

Guide to Tobacco Pipes & Pipe Smoking

Due to popular demand, we hired pipe enthusiast and maker Steve Morrisette to write a guide about pipes, Enjoy!

I am a pipe maker. This piece is about [tobacco](#) smoking pipes.

“When loves grows cool, thy fire still warms me; When friends are fled, thy presence charms me. If thou art full, though purse be bare, I smoke and cast away all care!” – German Smoking Song





[Pipes](#) and thoughtful contemplation have been good companions to each other, and Man, for many centuries. I love pipes and pipe smoking and find little to rival the sublime experience of sitting, smoking and thinking. Indeed, some of my fondest memories are of sitting at a sidewalk cafe, smoking a good blend and being “present” to experience life unfolding all around me. I have done this on four continents and never tire of it, nor will I ever lose my enthusiasm for time spent with a clan of pipe smokers, invariably engaged in a fine conversation. These small, ancient, and revered

objects, thus employed, have fostered great friendships, delighted the senses and soothed souls for millennia. Currently, and much to my delight, pipe smoking is enjoying a resurgence of popularity.

Over the past twenty years I progressed from an avid pipe smoker, to collector of high grade hand made artisan pipes and on to creating pipes for others to enjoy. I have formed, revised, and re-formed many opinions and conclusions about the smoking, collecting and the making of pipes over the years. I am still enthusiastically learning today and it is my great privilege to share with you a bit of what I have learned and absorbed. I am happy to see that pipe smoking seems to become more popular again. Tn the following I will briefly discuss the history of pipes, explain the mechanics, buying options, how to clean it, and of course how to smoke a pipe.





The History of the Tobacco Pipe

The history of the tobacco pipe is long and quite fascinating and could fill many volumes. As it is the purpose of this piece to cover many and several aspects of pipes and pipe smoking, a limited and general look at that history seems the practical course here.

I suppose we can all be grateful to [John Rolfe](#) who had the inspiration to plant tobacco seed from Trinidad in my native Virginia soil – just a few miles from my birthplace – in 1612. His first crop of tobacco (*nicotiana tabacum*) found great favor at court back in England, as it was a far tastier smoke than the rough native North American species introduced in London some years before. And popular it was, as just over a ton of Virginia tobacco shipped to London in the year spanning 1616 -1617.

And by 1620, some 40,000 lbs. of tobacco made it's way from the banks of the James River in Virginia across the Atlantic and up the Thames to London docks. Much of this tobacco was consumed by "drinking" the smoke from a pipe. So, some four hundred years ago pipe smoking was taking England and Europe by storm.

The pipe itself, as a means of smoking tobacco, had a much earlier appearance. Some 3,000 years before Englishman John Rolfe's fortunate experiment at Jamestown, Native American tribes were smoking pipes in the Mississippi Valley area of the U.S. Ancient relic pipes found there were adorned with figures of animals and other decorative markings and were mostly made of porphyritic and other hard stone. Early English and European pipes were generally made of clay and were the simple long stemmed pipes that many know today as the clay tavern pipe.

Most clay pipe making was done in London and Bristol in the 1650's using clay from the abundant nearby deposits in Devon. Though adequate, clay pipes were fragile and were frequently broken, often leaving the smoker with tobacco and no way to enjoy it. By the early 1700's, meerschaum from Turkey and Africa was beginning to be employed to fashion tobacco pipes.



Carved Meerschaum Pipe from the Dr. Sarunas "Sharkey" Peckus Pipe Collection as seen in [Collecting Antique Meerschaums by Ben Rapaport](#)

Meerschaum, from the German for "foam of the sea", is mined from deposits of the skeletal remains of microscopic sea creatures that settled to the bottom of ancient sea beds and was compressed over millions of years. The highest quality meerschaum is found in Turkey near Istanbul. This attractive chalk white material has the consistency of soft cheese when first extracted. This facilitates the ornate and often beautiful carvings one associates with these pipes. As the material is warmed by the sun, or in a warming room, it hardens and can provide a very pleasant, cool and dry smoke. Because of its capacity for accepting ornate carving, meerschaum pipes became quite popular with the upper classes. It did, however, share the unfortunate trait of the fragility that plagued the clay pipe, still smoked by most commoners of the time. As a result, pipe smoking was in decline by the turn of the 19th century, being replaced by the [cigar](#) and the cigarette. There was a growing need for a robust, serviceable and economical material for pipe making.



Dunhill pipe courtesy Uptown's

Nearly every pipe one encounters today is fashioned from briar. It is a nearly perfect material for a pipe bowl. Though fine grained and quite hard and heat resistant, briar is reasonably light weight, non – toxic, and often can be quite beautiful. And best of all, it is far more durable than either clay or meerschaum.

Some may say that the advent of the briar pipe saved the pipe smoking pastime from being supplanted by cigars and cigarettes. In the 1820's artisans from the French town of St. Claude in the Jura Mountains, renown for their wood carving skills, began to produce pipes with bowls made from the burl of the white heath tree. ([erica arborea](#)) This wood was called "bruyere" and through the years has become known as briar.

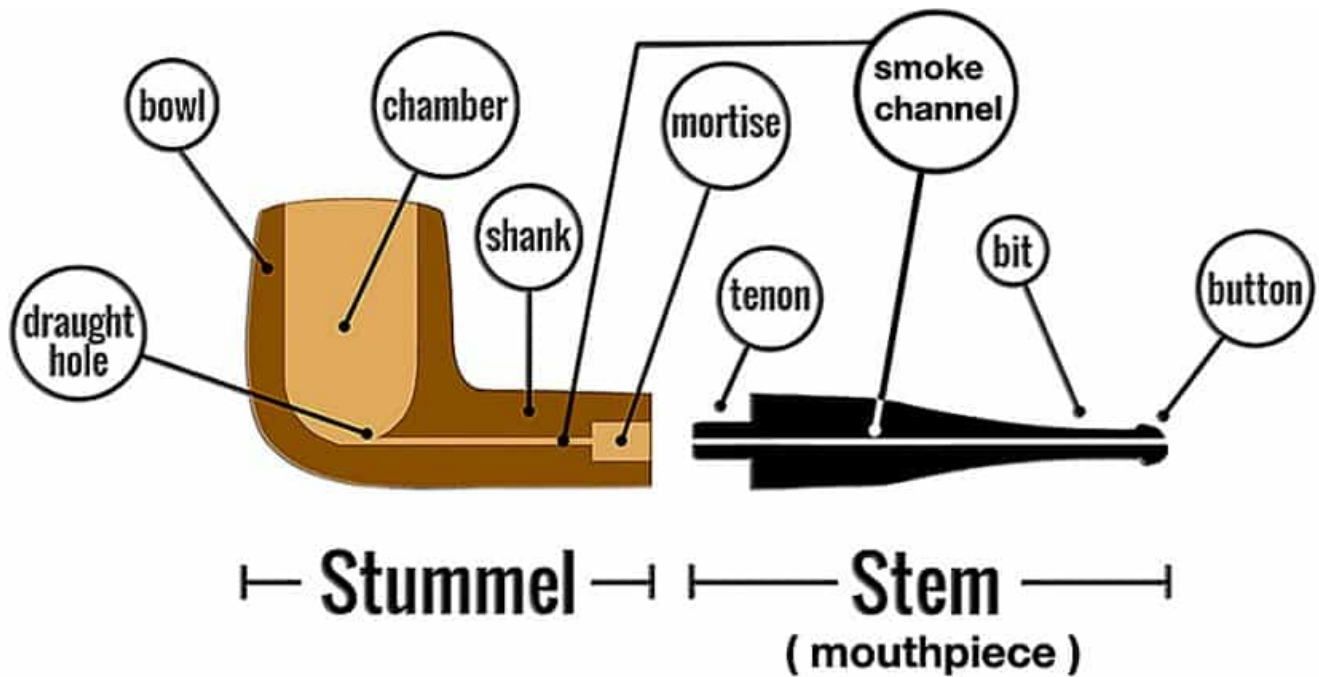
The Mechanics of a Pipe

The mechanics, or engineering, of a good pipe is all about what is not there. The tobacco chamber, draft hole, smoke channel and slot determine the smoking qualities of a pipe. Collectively, these drillings, more so than shape, size and component materials, are the factors that yield a well smoking pipe. Just as in a well tuned high performance engine, good airflow is the critical factor for a pipe to smoke well. Unrestricted airflow, of optimal volume from bowl to button, insures the best conditions for modulation of the burn. This, in turn, allows an easy pace or regulation of puffing without undue concentration and effort required of the smoker. Optimal airflow is achieved when the smoke channel maintains a consistent " Goldilocks " diameter – not too small and not too large.

This means that as the height of the smoke channel must decrease to accommodate the mouthpiece tapering down to the button, the smoke channel should increase in width, gradually transitioning from a round cross section to the flattened oval opening of the slot. Think of a long, thin cone of paper that you flatten gradually

from the point to the base. The ideal is to have the area of the opening along the entire length of the smoke channel consistent.

Factory brands and most high volume pipe makers generally cannot take the time to focus on this fine, but important factor. The better artisan pipe makers consider this attention to airflow requisite. That is not to say you cannot find a factory or high volume maker's pipe that smokes well, only that a highly skilled artisan's work is more likely to yield a good smoke.



Pipe diagram credit- the pipeguys.com

"Is that wood?"

This is often the first question I am asked when I show my work to a non – pipe smoker. Though it may strike some as an odd one, this question usually comes from someone unfamiliar with high grade artisan pipes. Many under the age of thirty, have never encountered a proper smoking pipe " in the wild ". They are truly an endangered species. As the pipe stummel, or body of the pipe can be made from numerous materials, I will just briefly discuss those that have been used most often.



As mentioned above, by far the majority of pipes are made from briar. The second most commonly used material is meerschaum. Finding one with excellent airflow and a thin comfortable stem can require some effort as until very recently most meerschaums were produced as souvenirs for the tourist trade around Asia Minor.

Corn cob pipes are quite popular and have a long history in the U.S. Also simply called "cobs", they are actual dried corn cobs crafted into pipe bowls and inserted with a

wood shank affixed with usually a plastic or acrylic stem. Most cobs are machine made. Often used by tobacco blenders to judge new blends, they do not affect tobacco taste and are inexpensive enough to be tossed when they begin to burn out.

There are many alternatives to briar and meerschaum such as fruitwoods, bog oak, clay, ceramic and metal. Currently bog oak and strawberry wood are popular among some artisan pipe makers. Both have interesting grain patterns that can be brought out further with sandblasting. Unlike briar, most fruitwoods, bog oak and strawberry wood will not accept color stain well, nor do they achieve that beautiful patina of a well smoked briar.



Vintage Pipe Drawings courtesy Uptown's

Pipe Shapes

There are more shapes and variations on shapes that one could possibly list and talented artisans create more every day. On the accompanying shape charts you can see many of the most common and classic designs.

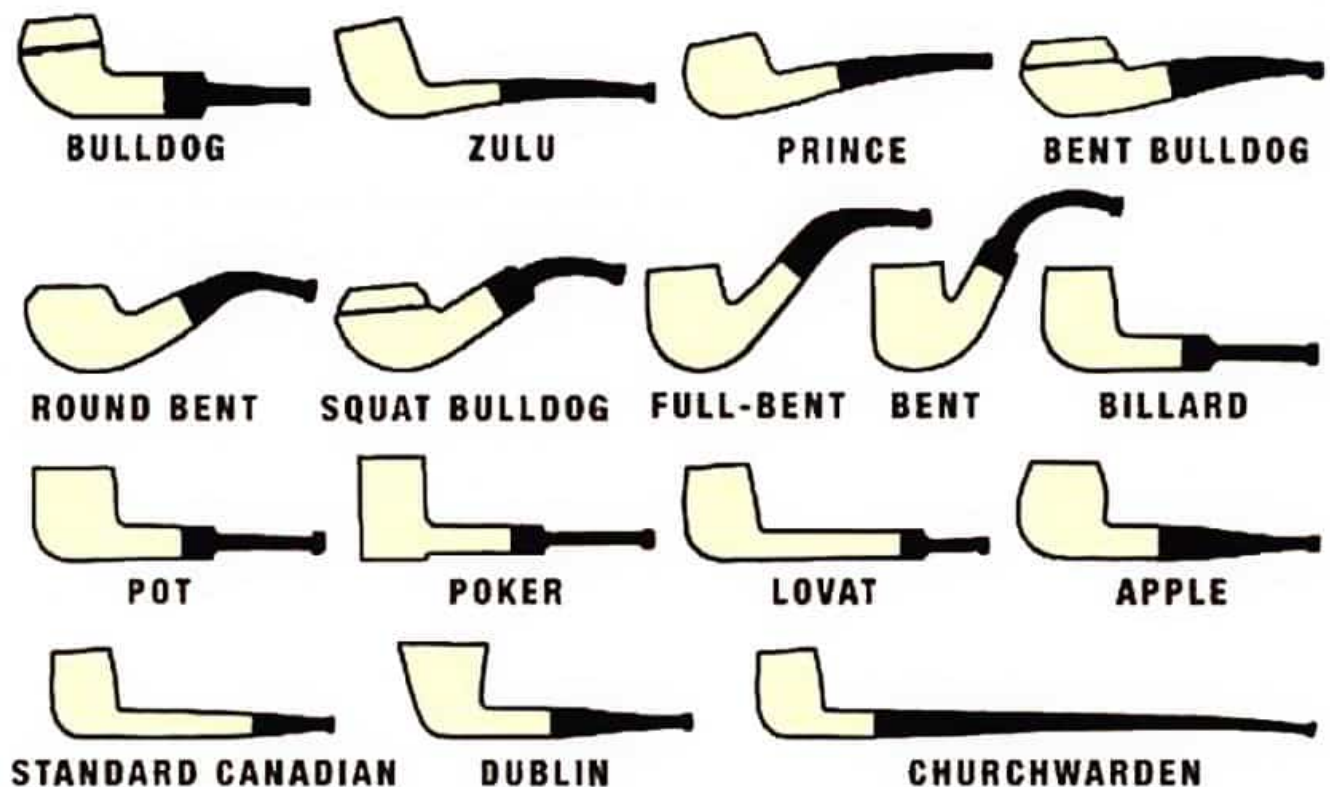
Generally, pipes fall into two broad categories that are defined by the course of the smoke channel. These are simply straight and curved. From there, one can jump off into an ever expanding realm of marvelous and creative shapes. As to the smoking

characteristics of straight versus curved pipes, there is an ongoing debate. My experience and the modest trend of opinion seems to indicate that straight pipes tend to offer a slightly better smoke. I should point out that this may be due to the fact that straight pipes are less likely to collect moisture in the base of the shank at the draft hole.

Over the centuries many styles of pipe shape have appeared and faded. in today's pipe world they are generally thought of in terms of classic English shapes and Danish, or sometimes freehand shapes.

Classic English shapes encompass the silhouettes that we are most familiar with and mostly originated in France and England. The ubiquitous billiard shape and it's straight and bent shank variations, the long stemmed Churchwarden recently re – popularized by the Lord of the Rings films and the venerable cutty shapes descended from the clay tavern pipes of the 1600's are all in this group.

The classic English shapes held sway for several hundred years until about the early 1950's when in Denmark pipe makers began to experiment with alternative shapes in an effort to inject more individual artistic expression into creation of a new and less regimented style of shapes. Many of these early creations, shaped by hand tended to incorporate the natural shape of the briar burl and direction of the grain.



Pipe shape chart credit tobaccodays.com

This was a big move forward toward the mostly universally accepted approach to fine pipe making; working with the natural attributes of the wood to allow the pipe to reveal

itself much as sculptors speak of revealing the figure in a block of marble.

Most pipe historians point to Sixten Ivarsson as the pioneer of the Danish movement and style and his shapes form the core of what many refer to as "classic" Danish shapes. Ironically, Sixten was born Swedish and moved to Copenhagen where he started this Danish revolution.

Today the classic English shapes still dominate the world's production of pipes, though artisan pipe makers on every continent incorporate Sixten's influences and continue to create more and more interesting and beautiful shapes with seemingly endless variations in color, surface treatments and unique combinations of materials.





How to Smoke a Pipe

Pipe smoking, as contrasted with cigar and cigarette smoking, is considered a more relaxed and contemplative pursuit. Cigar smokers may dispute this, but I've never witnessed a group of pipe smokers standing in a knot in animated discussion, as is common at cigar events. Perhaps this is because of the required accoutrement of the pipe smoker. Having need of tobacco pouch, lighter or matches, pipe cleaners, extra pipes, ashtray and a tamper, the pipe smoker is better accommodated in comfortable seating with adequate table space for his requisites. The need for preparation of these items, as well as the attendant rituals of the pipe and a comfortable spot for smoking all tend to promote a relaxed and unhurried state of mind.

For more videos, take a look [here](#).

Pacing is very important in pipe smoking and essential to appreciating all the flavor and qualities afforded by the blender's art. A slow and deliberate pace of puffing should be cultivated into habit so that one may soon be free of the conscious effort to regulate the burning tobacco in the bowl. This is to say that patience and perseverance are required to become a successful pipe smoker; one that can discover the joys of the hundreds of different blends currently available. Patience and perseverance are also necessary to pass through the nearly universal challenge of the beginner's "tongue bite" period. This brief span of the first few bowls of tobacco often produces some minor irritation to the tongue and is responsible for many novices giving up on the pipe before progressing on to have the fully enthralling experience of a great bowl of superb tobacco. Just as with fine liquors and wines, there is a brief period of adjustment

required in order to totally appreciate the consumption of fine tobaccos. It is therefore very important that mild, unflavored or lightly flavored tobacco blends that are not too moist be the the choice blend for introduction to the pipe. A properly engineered pipe is also of great benefit. These two factors alone recommend that a beginning pipe smoker seek advice from an experienced piper when setting out to acquire a first pipe and blend.



Blode Rhodesian pipe by Steve Morisette made with birds eye, celluloid and elephant ivory

It is unfortunate these days that such knowledgeable counsel is difficult to find in most smoke shops, as their primary focus is so often on cigars. One should not ask for advice when buying a new bird gun in the fishing dept. Again patience and deliberation are called for at the very beginning of a pipe smoker's odyssey. What is fortunate is that experienced pipe smokers are pretty much universally pleased to help, advise and mentor those who wish to take up the pipe and join our venerable ranks.

How to Buy a Pipe

There are two main categories of pipes offered for sale: new and estate.

New pipes are just that: un-smoked and never sold before. On the other hand, estate pipes are pre-owned and offer a great opportunity to get a very good pipe for half or less of the normal price at retail. These estate pipes can be smoked or un-smoked. Pre-smoked pipes offer the greatest chance at an excellent bargain and, when properly

cleaned and sterilized with any potable alcohol, can be truly marvelous acquisitions. I have been able to smoke pipes made by some of the finest pipe makers in the world by purchasing their creations on the estate market. Imagine finding a pre – war top of the line John B. Stetson, or a real Ferrari Dino for pennies on the dollar. Estate pipes represent such an opportunity. If you have no issues with using restaurant silver and glassware, you should have no problem smoking an estate pipe once it has been properly cleaned and sterilized with alcohol.



Assortment of Estate Pipes

How to Sanitize a Pipe

1. Buy Pipe cleaner – you should have [soft ones](#) and [hard ones](#) – and sanitizing grain alcohol, NOT isopropyl alcohol. Optionally, use an ultrasonic cleaner with warm water to remove resin and tar from the estate pipe, speeding up the entire cleaning process tremendously. However, on some pipes it might weaken the epoxy joints of horn, ivory or metal band editions.
2. Separate the components of the pipe by sliding or unscrewing the stem from the bowl.
3. Dunk a hard pipe cleaner into the alcohol and clean the pipe stem by running it

back and forth. If you think it is clean, insert a dry pipe cleaner. If it comes out clean, you are done, otherwise repeat this step. Never reuse pipe cleaners but they are so inexpensive that you won't mind throwing them away.

4. Remove resin and tar build-up on the inside of the bowl with a [scraping tool](#).
5. Fold an alcohol drained pipe cleaner in half and Clean the bowl and the tenon (the air hole inside the bowl of the pipe) by gently rubbing the sides of the bowl and sticking the pipe cleaner into the tenon. All residue should be wiped off with a dry pipe cleaner.
6. Rub and wipe the outside of the bowl with alcohol on a paper towel or cloth and let it dry.

Sources for pipes

There are many ways to find yourself a pipe. Pipe shops, online retailers, artisan web sites, Ebay, pipe shows, antique stores, estate sales and flea markets all offer the opportunity to purchase a fine pipe.

Most cigar shops also sell pipes but you will hardly find any standalone pipe shops anymore. Due to the anti – smoking movement and the Draconian increase in federal excise tax on tobacco in the U.S. enacted in 2009, many excellent small shops have closed their doors. Most of those that remain have pared down their pipe offerings to lower and mid market factory brands. There is a handful of pipe shops in the U.S. that still stock a good selection of pipes ranging from lower end factory pipes to the ultra high end pipes created by the world's finest pipe makers. Such retailers are also knowledgeable about their pipes and the tobaccos they stock. Among these are:



Iwan Ries Logo

U.S. pipe shops

[Iwan Ries, Chicago, IL](#)

Uptown's Smoke Shop, Nashville, TN

[Low Country Pipe and Cigar, Myrtle Beach, SC](#)

International pipe shops:

James J. Fox, St. James, London

[Peter Heinrichs, Cologne, Germany](#)

[FF Pipes, Randers, Denmark](#)

[Pipe and Tobacco shop Keigai Tokorozawa, Saitama City, Japan](#)

The internet is a great boon to the pipe smoking enthusiast hoping to purchase an excellent pipe or locate some rare tobacco. One can directly contact many of today's very best artisan pipe makers, online retailers, most brick and mortar shops and there are literally tens of thousands of items under "pipes" on Ebay. However, a huge percentage of them are, if not junk, then at least not to be recommended. Purchasing pipes or anything on Ebay can be fun and the possibilities of finding a bargain on a jewel are frequent, but such purchases are best postponed until one has gained the experience to be a savvy buyer.



Pipes & Smoking Lounge at Iwan Ries

Many fine online retailers offer a huge variety of pipes and many of the finest pipes made today are sold online by very reputable, knowledgeable and service oriented vendors, such as:

Nick Miller's Quality Briar

[Per Billhall's Scandpipes](#)

Smokingpipes.com

A good reputation is vital to these vendors so they pay careful attention to provide good service and often go above and beyond the usual return privileges one can expect from any good retailer. Most online retailers also offer estate pipes.





Pipe shows

My favorite way to secure a new addition to the "herd", as pipers often refer to their collections, is to do so at a pipe show. Pipe shows are held all over the globe these days and are very much like any sale and show event such as antique shows, gun shows, jewelry shows and craft fairs. At these (usually) weekend events like minded collectors, pipe and tobacciana vendors, factory reps and individual artisans gather to sell, trade, swap and revel in all things "pipe". One of the best aspects of the pipe smoking community is that it is made up of some very fine, friendly and discerning folks and they like nothing better than to get together at a pipe show.

Along with very pleasant activities of commerce, one will find a great deal of socializing, catching up with old friends and people making new friends from all points of the compass. Most shows are annual affairs and the largest and perhaps oldest and best known is the [Chicagoland Pipe and Tobacco Expo](#) held each year in St. Charles, Il which is just outside of Chicago. Pipe aficionados from all over the world converge on the Pheasant Run Golf Resort and for three or four days the hotel is virtually taken over by the hundreds of happy attendees. I can recall several years ago at the " Chicago show" as it is known, sitting in the packed bar smoking my pipe (which was permitted at the time) , looking around and seeing men and women of all ages and socio-economic, ethnic and political backgrounds. I heard conversations in Japanese, French, Italian, Austrian, Danish, Spanish, Portuguese and English; all well fuelled by alcohol, and I could not detect one unpleasant exchange or untoward look. It is an experience I shall not forget. And, it is one that has been repeated often in variations at many, many pipe shows since. Though the smoking and drinking now take place in well

appointed tents erected a few steps away from the show hall, the atmosphere of comradeship and fraternity (and sorority) still abound at pipe shows. For the true pipe smoker and aficionado, such events are not to be missed.



Beautiful Custom Pipe by Steve Morrisette

Buying from a Pipe Maker

Another very fine, though quite different, buying experience can be purchasing or commissioning a pipe directly from an artisan pipe maker. While pipes of all levels of quality and price can be found among the artisan makers, they all seem to share the same friendly and approachable attitude. One does not become a pipe maker to become wealthy. As with most artists, theirs is a labor of love and showing interest in their work is a gratifying experience for them. I found this to be equally true of fledgling craftsman and the grand masters of the art. They are passionate about their efforts and are happy when others show an interest. In this regard one should be aware that time spent away from the briar is unrecoverable and each piece is individually hand crafted by the artisan himself, so it is not only polite, but wise to be considerate of his or her time when conducting business. It is also well to keep in mind that while artisans are indeed in business, they are not factories or mass suppliers of goods. Stocks of pipes are not kept on hand and commissioned work takes time to produce. The themes of patience and perseverance arise in this aspect of the [hobby](#) as well as in the honing of one's smoking technique. Direct interaction with artisan pipe makers can be extremely satisfying and has often led to many lasting friendships. I have a collector – now friend – that told me he only buys pipes from makers he knows and likes. This is a truism among collectors and again points up the friendly social aspects of pipe smoking and collecting.

Pipe brands and makers

Very high quality artisan makers:

Lars Ivarsson

Tom Eltang

Jess Chonowitsch

Rainer Barbi

S.Bang

H. Tokutomi

Former

K. Gotoh

Smio Satou

Roman Kovalev (Doctor's pipes)

Viktor Yashtylov

Palo Becker

Cornelius Manz

Quality Factory/ high output handmade pipes:

Castello

Dunhill

(older) Stanwell

Defunct marks that are still widely available:

W.O. Larsen

James Upshall

Charatan

Barling

Saseini

Because I am a North American pipe maker, I shall not even try to list all of them in fear of leaving out a deserving friend. I may be able to dedicate a future posts just to North American pipe maker's, so stay tuned.

Recommended Reading

If you now want to learn more about the topic of tobacco pipes, I recommend you buy the book [In Search of Pipe Dreams by Rick Newcombe](#) and to take a look at the magazine [Pipes and Tobacco magazine](#).

Conclusion

Impossible to recreate for comparison or measurement any aspect of pipe smoking for objective observation. Tobacco blend, humidity, altitude, ambient temperature, pace of puffing, pipe shape, pipe materials and pipe condition are just a few factors that affect the smoker's experience. Judging food, liquor, or even cigars is far less challenging. The good news is that smoking your blend, in your pipe, your way, is truly a unique and sublime experience in today's frequently rough, often uncivil and contentious society. It is a true luxury that thankfully is available to virtually any adult. For now, that is.

[Want to learn more? Checkout our Cigar, Pipe and Tobacco Guide](#)

