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BARFLY ON THE WALL

Chapel Cigars in Lutz: The good kind of smoke-filled room

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[Photos by Luis Santana/tbt*]

How classic is this? The clubby Chapel Cigars is all leather, wood and stogies.

This week I found myself in Lutz, where a reader tipped me off to Chapel Cigars.

Chapel Cigars is a Perdomo lounge, one of only two such lounges in the country (the other is in Birmingham, Ala.). Chapel Cigars is officially sanctioned by Miami's Tabacalero Perdomo, a premium cigar company that has its origins in pre-revolutionary Cuba.

The idea is that you can expect a quality lounge experience when it's attached to the name of such a respected cigarmaker.

Although I'm loath to use the term "man cave," I think it's an apt description of Chapel Cigars. The spacious lounge occupies two units of a shopping center. Both sides are populated with overstuffed lounge chairs, with one side containing a small bar in the back and several televisions mounted on the walls, and the other side containing a large walk-in humidor.

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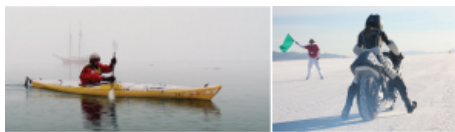
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The walls are covered in wood with a natural finish, which extends behind the bar, giving the impression that you're inside a friend's basement den or even in a cabin.

The entire place feels like anything but a bar in a strip mall.

I visited on a Wednesday night, when the lounge hosts its weekly poker tournament. I was expecting a modest group of friends hovering around a lone poker felt, but instead found a packed house with multiple tables and a Texas Hold 'Em tournament in full swing.

Nearly every player had a cigar dangling from his mouth, which added to the authenticity of the scene while also creating possibly the densest cloud of smoke that I've ever encountered upon entering a room.

Once my senses adjusted, I strolled to the bar to order a beer.

Chapel Cigars is a beer- and wine-only lounge, but that doesn't mean there aren't options. There are 33 bottled beers, which include domestic lagers, as well as a variety of imports and domestic craft beers — from Paulaner Hefe Weizen to local brews from Cigar City and Cold Storage (the Florida Avenue folks).

The prices are even better, with the most expensive options topping off at \$3.50.

The wine selection is fairly basic, but I was impressed by a small oak cask with a spigot. I'd never seen one. The wine is a pinot noir made by California's DeLoach Vineyards, with the idea of giving a straight-from-the-barrel effect by transferring the finished wine directly from its aging barrel to this serving barrel.

The barrel is more presentation than anything, as the actual wine is contained in a 10-liter "eco bag" inside, but the wine was excellent nonetheless.

As Chapel Cigars is a Perdomo lounge, a large portion of the walk-in humidor has cigars of that brand. However, most major brands are represented, including several premium brands carrying double-digit price tags.

If nonsmokers find the main room too smoky on busy nights, the room near the humidor is considerably quieter and less smoky, and it's also a perfect place to play a game of dominos.

The homemade domino table's top is constructed of heavily lacquered Perdomo cigar-box tops. If dominos are not your game, you can always try chess or cards.

Still, dominos are the game on Friday nights, along with live music in the evenings.

Chapel Cigars is a wonderful example of the classic cigar lounge, with a friendly environment, a strong focus on premium smokes, and quality beer and wine for a fair price.

This is one of my favorite kind of bars. If you're in the area, stop by and check it out.

— jg@saintbeat.com

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Chapel Cigars

26246 Wesley Chapel Blvd., Lutz; (813) 973-1166, chapelcigars.com

The vibe: A casual, roomy lounge with classic games and a living-room feel.
Booze: Beer, \$3-\$3.50; wine, \$6-\$9 by the glass and \$26-\$44 by the bottle.
Specialty: The beer selection rotates on occasion, but there are always a few fine craft beers to choose from, including local brews from Cigar City and Cold Storage. Wine folks may be interested in the DeLoach barrel-to-barrel pinot noir, in which the wine is served directly from a small oak barrel.
Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday, noon to 10 p.m. Sunday.

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