

# The Latest Thing They're Smoking In Pipes on College Campuses: Tobacco

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## Despite Risks, More Young People Light Up; 'It Looked Like the Coolest Thing Ever'

BY MARY PILON

Dan Nemets, a sophomore at Central Michigan University, likes the TV show "Family Guy," heavy-metal musician Ozzy Osbourne and a good pipe.

Mr. Nemets took up pipe smoking 18 months ago after strolling into a pipe and tobacco store near the Mount Pleasant campus with a friend. Mr. Nemets can't smoke in his dorm room but has networked with other youthful smokers on Facebook in the Collegiate Gentlemen's Pipe Smoking League.

"They say everyone has an inner child," the 19-year-old says. "I guess I have an inner old man."

Friday is International Pipe-Smoking Day, when a number of puffers will unite to protest tobacco taxes and smoking bans.

They will also engage in slow-smoking competitions to see who can keep a pipe going the longest. Each contestant is given just two matches. Events, which will go on all weekend, are promoted by the International Premium Cigar & Pipe Retailers Association.

Health advocates may warn of oral cancer, mouth lesions and rotting teeth, but Mr. Nemets and his online brethren are in the vanguard of an unlikely set of smokers taking to the brier—people in their 20s.

"They're eager to learn," says 71-year-old Vernon E. Vig, president of the New York Pipe Club and the United Pipe Clubs of America. Mr. Vig started smoking a pipe as an undergrad at Carleton College 53 years ago. "Back then, everyone smoked a pipe,"

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# Pipe Dreams for Young Smokers

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Mr. Vig says. His group, which meets monthly in Manhattan, has seen a definite increase in college students and young professionals, he says.

No one tracks how many young men and women are pipe smokers. But sales of pipe tobacco are rising again after years of decline, and many think young smokers are the reason. U.S. sales of pipe tobacco plummeted to 4.9 million pounds in 2006, from 52 million pounds in 1970, says Norman Sharp, president of the Cigar Association of America. Sales climbed to 5.3 million pounds in 2008. Pipe tobacco and smokeless tobacco sales are on the rise, offsetting over a decade of decreases in cigarette sales.

Pipe-smoking groups on social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have attracted thousands of members. Questions in the forums include: A bent or straight pipe? Does anyone have a favorite perique Louisiana tobacco blend? What is the consensus on corn-cob pipes?

Sykes Wilford, 28, burned his tongue when he first started smoking a pipe as a freshman at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tenn. He now walks new smokers through the first puffs in his own store in Little River, S.C., to ensure they don't meet the same fate. Although he mostly carries traditional pipes, he's trying to bring a modern edge to the ancient habit. "For me to have an iPhone in one hand and a pipe in the other is not unusual," he says.

To appeal to his own demographic, Mr. Wilford hired another young pipe smoker, Adam Davidson, 27. The two created a Web site where they post photos of their inventory. They tout the thriftiness of smoking a pipe in newsletters. The two contend that smoking a pipe, in the long run, is cheaper than smoking cigarettes. That has been a great selling point with the cash-strapped, ramen-noodle-eating crowd, the men say.

Money played a role when Ed Rice picked up his first pipe. The 21-year-old junior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign began puffing two years ago. "We bought the cheaper-end ones," he says. His pipe cost around \$30, but he estimates he spends much less than cigarette smokers do on their tobacco habits—less than \$10 a week.

Tom Moran, owner of the

115-year-old Rich's Cigar Store in Portland, Ore., noticed a recent uptick in sales of corn-cob pipes, which retail for \$4 to \$7 in his store, and "starter" brier pipes that sell for as much as \$22.95. Although the youngsters have less cash than some of his older clientele, he welcomes the business. "You hate to watch your customers die off," Mr. Moran says.

Bill Shindler, the pipe specialist who works the store floor of Rich's, estimates that 60% of the younger pipe smokers who come in once stay with it. "They're looking for an alternative to cigarette smoking."

## Out With the Bulls

Mr. Shindler also says that smoking trends reflect the changing economy. His store did a booming business in expensive cigars during the bull market of the nineties.

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"Cigars said, 'I've made it,'" Mr. Shindler says. "It was a form of reward for yourself. When Wall Street crashed, people backed off from that." Pipe smoking, he says, has a more calming effect. "It's a comfortable aroma. It reminds you of grandpa. People are looking for that kind of comfort."

Joanna Murakami, a statistics graduate student at University of California at Riverside, took up pipe smoking at 19 because "it looked like the coolest thing ever." The 24-year-old lights up about once a week.

Her reaction to onlookers, surprised at the sight of a young woman with a pipe? "I don't care," she says.

Public-health experts, of course, don't think pipe smoking is at all cool. It's smoking, and it's dangerous, they say.

"The end result would be they'll have fewer teeth," says Jasim M. Albandar, a professor of periodontology at Temple University, in Philadelphia. Dr. Albandar headed up a study published in December 2000 that focused on the dental impacts of pipe and cigar smoking. He

found that pipe smokers had severe plaque, inflamed gums and higher risks of periodontal disease, even though they tend to smoke less often than cigarette smokers do.

"It's a misconception that pipe smoking is a healthy alternative," says Thomas J. Glynn, director, cancer science and trends, for the American Cancer Society. Dr. Glynn says that pipe smoking has been associated with oral cancers and lesions of the lip, tongue and gums which can cause severe facial disfigurement.

Youthful pipe smokers seem to think the habit is less harmful than smoking cigarettes because the smoke isn't inhaled. "I recognize that it can be hazardous in the extreme," Ms. Murakami says, but "it seems healthier than smoking a cigarette. It helps me calm down, and it helps me think."

Others like that it's still unconventional in style. "There's something culturally attractive about smoking a pipe," Mr. Wilford says. "There may be some nostalgia there, too."

## Serious Puffing

There will be some serious puffing and pondering at slow-smoking competitions today and this weekend to commemorate this year's International Pipe-Smoking Day.

Skip Elliott, owner of the Briary in Homewood, Ala., will hold a slow-smoking competition on Saturday and expects some of his more youthful regulars to attend. He estimates that a quarter of his business comes from people under 30. "They come in groups," Mr. Elliott says.

He says that smokers pile in from the nearby universities, text each other, "and soon there's a line out the door."

Young smokers have been swapping emails, sending Facebook messages and Googling for information about techniques and strategies for smoking competitions. Many are competing for the first time.

But, as Mr. Nemets learned at his first competition in October, young lungs aren't necessarily a ticket to earning a tobacco trophy.

"I competed against a 96-year-old," Mr. Nemets says. "I got my butt kicked." Mr. Nemets's time was 26 minutes. The 96-year-old kept his pipe lit for more than two hours, Mr. Nemets says.

"There's a technique," Mr. Nemets says. "And I've still gotta learn it."