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A cigar by any other name would taste as sweet

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In 2009, under the provisions of the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (FSPTCA), the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned cigarettes with ‘characterising flavours’ like candy, clove and fruit, with the exception of menthol. Importantly, these regulations do not currently apply to cigars, which remain a heavily flavoured market.¹ Amid declining cigarette consumption in the USA, cigar sales have risen and prevalence remains high among certain groups. Indeed, among African–American youth, cigars are the most popular tobacco product.² Moreover, recent studies have shown that young adult cigar smokers have a clear preference for *flavoured* cigars.¹

We examined trends in flavoured cigar sales between 2008 and 2014 with Nielsen's Convenience Track System data, using previously described methods.¹ We coded flavours into key categories, including: fruit, sweet/candy, wine, liquor, clove, menthol and ‘other.’ figure 1 depicts flavoured market share between study years. In 2014, flavoured cigars accounted for more than half of all cigar sales (53.3%), with fruit (20.9%), sweet/candy (12.8%) and wine (9%) being the most popular flavours. Although these three flavour groups dominate market over this period, fruit declined from 28.7% to 20.9% while the ‘other’ category rose from 0.8% to 6.9%. When examining the ‘other’ category by brand, we noted that two brands, Swisher Sweets and Middleton's Black and Mild, were the greatest contributors to the category. Approximately 77% of all ‘other’ flavoured products in 2014 were extensions of these two brands.

Given the rapid emergence of ‘other,’ we sought to identify the nature of these non-descript flavours through internet searches of trade publications and other websites, like online cigar vendors. Black and Mild sold three flavours coded as ‘other’ in 2014: ‘Jazz,’ ‘Golden’ and ‘Royale’. Internet searches found that ‘Jazz’ was described as a ‘unique fruity taste,’³ while ‘Golden’ was ‘vanilla and nutty.’⁴ ‘Royale’ was described in YouTube reviews as ‘creamy, vanilla and mild flavoured.’⁵ Swisher Sweets sold two non-descript flavours in 2014: ‘Tropical Fusion’ and ‘Spicy Hot’. Trade publications described ‘Tropical Fusion’ as pineapple and coconut flavoured,⁶ while ‘Spicy Hot’ was cinnamon-like.⁷ Additionally, our search, conducted in June 2015, identified new cigar products from Black and Mild (‘Summer Blend,’ ‘Dark Blend’) and Swisher Sweets (‘Tropical Storm,’ ‘Island Bash,’ ‘Arctic Ice,’ ‘Calypso’ and ‘Summer Twist’) all with identifiable flavours mentioned in their product descriptions. These flavours are citrus/raspberry, watermelon/fruit punch, icy mint, orange/cream/blueberry and lemon/mango, respectively.

Given their long history of attempts to circumvent regulation,^{8,9} the cigar industry may be pre-emptively steering away from overt flavour descriptors, instead relying on more generic names on their packaging in anticipation of a ban on flavoured cigars. On April 25, 2014 the FDA published a proposed rule to expand their authority over cigars.¹⁰ Once these rules are finalised, the FDA could take steps to ban flavoured cigars based on the same arguments that guided the ban on flavoured cigarettes. To avoid unintended exemptions to a potential flavour ban, regulators should be aware that flavoured tobacco products may be deceptively labelled and any effort to ban flavourings should not rely solely on the language on the package. An appropriate definition for ‘characterising flavours’ that takes into account product ingredients may be necessary to fully capture cigar products that are distinctly flavoured.

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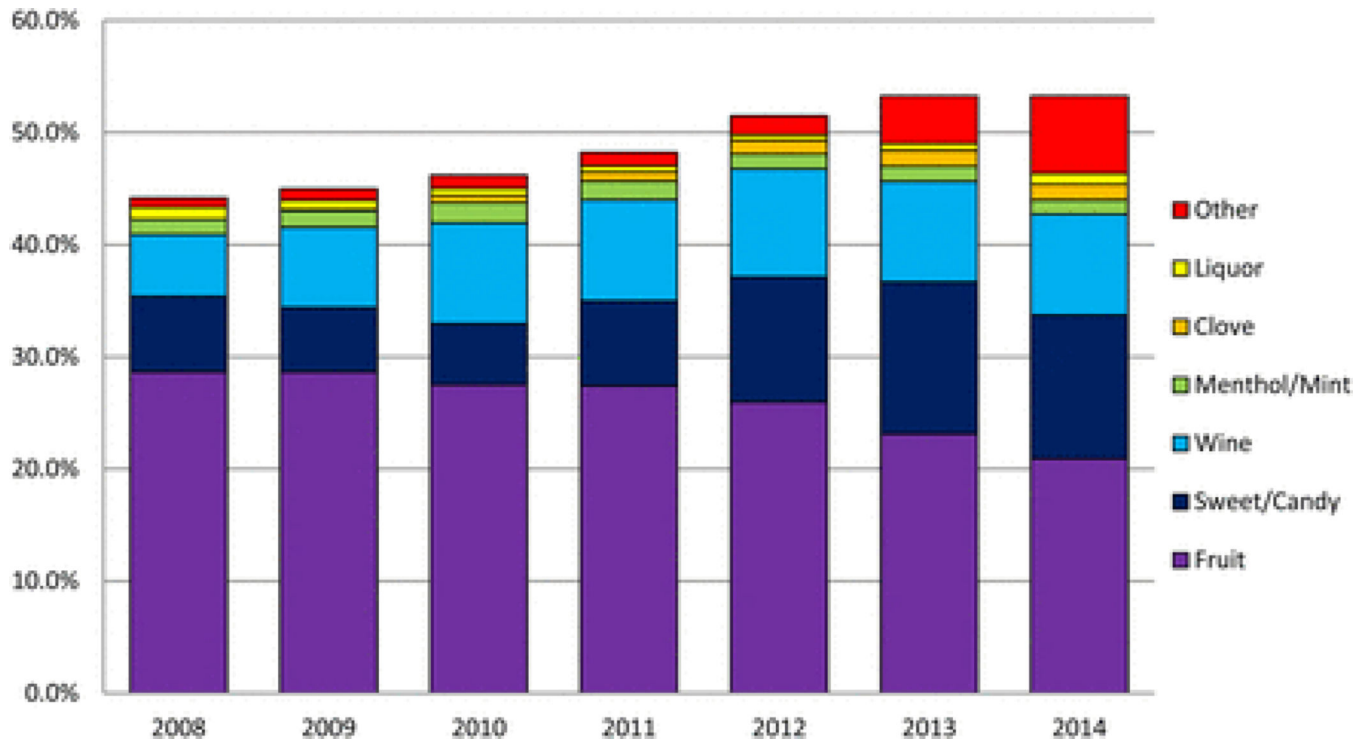


Figure 1.
Flavoured market share among cigars sold, 2008–2014 Nielsen C-Track*.