

WHERE TO SMOKE (/WHERE-TO-SMOKE)

## Trolley Car Cigar Lounge Coming to Norfolk, Virginia

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Photo/Lyfted Media

Michael Vecchione, owner of Primo Cigars & Coffee, is scheduled to open his smoke-friendly trolley on November 1.

*Unable to smoke inside his retail shop, this tobacconist came up with an innovative solution*

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**T**he historic downtown area of Norfolk, Virginia, is about to get a unique addition to its spread of hotels and restaurants along the Chesapeake Bay: a cigar lounge housed inside a decommissioned trolley car.

Michael Vecchione, owner of Primo Cigars & Coffee, is the man behind this ambitious project. Vecchione discovered his love of cigars during his 20 years of service in the U.S. Coast Guard and decided during a deployment to the Middle East that he would someday open a cigar lounge of his own.

Several years prior to his retirement in 2018, Vecchione obtained his retail license and began selling cigars at mobile events and breweries. Last year, he opened Primo Cigars & Coffee within the restaurant Southern Eats. Patrons can go between the two businesses to get food and drinks or buy a cup of coffee and a cigar (<https://www.cigaraficionado.com/article/10-great-cigars-to-pair-with-your-morning-coffee>) to smoke outside on the patio.

As any cigar smoker knows outdoor smoking, while pleasant, places cigar lovers at the mercy of Mother Nature and Vecchione wanted to open a year-round cigar lounge.

“The problem I was encountering was that in Virginia if you have alcohol, you have to sell food. If you sell food, you cannot have smoking in the establishment unless you have a completely separate room with a separate ventilation system. I am located in a historic building and sectioning off a space with its own ventilation system was near impossible, given the historic restrictions and cost,” says Vecchione.

Vecchione toyed with the idea of converting a shipping container and placing it in the neighboring lot as a makeshift lounge, but knew the city would never approve such an eyesore in a historic district. Eventually he decided a trolley car would have the perfect aesthetic for the downtown area, harkening back to the days of the early 20th century when Norfolk actually had a running trolley service.

City officials approved the plan with one major addendum: The trolley car must be made a permanent structure instead of a mobile vehicle.

Following the city’s approval to move forward, Vecchione began hunting for the perfect housing for his cigar lounge. He wanted to find a trolley car from the local area, but after being unable to find one in good enough condition, he ended up purchasing a 30-year-old Rhode Island Public Authority Transportation trolley car through a specialized broker in Las Vegas.

Work on the trolley car is currently ongoing, with the mission of preserving as much of the trolley car’s original interior itself, including keeping more than half of the seating. Vecchione is adding more modern touches such as a powered wheelchair ramp, new cushions for the benches, custom LED lighting, leather wingback chairs to replace the forward-facing benches, and a state-of-the art heating, cooling and ventilation system.

“I loved the wood trim, warm colors, and inviting layout of the trolley car, and I felt like it would be a perfect environment,” he says.

Further plans are being made to empty the driver and engine areas to make way for either a small bar or an additional four or five seats. The trolley car cigar lounge will seat up to 12 people and will be open to the public year-round with availability for private rental as well.

“As locations where cigars are welcomed shrink, I felt like we needed our own unique space. I want everyone to feel welcome and at home here,” Vecchione says.

Primo Cigars & Coffee, Cigar Trolley is scheduled to open on November 1 to mark Primo Cigars & Coffee’s one-year anniversary.

