

Slow Burner

There's a new anti-tobacco crusade afoot, and Santa Monica's Tinder Box is fired up

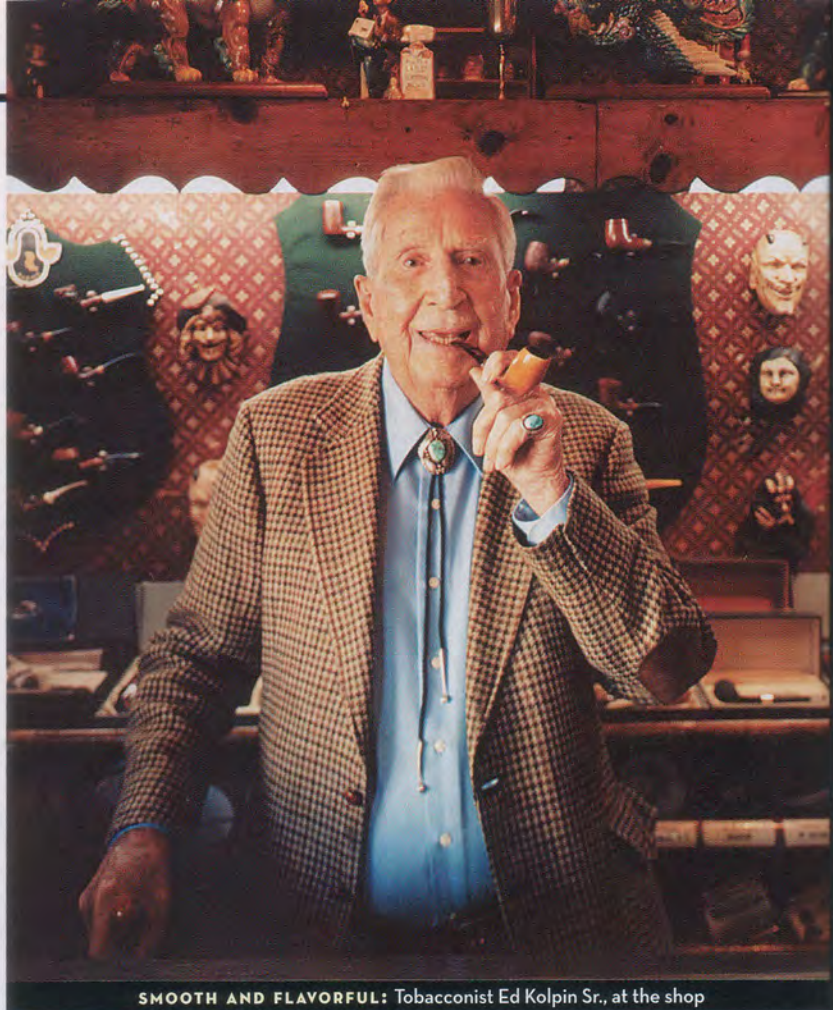
by Matthew Duersten

FROM THE STREET at least, Santa Monica's Tinder Box tobacco emporium would seem to have more in common with a sleepy village in Normandy than with a commercial stretch of Wilshire Boulevard. Heralded by a neon pipe, the stucco-and-shingle cottage was a throwback even when it debuted 75 years ago.

Step inside, and staring down at you from the slanted ceiling is a celebrity clientele from well over four decades—Jayne Mansfield's glamour photo hangs there, as does Gary Busey's, Jim Belushi's, and Arnold Schwarzenegger's. Unlike many of L.A.'s tobacco shops, the Tinder Box radiates none of that melancholy aura that says its best days are behind it. The humidors are well stocked; many of the pipes are hand-carved, European, and expensive; some cigars are custom blended. Patrons are not in short supply, and they tend to hang around, often to kvetch, with the volume extra loud—the way smokers used to talk before lighting up in a bar became a crime.

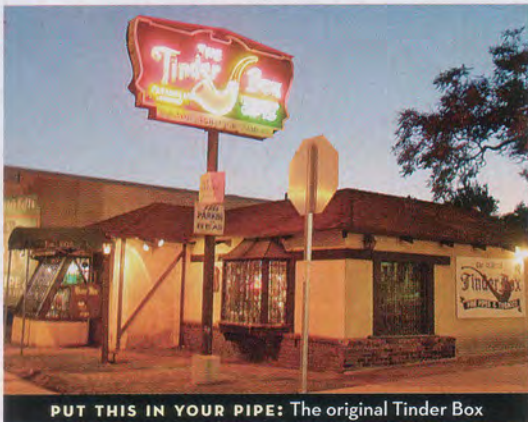
On a recent afternoon one large-limbed man in his thirties is complaining about the newer crop of tobacco stores. "They're either head shops or those cheap cigarette outlets!" he says, shaking his head as he grabs his vacuum-sealed bag of Partagas off the spotless glass counter. "Hitler was a nonsmoker, and Einstein was a pipe smoker," grunts another man with a snow-white mustache and a briar pipe clenched in his teeth. "What does that tell you?"

In the cluttered and bustling back room, its air heavy with sweet tobacco and its floor littered with cigar ash, Ed Kolpin Sr., the store's 97-year-old owner and founder, holds court behind a tiny desk. In his tweed jacket, turquoise bolo tie, and tinted glass-



SMOOTH AND FLAVORFUL: Tobacconist Ed Kolpin Sr., at the shop

es, Kolpin resembles a tan Walter Cronkite. Next to him sits a swiveling display of the curled-stem pipes he developed for Bing Crosby. When he unsheathes a new cigar to smoke, he cuts six little holes into its end with a Trilogy, a tiny spearlike device of his own invention. In the corner one of his employees applies steam to a wooden pipe in order to get the dent out of it—a "trade secret" Kolpin devised to avoid having to sand it down and ruin its grain.



PUT THIS IN YOUR PIPE: The original Tinder Box

Kolpin has been a mainstay in the business since Prohibition, launching his first nicotine venture at the soda fountain of his father's Santa Monica drugstore in 1927—a time, he says in his gravel-pit voice, when "every corner shop sold tobacco and everyone smoked cigars." Nowadays L.A.'s oldest living tobacconist is bracing

himself for the Tobacco Tax Initiative of 2006, a new ballot measure sponsored by 17 different health-advocacy groups. If passed, it will impose an additional \$2.60 levy on every pack of cigarettes sold in the state.

For his part, Kolpin isn't too rattled by new taxes on cigarettes, which account for only 10 percent of his sales. He

▶ seems to share the anti-tobacco lobby's disdain for that inferior, more addictive, and more deadly product. "If I'd been smoking cigarettes instead of cigars all these years, I would've been dead by now," he chuckles, taking a puff and expelling it in a cloud. "Hell, I would've been dead 50 years ago."

What irks him and other old-school tobacconists is that the initiative's supporters—and California law—make no such distinctions. Currently, California is the only state imposing the same level of taxation on "Other Tobacco Products" (OTPs)—cigars, pipe tobacco, and smokeless tobacco—that it imposes on cigarettes. "The way we're looking at it is that there are no less-harmful tobacco products," says Ann Gouré of the American Cancer Society. "Besides, when we tax tobacco as a whole, we know it reduces consumption on all levels."

In a recent letter to *Cigar Aficionado* magazine Kolpin warned of a different hazard: "It is imperative that we separate pipe tobacco and cigars from the category of cigarettes. With another rise in taxes, they will be up so high that we will be forced to close our doors after nearly 80 years in the business."

Tinder Box customers might have read this vow with some skepticism. Kolpin has proved more adaptable than those legions of competitors who folded 20 years ago, certainly more so than all those bankrupt cigar bars launched during the 1990s' social-smoking boom. Most of them didn't share his flair for innovation, nor did they cultivate such a wealthy customer base or purchase their own property. Kolpin's family sold the franchise rights to the store in 1974, and Tinder Boxes now grace malls from Costa Mesa to Columbus, Ohio. For his own store, he hasn't shied away from promotions or even tchotchkes. In addition to high-end smoking accessories, he's introduced other products that have everything to do with alcohol—beer steins, pewter flasks, porcelain cognac flacons—to offset his decreased profits from nicotine. "This shop has rolled with the changes and made the best of it," Kolpin says. "I will find a way to stay in business and make money. I'm determined, no matter what happens." **LA**



ADMIT ONE: A view of the Venice Amusement Pier and (below) NuPike

Thrill Re-seekers

The virtual return of lost amusement parks *by Michael Mullen*

SIXTY YEARS AFTER BEING shuttered, the Venice Amusement Pier is again open to revelers. The Giant Dipper roller coaster clatters and plunges, the Dragon Bamboo Slide offers milder thrills for the faint of heart, and the midway is mobbed. In the evening the sun sets beyond the stone breakwater as it did in the Roaring '20s heyday of Abbot Kinney's fantasyland.

The resurrected park is more pixelated dream than feast for the senses. Mark Paul Sebar, author of science-fiction works such as *Moon Racists* and a book of verse titled *L.A. Grudge Poems, Volume 1*, has created this computer simulation of the park with the help of Atari's Roller Coaster Tycoon 3 software program and Southern California theme-park historian Jeffrey Stanton.

As a child, Sebar—who has also re-created Van Nuys's Busch Gardens, Santa Monica's Pacific Ocean Park, and Thousand Oaks's Jungleground—spent weekends among the rides at Long Beach's NuPike and passed the time sketching amusement parks. Like many who grew up frequenting such now-defunct destinations, he finds something lacking in the contemporary versions. "In today's amusement parks the coasters are as smooth as a jet airliner," Sebar says. "The older parks had an air, a feel, and a look to them that said, in a word, 'simplicity.'"

Sebar's simulation offers more than just nostalgia. The queasiness of taking hairpin turns on the old wooden roller coasters is real, and the computerized people who wander the park point and gawk at the sights while they eat their cotton candy. Nevertheless, the graphics are a little clunky, and some rides had to be reconstructed from patchy information—not to mention that the pier hovers on an invisible coastline. "The Venice Pier took a lot of research," says Sebar, "but I've also been somewhat scolded by historians for its being inaccurate. I'll admit, some of it is less than perfect." *Roller Coaster Tycoon 3: Gold!*, \$39.99, is required to run the Venice Amusement Pier simulation, which can be downloaded at sebar.com/rct3/venice1926.html. **LA**

