

Sherry

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: The world's most neglected wine treasure.

Main grape: Palomino (white).

Many modern wine drinkers will look at this section and wonder why on earth I think it worthwhile devoting so much space to such a dinosaur of a wine as sherry. The answer is plain to anyone who has tried a good quality version. The trouble is that most people have not. They tend to have been put off by the tired, undistinguished syrupy stuff that lurks in the bottom of sherry bottles and decanters all over the world.

So fine, varied and noble a wine is sherry - and so intriguingly complicated is it to make - that replicating sherry, like imitating a top-quality champagne, is a common daydream for many of the world's more talented winemakers.

There are two basic styles of proper sherry, neither of which bear any relation to the sweetened-up popular brands. **Fino** sherry and the similar **Manzanilla** is a pale, delicate, prancing thoroughbred of a palate-reviver that is only about 15 per cent alcohol, is bone dry and tingles with life and zest. These sorts of sherry are as fragile as an unfortified table wine and rapidly lose their appeal if kept in an opened bottle for longer than a few days. They should be drunk well chilled, and their active life can be prolonged by keeping them in ever smaller bottles in the refrigerator. They should ideally be drunk in the first few months after bottling.

The other major style of sherry is dark, nutty and can thrill the palate with its subtle shadings of mahogany and nuances that are the direct and delicious results of extended ageing in oak. Dry **Amontillado** and, even deeper, dry **Oloroso** seem tailor-made for staving off the chills of winter. These names are also given to sweetened, darkened commercial blends of young wines, but the best owe their character more nobly to time, and top-quality base wines. Sweet sherry can also delight, but usually has to be much older and subtler than the heavily advertised **Cream** sherries usually are. (See Montilla below for details of where most of the really exciting sweet wine encountered in Jerez comes from.)

The sherry region, the only one that is allowed to use the word sherry in Europe, is one of the hottest fine wine regions in the world, just a short boat trip from the coast of North Africa in the far south of Spain's most southern province Andalusia. It takes its name from the principal sherry town Jerez (pronounced 'Hereth'), characterised by its brilliant white bodegas, dusty jacaranda-lined avenues and *mañana* culture.

It is just as well that the Jerezanos are not impatient people because the sherry-making process is prolonged. At least, ordinary sherry-like wine can be made by blending relatively young ingredients, but true, intense, subtle sherry demands decades (and yet, thanks to its current unfashionable status, its price rarely reflects this great age).

The vineyards are on dazzling, undulating countryside between Jerez and the two sherry ports of Sanlúcar de Barrameda and Puerto de Santa María, with the most valued being predominantly chalky and able to drip-feed the vines with what little rain falls each year. Palomino is the light-skinned sherry grape and a certain amount of slightly flabby full-bodied dry white table wine is made from it - which serves mainly to demonstrate that the Jerez vineyards are designed to produce sherry. (Still Coteaux Champenois says much the same about champagne.)

These are some of the world's hottest vineyards and so pressing stations tend to be close to the vines (yet another parallel with Champagne) with base wines transported to the major wineries for transformation into the final product, the first stage of which is to fortify, or add neutral grape spirit to, freshly fermented, clarified wine.

But making Fino sherry requires more than the chalky albariza soils of Jerez and the Palomino grape. Fino owes its special tangy character to a strange sort of yeast called *flor*, indigenous to the Jerez region, which grows a bread-like film on the surface of the wine. To give it a surface to work on, and to sustain its effect and its protection against oxidation, winemakers fill the barrels, or butts, in which sherry has always been matured only about five-sixths full, and add younger wine at regular intervals so as to give the yeast something new to feed on. Fino style wines matured in the bodegas of Sanlúcar rather than in the warmer, drier climate of inland Jerez are called Manzanilla and can taste even tangier. It is easy to persuade oneself that there is a whiff of ozone and salt in these lovely wines - so light that they are drunk with the tapas and seafood of the region as though they were table wines.

Flor is very particular, however, and grows only on wines with an alcohol content of around 15 per cent. The finest, most elegant base wines are therefore fortified to exactly that strength whereas more alcohol is added to the rather more full-bodied, perhaps slightly coarser wines that are destined to become darker, nuttier sherries, sometimes sweetened with specially concentrated Pedro Ximenez (PX) grapes (often grown in Montilla).

The constant replenishment of Fino and Manzanilla barrels has led to another unique feature of sherry production that is known rather technically as fractional blending or, in Spanish, the *solera* system. This is the sherry producers' clever way of maintaining a consistent blend year in, year out. With the exception of a new category of top quality special bottling, sherry is not a vintage-dated wine but the blended product of a system whereby a certain proportion of old wine is taken out of a blending stage and replaced by the same amount of younger wine. The more blending stages there are to a system, and the older the system, the more subtle the wine, but in theory at least, every bottle of sherry should contain at least the tiniest fraction of wine as old as the blending system itself - which may in some cases be more than a century. Sherry is surely one of the most undervalued wines made in the world today.

Most of the large sherry producers make small quantities of top-quality wines, but the following rules should help pick out the real sherries from the more commercially expedient blends.

- Most bottles labelled Dry Amontillado and Dry Oloroso are trustworthy.
- Look for Fino and Manzanilla at alcoholic strengths as low as possible. Those at 15 per cent will be as the Spaniards themselves drink them.
- Quiz the retailer or waiter about the date of shipment of any Fino or Manzanilla to make sure it's as fresh as possible, and avoid any bottle that has obviously been open for more than a few days. Once bottled, these wines should be drunk as soon as possible.
- Sherries labelled Almacenista are from special private stockholders and are usually well worth the premium for their extra character.

Sherry-style wines outside Spain

Flor-influenced wines are made in the Jura as *vin jaune*, and to an even more limited extent in Gaillac. Most countries sell fortified local wines in various styles labelled as though they were sherry but they can be rather stale, raisiny, distinctly inferior products. Both Australia and South Africa, however, have a sound tradition of producing the full range of sherry styles with some competence. Cyprus has made cheap sherryish wines for decades, as well as supplying much of the dubious base grape concentrate for UK-reconstituted stuff called British sherry, but the winemaking culture is not nearly so demanding here.

Southern Spain's other specialities

The **Montilla-Moriles** region east of Jerez doesn't benefit from Atlantic cooling and therefore has a less satisfactory relationship with the *flor* yeast. The result is that Montilla wines are very similar to sherry (in fact Amontillado means 'in the style of Montilla') but may lack some of the finesse. Montilla's grape is not the Palomino of Jerez but Pedro Ximenez. The region's greatest treasure is a heavenly elixir as sweet and rich as liquidised raisins and prunes, based on sun-dried Pedro Ximenez grapes, usually labelled simply PX. These complex wines are at last enjoying the admiration they deserve - in Spain at least.

Some even looser imitations of sherry are made to the west of Jerez in the region of **Condado de Huelva**, which also produces table wines whose acidity can be remarkably low.

The vineyards around the busy Costa de Sol town of **Malaga** are currently in a state of revolution. Not that long ago it seemed as though Malaga the wine would die out but, thanks to new energy from the likes of Spanish flying winemaker Telmo Rodriguez and Boston importer Jorge Ordoñez, there is now a new generation of fine sweet wines based on the local Muscat.

Vineyards around the hilltop town of Ronda are also being revitalised with a wide range of grape varieties - as throughout Spain, altitude is the key to quality.