



The Sherry Revival

Renowned wine writer Hugh Johnson describes them as “one of the world’s greatest wines”. Julian Jeffs, in *The Wines of Spain*, agrees, saying that they “are among the finest in the world . . . due for a great revival.” They come from a region described by Johnson as “the crucible of winemaking for Spain and a good deal of Western Europe”. They have enjoyed such fame and history that both Chaucer and Shakespeare spoke of them. And yet, no other wine seems to suffer from such poor public perception. The wine is, of course, sherry and it is time to change some perceptions.

In simple terms, sherry is the magnificently idiosyncratic fortified wine made in a specified region of Andalucia in south west Spain. The word ‘sherry’ comes from the English corruption of the name of the main city in the area, Jerez, although there are three major centres for the production and maturation of sherry, Jerez de la Frontera, Sanlúcar de Barrameda and Peurto de Santa Maria. The region from which sherry is produced is distinguished by two important features; the first is the chalky white soils, known as albarisa, which is ideal for quality wine production and on which the best vineyards are planted. The second is its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. Such proximity allows the region to enjoy the moderating influence of the ocean breezes on the otherwise hot climate of southern Spain.

Despite its rather dowdy image, sherry is an extremely complex wine, made in a host of styles that can be enjoyed at all times of the day or night and give it great versatility for matching with food. The secret is in the way it is matured in a network of barrels known as a solera system. This system involves the progressive replacement of older wine with the next oldest barrels of the same style and so on until the youngest wine from the most recent vintage, enters the solera. That is, the wine for bottling is drawn from the oldest barrels but only a maximum of 33% is taken. Those barrels are then topped up from the next oldest level of barrels and so on through the solera. This means that aged material is always being left in the barrels and the wine is continuously being blended which maintains a consistency of style.

There are numerous styles of sherry, ranging from delicate and dry right up to the lusciously decadent. The most delicate wines, usually drawn from the vineyards sited on the chalkiest soils, are lightly fortified to around 15% alcohol and are classified as fino. When placed in barrels these wines tend to form a yeast film or flor on their surface which protects the wine, keeping it fresh and imparting a subtle nutty, breadly flavour. Fino sherry matured in the town of Sanlúcar is called Manzanilla and has an even saltier tang to it. These bone-dry styles are perfect with olives or nuts or any salty nibbles and a great way of getting the juices going prior to a meal.

Fino sherry that loses its flor film during ageing (or is deliberately fortified to 16% alcohol or more) becoming amber in colour and developing a more nutty richness, is called amontillado. These wines are still dry but are more powerfully flavoured and have greater density and weight. They are wonderful accompaniments to consommés and bisques or can be drunk by themselves before or after a meal.

When the base wine is less delicate, often coming off the more clay-rich soils, it will usually be fortified to 18% or more and is classified as an oloroso. This wine does not develop a flor covering; instead it ages in the barrel as a tawny port would, gaining a darker colour, becoming more concentrated and developing intense richness and fullness. Oloroso in its natural form is dry, but most are sweetened, making them fine companions to cakes or blue cheeses. And speaking of sweetening, any sherry at any stage can be sweetened to create a

“cream” style, but these are usually inferior and have only contributed to the poor perception of sherry.

The most luscious style of sherry is a PX. In this case, a different grape variety known as Pedro Ximenez is used; the grapes are sun-dried, concentrating the flavours and the sugars. With fortification and barrel-ageing the wine becomes even richer, more concentrated and indeed, treacly. These wines are so hedonistic that they can be matched to chocolate desserts or trickled over ice cream. They are seriously sexy, yummy wines.

So there you have it. Sherry can be tangy and tasty, luscious and sensual. It can be a refreshingly crisp drink for the height of summer or a rich and comforting wine for sipping by the fire. Ideal for the start, middle or end of a meal. All that we need now is for people to realise what they are missing out on!



Footnote: Australia also has an admirable history of making sherry styles. That history looked in peril for a while when Foster’s began deleting their sherry range (such as the Mildara sherries) and looked to sell off treasured assets like the old Seppelts cellars. Fortunately, a consortium of wine lovers stepped in to buy the Seppelts cellars (and the resident fortified stocks) and have maintained production of these wonderful wines under the revamped Seppeltsfield brand. Bravo!

Seppeltsfield Clara Blanca Amontillado DP 116 500ml

This is part of the famed DP range of fortified wines and a wonderful Australian take on the classic sherry style. Bright amber colour; aromas are an alluring amalgam of mixed peel, walnuts, honey, teak and toffee. The palate is quite luscious, maybe a touch sweeter than the Spanish style, but with tangy, nutty flavours lifted by a little kick of alcohol. This is the perfect antidote to a cold, wintery night.

Romante Regente Paolo Cortado

Here is something different from one of the great, small producers in Jerez. Palo Cortado is a style of sherry created when fino barrels go wild, producing a wine that falls somewhere between an amontillado and an oloroso. The Romate version shows wonderfully complex aromas of toffee apple, nutmeg, honey, beeswax and brandy snaps whilst the palate is surprisingly dry, with spice and honey and nutty rancio notes all leading to an impressively long finish. A truly fascinating drink.

Hidalgo Pedro Ximenez Triana

Bodegas Hidalgo is one of the most venerable sherry houses, acknowledged as producing some of the best sherry in the world. This PX is a lesson in lusciousness, balance and, dare I say it, elegance. It is a deep mahogany colour; the bouquet is mesmerising with figs, dried moscatels, Christmas pud, leather and malt all evident. In the mouth the wine is rich, dense and smoothly rounded whilst the flavours linger on and on. This is a beautifully balanced wine that only heathens would pour on ice-cream (but do it anyway!!).