

SHERRY: THE WORLD'S MOST UNDERRATED QUALITY WINE



There is little doubt that the double appellation Jerez y Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda is considered by connoisseurs in Spain and beyond as a wine region with a richer tradition than any other in the country. Looking at this ancient growing area in the context of wine history, one cannot fail to appreciate its contribution. Sherry was one of the first true superstars of the international wine scene, ahead of Port or Tokay, and well before the historic Bordeaux clarets. The art of ageing wine in wooden casks gained its first widespread currency here. Needless to say, the region – now a protected designation of origin – can also claim to be one of the first large producers to bottle in glass. For many centuries, Sherry has been seen as the most successful and therefore the most sought-after of all the world's wines – a fact that has spawned endless imitations, even from countries with no history of wine production.

“I can say without a shadow of a doubt that sherry is one of the most underrated – if not the most underrated – quality wine in the world.”

Michael Broadbent

Complex and unique, Sherry is the most important and the only truly authentic contribution made by Spain to the multifaceted wine universe. Sherry – or at least biologically aged wines from the region – can never be copied, since flor yeast cannot be produced artificially. Because of this, the region – where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic – enjoys a special status in the annals of both classical and modern wine literature.

Sherry comes from the West Andalusian province of Cádiz and has been protected by the quality seal of the appellation Jerez – Xéres – Sherry y Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda since the 1980s. The geographic make-up of the area, which spans 10,000 hectares, initially conjures up images of an arid climate, particularly given the immediate proximity of the African coast. The fact that the vines thrive and produce sufficient yields without the need for irrigation speaks volumes about the distinctive soils and climate of the region.

In fact, Sherry is the product of a number of different factors that come together in this unique constellation. Take for instance the off white calcareous marl soil that reflects the intensive sunlight. Rather than fissuring in the face of high temperatures like other soils, it closes up, so that the moisture in the ground evaporates very slowly. In addition, the loam layers in the subsoil that mix with the lime have an excellent capacity for storing moisture. The stark contrast of the Atlantic and Mediterranean also leads to unusually high rainfall and to the formation of yeast, which covers the fermented wine and plays a crucial role in producing the famous Finos, Manzanillas and Amontillados.

Since the oak casks are not filled completely with young wine, the yeast – known locally as flor – can cover the wine like a fleecy carpet, protecting it from



oxidation. As the yeast feeds on sugar and alcohol, the winemakers increase the alcohol content of the base wine by adding vinous alcohol in order to allow the yeast to flourish. By including fresh young wine as part of the famous solera system, they ensure that a constant supply of new alcohol enters the cycle.

Future Finos and Manzanillas as well as Amontillados in their early stages age in this protected state for a number of years before being bottled with a typically

dry, delicately floral and tangy aroma. Unlike the two others, Amontillados are then fortified with further alcohol after the yeast stage in order to – like Olorosos – continue aging without yeast, directly influenced by ambient air. Were it not for the yeast, Sherry enthusiasts would have fewer varieties to choose from. In actual fact, these yeast cultures only thrive in coastal areas. As they near the dry inland, they become weaker and eventually disappear completely.



*left: Out of doors with Sherry and tapas
above right: The solera system
below right: White calcareous marl soil gives Sherry its unique character*

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The key to quality Sherry is the famous solera system. This method of ageing wine was developed in the 18th century at the insistence of the British, who set great store on consistent qualities from their three favourite regions: Jerez, Porto and Madeira. Still, biologically aged Sherry is by its very nature perishable. Once a bottle is uncorked, it is advisable to consume it within the space of a week. All Sherries without exception should be sealed and refrigerated once opened.

Sherry offers a broad range of flavour profiles. Knowing about the grape varieties and the method of production simplifies the choice.

Fino and Manzanilla

Fino and Manzanilla Sherries, which are almost invariably dry, are seen as being ideal as aperitifs, but can also be used to accompany a meal. They are at their best when consumed with green or black olives, savoury snacks, salted nuts or various classic tapas, as well as being the perfect accompaniment for rock lobsters or grilled shrimps.

Generally speaking, the wines are bright yellow in colour, but a strong straw colour is also common. They age biologically under a carpet of flor yeast and have a slightly salty and tangy nose, coupled with notes of bitter almonds.

While Fino comes from the communities of Jerez de la Frontera and El Puerto de Santa María, Manzanilla may only be produced in the small town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda in the west by the sea. Here, the damp influence of the Atlantic plays a central role in shaping the climate, which is why yeast develops an even thicker layer than in other parts of the region. Since flor feeds on alcohol and sugar, wine from Sanlúcar de Barrameda is somewhat leaner and drier than Fino. In addition, the salty components in a Manzanilla tend to be more pronounced than elsewhere.

FROM FINO TO OLOROSO



As well as being elegant, Fino and Manzanilla are also extremely sensitive: if they come in contact with air for a longer period of time, oxidation can interfere with the delicate balance between lean finesse and body. Once the bottle has been opened, it is advisable to refrigerate these two Sherry types and to drink them within the space of a week. However, even unopened Finos and Manzanillas do not last forever and should be consumed soon after being purchased.

Ideally, Finos and Manzanillas should both be served at 6-7°C. In spite of being 15% proof by volume, they are substantially tangier than many full-bodied white wines.

Amontillado

Dry, off dry or slightly sweet Amontillados rank among the finest wines of Jerez. A genuine Amontillado is a hybrid – a Sherry that has initially been aged like a Fino. After several years, the yeast flor is eliminated by adding more vinous alcohol, after which the wine continues to age in direct contact with air. This second, oxidative aging stage intensifies the wine's aroma and leads it to acquire an amber colour over the years. This complex Sherry keeps considerably longer than Finos or Manzanillas. After being opened, a well-sealed and cooled Amontillado retains its character for several weeks.

Amontillados boast an aroma that is elegant yet intensive. This is largely due

“If I had a thousand sons, the first human principle I would teach them would be to forswear thin potations and dedicate themselves to Sherry.”

William Shakespeare (Henry IV, part II)



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The solera system is based on the idea of creating a product in which a young wine is fed into a closed system composed of three or more vertical levels, each of which consists of a number of old, 500 to 600-litre American oak casks. The last, lowest level, known as the solera, yields the wine for bottling. Young wine is added to casks in the first, upper level, known as the primera criadera. There can be any number of levels between these two stages, which are then blended together.

to aromatic components such as almonds, cashew nuts, lovage and - depending on the degree of sweetness - dates and plums. Amontillados can be served as an aperitif or a digestive, but are also eminently suitable as an accompaniment to game, white meat or roast beef. Amontillado also deserves to be treated like a wine and should be served slightly chilled at 12-14°C.

Oloroso

As suggested by its name, which translates as "scented", Oloroso is a strong and full-bodied Sherry. Unlike Amontillado, it was never in contact with a yeast flor. Already voluminous in its virgin state directly after fermentation, this wine is fortified to 17 to 19 percent and aged in continuous contact with the air. Its colour ranges from dark amber to mahogany. Although Olorosos can reach great age and are naturally dry, a little sweetness is all they need to attain perfection. Their distinctive aroma is characterised by roasted wood, tobacco, nuts and lovage, to mention but a few common traits.

An Oloroso is a rich and full-bodied wine. A unique feature of this Sherry is its lingering aftertaste, which makes it ideal for accompanying a strong cigar. At the dinner table, it goes wonderfully with gravy and similar sauces, as well as with spicy culinary delights from the Middle and Far East. Once opened, Olorosos can keep for several weeks



when kept refrigerated. Its ideal serving temperature is 14 to 16°C.

Medium and Cream

There are many different kinds of sweet Sherry. Having said that, there are only three official types, depending on their sugar content: Medium, Pale Cream and Cream. Medium - also known as Amoroso, Golden, Rich or Brown - is arguably the most successful wine to hail from Jerez. However, connoisseurs also appreciate the sweeter Cream variety. This is seen as the classic Sherry dessert

wine, as it offers a fine balance between sweetness and body. Medium and Cream are generally based on a dry Oloroso, which is carefully blended with a typical local dessert wine such as Pedro Ximénez or Moscatel. Finos can also be used as the base wine for producing Pale Creams, hence the name.

The sugar content of a Cream must be between 115 and 140 grams. A Medium Sherry may contain no more than 115 grams of sugar per litre, which puts it on a par with Pale Cream. Wines classified as Medium Dry are not allowed to have



middle left: Cask with window revealing the flor
above: Fine Sherry offers a rainbow of colours
left: The soils in Jerez are white, the sky blue

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Looking back at the designation of origin over the last 30 years, it is clear that a lot has happened – or, rather, that a lot has been made to happen by external forces. In particular, constraints such as the complicated market situation have prompted many of the major producers to implement a rigorous quality philosophy, with the result that numerous traditional prestige brands are of higher and more consistent quality than ever before.



PHOTOS: SAM BAILEY, 2007

more than 45 grams of sugar. The sweeter a Sherry, the better it is for accompanying desserts. Sweet Sherries go very well with cakes, biscuits and the like, owing to the notes of candied fruits, orange peel and nougat that are unique to these wines. Once opened, these wines also keep for a number of weeks if kept chilled. Please note that sweet Sherries, in particular, are smoother and fruitier when they are not served too warm, that is not more than 14-15°C.

Palo Cortado

This wine is named after a chalk mark in the form of an “F” made on the cask to set it

apart from the rest. Literally meaning “cut stick”, it is actually produced by an accident of nature: it is a wine that did mature as intended. A Palo Cortado was originally destined to be an Oloroso, but does not show its powerful bouquet. Instead, it has a more refined taste, with a hint of almond that is more reminiscent of an Amontillado. It can be seen as a freak of nature, a mélange of two characters: the nose of an Amontillado and the concentrated mouth feel of an Oloroso. Only an experienced capataz, as the winemakers are known here, is able to sample a long row of casks from an Oloroso solera and determine the wines with Palo Cortado character.

A Palo Cortado should be treated in much the same way as an Oloroso, with one difference: in order to bring out its more delicate bouquet, it should be served at a temperature of no more than 15°C. A Palo Cortado is a rarity for special occasions and tends to be sold only in a moderately sweet form. Although it goes well with braised meat, this elegant wine is better served with candied or roasted nuts to ensure that it garners the attention it deserves.

Pedro Ximénez

This is seen as the king of Andalusian dessert wines and is in a class of its own, not only in terms of its sugar content. Wines in this category contain an average of 160 to 180 grams of sugar per litre; the finest examples can contain up to 400 grams. To this end, the grapes are initially dried on raffia mats for two weeks and then slowly pressed. Following this, the dried raisin juice is fortified immediately to an alcohol content of 18-20% and fed into the solera. Incidentally, the casks that for decades are impregnated by this nectar are later used to age classical Andalusian brandies.

Pedro Ximénez wines accompany all chocolate and mocha desserts. They are dark mahogany in colour with a scent of coffee beans, plum jam and mocha. Less concentrated varieties may also be served with liver pâté or blue cheese. A Pedro Ximénez, or PX, should be served at 14-16°C.



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For several years, the producers of Sherry, Champagne and Port have joined forces to educate American customers on the extent to which the quality of great wines depends on origin and the rigorous checks that this qualification entails. Remarkably, this campaign has also met with a positive response in domestic American regions, with Napa, Sonoma and Oregon State following suit and conducting joint campaigns together with traditional European regions.

SHERRY
SPONSORED PROFILE

In the last six years, the wine region of South West Andalusia has almost doubled the extent of its international promotional activities. A wide variety of campaigns were conducted in 15 countries, each one tailored to the exact needs and conditions of the market in question. The driving force responsible for the promotional activities is Fedejerez, a federation of Sherry producers managed by Bosco Torremocha with the support of the local control board and ICEX, which promotes Spanish goods abroad. The double appellation, for example, is particularly successful in its home territory. The close cooperation with Spanish bars and restaurants has not only ensured a stable consumption level of 14 million litres, but - and despite the plummeting per capita consumption of wine in Spain - has even succeeded in increasing it by a number of percentage points.

In addition to the traditional European countries that have long admired Sherry, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany, the main focus was on overseas and Asian markets, with particular successes being chalked up in the United States, Japan and Canada.

The US market was the target of two parallel campaigns launched at a total cost of US\$1.43 million (€1.06m). On the one hand, a budget of US\$1,000,000 was channelled into a generic campaign formed by a partnership with the celebrated traditional European appellations

PROMOTIONAL WORK ALL OVER THE WORLD

of Port and Champagne. Together, the classic triumvirate raised their profiles at tastings, restaurant campaigns and similar events. At the same time, the producers Domecq, González Byass, Lustau, Sandemann and Williams & Humbert carried out a pure brand campaign that concentrated on direct marketing. Needless to say, in addition to seminars, tastings and participation in various events, investments were also made in a series of advertising campaigns. In 2006, that level of investment was US\$430,000 (€315,600), with a slight budget increase planned for the current year.

In Japan, by contrast, the focus was primarily on associations with direct



links to hotels, bars and restaurants, such as the Japan Sommelier Association or the Hotel Restaurant Services Development Association. Here, too, a variety of campaigns backed by the European Union were conducted, in which Sherry was promoted together with wine from the Alsace and Rhône regions.

The main focus in Canada was on cooperating with the monopoly in that country's various provinces. The principal aim was to expand the range of Sherry on the Canadian market. While sales in Canada remained stable with marginal growth, volumes in the United States and Japan increased by 9% - or 22,511 hectolitres! - and 33.5% respectively.

left: From starters to dessert, Sherry has many uses at the table

above right: Tapas bar

right: Palomino grape on the vine before harvest



WINE BUSINESS INTERNATIONAL DOSSIER
WITH THE HELP OF THE CONSEJO REGULADOR DE JEREZ
TEXT: DAVID SCHWARZWÄLDER
PHOTOS: CONSEJO REGULADOR DE JEREZ; SAM BAILEY, 2007;
ICEX/INFORMATIONSBÜRO SHERRY
LAYOUT: WWW.DIRECT-AGENTUR.DE