

# L'Amateur

de Cigare

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# ZAYA YOUNAN, THE BILLIONAIRE OF THE CIGAR

Born in Iran, the businessman made his fortune in real estate in the United States. Recently, he bought himself the Costa Rican cigar brand El Septimo but also, on a whim, a few

French castles.  
- Laurent Mimouni -  
- Photos : Luc Monnet -

« The first time I came across El Septimo cigars was here in Paris four or five years ago. I found this unique tasting, it was the best of my life. I couldn't smoke anything else afterwards. >> A few months later, Zaya Younan entered into negotiations with the owner of the brand. << I bought a lot, for me or to offer them. I thought to myself, "Why not buy the business?" The man who receives us in a Parisian smokehouse where he has his habits, near the Champs-Élysées, is not one to be bothered with details. Whether it be cigars or castles, for that matter... He tells the same story almost when asked what motivates him to buy beautiful French homes all over the place: "Since I was very small, I am fascinated by the architecture of your country. I visited it when I was a child and I came here. So I decided to buy and restore French historic monuments and make them available to the public in the form of hotels or restaurants.

"The little Iranian - he prefers to describe himself as a "Christian Assyrian born in Tehran" - emigrated to the United States with his parents at the age of thirteen, and became a wealthy businessman after an engineering career (General Motors, IBM) that has been



interrupted by the urge to get into real estate. Specialized in office buildings, his Younan Properties, based in Los Angeles, now heads \$2 billion in assets. In 2015, while traveling through France with his wife for their twenty-fifth anniversary, the couple fell in love with the Château du Petit Chêne, in Deux-Sèvres, a 17th century residence surrounded by an estate of 24 hectares and an 18-hole golf course. "We visited it and during the day I made an offer," he said. He is putting 10 million euros on the table to completely renovate the building and make it a 5-star establishment. But it does not stop there: the acquisitions are linked. The Younan Collection, which is to France and luxury hotels what the Younan Properties is to the United States and to real estate offices, now has nine hotels, four golf courses and even two vineyards ( Château La Croix Younan and Château La Garelle, both in Saint-Émilion).

### **A mysterious blend**

we are convinced that "the Cubans do not age their tobacco well because of the too strong demand", our businessman assures that the assembly of his cigars contains Cuban tobacco "aged by us", even if we point out to him that Cuba does not officially export tobacco intended for cigars. Where do these leaves come from? What farmers or Cuban state-owned enterprise does he buy them from? "It's like wine, you don't say what barrels you use," he eludes, taking refuge behind the "secret" and the "part of mystery" that should be kept to make lovers dream. In this, it perpetuates the brand policy created in 2005 by Gilles Botquin, who has always played a mystery on the composition of his vitolas. "I don't know today, but yes, there was a hint of Cuban tobacco in our cigars from the start," he said. This is not 80% of the gut, and obviously, I will not tell you anything about our supply chains of the time which, I think, have not changed.

"Among the almost 500 cigars tasted in the Cigaroscope 2019, El Septimo is the only brand to have refused to reveal the origin of its tobacco to us. This" questionable traceability "(to use the expression of a very good connoisseur of the Parisian market) allied with very high prices ended up confusing many civets, but as admits a retailer, "it works well with a bling bling clientele". "It was marketing and nothing else, remembers Gilles Botquin, why sell cheap cigars when there is a clientele - especially foreigners visiting France - ready to pay very dearly for these stations? "



### **A BRAND WITH A TUMULTUEOUS PAST**

The El Septimo brand was created in 2005 by Gilles Botquin, character sulfur of French cigar

who had bought a license for tobacco importation in the late 1990s -

he used the license to distribute Cuban cigars acquired in France. In other countries

Europeans, in particular, prestige editions hard to find in France, after passing them through Switzerland. Attacked on the courts by the official importer Coprova, he then accumulated legal setbacks, until spending time in Grasse prison.

El Septimo cigars were then passed into the hands of investor Thierry de Conti before being bought in March 2019 by Zaya Younan. The brand, some references of which happily exceed 50 euros / piece, is only present in around twenty points of sale in France, mainly in the Paris "golden triangle" and on the French Riviera.

LE PRIEURÉ,  
PROPRIÉTÉ DE LA YOUNAN COLLECTION.

