

# Shisha Masters

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**HOW  
SHISHA  
LOUNGES  
IN SPAIN  
SURVIVED  
COVID-19**

**We speak to  
EUGENIO  
CLAVER,  
President of  
APEC.**



**We sat down with Eugenio Claver, President of The Association of Spanish Shisha Professionals and Specialists (APEC) to understand how lounges in Spain faced the COVID pandemic, what motivated him to get into the shisha business and what the future holds for shisha in Spain.**

Eugenio is the owner of Babilonia Hookah Lounge in Algeciras, and with APEC, has been a long term partner of ESCA where he has been a vocal representative of Spanish shisha businesses in meetings with regulators and politicians. He studied Business in Seville and from the beginning wanted to own a business. Since 2020 he became involved in mobilising the shisha lounges in the southern Spain when he became the president of APEC.

**Can you remember the first shisha flavour or product you ever tried?** I first tried shisha when I was in the University in Seville. Nevertheless, I did not know much about shisha and its flavors by then.

**What is your favourite shisha flavour and why?** My favourite shisha flavour is Kiwi and Lemon from Adalya, but, generally, the citrus ones are the ones I like the most.

**When and why did you first decide to enter the shisha business?** During my Business studies, I used to consume shisha quite often. After graduating and working some years in an import company, together with my partners -who also enjoyed shisha a lot- decided to start a business where people could enjoy a shisha while relaxing. We wanted to give people the opportunity to smoke shisha out of the busy places such as clubs.

In September 2017 we started the project and we opened our first lounge in 2018. Nowadays, we have a lounge in the city center and another next to the beach. One for the winter and the other for the summer season.



**“WE WERE THE FIRST PLACE TO SELL SHISHA 100% LEGAL AFTER THE PANDEMIC RULES EASED”**

**What challenges have you had to face in building your business?** The public administration has been, primarily, our biggest threat and challenge. When we opened we had a lot of difficulties with bureaucracy and that is still a challenge for us.

**How have you managed to survive through the pandemic?** We have managed to survive with our previous savings and getting into some debt. The purchase of cryptocurrencies at the beginning of the year has helped me a lot too. However, we are surviving month by month. We were the firsts to serve a legal shisha after the pandemic -thanks to our efforts negotiating with the public administration and institutions- and we are currently open, thankfully. Our terrace of almost 400 m2 is a good asset too, specially bearing in mind that shisha can be only smoked in exteriors and with a 2 meter interpersonal distance.

**Where do you see the shisha business in 10 years?** I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, if the public administration does not keep hindering, the shisha sector will grow as it is a social activity that the society demands. However, in a culture of cancellation, there is the fear that in a near future we won't be able to work in this sector anymore. It would be a pity, as many people would lose their jobs.



**If you could choose any company or business person in the world, which do you admire the most? And Why?**

From the very beginning, I have always admired Inditex and its president, Pablo Isla. I think his way of innovating is genius. I would propose him to be Spain's president.

**How would your colleagues or employees describe your business and management style?**

My close people describe my business as a family. I spend the majority of time with my employees and working in my business. Furthermore, I want my employees to feel like family while they work. I believe that if employees are happy, the service provided is going to be the best.

**What goals do you have for your life business?** Money is not a top priority in my life, but being happy and stable is. In my life business I pretend to be innovative all the time and keep up with the latest within the shisha world.

**What do you think one should be like if one wants to be successful in the shisha world?**

One should be honest and work with care and affection. In order to do the job right, it is important to take care of the utmost detail and have perfect hygiene. At my lounge, Babilonia Hookah Lounge, I prefer to prioritise quality over quantity. Even if this makes the price rise, the shisha lasts longer as we put in more tobacco and better quality products.

On the other hand, the shisha sector evolves a lot and it is fundamental to be eager to learn and keep up with the latest trends.

**What would you recommend to someone who wishes to start in the shisha business sector?**

I would recommend, in the first place, to check the regional and local regulations. In the end, not respecting the rules negatively affects the whole sector. I would suggest checking if the lounge can be placed in the establishment chosen.

**“The shisha sector is constantly evolving. To succeed it is fundamental to be eager to learn and keep up with the latest trends”**



*The unique views from Babilonia Hookah Lounge.*

**“SHISHA IS NOT A TREND, IT IS A MILLENNARY CULTURE WHICH HAS ARRIVED IN SPAIN TO STAY AND TO CREATE JOBS ”**

**What is unique about your business?** Apart from the best views of the city of Algeciras, the Babilonia Hookah Lounge has the widest menu of flavours and shisha types. A lot of customers come to my place first to try the different kinds of shishas and tobaccos before they buy a shisha for their home.

**Which qualities do you look for in new employees?** At first, I was looking to have the best technician for the job. However, now I look for good people. We spend a lot of time together and we are like a family. Likewise, customers come to relax and escape from their daily problems. Therefore, it is important to have a good working environment to transmit good vibes to the clients.

I also look for people who are willing to learn new things constantly and are innovative.

**What is the secret to keeping your regular customers loyal?** The secret is to have them the best prepared cocktail and shisha. Then there is the service, which needs to make the client feel comfortable and satisfied.

**Why do you think shisha has become so popular?**

Because there are different types of leisure. Some people like to dance in a club with a lot of people and others, like our customers, like to relax with a shisha and a cocktail while they chat with their colleagues.

Shisha is not a trend, it is a millenary culture which has arrived in Spain to stay and to create jobs. Moreover, it is increasingly appearing in the cinema and in music.

**What 3 things can you not live without?** I could not live without my job, my family and the gym. The gym enables me to forget about the daily business issues for a couple of hours every day.

**What three skills are needed to be successful in business?** The most important skill to have is perseverance. You never know when things can go wrong in this sector and it is easy to give up. In second place, I would say that it is important to be adaptive and to know that things change rapidly. Thirdly, it is very important to understand and be up to date with legislation, taxes and public authorities.

**What has been your most satisfying moment in business?** The most satisfying moment to me was the opening of my business. It took a lot of effort to get all the papers needed in order to start operating. We slept three hours before opening but it was a very special day and the lounge was packed with people.

**Can you describe your typical day?** Owning a business makes it difficult to have a typical day. Despite differences on a daily basis, I usually go to the gym at 8 am and then I do the shopping for the lounge and the administrative tasks. We open the lounge at 4pm and close until closing time.

**“The most important thing is to prepare the bowl very well”**

**How many hours a day do you usually work or think about work?** I think about work all the time except for when I go to the gym and I eat with my family. To be successful, you need to work a lot and that is my mindset. Luckily, I like what I do.

**Considering all the individual parts of the shisha (hose, bowl, stem, head, coal) describe your perfect shisha set up.** Throughout my experience, the most important thing is to prepare the bowl very well. Nowadays, people smoke shisha with heat managers which is important to have too. Aside from that, my perfect setup combines a good bowl, an important quantity of well-pressed tobacco, good quality heaters and good quality charcoal. In the end, the shisha itself is important but if it is not the best it's fine as long as you have a good bowl.  
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**Where is the best venue in the world to enjoy a shisha?** Although it's wrong for me to say it, the Babilonia Hookah Lounge is the best place in the world. I have not yet been to a lounge with such a variety of hookahs and flavours. In countries like Germany or Russia shishas are very well prepared, however, Spain is not even lagging behind.

