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Curtis Rush

When you think of pipe smokers, images arise of Hugh Hefner or Sherlock Holmes, or urbane college professors and upper-crust Englishmen who wear ascots and play chess.

The image carries tones of sophistication and intelligence, if not downright eccentricity. It's now a symbol of a bygone era, something your grandfather did.

In a bid to ward off extinction, a loose-knit group of pipe smokers in Toronto formed the Downtown Toronto Pipe Club in 2006, but it's gone underground to avoid running afoul of Ontario smoking legislation.

Without an outdoor place to meet, co-founder Mike Kennedy has opened up his Toronto residence to limited meetings whenever his wife agrees to leave for the evening.

He and co-founder Eric Mathurin put up a website and soon attracted a mailing list of 70 people and about two dozen come out at least once to a "smoker."



Mike Kennedy, co-founder of the Downtown Toronto Pipe Club, enjoying a puff at the club's year-end bash at his home on Niagara St. in Toronto.

CURTIS RUSH/TORONTO STAR

The group mainly consists of mostly men between the ages of 25 and 35 who are trying to revive the pipe habit.

"It's really an eclectic group," Mathurin says. "We have artists, craftsmen, IT and other professionals and even a sailor, a neurosurgeon and a school principal."

In early December, they met at Kennedy's studio apartment on Niagara St. for a year-end bash.

For the occasion, Kennedy made some cookies the night before and others brought over butter tarts. And of course, there was alcohol involved.

Members came bearing all sorts of pipes ranging from \$25 to \$175, with all kinds of tobacco blends.

The conversation was light, just as was the aroma from the pipes. While sipping Scotch, bourbon and beer, the gang mingled with each and exchanged information about blends.

"This club is really informal. There's no official business discussed," said Kennedy, the co-founder.

It was much like a wine-tasting event, except there were pipes and the room soon filled with clouds of pipe smoke.

Aficionados say pipe smoking isn't demonized to the same degree as cigarettes or cigars in the public domain.

Stefan Seles, who is an avid collector, says the reaction he often hears from other non-smokers is "that smells wonderful," or "my uncle or grandfather used to smoke a pipe."

Pipe smoking is a studied art, and they were all very good at it.

At novice at this, this reporter was offered a pipe and tried to smoke with mixed results. Unlike smoking a cigar or cigarette, there is a knack involved, from knowing how to stuff the pipe to knowing when to tamp it down to relight.

“You don’t inhale, you just let the smoke roll around in the mouth before exhaling,” co-founder Mathurin says.

Michael Parks makes his living making hand-crafted Briar pipes from a shop in Bowmanville. There’s not much of a market for his pipes in Canada, so he sells mostly to the United States.

“I’ve sold a pipe in a custom-crafted box for \$8,500,” he says.

Every year, some of them travel to Chicago where they meet up with other like-minded pipe aficionados at one of the biggest pipe conventions in North America.

Says Mathurin: “There has been a lot of focus on tobacco micro-blends and quality, hand-made pipes.”

But he does not anticipate a true renaissance of pipe smokers.

“In the long run, I think it will become the hobby of fewer and fewer people,” he says.

Inside the Royal York Hotel, one of the world’s premier pipesmiths still makes hand-crafted pipes for a niche clientele.

Julius Vesz, now 77, has been at the Royal York for 28 years and has made and sold pipes for such distinguished people as Gerald Ford, Anwar Sadat and Bing Crosby.

But business is bad. He blames smoking laws and the cost of tobacco.

A pound of pipe tobacco in Canada costs about \$200, he says, while in you can buy it in Buffalo for \$25.

“I’m losing business every day,” Vesz says, adding that if it weren’t for sales of his miniature military toys, he would be long gone. Most of his sales are made internationally through his [website](#).

Yet he wants to hang on.

“As long as I can make a few extra bucks and people still want my work, I will stay.”