



SHERRY?

Words by Conrad Louw

“Sherry?”

“No thanks, not for me!”

There is a big misnomer out there that Sherry is always sweet, and is the favourite afternoon tippie of grannies playing a game of bridge, or the overly-sweet sticky bevvy served to wedding guests in waiting for the bridal couple to return from their photo session.

Yet, in Spain, the home of Sherry, it will be the mucho matadors who would, when celebrating their victory, together with other noble cigar smokers, quaff down bottles of various styles of Sherry, usually dry. Shakespeare wrote about it hundreds of years ago (*Falstaf and other writings), and James Bond apparently was a connoisseur when it came to Sherry (*Diamonds are Forever).

What then is Sherry, and why the fuss? Well, that is a curvedball question that involves a prolonged response, but we will rather stick to a far more fun and easy riposte that would perhaps entice you to try out the real McCoy.

Sherry originated from the small province of Cadiz in the south-western part of Spain, wedged between three towns, Jerez de la Frontera (inland), and the two coastal towns of El Puerto de Santa Maria, and Sanlúcar de Barrameda, forming the Sherry Triangle. Unique to this area, are the snow-white Albariza soils, rich in calcium and chalk.

There are numerous styles of Sherry, some of which will be touched on. Essentially, Sherry is a fortified wine, meaning that an additional amount of alcohol, or wine spirits, has been added to it. There are two mainstream styles of Sherry; Fino and Oloroso. Then these wines are uniquely aged in a Solera system.

However, let us start at the beginning. Firstly, the winemaker makes quality base-wine from white grapes, much like normal good white wine. In Spain it is made from Palomino grapes, and in South Africa, mostly from the very versatile grape, Chenin Blanc, although some Palomino is also used. The really good wine, usually made from free-run juice, will be destined to become Finos, whereas the more coarse, fuller and richer wine will be used to make Oloroso.

FINO: THE BIOLOGICAL PROCESS.

The wine is made, then fortified to a specific percentage alcohol of between 15.2 and 15.5%. It is then put into barrels, but filled only to approximately four fifths. This will allow oxygen to be in the upper portion of the barrel. A specific type of yeast is introduced to the wine, which forms a protective layer that floats on top of the wine. This yeast is called flor (flower in Spanish) and thrives on oxygen that is in the upper space of the barrel, as well as from nutrients, glycerine and any residual sugar that might still be in the wine. This refers to the biological process. It protects the wine from any interaction with oxygen, and imparts a unique nutty character

to the wine. Finos are usually a fine, delicate style of Sherry. Each Fino made in the different towns in the Sherry Triangle taste very different from the others.

Those Finos from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, the only area with its own unique quality classification, are lean, complex and somewhat salty, due to the high humidity in this coastal town. Fino from Jerez de la Frontera is somewhat richer and more flavoursome, much like the Fino that is made in Paarl.

OLOROSO: THE OXIDATIVE PROCESS

The wine destined to become Oloroso-style Sherries, will start off in barrels, but fortified to a higher percentage of alcohol, which means the flor will never be able to grow on top of the wine. Here the wine will start its long process in the solera system to develop into a very complex wine style.

SOLERA SYSTEM? WHAT'S THAT?

Sherry is aged in a Solera system, the process responsible for the enigma surrounding the wine. This process is quite mind-boggling to most people, but

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essentially, it is a process of fractional blending of the wine, meaning that younger wine is added fractionally to older wine. The younger wine adds freshness to the older wine, whilst the older wines impart rich complexity to the younger wine, resulting in a multifaceted wine. Barrels are literally stacked on top of other barrels in layers of three or more, with the younger wine in the top layers, and older wine at the bottom, from where the wine is drawn for the final stage of bottling. The Sherry that is bottled from a Solera with three layers, results in the average age of the Sherry being approximately seven to eight years' old.

DIFFERENT STYLES OF SHERRY

Different styles of Sherry are the result when the natural course of the aging process changes the character of either Fino or Oloroso Sherry.

Sherry is almost always dry, except for the sweet styles made from Pedro Ximénez or Moscatel grape varieties. Lesser quality Sherries are usually sweetened with aged grape juice, resulting in the Cream styles, such as Pale Cream, Medium Cream or Full Cream. South African wine laws on Sherry-style wines are somewhat different to that of Spain, and locally, Oloroso has to be a sweetened version of more than 50 grams of sugar per litre, compared to the quality dry Oloroso Sherries in Jerez with around 5 grams of sugar per litre.



FINO: Pale, straw-coloured Sherry, light bodied, dry, and delicate. Fino Sherries are always matured under flor, in the towns of Jerez de la Frontera and El Puerto de Santa María. They have 15% to 17% alcohol and are best when served chilled like a dry white wine. It is an ideal accompaniment to shellfish and seafood.

MANZANILLA: Pale, straw-colored, delicate, light, tangy, and very dry fino-style Sherry

which has to originate in Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Manzanilla is thus the driest, almost salty, and most sharp-tasting of all the Sherries. Manzanilla should also be served very cold, and probably the best drink with a plate of freshly shucked oysters.

MANZANILLA PASADA: This is Manzanilla that has been aged in casks for about seven years, and has started to lose its flor

In traditional Spanish style, Sherry is poured from a venencia or Sherry butt with characteristic flourish by a venenciador, and drunk from a copita.



character. The colour has changed from the pale straw the Manzanilla had, to more amber in colour. It is fuller-bodied, yet still very dry. It falls in a style between Fino and Amontillado.

AMONTILLADO: Amontillado started off like Fino under a layer of flor, but later on it is fortified again to an alcoholic level higher than in which flor can grow, and then it is aged similarly to an Oloroso. It has a deeper amber colour, and is much richer, nuttier and multifaceted than Finos. Amontillados are very complex, multi-layered and elegant in taste, and should be served slightly cool, much like a wooded Chardonnay.

PALO CORTADO: This used to be rarest of all Sherries. It starts out as a Fino, under a layer of flor, but then the flor starts dying off naturally, and develops like an Amontillado. In addition to that, for some 'unknown reason', it begins to resemble the richer, more fragrant Oloroso style, all the while retaining the elegance of an Amontillado. This used to be reserved exclusively for the Bodega owner and his special guests. Today the 'unknown reasons' are simulated and it is more commercially available, at a higher price of course. It should be served between 16 and 18°C.

OLOROSO: As mentioned above, Oloroso is aged without the influences of flor, but it is still very dry. It ends up being dark in colour, between amber-gold and brown. It

is full-bodied with rich, complex flavours of roasted walnuts, prunes, dates, coffee and dried figs. They are served like a full bodied red wine with cuisine fitting in complexity, at 18°C. Amoroso is sweetened Oloroso.

PEDRO XIMÉNEZ AND MOSCATEL: These styles are extremely sweet, dark brown to black in colour. They are syrup-like, silky and seductive dessert Sherries, with nuances of dates, figs, raisins, liquorice and cocoa. These Sherries are labelled under the name of the grape variety it is made from.

There are more styles of Sherry than those mentioned above, but before I attempt to tell you about the En Rama "cult movement", and East India styles, I will first let you get your head around just those mentioned above.

The main reason why I love Sherry so much, is that each and every style has an array of food it can pair with. Especially seafood and sushi, but also meat dishes and casseroles, to any style of cheese and desserts. When talking about Sherry, I always develop a yearning for some Spanish cuisine, so I attempted to make François Ferreira's Chicken Chilindrón (GINJA April/May 2016 edition) which I enjoyed with Lustau's Dry Oloroso 'Don Nuño' (imported by Wine Cellars in Cape Town). Pure bliss!

"Sherry?" "Yes please!! With which one shall we start?" 🍷