

The Story of Sherry

by Paul Dunseath © 2000, 2001

Sherry is the corrupted name in English for a town in Spain, Jerez de la Frontera (Jerez is pronounced "Hereth"), which is located about 20 km inland from the Atlantic Ocean, and about 100 km west of Gibraltar, where the Mediterranean Sea begins. It is located in the province of Andalucía (pronounced "Andaluthia"), and is notable for its soil, which varies between white Albariza soil, which has a high limestone content, and clay. The area planted in the three grapes used in Sherry (or XérPs in French) is about 30,000 acres, with the dominant grape being Palomino, with very small plantings of Pedro Ximenez and Gordo Blanco, also known as Muscat of Alexandria. For its part Palomino has no less than eight different names within the Sherry region itself, the most well-known being Tempranilla. Maximum permissible planting under the Jerez DO (roughly equivalent to the French D.O.C.) is 1660 vines per acre with a maximum yield of 4.5 tons per acre. Harvest occurs at about 20 degrees Brix, or an SG of about 1080.

The chalk-rich soil is dug to a depth of up to 3 metres in a pit and then cultivated; the vines draw some moisture from the winter rains but are sustained during the summer through the roots from the subsoil, since the area receives little or no rain during this period and the vines are not irrigated. As one would expect they are trained low on the ground and with a single branch to avoid drying out in the intense sun and during the Levant, the hot wind that dominates the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula. The climate can be very harsh; at Jerez the summer temperature can rise to 30°C to 40°C, while on the coast, where there are bodegas (storage facilities) at Sanlúcar and Puerto de Santa María, the temperature is about 10°C lower. Most of the rain arrives during the winter, totalling about 25 inches, but from June to October there is virtually none, and as mentioned the vines survive because of the moisture-retention capabilities of the Albariza soil. An infestation of phylloxera in the 1850s resulted in the current vineyards being exclusively grown on American rootstock.

Contrary to public perception, since many so-called Sherries are produced in other countries, it is in fact a regional wine, in the same sense that Bordeaux and Château-Neuf-du-Pâpe are correctly regional rather than types of wines; but over the centuries it has come to be thought of in the latter category rather than the former, which is a shame since the imitators never achieve the quality of the real thing. Real Sherry is from the Jerez DO, and is marked as such.

It first made its mark in England and entered English literature in the 1500s, when it became known as "Sack", a name that has clung to it just as German wines have often been called "Hock". In those earlier days it was always a sweet wine - a luxury when sugar was neither readily available nor inexpensive - and came from a number of sources around the Mediterranean. Eventually it came to be recognized that the Sack from Jerez - or "Sherris", as it was then spelled (Samuel Pepys is my witness to this!) - was superior to all of the others.

The grapes are raisinified for a period from one to several days on straw mats to increase the sugar content, and, historically, when gathered for the fermentation vats, a quantity of the soil found its way into the vat. This soil, rich in calcium carbonate and potassium bitartrate, affected the ultimate acidity of the wine through conversion into calcium tartrate and thence to tartaric acid, thereby increasing the acidity level. Health concerns as early as the turn of the century eventually led to the end of this practice, which up to then had been enhanced by the addition of gypsum, a practice known as "plastering" or "chalking"; now the acidity is usually raised through the simple addition of tartaric acid.

Fermentation takes place in cool bodegas cut into the hillside. Even with the lowered temperature, the fermentation is tumultuous and lasts only from 3 days to a week; when it is finished, the new wine is stored in barrels, or "butts", in a "criadera", or nursery, and watched carefully throughout the winter.

There is a myth that holds that by chance some butts develop a growth of "Flor", a film yeast also called in Spain "Flor del Vino" (not to be confused with the unwelcome "Flowers of Wine" in English), which causes a number of changes in the young wine. Actually, virtually any Sherry will produce a Flor growth, unless the alcohol level is too high, since the cellars are infested with it. Flor growth occurs twice during the year in Spring and Fall when the effects of the hot summer and the cool winter are not felt.

Flor, or in correct terms *Saccharomyces bayanus*, *S. Capensis*, and *S. Fermentati*, are strains of yeast which ferment sugar anaerobically, but when the sugar is consumed are able to convert to aerobic fermentation in the presence of air and act on alcohol. They are antioxidants, so that wines which develop the Flor are pale, delicate, and with a distinctive nutty taste.

The Flor forms a sort of white curds on the surface, and produce acetaldehydes, the main component of the Sherry characteristic bouquet and flavour (typically in the range of 200ppm), as well as acetals, polymerized acetaldehyde resins, esters and higher alcohols. Little of the original fruit flavour is left.

The alcohol level is critical, since in a wine of less than about 14% alcohol, vinegar will be produced, while above 16% the Flor is deactivated. Consequently the Sherry producers fortify the wines intended to become Flor Sherries to about 15% alcohol, while the non-Flors are fortified above 16%.

The Flor yeast is heat sensitive and is inclined to expire after doing its act on a butt; to prevent this, and keep the Flor alive (and to achieve a uniform blending process), the Solera system has been created.

The Solera consists of from 3 to as many as 14 sets of barrels. Conceptually, these are usually portrayed in a series of rows, one above the other, but physically this is often not the case and one set, or "criadera", may even be in a separate bodega from others. The first criadera contains the oldest wine, with those in the second, third and other criaderas containing progressively younger wines. Each year up to one third of the wine in the first criadera is bottled, with each barrel in that set giving up that amount. These barrels are replenished from the second criadera. They in turn are replenished, in a similar manner, from the third criadera, and so on. The final criadera in turn is replenished with new wine. The effect is a total mixing of the wine as it ages but

with some wine remaining from earlier batches, so that every bottle of wine drawn off from the bottom row of a 200 year old Solera contains some small amount of the original, 200-year-old, wine that went into its founding ! That, of course, is why there is no such thing as a "Vintage Sherry", i.e. a wine from a single year's production.

Sherries fall into a number of categories.

The very palest and driest are the **Fino** Sherries, produced by the Flor method and intended to be served as a pre-dinner aperitif. In terms of dryness, these are in order Manzanilla (which is claimed to have a slightly salty taste, which is attributed to the fact that Manzanillas are matured in bodegas at Sanlucar de Barremeda, on the Atlantic coast), Fino, and Amontillado (which is distinguished by a nutty taste).

Amontillados were immortalized in Edgar Allan Poe's novel "The Cask of Amontillado". "Dry Sack" is an example of a popular Amontillado.

The non-Flor Sherries are the **Olorosos**, also dry but darker in colour. These are grown largely on clay soil and increase in alcohol level as they age in barrel.

Typically Olorosos range from 20% to as much as 24% alcohol. While Flor sherries are virtually exclusively made from free-run juice, Olorosos often also contain press juice.

Other varieties one will experience are the **Cream sherries**, which are Olorosos to which sweet wine (usually made from sun-dried PX grapes) and colourizer wine have been blended. You may also occasionally encounter Rayas, which are dark and harsh precursors of Olorosos.

A final, but uncommon, variety is **Palo Cortado**, which combines the intensity of a fine Oloroso with the fragrance and delicacy of a Fino.

The major shippers of Sherry have been around since the 1800s, and include Pedro Domecq, Duff Gordon, Gonzalez Byass, Sandeman, Williams and Humbert, and Harvey. You will notice from the foregoing a significant number of British names, which have been associated with the Sherry trade since Sir Francis Drake attacked Cadiz during one of the many wars between Spain and England and seized about 1 million litres of Sherry, so setting the taste in England for this unique wine for centuries to come.

For judging purposes remember that the comment "too dark for a Sherry" is an indication of ignorance. While the Flor Sherries are generally light in colour, the Olorosos are darker, ranging in colour to dark brown, and the Creams even more so, although clearly a Cream Sherry would be out of class in the Dry Aperitif-Sherry category. A dark, dry Oloroso would, however, be fully acceptable in this class.

The LCBO sells the following classic Sherrys, among others:

Gonzalez Byass Tio Pepe Fino (\$15.25);

Emu Fino (Australian) (\$7.75);

Burdon Manzanilla (\$ 9.15);

Williams and Humbert Dry Sack (Amontillado) (\$11.45);

Harvey's Bristol Cream (sweet Oloroso) (\$12.90) (Sale price)

Sources:

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