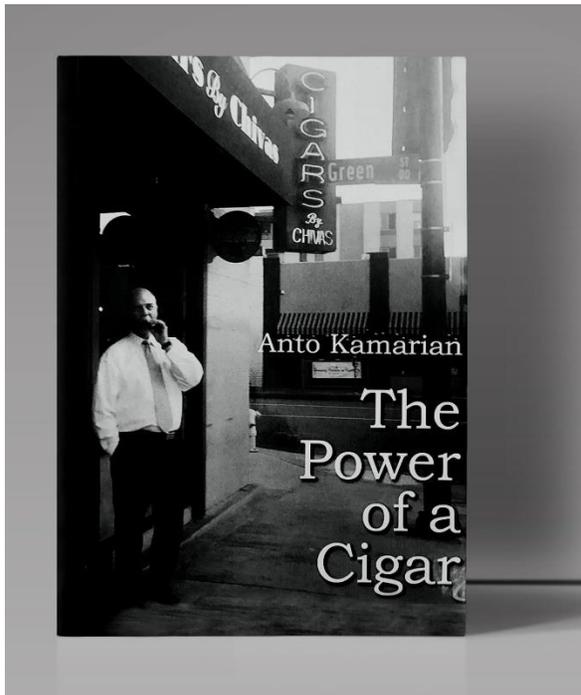




## An Informal History of Cigars by Chivas



How do you end up doing what you do in life?

It's a good question. People ask it all the time: you look at where you are, then at where you've come from, and you have trouble finding the logical process which got you from Point A to Point B.

Or, in my case, from Point A to Point T. One thing is certain: I never set out to become one of the leading tobacconists in greater Los Angeles.

Was it what's called in Armenian *djagadagir*, fate, that explains how Cigars by Chivas came to be? Or was it luck, *hajoghut'yun*, or was it just *hnaravorut'yun*, chance? Or was it a combination of all three?

I'll let you decide.

The story begins more or less with the name of the business, which I'm sure a lot of my clients – even the regular ones – have wondered about. One very steady client recently said that the name "Chivas" came from a Mexican soccer team I idolized. Everyone knows that I'm a big soccer fan – but would any self-respecting Armenian name his shop after a *Mexican* soccer team?

In reality, Chivas was a man's nickname, that of a fellow Armenian and good friend of mine. More than a friend, he was also a client of some of the businesses I was involved in back in 1995. I was keeping the books for the jewelry store Chivas was running – called Chivas Jewelry – which, as our story begins, he had decided to turn over to his brother.

Maybe it would help if you imagined the scene: the two of us (you need to imagine me as somewhat younger than I am now...and with more hair, and Chivas, older than I, balding. but with his hair pulled back into a pony tail) sitting in my office in Downtown Los Angeles, leaning back in our chairs and trying to come up with Chivas' next business move. Oh, wait – I forgot one important detail: we were both smoking cigars at the time. Although I'd been fond of cigars since I smoked that first one on that crossing of the English Channel, at this point in our story, I was a couple-cigars-a-week smoker. This should give you an idea of my relationship with Chivas: he was the kind of client you'd have a cigar with when you were having a meeting.

It would be fun to say that Chivas and I were also drinking coffee, and that it was after studying the grounds in his saucer that I came up with my Big Idea. But all I had in my head was that cigar, and, more as a casual suggestion than a vision of the future, I pointed to it with my free hand and said to him, "*this* will be your next business."

That's it. Six words.



Chivas thought about it for a few seconds, then said to me that he'd go in if I went in with him. My turn to think about it, and my brain reasoned that running a cigar shop might help me find clients for my other ventures, so I agreed. In the space of less than a minute, I found myself entering a partnership and going into the cigar business. Let me assure you that I had no idea where that decision would take me.

Maybe this is a good time to explain how Chivas got his name. No, it's not another Armenian name no one in this country has ever heard of: at least back in 1995, it was a word most Americans knew. Those were the days before single malts took over the scotch market, when scotches were generally blended, and the *crème de la* blended *crème* was Chivas Regal. My new partner, whose real name was Richard, drank a lot of Chivas Regal (he wasn't the only one) – so much so that we'd started calling him by the name of his favorite drink.

So that's how Chivas became Chivas. And how our new business venture came to be called Cigars by Chivas.

We put Chivas' name on the shop because he was to be the front man, while I was to remain a silent partner behind the scenes. People knew Chivas from his jewelry business, and he was the kind of outgoing guy you'd want as the face of what we'd decided would be as much a hospitality business as a retail one. The idea was never just to sell cigars; we also wanted to provide a space where our clients might *enjoy* their cigars. (That this was just around the time when the State of California banned indoor smoking made the idea of a cigar lounge all the more fortuitous. Safe havens for smokers were going to be in demand. We were, in fact, one of the very first tobacconists in California to offer a full-service cigar lounge.)

Chivas and I started out by signing a lease for a 2400 square foot retail space on Arroyo Parkway, just north of Colorado Boulevard. Our plan was for something which was more cigar bar than cigar lounge: we obtained licenses for liquor and entertainment as well as for tobacco, and were imagining a more diverse experience than the one Cigars by Chivas would ultimately come to offer.

That was towards the end of 1995. The Grand Opening was slated for the following February.

In the interim, another unplanned but life-altering twist of fate intervened. The realtor who'd gotten us the Arroyo location came back to tell us that a terrific retail space was opening up at the other end of what was starting out to be the Pasadena Old Town we know today. It was a small shop, smaller than 1000 sq. ft., situated across from Twin Palms on the corner of De Lacey Avenue and Green Street. (This is where you say "aha!".) The most recent tenant had been a seasonal shop for Hallowe'en costumes, and a longer lease was available.

It was too good a space to pass up, even if Chivas and I were still in the process of getting ready to open up only a few blocks away. I like to think that I've got some business sense, and, looking at the De Lacey space, I thought that there might be a good idea in having cigar shops that bookended what was clearly an up-and-coming neighborhood. In 1995, Pasadena's Old Town was still a few years from really taking off, but it wasn't all that hard to see that it was going to be huge. And, as far as having two cigar shops in a so small



an area, I thought it would be better to have two than to have to compete with someone else.

But it turned out that there *was* competition. In the form of a tall, handsome, and *extremely* tan gentleman who'd had a little Hollywood experience. George Hamilton had taken a lease on a second-floor property on Raymond Avenue, south of Colorado Boulevard, where he intended to start a high-end members-only cigar club. I'm sure it was purest coincidence that led him to schedule the opening of Hamilton's for exactly the same weekend that Cigars by Chivas had announced its opening on Arroyo. After some shuffling, we managed to beat him out, by opening our doors on a Wednesday, which we made the first day of a Grand Opening Weekend. Several city officials turned out to welcome our business to Pasadena – those being the days when elected officials weren't afraid of being seen within 20 feet of tobacco.

I did get to meet George Hamilton once, however. One afternoon, when I was in the Arroyo shop getting things ready, he stopped by to have a look at how things were shaping up. I invited him to have a drink, but he said that he couldn't spare the time just then. He was thoroughly friendly, and suggested that I come to his place sometime and join him for a drink.

He still owes me that drink. I may not get it anytime soon, however, as Hamilton's went out of business several years ago.

Fate, which had already played its role in the story, then intervened and completely upset the plans we had made. During the time that we were getting the De Lacey location ready to open, immigration officials turned up in the Arroyo shop and picked up Chivas, who was deported back to Lebanon three months later. (Chivas died a few years ago, so he never got to see the opening of the shop which, to this day, bears his name.)