



JEREZ

Covert Evolution

Manufactured in their own and unique way for centuries, the fortified wines and brandies of Jerez have, by and large, remained unchanged through the years. So much so that Jerez and sheries were a near synonym for tradition. Recent years, however, are yielding subtle innovations. Bruce Schoenfeld reports

Text

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Photos

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Spain's sheries and brandies seem timeless. Unique fortified wines that rely on consistency and brand loyalty stretching back a century and more, they've typically carried no vintage dates to mark the passing of the years.

And each time I venture within the triangle of Andalusian towns that accounts for all the world's sherry and Spain's finest brandy, I wonder if the years are passing at all. I stand beneath stacks of decades-old barrels in a dark

bodega in Jerez de la Frontera or separate *cigalas* from their shells at El Bigote on the water in nearby Sanlúcar de Barrameda, as I did last month, and feel myself right back in the mid-1980s, when I first encountered the area. "Jerez

remains a bastion," agrees Julián Medina, whose family owns and runs the sherry and brandy house Williams & Humbert. "You're aware of all the trends happening outside, but things haven't changed in this part of the world for a long, long time."

A time for change

Actually, the area is slowly but perceptibly evolving. It has needed to. Consumption of fortified wines and spirits are down, both worldwide and – perhaps more critically – in Spain. And a culinary revolution over the past two decades has changed how Spaniards eat and drink. Vanguardista cuisine as pioneered by Juan Mari Arzak, Ferran Adrià and others hasn't replaced traditional dishes, but it has augmented them at the highest level – just as the fully modern *vinos de autor* that first appeared in La Rioja more than a decade ago have added a new dimension to the country's enological heritage.

Traditional products haven't been overlooked, but they're not getting the attention they did when Spain's wine

industry defined itself by them. "So we had to change, and we must continue to change," says Ignacio Osborne, the CEO of Bodegas Osborne, Spain's largest family-run company. "If not, a lot of these houses will be gone forever."

During my recent visit, I tasted more than a dozen innovative sheries and brandies that couldn't have existed a decade ago. Those and the growing accouterments of a world-class wine-tourism region are helping to tell a new and different story. Among the many things I saw, I would highlight the following.

Vintage-dated sheries

The *solera* system, in which younger wine is used to top off barrels of older wine to create the complexity of

many-vintage blends, has always been one of sherry's major distinctions. But *bodegas* have also been aging experimental single-vintage casks outside soleras for decades, so a stock of vintage wines exists around the area. "We have some very, very old wines dating back to the 19th-century," says Pedro Rebuelta González of González Byass. "And since the end of the [Spanish] Civil War, we've kept some from every year."

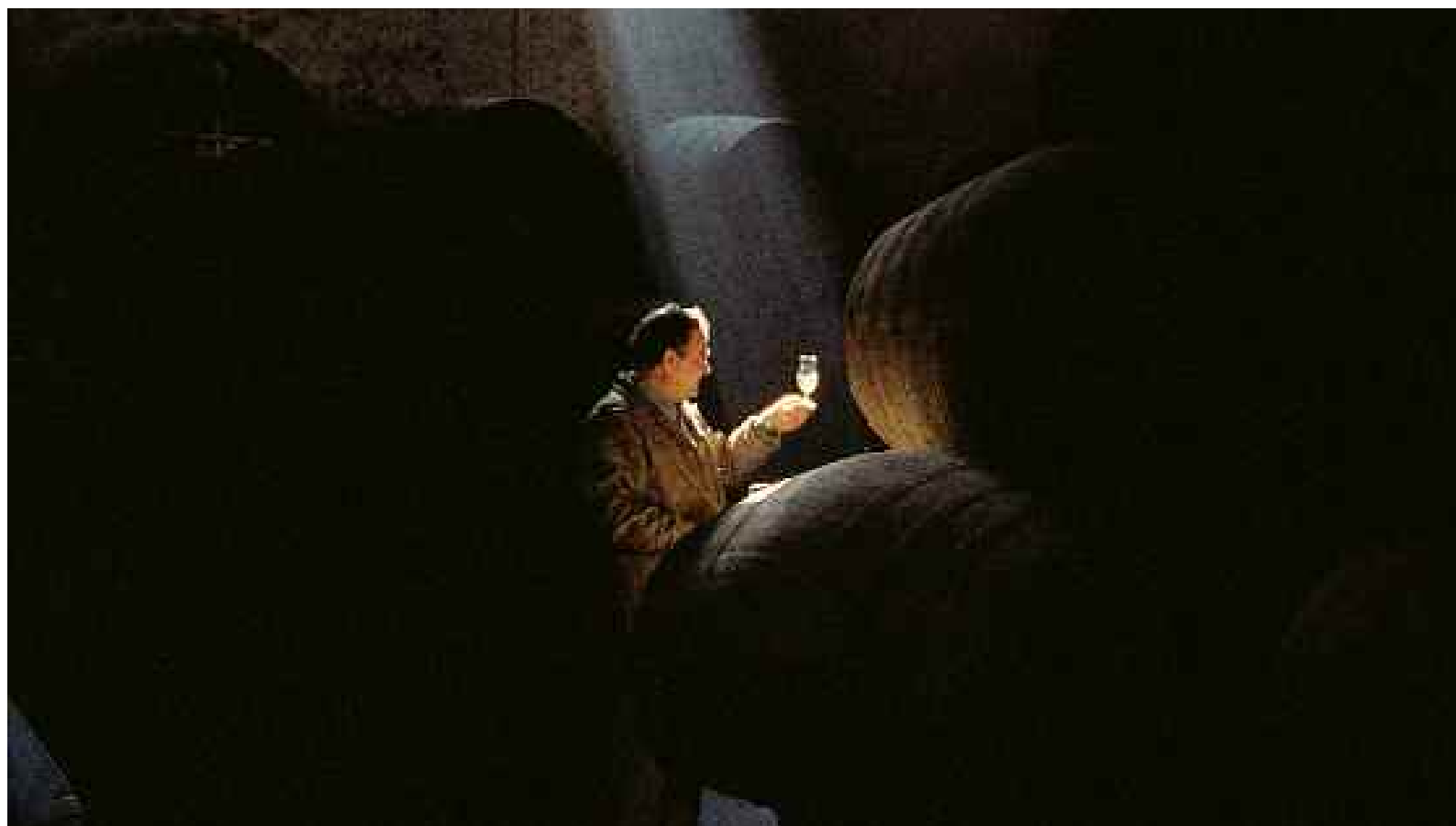
Tasting through them, Rebuelta and his oenological team came to the conclusion that ideal consumption peaked at about 30 years of age. In 1993, the house bottled a small selection of still-fresh but intriguingly complex Olorosos from the 1963 and 1966 vintages, then followed with several more. The most compelling was a one-off

blend of single-vintages called Milenium, released for the celebrations in 2000, that contains wine from one year of each of the 10 decades of the 20th-century, from 1902 through 1992. Full of grace and power and an astounding range of flavors, with a velvet mouthfeel and a surprising freshness, it may stand as one of the single greatest sheries ever released.

In the late 1990s, Williams & Humbert began auctioning off a few single-vintage bottles of its own sheries at auction at London to great interest. Since then, the winery has annually set aside 50 casks for aging outside the *solera* system, and now sells bottles of older vintages in its winery gift shop for as much as \$1,000. A wider release is planned.

Entrepreneurs starting new bodegas

Like everywhere, wineries in Jerez continue to consolidate under corporate umbrellas. That creates openings for new boutique producers. But because they rely on the *solera* sherry and brandy houses are far harder to start than other wineries.



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María Vergara, enologist of Rey Fernando de Castilla

It isn't just a matter of planting vines and beginning to harvest grapes, or – easier still – buying grapes from an array of growers and creating blends and brands, as can be done most everywhere else. The point of difference for both sherry and brandy lies in the process: the age of the *soleras*, the unique history of the brands, the tradition and continuity of the house. All that is difficult to start from scratch.

Nevertheless, recent years have seen the emergence of important new or revived producers. Bodegas Tradición was started 10 years ago by the Rivero family and is now producing exquisite aged sherries. (The winery produces no Fino or Manzanilla, only products with at least 20 years in the *solera*.) Housed in Jerez's oldest known winery (circa 1650), the *bodega* also displays Joaquín Rivero's private art collection, which includes paintings by El Greco, Velázquez, Picasso and Goya.

Bodegas Valdivia was a vision of cement magnate José Antonio Pérez, who invested more than 30 million Euros in it starting in 2002. The winery was just beginning to show returns – both fiscally, and in the form of wines such as a gorgeous dry Amontillado and an unusual Sacramonte Oloroso – when he sold it in March. The buyer was the Nueva Rumasa corporation of Zoilo Ruiz-Mateos, whose family had once actually owned the house that was transformed into the Valdivia *bodega* by Pérez.

Both Tradición and Valdivia bought a variety of existing *solera* systems from defunct houses, houses that had a surplus of wine, or small producers that were looking



Jose Blandino and Daniel Martínez Becerra, two generations working at Bodegas Tradición



to sell. "In *bodegas* there are always secrets," says Lorenzo García-Iglesias, who runs Bodegas Tradición for the Riveros. "If you have the luck to know that they exist and the money to buy them, they're yours."

Founded in 1970, Rey Fernando de Castilla isn't technically a new *bodega*. But since former Osborne executive Jan Pettersen and his backers purchased it in 2000 and hired Maribel Vergara of Sánchez Romate as the enologist, it has emerged as the producer of top-quality

sherries and perhaps the finest line of high-end brandies in Spain. Most notable, perhaps, are the 800 bottles of a brandy called Único that are taken from a unique *solera* that remained untouched from 1968 to 2001. The extra-long exposure to oak is evident, but it provides a subtle backdrop for an exceptional flavor. It reminded me of a subtle, long-aged dark rum.

Single-cask and designated-barrel brandies

At most houses, brandies are taken from several *soleras* and blended for consistency. Like branded products from Coca-Cola to Dom Perignon, the goal is to have today's Gran Duque de Alba or Magno taste identical to the one you had last year, or the year before. At Fernando de Castilla, single barrels within various *soleras* are being tapped for inclusion in an Artisan Series of Gran Reserva brandies in a joint

project with Lavinia, the Madrid-based chain of speciality wine shops. The bottles are released in impossibly tiny quantities – 360 from one barrel, 726 from the next – and are identified on the label only by bottling date. That's a drawback, for if you decide one is the finest brandy you've ever encountered, it's doubtful you'll ever be able to track down the same bottling again. But as a rare and specific brandy product that transcends branding, it creates a new direction for the future.

Lepanto, the Gran Reserva-level brandy at González Byass, has always been finished in casks that formerly contained Fino sherry rather than the richer Oloroso, Palo Cortado or Pedro Ximénez wines, as is usually done. That set Lepanto apart from the other top brands as lighter and more elegant. Now special versions of Lepanto aged in Oloroso and Pedro Ximénez casks are being produced, giving

consumers a chance to experience just how much the seasoning of the barrels contributes to a great brandy. Though I'm a fan of the austere Lepanto style, the version aged in Pedro Ximénez, especially, is tremendously rich. A deep copper color, it has the smell of blackstrap molasses, yet hasn't lost the flavor profile that identifies it as Lepanto.

Age designations

With carbon-dating and other technologies, the average age of the wines in a *solera* can now be pinpointed. Those exceeding 20 and 30 years now can legally put such designators on their labels. Some houses are using them on existing sherries to help underscore the idea that these are old wines. Others, such as Williams & Humbert, have launched a new line of 20- and 30-year-old sherries as companions to their existing brands.

Single-pago sherries

By law, sherry grapes must be grown in an extended area around the triangle of sherry-producing towns. Like everywhere, certain vineyards are better than those around them, while others produce wines with unique characteristics. Those geographic specifics have always been lost in the blending process, but now single-vineyard (or *pago*) sherries are being developed

that will presumably reflect their place of origin. "We have one of the best vineyards in the area, 250 hectares of Balbaina Anina," says Medina. "Why not say it?" Look for those from Williams & Humbert in the coming year.

Restaurant Aponiente and the Prestige Palmera Plaza hotel

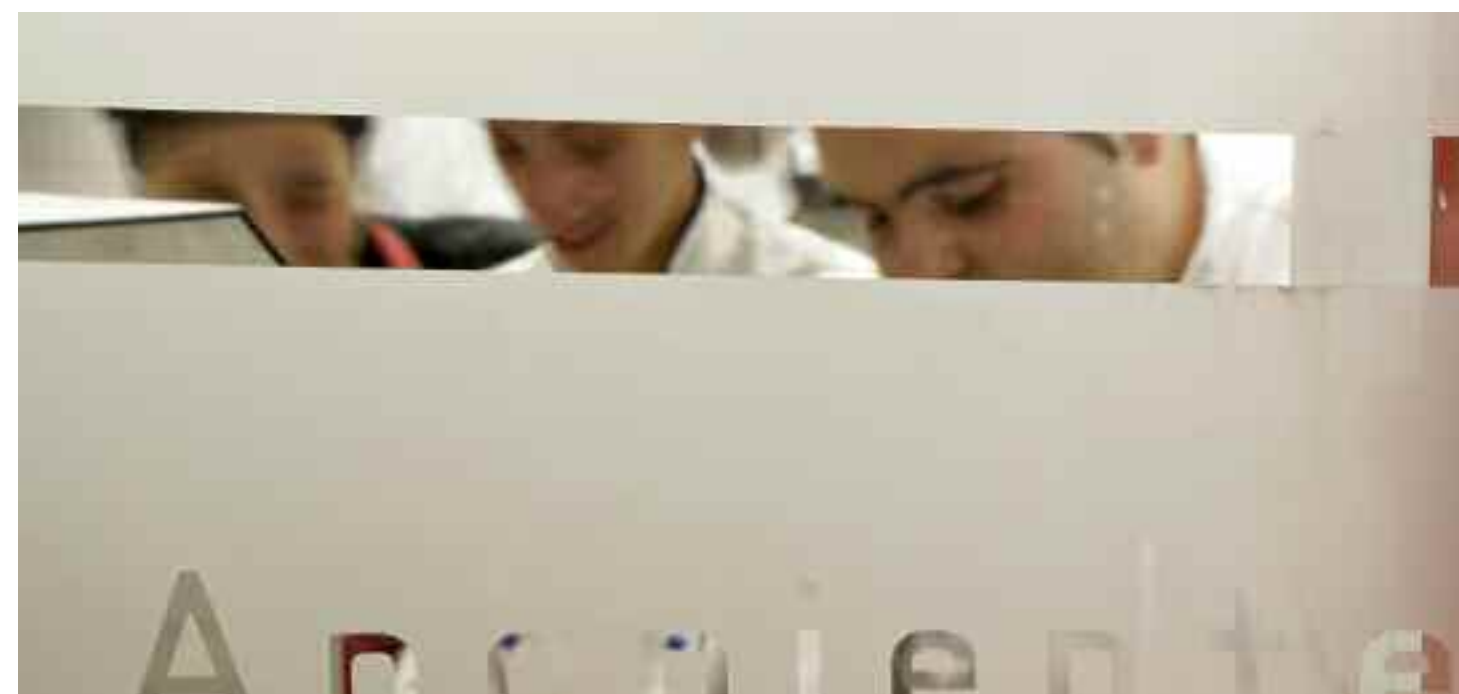
Nobody will ever confuse young Ángel León with Adrià. But León's Aponiente, in

El Puerto de Santa María, is the first incursion of Adrià-influenced *vanguardista* cooking in this corner of Andalusia. Dishes such as a fried chickpea cone stuffed with tiny baby shrimp, then topped by a foam made from the *flor*, or yeast, that forms inside barrels of sherry, access the local tradition but in fully modern form. They're also delicious.

And in the 52-room Prestige Palmera, Jerez finally has a superior small hotel with full-service amenities, including an inviting outdoor pool. The physical setting, in the heart of the city but set back from the street and surrounded by greenspace, is tranquil – and

the staff's willingness to make an extra effort to satisfy client needs matches the new, customer-friendly mindset in the area's *bodegas*. It's another sign of the excitement to come.

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SHERRY EXPLAINED

Sherry is generally made from the Palomino grape, which grows well in the calcareous and poor soils in the surrounding region. Aged normally, the grape is generally considered to yield unexceptional wines, but in Jerez, the development of the *solera* system transform it to produce truly unique, complex and incomparable wines.

The *solera* is a column of wine casks, stacked four high. The casks, called *botas* in Jerez, are filled up to two thirds during ageing. Every year, roughly one third of the *botas* at the bottom of the column are drained to be bottled and sold. They are then refilled with wine from the barrel above. This one, in turn, is filled with the *bota* above, until the top *botas* are filled with the new year's wine, and fortified with a certain amount of alcohol.

However, different blending techniques, the amount of alcohol used to fortify the *bota* and ageing processes result in a wealth of different varieties of sherry ranging from some of the driest to the sweetest wines in the market. The main varieties are:

FINO is the driest and palest of the traditional varieties of sherry. The base wine is fortified to roughly 15%. During the ageing process, a layer of *flor*, a natural yeast found in the area develops on top of the wine, preventing it from coming into contact with the air. From pale straw to light golden in colour, it is dryer than a bone, refreshing, with a touch of saltiness and a tang. Normally they also exhibit a slightly nutty finish.

MANZANILLA is a variety of *fino* Sherry made around the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, inside the area called the Sherry Triangle. It is a little paler, a little saltier and less nutty, making it a little more refreshing.

AMONTILLADO is first aged under a layer of *flor* yeast, but is then exposed to oxygen, which darkens the wine, making it darker than *Fino* but lighter than *Oloroso*. The two-stage ageing means that it retains the saltiness and crispness of *Fino*, but develops a complexity and concentration that yields herby aromas, nuts and a slight oakiness.

OLOROSO is aged oxidatively (without *flor*) and for a longer time than a *fino* or *amontillado*, producing a darker and richer wine. Intensely nutty, rich and full of complexity, it is an ideal wine to have smooth cheeses with.

PALO CORTADO is the rarest of the varieties rare variety of sherry. It is initially aged under *flor* like a *Fino*, but when the cellar master identifies a specific cask as a potential *Palo Cortado* cask, it is fortified to 17% alcohol, killing off the *flor* and beginning an oxidative ageing. Long years later, some will have developed into a rich and outstanding wine, among the most complex in the world. Others will not make the cut and will never be sold. The ones that make it into a bottle are chestnut to mahogany in colour with a bouquet half way between an *Amontillado* and an *Oloroso*, complemented by notes of bitter orange and fermented butter and one of the longest finishes in the world of wine.

SWEET SHERRY is made using the two other varieties of grape grown in Jerez, Pedro Ximénez (or PX) and Moscatel, although the latter is quite rare. In Jerez, PX grapes are left out under the hot Andalusian sun to lose some water and become "raisinified" before being pressed and aged. The resulting wine is ebony in colour, intensely sweet and with notes of chocolate, prunes, roast coffee and liquorice.