

## CIGAR AFFAIRS

**The Prince of Ecuador**

By Samuel Spurr

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"Crocodile on my feet, fox fur on my back, bowtie round my neck, that's why they call me the gangsta mack in the Cadillac." This is the rap I hear strutting from my speakers and although not a gangsta mack and definitely sure I'm not driving a Cadillac, Outkast's lyrics are quite appropriate for the story I'm following, visiting South American gallery 'Caramba,' located in the inner city suburb of Newtown in Sydney.

The suburb is as eclectic as Outkast's music. King Street is home to a range of colourful personalities; people of various backgrounds, ideologies, sexualities, styles and tastes melt together, where pubs, sex shops, cafes, hairdressers, Thai restaurants, used book stores and tattooists all share the same facade. It's a street where you initially feel out of place, but with each step you feel as though you belong even more by contributing to its diverse mix. As the title might suggest I am not trekking up a mountain in Ecuador in search of a long lost prince, but looking for a prince whose history and very name has been lost to history for far too long.

The Panama hat: 'The Prince of Straw Hats.'

Panama hats were, are, and will always be created in Ecuador. During the second half of the 19th Century, they were exported to Europe via the Panama Canal, thus garnering their name. That 'Panama' could be the name given to these skilled works of art from Ecuador was merely an oversight by the fashion conscious of Europe who cared little for the origins of their new hats. The genuine article, made from Toquilla straw, are all woven individually by hand with the top grade taking three months to make. The thickness of the straw, tightness of the weave and the skill of the weaver determines the grade and the price of the finished product.

Walking into 'Caramba,' I'm greeted by lively South American folk music, vivid, flamboyant works of art and Julio Proaño to discuss his passion for all things South American, including Panamas. I can think of only one word to describe the gallery overflowing with gifts, crafts and art from all corners of South America: Caramba! Julio, himself a native of Ecuador, and speaking with a still noticeable accent despite his many years in Australia, has been operating Caramba with his wife Fiona for about three years after realising that their passion for all things Latin American was too strong to ignore. Julio began by promoting Latin American artworks: "For approximately twelve years we started by making contact with artists and poets and finally we got the idea of putting it all together with a few examples of work to start the business." And bohemian Newtown was the perfect venue for the set up of the shopfront. He revels in supporting small cottage industries in South America from where he purchases all his products "We feel like we are doing a really really good thing for so many people who are so glad to share their art" he says. "They've given me their full support to exhibit their work in Australia as well as sell it."

In regards to Panama hats, Julio's passion is easily noticeable "I consider every single hat as art and I treat them like that. There is no gallery in Australia with the type of products we have." Julio is also quick to point out one of the proper names for a Panama, 'Montecristi Fino.' He goes on to state that his Cuban amigos are a bit muddled up when it comes to the hats. "The Cubans until now are convinced that they weave the Panama hats, however we Ecuadorians saturated the Cuban market with very low priced Panama hats because of their need with their sugar and tobacco plantations so that they could afford it." "You wear the Panama hat, it's so light on your head and so comfortable to wear, lovely to work in under the sun, that's the beautiful thing about them."



Samuel Spurr



Julio goes on to explain the various grades of hats: "They start at grade 2 and then go up to grade 4, 6 and so on up to 24. A grade 24 can go for up to \$4000. Like a good cigar or a good wine, it is something that involves a skill that has been passed down for generations. The work and time involved is amazing. My latest order took 5 months from arranging the order until the finished product."

Julio finds that many people come back after buying a base model, perhaps a grade 2, and want to upgrade "I have received many compliments with lots of positive feedback," Julio said. "Not many people leave here unhappy. A guy bought one for the Bacardi festival and he was dancing, throwing it around, people were grabbing it and it was ruined. It is natural straw and not indestructible. It was mistreated. That happens but normally everyone enjoys them. There's so much to them only a true connoisseur knows all about Panamas."

How would Julio describe a person who comes in and buys a Panama hat? Would they all share a common attribute? "That's quite a tricky question. It's not that easy actually. Every single person likes to have something classy, nice, and they are prestigious. Some people can't find a hat but most of the time a certain style of Panama will suit them even if they aren't a hat person."

Though Julio himself does not smoke, he still enjoys the pleasures that cigars bring. "I always have cigars to hand out with my Panamas (Julio pulls out some Montecristo No.4s) and I give them out when someone buys a hat because you always deserve a good cigar with a Panama." Julio said. "I'm thinking about also stocking cigars as they are a work of art as well, but that's a long way off, there's still a lot to do with the stuff I have. We're not just there yet but that's the next thing!"