

Pipe Tobacco Pressing At Home

By John P. Seiler

For a long time now, the members of the Washington County Pipe Collectors' Club (PA) have been talking about pressing pipe tobacco. Generally speaking, there are three ways to improve the qualities of pipe tobacco:

1. Aging
2. Stoving/steaming
3. Pressing

It has been well documented that aging pipe tobacco improves the taste of pipe tobacco and makes it generally smoother. Virginias tend to age the best. Many people age their tobacco in the tin through cellaring. In my case, I have tins of tobacco that have been aging since the 1990's. Old tins of tobacco can command high prices at pipe shows and on the internet today.

Stoving and steaming are processes where tobaccos are either heated at a proscribed temperature and for a certain amount of time to improve the taste of the tobacco. Steaming also has a similar effect. Stoving also is used generally on Virginia's and tend to turn them from a brown to a black color. Deep Star or McClelland's #5105 are examples of stoved tobaccos. The literature contains methods using ovens, microwaves, and other techniques for the home smoker to try.

Pressing is a method where tobaccos are exposed to high pressures to merge the flavors of the tobaccos. This is usually done in a press. Some of the tobacco manufacturers have quite elaborate presses. Perique tobacco is made through a pressing process where hogsheads of tobacco are pressed in casks for an extended amount of time. Tobaccos such as McClelland's Dark Star and their #5105 bulk blend are made through stoving. Pressing is used to produce crumble cakes and flakes.

There has been much written on how tobacco manufacturers and blenders use these products commercially. Pressing pipe tobacco has long been the province of the large tobacco manufacturers and blenders. Some manufacturers have quite large presses and their processes are often closely guarded secrets. But, what about the individual pipe smoker? How can the individual pipe smoker press tobacco, get good results, and experiment? The intent of this article is to help answer this question.

Beginnings – Where to get a press and forms.

Several years ago, an individual sold a rock maple square form with a top piece and a bottom piece to press tobacco. I do not believe this product is available at the present time. There are several good UTUBE videos of individuals pressing tobacco in such a 'form' and also using wax paper between C-clamps. Some examples include using end pieces on a pipe between furniture clamps. These methods also provide some good, but inconsistent results. I tried them all in my quest. Our club has tried to get a

member to make such a set of forms and use a small screw press, but other commitments interfered with the development of the system...So I "PRESSED" onwards.

Ok, I'm Cheap! I purchased a \$79 - 6 Ton press from Harbor Freight (At the time of purchase it was on sale with a \$10 discount). I finally got it together following the %\$%^ Chinese instructions. Moving the handle up and down causes the bottle jack cylinder to go up against the head frame resulting in the downward motion of the ram. For a 'mold', I cut a 3"-diameter cylinder out of PVC plastic pipe and added two end-pieces out of plastic decking. The photo below shows the initial press.



I thought it would be a rather simple exercise. You put the tobacco in the tube. You put the top piece over the tobacco and just pump the handle. But how long and how hard do you press the tobacco? I let it go for three days constantly adding pressure. The results were rather tragic. The ram on the press went through the plastic top piece and melted it to the steel ram. I had to cut the top piece off of the ram. The second photograph above shows the result of the press. The dimple in the top is where the ram went through the top piece. It was also hard to remove the pressed tobacco "hockey puck" from the PVC pipe.

So after the first press, the lesson to learn was that a better set of end pieces were needed and that a better design was needed to make tobacco extraction from the 'mold' easier. After scratching my head, I came up with the following design:

- Slit the PVC pipe lengthwise once so that it can spread and use hose clamps to secure the mold during pressing. After the press, loosen the hose clamps and press the 'hockey puck' of tobacco through.
- Secondly, use pipe floor stands of comparable diameter to the PVC pipe 'mold' as end pieces.

The setup would look like this:



(Note the nicks on the ram caused by removing the old plastic top-piece that the ram had pierced and melted to it.)

You may also have to develop a method to center the bottom of the ram onto the top of the top end-piece to ensure an even distribution of the pressure across the entire surface area of the volume of tobacco.

I found that it was not necessary to have a hard bottom piece and that you should use wax paper on the top and bottom to facilitate tobacco removal and to isolate the metal top piece from contacting the tobacco and perhaps affecting the flavor. In my opinion, there should be no metal touching the tobacco as it may tend to affect the flavor of the resultant tobacco. I do not like any type of metallic flavor to anything. The design show below seemed to work pretty well and shows the result after the tobacco is pressed. A plastic bottom piece was used and the anvils supplied with the press were left in-place during the pressing.



This was the design of the system that was used. I should add that there was no concern for a leakage of 'juice' from the pressing as I decided to generally use dry tobaccos. The other photograph shows another pressing. The 'dimple' on the top was from the indent in the top piece.

Another way to get similar results is through the use of a large, heavy duty C-clamp shown in the following photograph:



However, it is hard to get reproducible results and it is hard to 'center' the clamp on the top piece.

It was found that the press resulted in a much harder 'hockey puck' type of cake than when using the C-clamp method. The C-clamp method resulted in a puck that was more like a crumble cake which fell

apart quickly. The two types can be seen in the following photograph (the bottom dimple press was created in the high pressure press):



Note that when you press tobacco, the volume is compressed. I have found that the volume compresses to a ratio of 8-10 to 1. You can either start by compressing the entire volume or compress – add-compress-etcetera. Generally, I do not add additional tobacco once I start a press so as to only marry the flavors in the initial volume of tobacco. That being said, you can get some interesting results by layering the tobacco during single or multiple presses.

Time

The question arises as to “how long to leave the tobacco in the press” and “how do you apply pressure”? This is something you can only determine through experimentation. Generally, I found that you apply a lot of pressure initially and then just keep checking to see that the pressure is maintained. I found that I got good results if I pressed the tobacco over three days – keeping a constant pressure applied after the initial pressing. You also got a harder pressed cake. You can also keep increasing the pressure over time for the entire time period.

Moist or Dry?

In my experiments I always started with relatively dry tobaccos to blend. I found that this did not produce any goop. I never used aromatic tobaccos. In the case of where I used tobacco right from the tin to the press, goo was produced.

Blending

You can either press specific types of tobaccos, established blends, or blends of your own development. If pressing a newly created blend, I would recommend designing and producing a small volume ‘mold’ to handle small quantities of tobacco. Although I would recommend the same amount of time to press small volumes, it may be desirable to press large volumes of tobacco for longer amounts of time.

Layering

I also found out that you can get some very interesting results by layering tobacco. If you take a nice Virginia (such as McClelland's 5100) and press it with a layer of Stoved Virginia (McClelland's 5105), you get a very interesting result. Of course, you could layer various types of tobaccos and blends to your heart's desire.

Results

At a meeting of the Washington County, PA pipe club, seven members were in attendance. We tried about 6 or 7 different pressings that I had done in both crumble cakes and hard presses. We noted that after sitting a couple of days, the hard pressed 'pucks' easily broke to provide tobacco to fill a pipe. Some of the 'crumble cakes' had either completely broken apart or came apart very easily.

There was general agreement that pressing the tobacco definitely concentrated and enhanced the flavor of the tobacco and made it much smoother. The 'best' pucks were ones of a pressing of McClelland Deep Hollow that went right from the tin to the press. It also was the only one which provided some 'gook' in the tubes and had to be cleaned before being re-used. The JB Hayes "Toms red and black" that was pressed was excellent. The hit of the night was a pressing of a layer of McC 5100 with a layer of JB Hayes English Rum on Top.

I passed out samples to people at the NASPC show this year of pressed McClelland's #5100, Red Cake. People could not believe the result. Those that tried smoking a sample agreed that it improved the tobacco.

Be careful – If you press tiny amounts of tobacco into individual flakes, it tends to concentrate the flavor and the nicotine. I pressed some eastern Carolina Virginias into a tiny flake and smoked it in a large bowled pipe. It tasted quite good, but after about a half hour, it kicked me in the behind. It had to be the concentrated nicotine.

Another word of caution, pressing tobacco can be habit forming. If you develop a liking for pressing tobacco, you will find that you may go through large volumes of tobacco, depending on the size of the 'molds' that you use. I would advise several different sizes can be produced based on the sizes of available PVC pipe and hardware.

Recommendation

EXPERIMENT! EXPERIMENT! EXPERIMENT! – Try different types of tobaccos, and different blends. Adjust the process – try different pressures, different amounts of time. Find a method you like and let us know how your experiments turn out. Get a more heavy duty press. Harbor Freight makes a 12, 20, and 50 Ton Shop Press.

Develop your own method. I got good results just pressing a pound of English Rum in one press between two large 1" thick rock maple rectangular pieces of wood.

That is the report on the results of the tobacco pressing experiment. It doesn't take a lot of \$\$ in equipment and yields very satisfied results.

(Note: The author can be reached at seilerjp@verizon.net. He is the author of the "Emperor Leopaldo Saga", a series of short stories that combine pipe smoking, pipe collecting, and science fiction which can be down loaded at <http://mysite.verizon.net/seilerjp>)