

The New York Times

For Overlooked Sherries, Some Respect

By Eric Asimov

July 9, 2008

It's become painfully familiar: wine writers pleading with an uncaring populace to embrace the singular wonders of dry sherry. Why painful? Because the wine writers (count me in) so much want others to experience the pleasures that these gorgeous wines have to offer, yet it appears that few consumers are getting the message.

If that notion appears too arrogantly altruistic, let's approach that equation from the other side. If nobody is listening, what does that say about the influence of wine writers?

Now that's painful! So let me try again.

Dry sherry is both the greatest value and the single most abused category in wine. In what other wine genre can you find world-class examples for less than \$20 and sometimes even less than \$10? Yet dry sherry is perennially maltreated. The same restaurants that install expensive refrigerators and gas-injection preservation devices to care for their other bottles leave the sherries — if they even have any — in some warm, dusty corner of the bar. Am I annoyed by this? Why, no, why would you think that?

The situation of dry sherry today is somewhat analogous to riesling 10 to 15 years ago. Rieslings were the favorites of sommeliers, wine writers and other serious wine geeks who could not figure out why the world was settling for that floozy chardonnay when intelligent, spirited and sexy riesling was there for the taking. It took longer than the riesling fans would have liked, but the world has come around to acknowledge its pleasures.

So now is it sherry's turn? I think not. The flavor characteristics of dry sherry are too peculiar to ever achieve mass popularity. Also, sherry is generally fortified with neutral spirits, which lead many people to think of heavier port-like wines, even though dry sherries can be feathery light and almost fragile.

But I am convinced that many people could enhance their wine-drinking lives by giving dry sherry an opportunity to do what it does best: whet the appetite.

Nobody in Spain needs to be told this, of course. In tapas bars, especially in the sherry region of Andalusia, patrons toss back chilled glasses of fino and manzanilla, the two lightest and driest sherries, with its natural accompaniments: almonds, olives, boquerones and other tapas. The keen, tangy, almost saline flavors of the sherry seem to mimic those of the tapas.

To me, there is no better aperitif in the world than a glass of manzanilla, though with a seafood or sushi dinner I've been known to drink it throughout the entire meal.

While I might be pessimistic about the chances of sherry gaining widespread popularity, Jennifer Lordan, the beverage director at Dovetail on the Upper West Side, is not. Dovetail offers an extensive sherry list, which Jennifer said has piqued the interest of her clientele.

"The interest in sherry is growing very quickly," she said. "It's amazing what's happened in the last few years."

Jennifer and another guest, Mani Dawes, an owner and the wine director at Tía Pol, an exceptional tapas bar in Chelsea, joined Florence Fabricant and me recently for a tasting of 12 finos and 12 manzanillas.

To get technical for a moment, manzanillas are really a subset of finos and come only from the seaside town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. There, the briny air is said to imbue manzanilla with the taste of the sea itself.

Who knows if that's true, but indeed fine manzanillas, like our top choices, the delicate Domecq and the richer Gaspar Florido, make you feel as if you can hear waves breaking in the distance. With its persistent flavors of salted almonds, the Domecq is a classic manzanilla, but many, like the Herederos de Argüeso, the Barbadillo and the Hidalgo-La Gitana, offer lovely floral and herbal aromas as well.

Fino sherries may be ever-so-slightly less delicate than the manzanillas, with less of a salty tang, but perhaps a bit more

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LOCAL HERO Jerez de la Frontera, Spain, pays tribute to the maker of Tío Pepe sherry.

complexity. Now, before I say anything about our favorite finos, let me get technical again: Our No. 1 fino, the Pérez Barquero, and our No. 4, the Alvear, are not, strictly speaking, sherries but Montillas.

They come from the neighboring region of Montilla-Moriles and are made using similar techniques with two exceptions: fino and manzanilla sherries are made from the palomino grape while the main grape in Montilla-Moriles is the pedro ximénez.

In the sherry region proper, the pedro ximénez grape is generally used to make sweet sherry, and in fact, before Montilla-Moriles was recognized as its own appellation in 1933, much of its wine was sent to Jerez to be made into sherry.

This leads to the second difference. Since the pedro ximénez grape has a higher sugar content than the palomino, it reaches an alcohol level of around 15 percent without the need of neutral spirits. So many of these wines are unfortified.

Nonetheless, they are similar enough in the glass to be discussed together.

Montillas are often said to be more rustic than sherries, but the only two Montillas in our tasting made the top 5 of the finos. The Pérez Barquero was elegant and complex, while the Alvear was almost as delicate as a manzanilla. The Alvear was singular in another way: it was a 2003 vintage. Most sherries and Montillas are blends of multiple vintages.

Now, I haven't even spoken of flor, the remarkable yeast that gives finos and manzanillas their tang. Another time. But I will emphasize again the importance of keeping sherries refrigerated. Several well-known sherry names, like Lustau and Domecq's La Ina, seemed flawed by poor storage and didn't make our cut.

So keep them cold, pour yourself a glass with some olives and almonds, and I promise you a distinctive pleasure. Don't make me have to beg again.