cost of the expansion, noting only that “cedar is not cheap.”