

# San Francisco Chronicle

## **Restaurants' pairings ease novices into sherry**

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By Jon Bonné

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My moment of sherry shame came in 1999, at a farewell dinner from a job. We sat at El Quijote, perhaps the most garish of New York's many old-guard Spanish restaurants, paella and all.

Settling in for the meal, my co-workers ordered sangria. I asked the waiter for a glass of fino. Heads turned like a record had scratched. One of my soon-to-be-former co-workers finally piped up. "Isn't that," he sniped, "for grandmothers?"

We merry band of sherry fans have learned to suffer in silence. I have loved sherry for as long as I've loved wine - its tang and drama invigorate my palate as few drinks can. But if Dionisio is the patron saint of Jerez de la Frontera, perhaps it should be Jude, because sherry has long been the wine lover's lost cause. Riesling? Now trendy, inconceivably. But sherry? All attempts to make it an honest drink have been - to cast onto Andalusia's pride a well-abused metaphor from La Mancha - just more tilting at windmills.

Or so I thought until sherry started making cameos everywhere this past year - on wine lists, in my cocktail glass, in reputable publications. A faithful band of followers and new converts have begun to lift sherry toward respect. "It's not so much that sherry is a new wine," says Marc Destito, director of the newly formed Sherry Council of America. "It's that they're discovering it for the first time."

### **Don't call it a comeback**

It's not a comeback yet. Sherry's popularity in the United States has been modest at best for much of the past century and though sales appear to have ticked up in the past year, in the long view they are down sharply. By one estimate, the current imports of about 200,000 cases have dropped 75 percent since the 1980s.

"We have skipped a whole generation," says Felipe Gonzalez-Gordon, president of Gonzalez Byass U.S. and descendant of Manuel Maria Gonzalez, who founded the legendary sherry bodega in 1835. "Today's consumers just don't have an image of what sherry is. I think that's a positive thing, because it allows us to educate them again."

Gonzalez Byass now ships about 7,500 cases to the United States, down from 30,000 two decades ago. That's an improvement from years when its landmark Tio Pepe fino, one of the world's top sherries, couldn't be found on American shelves.

Part of the rebound can be traced to smaller, high-quality efforts - special bottlings like Hidalgo's electrifying single-vineyard Pastrana or Lustau's refined Almacenista line, whose quality highlights the best of sherry's good name. And though sherries are almost always a blend of multiple years, in 2000 the Consejo Regulador, Jerez's governing body for wine, created two new marks - VOS, for wines with an average age guaranteed to be 20 years or more, and VORS for those 30 years and older. These allowed bodegas to dig into their old stocks and provide a glimpse into the past. Such wines share little with the sweet, mass-produced specimens that have largely been sherry's public face.

The irony is that sherry can be one of the most versatile of wines. A glass of cool fino slakes thirst and builds appetite as effectively as a cold beer. A layered amontillado does credit to roasted pork loin, while a nutty oloroso serves as the perfect foil for aged Manchego. To borrow a line from Gonzalez-Gordon's great-uncle Manuel Gonzalez Gordon, "There is sufficient range in the choice of sherries to cater for the changing rhythm of taste and fashion."

Suddenly sherry has proximity to the hip. It is featured at such of-the-moment restaurants as Gitane in San Francisco and New York's Boqueria, venues where a glass of fino is far more comfortable amid spaghetti straps and heels than tatting and old lace.

Quite presciently, sherry has also been elevated via the cocktail. Many top bartenders view it as the revival of an ingredient held high among 19th century barmen in drinks such as the Adonis, a mix of sherry and vermouth, or the sherry cobbler, a mix of sherry, fruit and ice. (See recipes, Page F6) "The sherry cobbler was pretty much king. It was like the Cosmo of its time in the late 1800s," says bar consultant Dominic Venegas, who devised a cocktail list at Gitane that includes the cobbler along with creations like the Solera, based on rum and oloroso sherry.

Gitane's patrons can also choose from 20 sherries by the glass, served in Schott Zwiesel stemware instead of the traditional copita. "It's so fragrant in its style that it really warrants a wineglass," says Sean Diggins, Gitane's wine director.

Last year, Spanish trade authorities approved a 1 million euro (\$1.35 million) annual campaign to ramp up the evangelism. But quiet efforts have been under way for a decade, including a nationwide sherry cocktail contest

launched in 2005 that San Francisco seems to have a knack for winning. Last year, the Sherry Shrub from Nopa bar manager Neyah White emerged victorious among more than 50 entries. Spirits consultant Jacques Bezuidenhout won the first contest with the La Perla, a mix of Tequila, sherry and pear liqueur.

Which is not to say there aren't still hurdles. The new sherry council thought the New York premiere of Woody Allen's "Vicky Cristina Barcelona" last August would provide a perfect tie-in, even creating a sherry-based cocktail for the occasion. Quipped gossip columnist Liz Smith: "I've never witnessed so much discussion and trepidation over a free drink."

### **A food-friendly match**

Ultimately, food may be sherry's savior. As chefs like El Bulli's Ferran Adria highlighted Spanish haute cuisine and tapas bars became manifest, sherry stepped forward as a match for the whole meal. It need not even be Spanish. Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck restaurant in England pairs sherry with his Michelin-starred molecular cuisine.

This week, chefs and sommeliers from eight nations are competing in the finals of the Copa Jerez, a pairing competition held in Jerez de la Frontera. "The biggest hurdle for most people with sherry is understanding that sherry is wine," says Seamus Mullen, Boqueria's executive chef and partner, who is representing the United States there. "There's this particularly steep learning curve on the palate. They may like it, but they may not necessarily default to it down the road. That's where I think the food really helps."

To that end, Mullen and Roger Kugler, Boqueria's wine director returned to sherry's homeland with a menu that pays tribute to the three sherry-producing towns. To honor Sanlucar de Barrameda, they matched rouget a la plancha with Pata Negra ham and chanterelles to a 30-year-old amontillado (Viejo VORS) from Hidalgo.

Yet among wines, sherry remains an outcast. Others may be fortified (Port) or blended from multiple years (Champagne) but the region's climate and means of winemaking are unique. Its chalky, alkaline soils, known as albariza, and indigenous Palomino grapes are geared toward wines that would be too sharp to drink without being fortified and transformed. The solera system used to meld multiple vintages and preserve a consistent flavor remains a unique invention.

Yet its reputation has often been scuttled by examples barely acceptable to cook with - to say nothing of wines labeled as sherry but made nowhere near Spain. (Jerez officials are now defending their good name. As with

Champagne, they have largely secured phaseout of the generic use of "sherry," though several U.S. wineries can still use it.)

Its many styles further stoke confusion. The range of tastes can be dizzying, from sharply dry fino to achingly sweet Pedro Ximenez. Terms like medium and cream (both sweet) confound the issue, and styles like oloroso can be either dry or sweet. Because many popular sherries have been on the sugary side, notably Harveys Bristol Cream and the misleadingly named Dry Sack, drinkers often lock sherry in the same fusty box as Port.

"There's still a lot of people, especially when we do a tasting," says Andy Booth, co-owner of the Spanish Table in Mill Valley, "where they try the dry stuff and say, 'Wow, I really like this. I expected it to be sweet.' "

True sherry requires a minimum of three years aging, more than Champagne. Even a straightforward fino like Tio Pepe spends five years in the solera system. This has typically skewed the system in favor of large shippers who could afford to buy and blend smaller stocks.

But Jerezanos have seen the virtues of the small. Just as Champagne was reinvigorated by small growers whose wines offered an alternative to the uniformity of the region's biggest names, small sherry shippers are finding a modest market. It has given rise to tiny labels like Equipo Navazos, which selects individual casks of outstanding sherry from various bodegas. Each becomes a unique numbered release, typically 2,500 bottles or less.

For these reasons, Andre Tamers, owner of the import firm De Maison Selections, selected sherries from a bodega in each of Jerez's three major towns. Proximity to the coast and a facility's unique microbiology can vary a winery's style, even impacting the flor, or yeast veil that protectively rests atop maturing sherries.

"I think Champagne is a really good model, where you've got these grower Champagnes that really are quite interesting," Tamers says. "My interest is not in the terroir of where the vines are grown but in the terroir of the wineries."

### **A wine's ups and downs**

As one of the world's oldest wines, sherry's fortunes have been on the skids before. Magellan spent dearly to stock his voyages with it, and the British fondness for Shakespeare's "sherris-sack" had been well established by the 15th century. But an effective campaign in the 1800s accused Jerez winemakers of tainting their wines with gypsum. (Essentially true, but irrelevant.) Sales withered.

Recent troubles stem from continuous consolidation and upheaval, beginning in the 1970s when the largely family-owned sherry houses, many dating to the 1700s, were targeted by large corporations, including Spanish conglomerate Rumasa, which at one point controlled more than a third of the sherry trade. Financial bumbling led the Spain government to seize Rumasa in 1983 and dissolve it, but not before sherry quality tumbled and prices were drastically slashed. Many names are shuffling from owner to owner; even the historic Domecq line has been split up among multiple firms.

When good sherry made it to these shores, distributors often weren't sure whether to treat it as wine or liquor. Major names like Domecq and Gonzalez Byass all but vanished from shelves at one time or another.

It fared little better with restaurants, many of which still put even the driest fino on their dessert wine lists, where they grow stale. While oloroso and amontillado sherries might survive for months in a cool spot, fresh styles like manzanilla must be drunk young, preferably opened within a year of bottling and finished within a week. Freshness is so crucial that come March, de Maison will mark all its sherries with bottling dates to help shoppers verify the shelf life.

The American interest in sherry seems to be cyclical. In 1969, Darrell Corti convinced the Lustau family to ship special fino wines to his Sacramento grocery store, Corti Brothers, thus pioneering California's interest in sherry. At a 1976 dinner at San Francisco's Stanford Court hotel, sherry enthusiasts tucked into roast leg of lamb that Corti paired with a Gonzalez Byass oloroso.

But as the bodegas' ownership woes mounted and Americans started ordering wine by the glass, the market fell off. "People began to turn away from that when there were more examples of white wines, specifically Chardonnay, that they took a fancy to," says Corti, still one of the foremost U.S. sherry experts.

The free fall in sales continued through the 1980s before leveling off in the 1990s. But another problem had surfaced.

"Basically, our consumers were just dying," says Gonzalez-Gordon. "We had done a lousy job to recruit new consumers."

### **New opportunities**

Several smaller bodegas saw the opportunity to make their name amid the crumbling market.

Notably, the house of Emilio Lustau unveiled its Almacenista range, featuring top lots from individual sherry middlemen (almacenistas) who didn't have licenses to export their own wines. But more importantly, it embarked on a mission to teach the American wine trade about sherry styles. Then as the millennium rolled around, Spanish officials quietly approved a small campaign to educate restaurants about things like proper storage and service.

"At the time, I thought I was crazy, much less them crazy," recalls beverage consultant Steve Olson, whose firm, aka wine geek, was hired for the task. "Why would anybody in their right mind take on something that's impossible?"

Olson accepted the mission, with one caveat: to include cocktails as part of his push, drinks like Sherry in the Sidecar (exactly what it sounds like). Soon after he hatched the cocktail contests.

Sometimes sherry's sales pitch is as simple as getting a glass in a convert's hand. Last fall, the punky New York wine bar Terroir began offering customers a taste of manzanilla (the wine list compares it to Amy Winehouse; fino is Avril Lavigne) as a sort of liquid amuse-bouche to whet their appetites. Gitane launched a similar effort last week.

Olson's next move is to get sherry by the glass onto the average wine list. If someone can order a glass of Chardonnay, why not a glass of fino?

A decade ago, I halted a conversation by doing just that. This year, perhaps, my sherry will be served with no apologies.

### **How sherry is made**

A long process from vineyard to bottle, often passing through several firms. Grapes are crushed, pressed and fermented, then gauged for quality. Finer base wines will be reserved for so-called **biological aging**; they are lightly fortified so the protective yeast blanket called **flor** can grow, and will presumably become **finos** and **manzanillas**. Others are more heavily fortified to prevent any developing flor and will be destined for **oxidative aging** - exposure to air - to become **olorosos**.

Eventually the wines are moved into the **solera**, the heart of the Jerez system. This can be as simple as a series of stacked sherry casks, with the oldest wines on the bottom and successively younger wines on higher levels ("criaderas," or nurseries). As the wine ages, it is blended into successively lower levels, with younger wine taking on characteristics of older, until it reaches the bottom level and is bottled or sold.

## **Types of sherry**

**Fino:** The freshest, lightest sherries, aged under the protection of flor.

**Manzanilla:** Fino made in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, the riverside town whose flor is thought to impart a saline quality to the wine. A partially aged version is called manzanilla pasada.

**Amontillado:** A richer style with more depth and nut-like flavors. True amontillado is an aged fino whose flor dies off, exposing the wine to air during aging. But some lesser wines have been known to appropriate the name.

**Oloroso:** Rich, dark and complex, it is the result of exposure to oxygen through an often long aging, which protects the wine and adds the classic sherry bite.

**Palo cortado:** A rare, refined style that starts life as a fino, but which loses its veil of flor, either naturally or by additional fortification, and takes on qualities of an oloroso but with an extra nuance.

**Cream:** Usually an oloroso that has been sweetened with wine or must. Pale cream sherries are sweetened finos. A medium sherry is often a sweetened amontillado.

**Naturally sweet sherries:** Made from Pedro Ximenez or Moscatel grapes, often dried on mats before pressing, and fortified.

## **Serving sherry**

Fino, manzanilla and lighter cream sherries are intended to highlight freshness. They should be served slightly chilled, opened within a year or so of bottling (though it's hard to know when they were bottled) and finished within about a week.

Amontillado and oloroso best express rich, deep flavors. They should be served around cellar or cool room temperature. Richer amontillados can improve slightly with time; lighter ones should be finished quickly. Olorosos can last for months after being opened. Closed bottles can improve with a few years' age.

Any closed bottles should be stored upright in a cool, dark spot. The classic glass for sherry is the narrow copita with its squat stem. These work fine, but I find a slim white-wine glass works as well or better. Slightly flared glasses designed for Riesling are a perfect vessel.

## Food pairings

Sherry food pairings center on the wine's weight and sweetness level, though many dishes will work with more than one style.

**Light and dry (fino, manzanilla).** Nuts; salumi and charcuterie; egg dishes; seafood including sushi and sashimi; shellfish; green olives; tempura; soft cheese; vegetables; all types of Spanish tapas.

**Medium weight (amontillado).** Green and black olives; fried foods including fried chicken; moderately aged, firm cheese; slightly spicy foods like stuffed piquillo peppers; padrone peppers sauteed in olive oil and sprinkled with sea salt; vegetable stir-fry; herbed roast chicken, charcuterie.

**Moderately full-bodied (oloroso, palo cortado).** Braised meat like beef and oxtail stew; game; mature cheese.

**Sweet (cream).** Fruit desserts like apple and pear crisp; custards like creme brulee flan; blue-veined cheeses.

**Weighty, unctuous and very sweet (Moscatel, Pedro Ximenez).** Bananas Foster; ice cream sundae; chocolate desserts; nut-based desserts like pecan pie and chocolate-covered nuts; blue-veined cheeses.

## Sherry buying guide

Plenty of excellent sherries can be found on the shelf. While some might seem expensive at first glance, they are relative bargains compared to most table wines. This is particularly true for bottles of oloroso and palo cortado, which can stay open for months in a cool spot. As Darrell Corti puts it: "It's open and it's waiting for you to enjoy it - not tempting you to enjoy it, since it's already open." I limited the list to drier Palomino-based styles that go with a wider range of foods, though a couple sweeter examples are included that will match dishes that mix savory and sweet flavors.

## LIGHTER SHERRIES

**NV El Maestro Sierra Fino (\$18)** A lesser-known fino from an old house in Jerez de la Frontera. Floral and tinged with golden currant and brine aromas in a rounder, more delicate style with a subtle grip. (Importer: De Maison Selections)

**NV Emilio Lustau Papyrusa Light Manzanilla (\$16)** Amid the typical salty notes are hints of sesame oil, peanut and tarragon, with precision and a mineral kick. A deft manzanilla with great complexity. (Importer: Europvin)

**NV Gonzalez Byass Tio Pepe Fino Muy Seco (\$18)** One of the world's most popular sherries still delivers, with a warmer mouth-filling profile amid its fresh salt and green apple notes. (Importer: San Francisco Wine Exchange)

**NV Hidalgo La Gitana Pastrana Manzanilla Pasada (\$29)** An extraordinary single-vineyard release from Hidalgo, which also makes the excellent La Gitana (\$18/500 ml) a standard-bearer for manzanilla. This is aged manzanilla from a single vineyard near Sanlucar de Barrameda, with salty freshness but impressive mineral depth and butterscotch richness. (Importer: Classical Wines)

## **DARKER SHERRIES**

**NV Barbadillo Cuco Oloroso Seco (\$30)** More austere and dramatic, with a stark nose of chalk and flowers leading to brown-sugar sweetness and crushed walnut. Plenty of edge and distinction. (Importer: Grape Expectations)

**NV Emilio Lustau Almacenista Pata de Gallina 1/38 Jarana Oloroso (\$40)** From Lustau's "Almacenista" collection, designed to highlight the talents of individual small sherry vintners, in this case Juan Garcia Jarana of Jerez de la Frontera. An eloquent blast of crusty salt, toffee, copper and plump golden currant, lots of dark notes yet focused around a huge mineral presence and filigree. Refined and complex. (Importer: Europvin)

**NV Gonzalez Byass Alfonso Oloroso Seco (\$18)** One of the most elegant dry olorosos around. Clear iodine and hazelnut skin notes, with dried peach, toffee and a delicacy on the palate. (Importer: San Francisco Wine Exchange)

**NV Gonzalez Byass Vina AB Amontillado Seco (\$18)** A perfect meal companion. Slightly woolly on the nose, with earth and mahogany notes on its finish, but plenty of bone-dry sherry tang and tension. Or look for a bottle of the rare and surprisingly fresh Del Duque Amontillado Viejo (\$44.50/375 ml), aged an average of at least 30 years and given the VORS mark. (Importer: San Francisco Wine Exchange)

**NV Gutierrez Colosia Sangre y Trabajadero Oloroso (\$19/375 ml)** An old Puerto de Santa Maria almacenista that began bottling its own wine, in this case a tribute to the butchers of the local meat market. Darker and rich for an oloroso, and aged at least seven years. Stewed raisins, brandy and chestnuts. Beautifully warm and dry in its style, with a hint of sweet caramel. (Importer: De Maison Selections)

**NV Hidalgo Napoleon Amontillado (\$20/500 ml)** Lovely amber color. A sharper, austere tang to the nose, with almost steely presence. Less rich nutty flavors than hazelnut skin and iodine. (Importer: Classical Wines)

**NV Hidalgo Wellington VOS Jerez Cortado (\$64)** This rare palo cortado, guaranteed at an average age of over 20 years, remains a standout. The freshness of fino, with sea spray, salted almond, plus the depths of oloroso - toffee and apricot. (Importer: Classical Wines)

## **SWEET SHERRIES**

**NV Bodegas Dios Baco Oloroso (\$19)** Dios Baco's oloroso takes on a slightly sweet countenance, but the caramel and spiced apple mesh with mahogany and mineral in a style that complements both sweet and savory dishes. (Importer: CIV)

**NV Barbadillo Amoroso San Rafael Oloroso Dulce (\$20)** Most sweetened olorosos are simply known as cream, but a few still label themselves as amoroso, including this dramatic, delicious bottle. Tart, leathery scents of crushed toffee candy and stones, with a molasses sweetness cut through by the sharp tang of long-aged sherry. (Importer: Grape Expectations)

## **COCKTAILS**

### **Solera**

#### **Makes 1 drink**

Adapted from a recipe by Dominic Venegas.

- 2 ounces Santa Teresa 1796 rum or other aged dark rum, preferably Venezuelan
- 1 ounce Lustau Palo Cortado sherry
- 3/4 ounce velvet falernum (John Taylor)
- 2 dashes Regans' Orange Bitters
- -- Orange peel for garnish

**Instructions:** Fill a mixing glass with ice. Add the rum, sherry, velvet falernum and bitters. Stir, then strain into a cocktail glass. Garnish with a ribbon of orange peel.

### **Gitane Cobbler**

#### **Makes 1 drink**

Adapted from a recipe by Dominic Venegas.

- 3 ounces dry amontillado sherry
- 1/2 ounce lemon juice
- 1/2 ounce triple sec
- 1/4 ounce simple syrup
- -- Handful of seasonal berries, such as raspberries, blackberries and blueberries

**Instructions:** Place the sherry, lemon juice, triple sec and simple syrup in a mixing glass with ice. Shake vigorously for about 10 to 15 seconds and strain

into an old-fashioned glass mostly filled with cracked ice. Cover top of glass with berries. Add straw.

**La Perla**

**Makes 1 drink**

This drink, devised by San Francisco bar consultant Jacques Bezuidenhout, won the 2005 Sherry Cocktail Competition. Note: It calls for pear liqueur, which typically is at a lower proof than an eau de vie.

- 1 1/4 ounces manzanilla sherry
- 1 1/4 ounces reposado Tequila
- 3/4 ounce pear liqueur, such as Mathilde

**Instructions:** Combine ingredients in a cocktail shaker over ice. Stir and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

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