

# focus

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PHOTOS BY CALEB WILLIAMS

# BOWL GAME CHAMP

**// Tobacconist Rich Lewis gets tapped to make The North American Society of Pipe Collectors' 2011 Pipe of the Year //**

BY GREGORY J. SCOTT

**IT** It looks like a narrow roadway spiraling up a steep, craggy mountain peak. Meticulously chiseled with small hand bits, the ridges corkscrew around a rusticated bowl, giving it the tiered shape of a pinecone. Or, if you will, of a certain scaly Texas mammal.

It's known as the Armadillo finish, and it is the specialty of Downtown's master pipe maker Rich Lewis. Few people can pull it off, which is one huge reason Lewis was selected by the North American Society of Pipe Collectors (NASPC) to make its 2011 Pipe of the Year, a big-time honor bestowed once a year by one of the premier pipe-collecting organizations in the country.

Essentially the big fish in the rarefied pipe-collecting world, the NASPC boasts more than 11,000 members. Its annual collectors show in Columbus, Ohio, is one of the industry's biggest drawing events, and aficionados regard the NASPC newsletter as one of the foremost authorities on the pipe-making craft. Since 1998, the group has selected one craftsman each year to execute a limited edition pipe, which is then offered for sale exclusively to NASPC members.

"We definitely know who the good people are," says President John Tolle. "And Rich's reputation is very, very high. He's as good as you can get."

Downtowners know Lewis as the mutton-chopped proprietor of Lewis

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The 2011 Pipe of the Year: a quarter-bent Armadillo. The Armadillo finish is Lewis' specialty.





Lewis in his workshop, tucked away behind a glass window in his tobacco store.

PHOTO BY CALEB WILLIAMS

**Lewis**  
FROM PAGE 13

Pipe and Tobacco, a den of retro manliness located on the first floor of the Rand Tower, 527 Marquette Ave. That, or they might recognize him as the lead singer of the Rich Lewis Band, an acoustic R&B act that plays regularly around town. Either role places him high in the running as one of the coolest cats in the city.

His shop is part smoking museum, part tobacco emporium, with displays of historic cigarette lighters and classic pipe design sharing prominence with an endless library of tobacco varieties. Just before the holidays, business is brisk. In a single hour, Lewis supplies a guy in a Fedora with a box of stick matches (no charge, of course), sells a well-heeled woman a pack of luxury Dunhills, and helps out a Christmas shopper on a wild goose hunt for something her father-in-law calls “Clint Eastwood cigars.”

“This is what you want,” says Lewis, grabbing a box of Ram Rods from a glass case. Inside, pairs of moist cigars, deep brown and wrinkled like

ropes of jerky, are packaged together, two for \$6. They’re the exact cigars that Eastwood chomped on in all of those spaghetti western movies.

“Can you smell those?” he asks the shopper. “They have real bourbon in them. That’s why I have them behind glass.”

But the real action happens in the workshop, behind a glass window that looks into the shop. Here, Lewis works his lathe and hand bits, laboring these past few months on more than 50 or so Pipes of the Year, each bearing his signature Armadillo bowl. The bowls are carved from blocks of briar, a ground-level burl from something called the heath tree, a shrub that grows in the Mediterranean.

The NASPC will accept orders through Jan. 14. Each costs \$295. Pipes are reserved for members, but with annual dues at only \$17, Tolle says it’s pretty reasonable to join just for the chance to buy the pipe.

Lewis has been running the shop for 32 years, ever since his father’s death put him in charge of the business when he was only 20. He’s survived smoking bans and health campaigns, emphasizing quality and special-occasion tobacco over mass-produced smokes. There isn’t a single

“The baby boomers are picking it up too. ... I think they’ve finally admitted that in reality they’ve turned into their fathers. You look in the mirror long enough, you start to see it.”

— Rich Lewis

Camel Light in the whole place. And Lewis himself never touches cigarettes — it’s bad for his singing career, he says. Pipes are way cooler, anyway.

“The last year, it’s definitely been an increase in 20-somethings smoking pipes,” he observes.

The last two years, he’s participated in the now-annual Mad Men party at Northeast’s Jax Café, selling cigars on the supper club’s patio.

“I had a lot of these kids say, ‘Man, it must’ve been really nice to be able to smoke at your desk,’” he says. “And it just kinda hit me: These kids are under so many more restrictions than I ever was when I was growing up. It’s so different now. And there’s a bit of that rebellious edge to it.”

“But the baby boomers are picking it up too,” he says. “I think they’ve finally admitted that in reality they’ve turned into their fathers. You look in the mirror long enough, you start to see it.”

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