



## Yvonne and Yvette Rodriguez Are Shaking Up the Cigar Industry

When a santera declared that it was time for Yvonne and Yvette Rodriguez to work together, the twin sisters didn't flinch. Today, they're shaking up the cigar industry with their Miami-based brand, Tres Lindas Cubanas. With charisma and humor, the sisters tell Alicia about launching their business with only \$500, harnessing the power of their Afro-Cuban roots in the cigar market, and why they're doing it all to honor their ancestors.

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Clip, Yvonne Rodriguez:

*The cigar has been weaved into our history. If it's not from slavery, working in factories in Cuba. But for us, even religiously, if I walk into one, I smell cigar smoke; that's like if somebody walks into a church and they smell the incense that they burn, its like that. It is the ultimate representation of our history.*

Alicia Menendez:

Almost as if to test just how close twin sisters could be, Yvonne and Yvette Rodriguez are also business partners. They own Tres Lindas, a Miami-based cigar company, and in a crowded male-dominated industry, the two Afro-Cuban women harness the very things that make them different to rise above competitors.

This is the first time we've had two people on at once, so thank you. This is like a grand experiment.

Yvonne: Twin power. Pioneers.

Menendez: Yvonne, the business begins with a visit to a santera. So I feel like we have to start there because it can't get any better than that. You knock on the santera's door, you give her your \$21 payment, and what does she tell you?

Yvonne: Well, first of all, that is completely the truth. I went to a santera. My brother recommended me to her.

Menendez: I know, I love that your brother had a santera on tap.

Yvonne: Yeah, she was clara clara, she was gladísima. She said, "Listen, you came in with a whole bunch of spirits," I'm assuming ancestors, and she said, "They want you to talk about them." During that time, I was working in TV. I was working at Telemundo--

Menendez: As an editor.

Yvonne: Yeah, post-production editor working on soap operas. And the santera said, "They want you to speak about them." She kept mentioning that. She said that I was going to be working with my sister. She said that we're going to be doing something together, you know, consider her like a business partner. Cut to 12 years later, I left my job, my corporate job.

Yvette: They removed you. Your ancestors removed you.

Yvonne: Yes. Yes. They opened the door for me to leave.

Menendez: Just took you 10 years to walk through it. And so Yvette, when she calls you and tells you all of this, what's your first thought?

Yvette: I'm more or less a "yes" person, and you know I'm ride or die for my sis. I was like, "Yeah." It was a little bit in the talks like, we're cigar smokers or whatever. So, we did have a conversation before, casually actually about, "Oh, maybe having a cigar brand, something like that." And it was like, okay.

Yvette: And then one day she calls me and she's like, "Listen, I think that we should have a cigar brand. I think that we should have three blends, and that we should call it Tres Lindas Cubanas. And I think that one blend should be La Negrita, one blend should be La Mulata, and one blend should be La Clarita" And I go, "Yes."

Menendez: So what's the moment where it goes from being an idea to something that you're actually putting money into?

Yvette: It was a lot of research. We kind of jumped in blindly. Again, being in Miami, this is like the cigar industry headquarters. A lot of the offices are here. A lot of the owners are Cuban descendants of tobacco owners or cigar brand owners in Cuba. When they left and they went to other countries, they went to Dominican Republic, they went to Nicaragua, they came to Miami also. So for us, it started with research. We were already cigar enthusiasts. We were already visiting cigar shops and things like that. It was like saying going to a bar or something.

Menendez: Sure, but Yvette, you are a cigar enthusiast. What do you know about actually making cigars?

Yvette: We actually do not roll our cigars. We leave that to the master rollers in Nicaragua. We do dabble if there's an event or something like that. But we admired everything about it from seed to smoke basically. So, then as consumers and enthusiasts, we're going to cigar shops, we're trying out different cigars, we're looking at the construction of the cigar. There's different shapes of a cigar. Our most popular is our torpedo shape. It's a whole world to research and to learn.

And besides that, the bands on the different cigars, what are the words that pop out the Most? How do the boxes look like? My house is full of cigar boxes with things in them. I've always loved it, you know? So from our point where we're coming from the consumer point, not from our old family that owned a farm. We're coming from it like hardcore business but hardcore traditional in a sense, but our style.

Menendez: What was missing in the market? I mean, there are a lot of brands. Where did you see the opportunity to create something new?

Yvette: When we first launched around that year, there were a lot of boutique cigar brands coming out. Seeing when we started and who was starting their brands, also that we were all kind of the same age. We were all immigrants, obviously Spanish-speaking from parents of other countries, mostly Cuban of course. And we're creating small-batch blends. So then for us it was doable because we weren't creating a high volume to begin with, you know? And there was a market for that because people were looking for things that you don't just buy big box. So then that also came into play for us, because we were small fish. I mean, we continue to be small fish, but we have followers and a consumer base. But again, this was, we went into it blindly, truthfully.

Yeah, it wasn't like, "We're going to take over the industry." That wasn't the goal. It's the goal now, it's the goal now. But seriously, it was just for fun. We saw all the competition, we thought it was fierce, but then it became even more so, we saw the real deal.

Menendez: Tell me, what does that look like?

Yvette: What does it look like? It looks like our boutique cigar brand owners too, like hot Afro-Cubana sisters with Afros, Black, walking in, Afro-popping, walking into your cigar shop, you know? And no, I'm not even going to say Little Havana because--

It's like the record screeches, and everybody's quiet and they're staring, you know?

Menendez: And what's the vibe? Why are you here?

Yvette: Yeah. They turn around and they are looking at you. It's like if you're on the TV show that's on right now, they take their focus off of Fox News. They stop watching Fox News for a second.

Yvonne: Yeah. And this was at the height of the campaigning back then. So then we would walk in and the atmosphere was not aggressive or anything like that, but they were white, older, Cuban men in there. And again, we speak English and Spanish, but you're walking in and they don't even think that you smoke a cigar. So then you're walking in and they think that you are the tourists buying something for their boyfriend or their husband, you know? So it's like, "No, hold on, I'm, this is my brand, Tres Lindas Cubanas Cigars, and--

Menendez: She's switching to Spanish immediately.

Yvonne: It, yeah. I naturally speak both anyways fluently.

Menendez: But to demand that they understand and contextualize you, you must switch us back.

Yvonne: We have to, yeah. Because they also, a lot of these shop owners, only speak Spanish in Miami.

Menendez: And so, how do you prove yourself?

Yvonne: I wake up and I throw myself off a cliff every day. You come in thinking that you're going to win this over, or you're going to make the big sale, and they are not paying attention to you. And that happens a lot. But again, that's a great way to sharpen your knife. And I'll tell you truthfully, immediately, I'm seeing within two to three months, we were getting responses from, truthfully, a lot of Black-owned cigar shops, a lot of Black-owned or Black-focused events. To be a sponsor at a corporate event, you have to pay, you have to do a whole bunch of things. We said, "Listen, we want to do this. We have no money. We cannot give that much inventory at all." You know? But they wanted us there because they've never been able to speak to someone that owns a cigar brand that speaks English also, that looks like them, you know? So we were like a highlight of their day.

Menendez: What, then, have you learned about your consumer?

Yvonne: They're smart. They're smart, and they have money. We attract mostly the consumer that knows about cigars, knows the leaves, knows the process because they're very into it. An American--let me tell you, I thought they were going to get a lot of Hispanics, a lot of Latinos smoking. Americans are smoking. They are the consumer.

Menendez: But you're not just in Miami. You're in Virginia, you're in Texas, you're in Maryland. So you're actually doing that, each of those touchpoints. Are you traveling to those places and meeting other shop owners?

Yvonne: A lot of those, to bring it back a little bit, when we started, we knew that we didn't have the ability to travel everywhere and I don't like long road trips. I don't like getting in a car and just driving. I don't like that. Yvette, for me, I think she's a genius because she saw that we were attractive to media. You get what I'm saying? Like our story, which I didn't think it was. So then instead of putting out marketing dollars towards putting ads into trade magazines, cigar trade magazines, we decided to get features on us. And we are small business owners, minorities, in a niche that nobody looks like us to this day. We go and we're like the sore thumbs there, and you know what, better for it. It's better and, truthfully, for being a small business, that a lot of big brands know about us. We are not just a typical guayabera-wearing viejo el señor sitting down with his whole family around him or whatever. We are the new generation of cigar smokers. So then we reflect what's out there. The consumer.

Ad: *Feeling My Flow is a podcast co-created by Juleyka and produced by her company, Lantigua Williams & Co., which also produces Latina to Latina. Feeling My Flo sees and talks about menstruation as an event that happens to all types of bodies and affects menstruators in different ways, how they feel about their bodies, how others treat them based on social norms, what access they have to information and power. Feeling My Flo brings us the stories of individuals and how they've been shaped by menstruation. There's Lola, a late bloomer, PJ, a trans man who gets sympathy cramps, Cass, who sparked an international conversation with an Instagram post. Feeling My Flo wants to help you start important conversations of critical moments. Listen and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts and visit Feeling My Flow. That's feelingmyflo.com for more. Listen and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.*

Menendez: Cigar smoking is most often portrayed as a male pastime, as a masculine pastime. Did you have women in your life who smoked cigars?

Yvette: Yeah, my grandmother was a big-time cigar smoker.

Yvonne: Stereotypical, a caricature. If you Google "Cuban cigar-smoking woman" online, the ladies that come out look like my grandmother. You might hear that my grandmother was a santera. She would wear these long, white, flowing skirts and she would--and this is inside the house--and she would ash on top of the skirt. So, then her skirt. But I mean we are, she lived in Little Havana and we lived at that time growing up, we always grew up down south in South Dade, South Miami-Dade. So that was--we grew up as Americans, and speaking English and things like that, and we spoke Spanish at home. So going to my grandmother's house, it was like an experience.

Yvette: Culture shock. That we were used to it at that point.

Menendez: Your mom came on the Freedom Flights in '69. Your dad was a member of the National soccer team, defected to Panama, came the year after your mother. So, your parents meet in Cuba, but they marry here. What have they shared with you about the decisions they had to make during those times, both about leaving and then choosing to raise the two of you here?

Yvonne: It's bittersweet. My mom said that her teenage years were sad because she left Cuba when she was about--how old was she, like 15 or something?

Yvette: Yeah, like 14 or 15.

Yvonne: So that you're leaving at your teen years that, just like teens over here, at 14 or 15, they're out of place. They are, she's coming into a foreign land. So for her, I guess it was very sad. And then during that time when they came over, her father passed away in Cuba, and she said that she cried for her dad, but she didn't cry as much as when she first left, because for her she didn't feel like she was ever going to see him again anyways, you know?

And then I guess my father came over, they were teenage. It's a love story. He came about a year later that she heard about it on the radio because they said a Cuban, he was, he was a captain of the team and he defected. So that was, I guess, a big deal. So that's how she found out. And then I guess they got into some kind of communication, but from there we grew up further down south. They left the Little Havana area.

Menendez: Yeah, not the epicenter of Cuban life.

Yvonne: No, no, no, not at all. Yeah, we grew up, like I mentioned earlier, in South Miami Dade. There were very few Spanish-speaking kids there and not, none that looked like us at all.

Menendez: So what were the cultural influences at school?

Yvette: Jamaican, Haitian, Puerto Rican. At that time, there were a lot of Puerto Ricans in Miami. Our best friend was from St. Lucia that she lived right across the street from us. We had a neighbor down the block that he was Filipino. It was very eclectic now that I think about it. Very Caribbean. But at that time in elementary school, there were not a lot of Cubans at all.

Menendez: Were you being exposed to American Black culture and were you latching onto that and identifying with that?

Yvette: Yes, definitely, definitely. We listened to it. We were little Black girls and we continue to be Black women. We had to learn English in elementary school, because remember the Spanish was our first language. We were in ESL classes, but we latched on. Even though, we latched on. That's what was in style.

Yvonne: For us, it wasn't Black culture or white American culture. It was American culture. So everything was McDonald's. We latched onto everything American, and my parents of course frowned upon all of it.

Menendez: Was it easier to blend into that Americanness than to assert your Afro-Cubanness?

Yvette: I think that we didn't feel like we had to choose, because it just came naturally for us. We always had this Miami accent and it was even worse. It was a thick Miami accent. Cleaned it up a little bit. We went to school in Gainesville at UF, the University of Florida. Go Gators. But this Miami accent was thicker than it is now.

Yvonne: Yours is super thick.

Yvette: Well, they could hardly understand me when I got up there.

Menendez: You just spent basically this entire interview ribbing each other. So I feel like I already know the answer to this question, which is, working not just with your sister, Yvette, but with your twin sister. What is that like? Pretend she's not here.

Yvette: No, it's not bad. It's not bad. If I didn't get along with her, this would be impossible to do. And I tell her all the time that everybody hates on the Kardashians, but to work with family members, man that's tough. It's not easy to be around each other that much. But we've shared a room growing up at my parents' house. We had to learn how to compromise and communicate. But our communication is sometimes through arguing. That's, you got to communicate, you got to get it out. And we get over it. It's like the end of the world if we argue, and literally it's like five minutes later and we're like, "Yeah, because yeah, no. Okay, good. Yeah."

Menendez: Yvonne, did you set guidelines at the start?

Yvonne: As far as what? Between our relationship?

Menendez: As far as who's in charge of what, what your lanes would be?

Yvonne: Yeah, yeah. I think that we both had, from the beginning, we knew what our expertise was in. She handled all of our media. When it comes to details, she's the one that deals with it. When it comes to selling, that's more me.

Yvette: That's her gift. She's charismatic, she knows how to talk to people, she knows how to sweeten up people. And I'm more detailed, and I'm like, "Okay, this email has to look like this," or we have to, "The cigar box has to look like this, that style."

Menendez: So then tell me, being where you are now, what is your best advice, Yvette, for family members who want to go into business together?

Yvette: I think that definitely give it a try. At the end of the day, family's first. You're not going to not speak to your sister because of some business. We knew that this was a risk. However, it does help a lot, a lot, a lot to know when to get in business mode. Like if it's a business meeting, we're having a business meeting. Treat it like if it's a stranger. But you have to be open to a lot of communication and serving it politely. If you have to say something, say it, but instead of saying, "You're always doing this," we don't talk like that. But outside of the business, we're vicious, we're vicious, but in a funny way. We're just normal.

Menendez: Let's talk about the nitty gritty of the business. You started Tres Lindas with \$500. What did that money go towards, Yvonne?

Yvonne: It went towards fulfilling an order actually because we first only had samples of different blends and that took about a year trial-and-error dealing with a factory in Nicaragua. That was very little cost and that was before we even launched really. And our first \$500 went to fulfilling an order at a cigar shop. That's how it went. We didn't have inventory before that.

Menendez: What are you actually paying for? You're paying for the seed and the labor and the additional, like the rolling products?

Yvonne: Yeah, yeah. We're dealing, we're paying for the product. We are the ones that choose the year and the leaves that we want to use.

Menendez: So, Yvette, you spend the first \$500, you get an immediate return on that investment. There's a profit. What are the next decisions that you had to make in that first year as business owners?

Yvette: Well, that was to have our boxes in a local shop here in Miami, which we popped champagne on that one because I was like, wow. We were very happy for that. And then it was, "Okay, let's start getting into other cigar shops."

Menendez: What was the biggest mistake you made during that period?

Yvonne: I think that, to tell you the truth, I don't think that it was a mistake, but we called the brand Tres Lindas Cubanas cigars, thinking that we're going to get a big response from the Hispanic smoker or the Latino smoker, and it turns out that our consumer has been African-American for the majority. So then not that, we didn't make any mistakes as far as marketing ourselves, but we didn't realize that we... Our story was part of the reason why people would buy our brand or even give it an opportunity, and that if we would have known that--not that it took up too much time to recognize that--but I feel like we all have gifts, and we failed to recognize the gifts and to promote ourselves with that gift.

Menendez: The seed that you use for the cigar is Cuban, but every other piece of it is Nicaraguan and is made in Nicaragua.

Yvonne: Yeah, the soil's Nicaraguan. Yeah.

Menendez: Do you describe that, Yvonne, as a political choice or a practical choice?

Yvonne: Practical. Practical in the sense again that that's the only, as far as recipe, that's the only recipe that I knew: using Cuban seed tobacco. We don't even really mention that it's Cuban seed, because it stands alone. You know what I'm saying? We never mention the factories that we work with, which are very, these are prominent factories, because we don't want to stand behind that name. We want us to be the name. So then as far as Cuban seed, we went with the region, which is Esteli, Nicaragua. That was, for us, yielded the best crop and the best cigars.

Menendez: So if someone is a cigar novice, what are the qualities that define a cigar?

Yvette: Okay, how are you going to feel holding this in your hand and sitting for an hour? Secondly, I look at the shape of a cigar, the length, how long it is. Our cigars are made in Nicaragua and farmed other tobacco is Nicaraguan basically. That's usually my go-to Nicaraguan cigars.

Menendez: Because of the texture? Because of the taste? Because of the boldness of it? I mean, what is it that you're looking for?

Yvette: Well, right now, I'm drinking French blend the coffee right now. I would love una Clarita cigar right now, which is like a lighter Connecticut. It has lighter tones. It just compliments a café con leche perfectly, you know what I mean? So then, if I'm having a wine after dinner, I would love una Negrita, which is full-body, strong, like bold.

Menendez: Right, as a wine drinker, I'm like, "Okay, so you have a Pinot Noir, now we're talking about your Merlot, and then you have a medium-bodied cigar."

Yvonne: I have, I usually go at that point, I'm on a full-body dark. The darker, the better. The blacker, the better.

Menendez: Okay, so we've talked about La Clarita, we've talked about La Negrita, and then La Mulata. What is that one like?

Yvonne: La Mulata is like my grandmother, Esperanza: a little bit of the light with a little bit of the dark. La Mulata is Cuba. So yeah, that's like our homage to Cuba. La Mulata.

Menendez: A big part of the brand, to bring us back to where we started, is about honoring your ancestors. How exactly do you do that?

Yvette: Well, for me, smoking a cigarette is a religious experience. It is.

Yvonne: The cigar has been weaved into our history. If it's not from slavery, working in factories in Cuba. But for us, even religiously, if you're looking at Afro-Cuban or African religions, that is part of their lifestyle, you know? So then for us, if I walk into one, I smell cigar smoke, that's like if somebody walks into a church and they smell, you know that incense that they burn? It's like that. And I'm not even playing around about that. It's like that, you know? So for us, we have, as far as the cigar, we hold it in very high regard. It is the ultimate representation of, as far as in my family, our history. I'm a good Cuban woman and you walk into a good Cuban woman's house and there's a cigar in the corner because that's for our ancestors. That's like, blow some smoke in the air for him or for her. As far as when



she mentioned that my ancestors wanted me to speak about them or to tell their story, I think that we took the right route.

Yvette: I think so, too.

Menendez: So what, Yvette, do you think your ancestors would think about this endeavor?

Yvette: I think that they probably been knocking on the door for a while. Just, just trying to get our attention. And I think that we are them walking. So then when we walk in a cigar shop, how are we getting all this confidence? You know, we're coming in like Beyoncé, we're coming in like Beyoncé with her dance, her dancers. I think that we're coming to a point in this, in this world that we have to recognize our people. It's not even so much like being a daughter of immigrants, that it's okay to mention my muertos, my spirits that are amongst us, our ancestors. I mean, I think that they're thrilled and I mean, who wouldn't be? This is like, instead of, instead of just putting a picture on the wall, we're like the walking embodiment.

Menendez: I also always think about the fact that's like, these women left everything they had. Oh, you started a cigar company? How brave.

Yvonne: I don't think it's that big of a deal. Yeah.

Menendez: It gives you a difference, when you come from that story and that mythology, it makes every risk you take, it puts it in context. Right? It's like, "I got to speak the language I grew up speaking, I got to operate in it all the time, I have lived in different states, but I've lived in one country. The risk is not, is not as great as what has come before me."

Yvonne: Exactly, and subconsciously I think that that's always in my mind, on my mind. I think that we're the American dream, FYI, first-generation Americans and we have a thriving business.

Menendez: Yvonne, Yvette, This was so much fun.

Yvonne: You think? I had a good time.

Menendez: I had the best time. Thank you both. You two are amazing.

Yvette: Thank you for the questions though. This was awesome.

Ad: Thanks as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Lantigua Williams and me, Maria Murriel, is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez is our sound engineer, and Emma Forbes is the show's intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com) and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening, and please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

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