Reviving the sleeping sherry giant

31 Oct 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

See this guide to this week's sherry coverage.

Every now and then a wine style comes along that seems to capture the imagination of wine geeks and the international sommelier mafia so that word of it spreads, not via marketing campaigns, nor by determined selling in to large retailers, but by the most effective means of all: personal recommendation. This was certainly how the Grüner Veltliners of Austria got off the ground, and to a large extent it is behind the current fad for 'natural' wines.

I see increasing signs of a similar force behind sherry, particularly what we might call raw sherries. More and more restaurant wine lists now offer a range of sherries by the glass, London at least is almost awash with sherry and tapas bars (see list below, many names kindly supplied in this thread by Purple pagers), and an increasing number of sherry producers are offering wines for connoisseurs rather than the old mass-market brands that used to sell in such quantity.

And not all of these wines are technically sherries. In April 2008 I spent a couple of days renewing my acquaintance with the magically atmospheric dust-floored, whitewashed sherry bodegas of Jerez de la Frontera and Sanlucar de Barrameda in Andalucia, southern Spain, guided by sherry fanatic Jesús Barquín and in the company of American wine writer David Schildknecht and Portuguese wine producer Dirk Niepoort (See The world's least appreciated fine wine?) David, Dirk and I had been so impressed by the compelling freshness and breadiness of the youngest wines, wines that are not yet fino or manzanilla sherry, that Dirk and Jesus now produce together a table wine based on sherry ingredients. Navazos Niepoort Vino Blanco (about £18 for 75cl from various retailers) is widely available and is no more than 13% alcohol, as opposed to the usual 15.5% of the lightest, driest styles of sherry.

Barquín's Equipo Navazos initiative, with friends, of selecting particularly fine individual casks, or butts, of sherry to bottle in their numbered La Bota range is one of the key locomotives of the current sherry fad. These wines are not cheap, but they are great wines by any standard, as becomes clear when they are shown to wine lovers with food and in proper wine glasses.

Perhaps most hearteningly of all however for a sherry industry that has seen orders plummet, its total vineyard area shrink by two-thirds in the last 20 years, and grape prices shrivel to uneconomic levels, mainstream producers are also broadening their range of top-quality sherries. Emilio Lustau has led the field, first with its range of Almacenista sherries, small lots from small stockholders introduced back in the 1980s, and still with the widest range of individual sherries efficiently distributed around the world.

But now we are seeing a wave of sherries deliberately bottled 'en rama', or raw, direct from under the bready flor yeast that protects light, dry sherries from oxygen and keeps them fresh, but with the difference that the wine is not chilled to stabilise it nor filtered to clarify it, so tastes much more alive and interesting. Barbadillo of Sanlucar were first with their Manzanilla En Rama sold in Spain, and now Germany. But in May 2010 González Byass of Jerez, makers of the ubiquitous Tio Pepe fino and also of such admirable dark sherries as Matusalem sweet(ish) oloroso and the intensely nutty Apostoles palo cortado, celebrate their 175th anniversary by bottling 175 cases of a Tio Pepe Fino En Rama and exported the lion's share to The Wine Society in the UK. They sold out in two hours.

The wine was slightly cloudy but much, much more characterful, and people loved it. This year's Tio Pepe En Rama offering, the second one, was bottled after a particularly cold Easter, which meant that more solids had naturally been precipitated out of the wine and it was much clearer than the 2010 bottling, which apparently disappointed some particularly wholemeal customers. And now others are following suit. An En Rama bottling of Javier Hidalgo's La Gitana Manzanilla is about to be launched in the UK, while Argueso have also produced a Manzanilla En Rama, and producers in the Andalusian Montilla region, Alvear and Delgado, also bottle En Rama wines. These wines are quite fragile and it is recommended that they be consumed within six months of bottling.

In late September I had the fun of helping to choose the barrels to go into a whole new range of en Rama sherries from González Byass, the Palmas range. This is to be a limited annual edition of bottlings like Tio Pepe En Rama but of much older wines. Fino Una Palma is six-year-old flor-covered wine from the fourth criadera of their top quality fino-amontillado solera, Dos Palmas an eight-year-old fino from the second criadera, Tres Palmas one cask-ful volume of 10-year-old wine where there is practically no protective flor yeast left, and Cuatro Palmas is just half a cask's worth of particularly rare wine from their six-cask solera of 40-year-old amontillado. Prices range from £12 to £50 per half litre, labelled with

facsimiles of labels from the Victorian era when Mr Byass was busily flogging Sr González's light, dry wines from Jerez around Britain.

What was particularly exciting was to be reminded of the extraordinarily strong character of sherry and sherry bodegas. The González Byass headquarters in Jerez is centred on an old Andalucian homestead that has surely hardly changed in more than a century - except perhaps to remove the antimacassars - and houses an exceptional archive of the sherry business. I wandered through the portrait-lined entrance hall, past a well-polished grandfather clock and then suddenly got a great, heady whiff of sherry wafting in from one of their many bodegas via a side entrance.

It was a great learning experience to taste cask after cask of possible ingredients in the final blends for these four new wines with González Byass's hugely respected head winemaker Antonio Flores, born to his predecessor virtually over the small bodega where Tio Pepe (Uncle Joe) was initially developed. The exercise made me realise just why Jesús Barquín and colleagues make their selections for La Bota bottlings from single casks. There were such marked differences in the wine even from adjacent casks containing wine of exactly the same age and provenance. The amount of flor yeast left on the top of each cask varied enormously, presumably partly because of precisely where they were in the high-ceilinged bodega, the condition of the barrel and so on.

Una Palma is pungent, floral and fresh with an apple-like aroma - like Tio Pepe En Rama with a bit more depth and density. Dos Palmas has the most wonderful combination of lemon oil and almonds and really is a big step up from the Una Palma in my view - best value of the four at £16 a half-litre. The Tres Palmas is much darker and more pungent, with hints of a past under flor and strong amontillado notes, a blend of my favourite cask and Antonio's slightly more austere favourite. The Cuatro Palmas is more of a curiosity. Once sherry gets this old it can be very demanding; some of the really old wines we tasted were almost bitter. The final wine chosen was Antonio's and my favourite cask that smelt of toffee and peaches and above all the aged austerity of a fino that has lost its flor and has become an amontillado - which is after all, simply an aged fino.

The plan is to continue to release just one autumn bottling each year of these Palmas sherries to complement the spring Tio Pepe En Rama bottling. This year's offerings have just arrived in the UK. Lay & Wheeler have already sold out of their stock but apparently you can or will soon be able to order them in the UK from Alfred the Grape, Amps, Berry Bros, Cambridge Wine Merchants, Flagship Wines, Grape & Grind, Harvey Nichols, S H Jones, Lea & Sandeman, Old School Wines, Oxford Wine Co, Savage Selections, Tanners, The Vine King and The Wine Society, although stocks are very limited. A small quantity is also available in Spain.

I do hope these and other top-quality sherries will survive and prosper.

SOME RECOMMENDED TAPAS & SHERRY BARS IN LONDON

Angels & Gypsies
Barrafina
Barrica
Capote y Toros
Dehesa
Iberico
Jose
Lola Roja
Morito
Opera Tavern
Pepito
Salt Yard
Tapas Brindisa
Tendido Cero
Trangallan