



Sherry -- it's not just for Grandma

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WINE NOTES: A new generation is enjoying this affordable, fortified wine; surprise your Valentine with an aperitif



If your only experience with sherry is watching Merchant-Ivory films, it's time to discover this wine's versatility and its many different expressions.

This time of year, I like to drink unusual wines from warm places. They're a quick pick-me-up for the palate, not to mention the brain and the soul.

So while I'm sitting here shivering over my keyboard, I'm thinking about southwestern Spain, spitting distance from the Strait of Gibraltar and Morocco. This is Andalusia (Andalucia en Espanol), land of champion horses, bullfighters and flamenco dancers.

Here in the province of Cadiz are three towns that every wine drinker should know: Jerez de la Frontera, Sanlucar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa Maria.

It is in these spots that the one-of-a-kind tippler generally known as sherry is produced. Ranging from tangy to sweet, this fortified wine is being rediscovered by a new generation of drinkers eager to spice up cocktail hour or enliven dessert at an affordable price.

Label lowdown

Sherry is a complex creature that goes by many names. Manzanilla and fino are pale, light, dry and

delicate, reminiscent of sea foam; amontillado is amber-colored and tastes more like honey-roasted almonds; palo cortado and oloroso are mahogany-hued, with notes of hazelnuts and molasses. Contrary to what you might assume, most of these styles are dry, although oloroso and palo cortado can also range from off-dry to somewhat sweet.

Then there are cream and Pedro Ximenez (aka PX), which might fit your sherry stereotype of a drink only your great-aunt could love. Sweet and syrupy, they can be excellent or atrocious, depending on the producer. But that's true of any wine, isn't it?

No matter which style of sherry you choose, chances are you'll get it at a great price: It's easy to find a high-quality bottle for less than \$20. And since sherry's fortified, it's best served in small sips and lasts much longer than wine when refrigerated. Now that's a lot of bang for your buck.

Opening occasions

Sherry is extremely accommodating to infrequent wine drinkers. For starters, you needn't locate your corkscrew to open this unusual beverage because it's generally topped with a foil-wrapped stopper; simply pull the tab to remove the foil, then twist and pull the stopper to remove. Plunge the stopper back into the bottle's neck and refrigerate the bottle for future use. (And if the bottle is topped with an aluminum screwcap, then it's even easier to operate.)

Also, because it's fortified and has an unusually -- but deliciously -- pungent aroma and flavor thanks to a Spanish yeast called flor (as in "flower"), sherry needn't be served in your serious wine-tasting glasses. Although it is traditionally sipped from a copita, or a short, slender wine glass, you can have fun with the presentation and pour it into granny's antique cut-crystal coupes or brandy snifters, little shot glasses, sake goblets, Champagne flutes or whatever strikes your fancy.

Sip manzanilla and fino, chilled, before dinner as aperitifs, with marcona almonds or cold seafood. Try amontillado -- best cool but not cold -- with savory tapas and olives.

Oloroso and palo cortado are dynamite with fried fare; the Spanish might serve them alongside bacalao, or salt-cod fritters. Finally, since they're sweet, cream and PX are best saved for dessert. Serve them at room temperature or try them in a tumbler on the rocks, with a wedge of lemon or orange.

Four for beginners

Looking to spice things up with your cheri on Valentine's Day? Surprise him or her with a sip of something new: sherry with dinner or dessert. Here are a few classic choices that will offer you a solid introduction to the genre:

Bodegas Hidalgo La Gitana Manzanilla (\$15): From a Sanlúcar de Barrameda bodega founded in 1792 comes this diaphanous aperitif. Salty-sweet aroma with notes of Orange Julius; refreshing palate with gentle notes of orange peel. The briny acidity calls for a match of cold shrimp or smoked fish. Find it at Fred Meyer Hawthorne, Hollywood West, Tigard and Walker Road; Haggen Murray Hill; Market of Choice; Mt. Tabor Fine Wines; New Seasons Market Cedar Hills Crossing, Concordia, Mountain Park, Orenco Station, Raleigh Hills and Seven Corners; Pastaworks; Pearl Specialty Market & Spirits; QFC Mt. Tabor; Vinopolis; Whole Foods Laurelhurst; and Zupan's Burnside and Raleigh Hills.

Sandeman Don Fino Superior Fino Sherry (\$17): In the 19th century, British shipping companies realized they could fill partially empty boats returning from trade expeditions with nonperishable payload in the form of fortified wines, which can withstand exposure to motion, light and heat better than standard table wines can. Ever since then, Sandeman has been a reliable label for sherry and port (from Portugal). Dry and tangy with an herbal, food-friendly finish, this aperitif will appeal to white-wine drinkers. Notes of creamy almond meld with minty tarragon in a flavor-packed fino. Find it at Cornell Wine Co.; E&R Wine Shop; Liner & Elsen; Pearl Specialty Market & Spirits; and Portland Wine Merchants.

Lustau Solera Reserva Los Arcos Dry Amontillado (\$17): Amber-hued beauty with fresh-cut flowers on the nose. Floral and spicy palate features a finish of Red Hots. Clean and crisp. From a prolific and quality-driven producer, so if you can't find this particular style from Lustau, try another. Find this one at City Market; E&R Wine Shop; Food Front Cooperative Market Thurman; Fred Meyer Burlingame, Hollywood West and Raleigh Hills; Mt. Tabor Fine Wines; New Seasons

Market Happy Valley, Sellwood and Seven Corners; Pastaworks; Whole Foods markets Fremont, Pearl, Laurelhurst and Tigard; and Strohecker's.

Harveys Reserve Rare Cream Sherry (\$18): The British shipper and wine merchant John Harvey & Sons coined the term "Bristol cream" for sweet blended sherry; and under current winemaker Beltran Domecq (you might have heard of his family company, Allied Domecq), the label continues to produce the cream of the crop. This new improvement on the basic Bristol Cream is a molasses-flavored (and colored) treat that sings when paired with gingerbread or flan. It's not cloying, and the finish is surprisingly clean. Find it at E&R Wine Shop; Liner & Elsen; Mt. Tabor Fine Wines; Wine Cellar; and Wizer's Oswego Foods.

Note: Prices are approximate. These wines may be available at stores other than those listed; and you can special-order most wines through your local wine merchant.