

Sanchez Romate, D.O. Jerez

Sherries

D.O. Jerez

Sherry is an Anglicisation of Jerez, the central town in the south-west corner of Spain. In its time it has been invaded by Ottomans, Romans, Huns and the Moors. While these left some splendid architectural traces and pretty ceramic tile work, 400 years of British merchant dominance has celebrated, entrenched and refined the production of the diverse group of lightly fortified wines which today we call "sherry".

Sherries come in sweet and dry, rich and elegant styles. They're made from both brown and predominantly white grapes. But what they all share is an extended period of barrel maturation (4 years minimum for decent wines) in a solera system, and fortification with three or more degrees of clean, neutral alcohol.

The Sherry Region

Sherry is produced in the province of Andalusia, in the south-west corner of Spain, in a quadrilateral area running north-west up the coast from Cadiz, near the Gibraltar Straight, and diagonally inland. It is centred around the inland town of Jerez de la Frontera, so named as it was often the "frontier" of various battles for land-ownership and cultural-economic supremacy.

Like it or not, the history of sherry is inextricably linked with war. British soldiers invaded, caused havoc, drank lots and stayed. British merchants established trade links, bought bodegas (wineries), formed partnerships with Spanish Lords and Dons and conducted trade on behalf of themselves and the Jerezanos.

The Sherry region today is owned and managed by a complex Colonial amalgam – Spanish and British names intermingle at every level of ownership management and promotion. Although it's a Spanish wine, geographically speaking, the weird mix of economic vested interest and mad passion for a very particular wine by the British has undoubtedly been instrumental in keeping the region economically viable and a part of the world market in fine wine.

Solera, Flor, and Production

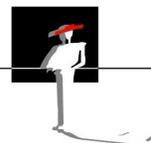
Three main varieties are used to make sherry: Palomino, Pedro Ximénez and Muscat of Alexandria. After fermentation the wine is fortified with an addition of neutral grape spirit to raise the alcohol to between 15% to 20% a/v, depending on the style. The wine is then transferred into very large old barrels (commonly called butts) for ageing.

All Sherries share a parental link to the "solera". A sherry solera comprises of a number of groups of butts, each of which is called a "criadera". When the Bodega (wine house) needs sherry for bottling, it is drawn out of the oldest criadera (which is also called the solera). Rarely would more than 30% of the solera criadera be drawn off in a single bottling. The solera criadera is replenished with wine from a younger criadera, which in turn is replenished by an even younger criadera, and so on and so on. Simple soleras are fed by three or four criaderas while more complex systems may run up to fourteen. The whole solera is fed with new wine from each harvest. This method ensures the consistency of house style and standards are maintained. Criaderas can range from just one barrel to tens of thousands.

Sherry butts are kept ullaged – usually about 90% full. This allows oxygen to feed the flor yeast. The basic stylistic differences of sherry revolve around the flor yeast (literally, flower), which grows like a carpet across the surface of the sherry in the butt and defines its character. Oxidation is minimised because of the blanket effect of the flor, and the yeast cells that die impart a gentle nuttiness. Richer, broader base wines have the natural flor growth stopped, and instead of the fine, edgy styles raised under flor, develop a deeply nutty, rich, brassily-oxidised character.

The solera system is particularly important to flor-based styles – regular movement through the criaderas of different aged wines refreshes the flor by adding fresh nutrients from younger barrels. Nevertheless, the carpet of flor is far from constant – the temperature of spring and autumn is most conducive to a full, thick yeast carpet; in winter and summer it can become alarmingly sparse. If the flor dies off, the tang, vigour and finesse which defines good fino sherry will be lost.

An interesting side-note to sherry has to do with indigenous yeasts. Flor is far from the only such strain in the Bodegas: *mycoderma aceti* (vinegar yeast) also abounds, and the two are constantly at war. In a healthy



solera, however, the flor yeast will almost always win out, and only a few barrels are lost to vinegar (which go on to become sherry vinegar).

While the solera system is a seamless intermingling of vintages, to the point where the year of origin and average age are more or less incalculable, "Anada" (single-vintage) wines are made, but are extremely rare and expensive. However, this is a relatively recent evolution. Until the early part of the 19th century, nearly all sherry was "Anada" wine – the product of a single vintage, held in a row of barrels of the same provenance.

The Range of Styles

The common processes of fortification and barrel ageing within a solera system nevertheless yields many distinct types of sherry, and subtle variations within each type. The majority are based on the white grape Palomino, while a small percentage come from the brown grapes Muscat of Alexandria and Pedro Ximénez (PX). The later become sweet, rich, alcoholic wines much akin to the Muscat and Tokay produced in Rutherglen. Most sherry, however, is the product of the virtually characterless Palomino, which gains its actual style and character from the solera-ageing process, not from the grape. Two things which can be said of Palomino is that (a) it faithfully exhibits the character of the earth in which it is grown – the barren, chalky-white soils (termed "albariza") of the region between Jerez and the coast; and (b) it has terrific acidity for a warm growing region.

Fino

Literally meaning "fine", it is a bone-dry white wine, grown under a fairly constant covering of flor yeast. With delicate hints of nut and chalk, these are remarkably fine, delicate wines considering their heightened alcohol content. The slightly oxidative regime of barrel-aging imparts a gentle textural breadth and depth, and alcohol adds warmth and mouth-feel, but the green, acidic fruit at harvest cuts its way through all of this, leaving a clean final impression of lightness and delicacy.

As mentioned, all flavour and character are imparted in the butt. Hence the location of the cellar becomes influential. Sherry bodegas inland (Jerez), in estuary waters south (Puerto de Santa Maria), and the Atlantic coast west of Jerez (Sanlúcar de Barremeda) produce notably different Fino sherries. This is entirely due to the microclimate of the Bodega in which the butts are stored, for all the fruit comes from a single growing region of chalk soils triangled between the three towns.

The cooler, humid, maritime climates of the coastal towns produce much finer, more delicate and tangy sherry. The relative stability of temperature compared to the blazing hot/cold alternation at Jerez, is also conducive to a less lusty wine, thanks to the more even growth of flor yeast which is facilitated. While this is true for Fino del Puerto, it's doubly so for the wines from Sanlúcar. The astonishingly light, pale and pretty Fino here is not even called Fino – its appellation name is Manzanilla. The sea air imparts a definite sea tang, redolent of oyster shells and the twining sweet-sour crunch of sea salt. Manzanilla, in Spanish, also is the word for chamomile, whose floral character is clearly suggested in the delicate aromas of this sherry. In keeping with its delicacy, Manzanilla is often slightly lower in alcohol than other Fino styles. As a result, an open bottle will oxidise and lose its fresh vitality at about the same rate as a bottle of freshly opened sauvignon blanc, while other Finos dull at about the same rate as an opened bottle of decent chardonnay.

No matter their origins, Finos at maturity (four to eight years in barrel) are delicate, nervy, and nutty with an agreeable tension between softness and tang. They have an overall savouriness, and are utterly bone dry. They are a perfect aperitif or accompaniment to seafood or tapas and are always consumed chilled.

Amontillado

Amontillados evolve naturally when the flor has exhausted its supply of nutrients, or the style may be induced if the flor is killed off by fortification to 18% or above. A good Amontillado will have spent sixteen years or so in oak, about half of which time is oxidative, post-flor. Amontillado is Fino in style and flavour, but overlaid with a brassy richness, enhanced nuttiness and depth, with extra warmth from the higher alcohol levels. Classic Amontillado is full-bodied, amber and dry with delightful soft nutty flavours. It is ideal served as an aperitif at cool room temperature or with tapas and pâtés.

Oloroso

Since only the most delicate Palomino wines are designated to become a Fino, broader, less vibrant base wines are used in the production of Oloroso (Spanish for fragrant). Oloroso is sherry raised from the same Palomino grape, in the same solera system, but the flor yeast is killed off. It is in an oxidative regime from the

start, and so has even greater richness, brassiness, warmth and a different form of nuttiness. Olorosos also have a roundness, and silken texture absent in flor-related sherry (since flor survives on the glycerol of its host wine).

Most good Oloroso remains as Seco (dry) but some is sweetened to Abocado (mildly sweet) by the addition of sweet base wines. Oloroso Seco is dry, amber to mahogany coloured with a pronounced aroma of dark, old walnut characters. It is quite full-bodied and velvety, is usually served at room temperature and complements rich winter foods such as consommés, pâtés, game and mushrooms.

Pedro Ximénez

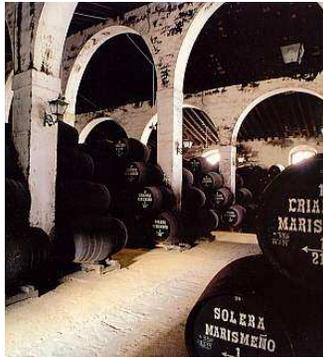
The darkest and sweetest of all sherries are the PX styles, where very ripe grapes are further concentrated by raisining on mats prior to vinification and barrel maturation. PX is a dark mahogany colour wine with deep raisin aromas and is smooth and sweet in the mouth. It is full, vigorous and often extremely viscous. PX is mostly consumed at room temperature, and is one of few wines which match well with chocolate desserts. Otherwise, it's delicious poured over ice cream.

Other Styles

And then there is the black sheep of the family: Palo Cortado. Some sherries just refuse to play by the rules. A Palo Cortado is a rare and accidental sherry – the product of a barrel designated as fino but in which the flor fails to take, and the wine remains stranded in a stylistic half-world, in-between Amontillado and Oloroso, and sharing characteristics of both.

Moscatel is a medium sweet wine made from the Muscat of Alexandria grape. It is raisiny, smooth and has a delightful clean dry finish, which means it is not as rich as a Pedro Ximénez. Having much higher acidity than PX, it's a cooler, fresher style, and very versatile with food.

Cream sherry was originally produced for the British market; this is dark with a rich, sweet flavour. Obtained from a blend of Oloroso and Pedro Ximénez, it is usually preferred as an aperitif, and much like Moscatel and Oloroso can be served anywhere from room temperature to fairly cool, depending on ambient temperature, food to match and personal preference.



Sánchez Romate, D.O. Jerez

Sánchez Romate was founded in the late 18th century by Juan Sánchez de la Torre, and today is one of the few D.O. Jerez wineries to still be in the hands of local owners. Over time the winery has grown and adapted to modernisation and technology, whilst maintaining their respect for traditional viticulture and winemaking.

The near-biodynamic vineyard and winery of Sánchez Romate are situated on the white *albariza* soils of Jerez de la Frontera. Fruit harvested from the 100 ha of estate owned vines is crushed and pressed onsite, with each of the three main classifications (Fino, Oloroso and PX) that Romate plans to produce being pressed separately at different pressures to get more or less 'body' from the fruit, depending on the classification being produced. The must is then transferred to either stainless steel or concrete tanks for fermentation. The fermented wine is then lightly fortified with grape spirit (produced by Romate's brandy production arm), and is transported by tanker to the main cellars in the centre of Jerez and transferred into the entry level of an existing *criadera* called the 1st Criadera or *añada* for ageing and maturation.

Reserva Range (15 years average solera age)

Romate Fino 'Marismeño': Fine, great mouthfeel, clean snappy finish. Very dry and delicious with almond, briny green olive, chalk.

Romate Amontillado 'N.P.U.': Pretty and elegant - mahogany, hazelnut, roast almond in a dry, spicy palate with trace of green olive. Long+. In our judgement, a close to perfect Amontillado, aching dry and spare.

Romate Oloroso 'Don Jose': Rich, woody-nutty walnuts and quince fruit. Soft, round middle given grip by oak. Delicate, languid, spicy to finish. Very good example of the dry-but-glyceric richness of Oloroso.

Romate Palo Cortado 'Regente': Palo Cortado is the weirdest of Sherry classifications: a mixture of Oloroso aromatics and the lean drive of Amontillado, formed when Fino barrels fail to conform to style. A great Sherry to serve with meats.

Romate Cream 'Iberia': Oloroso plumped with 15% PX. Walnuts meet prune juice - very good balanced sweetness. Really excellent wine to serve cool with mixed cheese plates.

Romate Moscatel 'Ambrosia': Very old, but nervy material, thanks to Moscatel's lovely fresh natural acidity. Rich and heady, with dried fruits and fresh motor oil. Balanced, silky back palate, drying finish.

Romate Pedro Ximénez 'Cardenal Cisneros': Raisiny, prune juice, chocolate dates—rich, sweet, viscous, spice and through-line, gentle grip to off dry finish.



Old+Plus' Range (30+ years average solera age)

These wines bear the new VORS appellation tag—Vinum Optimum Rarum Signatum, which colloquially means Very Old Rare Sherry. Classified as 'over 30 years' age, they are more likely to be based on material no less than 40 years of age. Each have been skilfully freshened and they really dance!

Romate Amontillado 'Old+Plus': Made from Palomino fino grapes, the Amontillado 'Old+Plus' is made and aged in an oak cask solera for more than 30 years in line with Jerez's traditional methods. Exceptional smoothness and intense aromas of toasted nuts, olive and age are its defining characteristics, yet it is typically Romate in its weightless, clean ease. Splendid!

Romate Pedro Ximénez 'Old&Plus': Pedro Ximénez grapes are picked very ripe and then left out in the sun to attain a higher sugar concentration, yet the 16% alcohol belies the heady concentration of this wine. Pedro Ximénez 'Old&Plus' has been aged in an oak casks solera for more than 35 years following the traditional Jerez method. Layers of deep prune fruit, with mace and sweet spices. Essence, for sure - but almost ethereal in its dancey, light-hearted finish. Remarkably refined PX.