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SNUFF LURES TOBACCO FIENDS WITH WHIFF OF EXOTIC HISTORY

Aad Van Strien, a volunteer miller at De Ster snuff and spice mill in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, demonstrates proper snuff technique. Photo: Jock Fistick/Wired

A SMALL ROUND tin is produced from the pocket.

It's about an inch and a half in diameter, with a green label bearing a German brand name. The top pops off with a twist, revealing the contents: a fine, dark brown powder. A pinch of powder is removed, brought to the nose and inhaled with a quick whiff.

A bystander, watching from nearby, grows suspicious. "What is that, drugs?" he asks.

Yes, and no.

One of history's most esoteric methods of satisfying a tobacco jones is making a resurgence as a new generation of hipsters trade lungs full of smoke for a nose full of snuff.

Unlike dip, chew or "snus," moist tobacco products that are ingested orally, dry snuff is made from tobacco leaves that have been ground into a fine powder. Pre-Columbian American inhabitants were the first known snuffers. It's been used in Europe since the 1500s, mostly among the aristocracy, both for enjoyment and for its perceived medicinal properties. Use has declined sharply over the last hundred years, but the stuff is still around.

Modern snuff comes in a variety of flavors. It is sniffed quickly into the nostrils, where it produces a stimulating burn — and a heady nicotine buzz — without the tobacco smoke that's been banned from many public locations.

"For most, snuff is an alternative to smoking," says Alexander Schardt, a snuff lover from Hamburg, Germany, who runs the popular Snuffhouse.org discussion board. "People recognize cigarette smoking is unhealthy, and you can't do it at work or a lot of other places."

Like trendy boozers pouring absinthe over antique spoons or rockabilly fans digging up vintage clothes and restoring classic cars, nasal snuff users are drawn in by an anachronistic habit with a colorful past. Decorative snuff boxes and fancy snuff bottles add to the international allure of an exotic vice with a fascinating history.

With smoking banned in many bars and nightclubs — hangouts that once were synonymous with a haze of tobacco smoke — snuff, electronic cigarettes and other smokeless methods of ingesting nicotine are growing in popularity. While these methods of consumption cut out the tar and carbon monoxide associated with smoking, they do not eliminate the addictive properties of nicotine, the stimulant found in tobacco.

Though users rave about how benign snuff is, the substance's safety as an alternative to cigarettes is largely untested. While users aren't inhaling tar or producing second-hand smoke, definitive research on the safety of nasal snuff is lacking, mostly because dry snuff is such a microscopic segment of the tobacco market. Most studies in the United States and Europe have tended to focus on oral snuff, which is a known cause of mouth, head and neck cancers.

The U.S. Surgeon General will not recommend dry snuff as a safe alternative to other tobacco products, and tins sold in this country bear the same warning stickers as oral snuff and other forms of smokeless tobacco. European snuff makers apply similar labels warning users of snuff's damaging health effects and addictive properties. Studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have shown the use of smokeless tobacco products like snuff can lead to nicotine addiction, and that smokeless tobacco users are more likely to become cigarette smokers.

According to a Federal Trade Commission report, roughly 20 million individual packages of dry snuff were sold in the United States in 2005, the last year for which such data is available. In the same year, roughly 17.7 billion packs of cigarettes were sold in the United States.

Dry snuff's popularity in the Western world peaked generations ago. Since then, it's been seen primarily as an old man's vice. For most, talk of the stuff conjures vague images of mustachioed Germans wearing tweeds and toting pocket watches, taking toots from a wooden snuff box after a hearty dinner of Weisswurst in some candlelit Munich den a century ago.

“There’s still that image of the old guys in Bavaria,” says Schardt. “But it’s also being used by the younger guys in their 20s and early 30s.”

Exotic flavors and strange rituals

Snuff comes in different strengths and flavors. The powdered tobacco is most commonly mentholated, but some varieties are scented with fruit, floral oils or anise. More exotic blends are flavored with bourbon, coffee, chocolate, coconut or peppermint.

The act of taking snuff is somewhat colorful as well. For starters, you don’t just snort the stuff. In fact, you never even inhale it. The trick is to take a small pinch between the thumb and index finger — some use a knuckle — and sniff just enough of the fine powder to coat the inside of the nostril’s opening. It sits there, producing both the desired buzz and a strong burning sensation.

First-time snuffers will often cough and sneeze repeatedly as their eyes fill with tears. Sniff too vigorously and the powder winds up in the back of the throat, resulting in an unpleasant taste and, often, an upset stomach.

A variety of dry snuffs from the Netherlands, India, Great Britain, Germany and the U.S. Photo: Jon Snyder/Wired.com

Snuff is a niche product “for people who are trying to be different, or for people who like it for the ritual,” says Schardt, who has created a beginner’s guide (.pdf) demonstrating various sniffing techniques and suggesting mellower brands for curious beginners.

Snuff is also much cheaper than cigarettes. While a pack of 20 smokes can set you back $7, dry snuff costs between $2 and $5 for a pocket-size container of about 7 grams. One such tin can last a regular user several weeks.

Professor A. Phillips Griffiths, a regular snuff user since the 1940s who writes on his Snuffs and Snufftaking website, says the habit is catching on with a new generation.

“I’ve been told by the people I know who make and sell the stuff that it’s becoming quite popular with young people,” says Griffiths, who became curious about snuff as a teenager after finding it referenced in a work by Charles Dickens. He cites the latest smoking bans in his native Britain as the likely cause of the most recent uptick.

Hipsters sniff out snuff

Twentysomething hipsters are certainly giving snuff a try. Rather than finding motivation in literary references or legislative proscriptions, it may simply be the badge of coolness one earns by embracing an obscure counterculture.

There are other social complications, like the fact that shoveling any sort of powder into your nose while in public is quite suspicious for obvious reasons. Add to that the need to carry a tissue or handkerchief to wipe away the brown tobacco crumbs that line the nostrils after each use, and you've got a drug that's more ostracizing than inviting.

"It's still sort of like a cult, because it's a bit too complicated to be accepted by the mainstream," says Snuffhouse.org's Schardt, who figures snuff is too much of an underground phenomenon to be tagged as the next hot trend.

Myche Worthen, a longtime snuff lover from Eureka, California, says he is continually trying to educate his friends about the stuff.

"The average person doesn't know what to make of it, and sometimes they even assume that it is a drug that is being used," says the snuff evangelist, who was once sent home from high school after being caught using the substance. The principal, convinced the snuff was a hard drug, sent the confiscated brown powder to a lab to be tested.

These days, Worthen buys exotic snuffs from around the globe over the internet and mixes up his own blends for himself and friends. He credits snuff with helping him quit cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

Even after citing its benefits, Worthen has difficulty communicating snuff's allure to his friends.

"I tell them how it was the first form of tobacco ever used and how it is far superior to smoke or spit," he says. "It's amazing how many people are scared to death of it and will not even listen."