



The New York Times

Sherry Is Ready to Come to Dinner

By Florence Fabricant

December 31, 2008

A SIP. And then, surprise.

“It’s different from what I’m used to, drier and more bitter,” said Carlos Wesley, a cosmetic surgeon. He had stopped by Tinto Fino, a [Spanish wine](#) shop in the East Village, recently for a tasting of sherry’s best: light and dry finos, lip-smackingly crisp manzanillas, full-bodied amontillados and olorosos.

He’s not alone. Sherry’s image in this country is still influenced by sticky, mahogany-colored cream sherry, a bottle of which might have been on your great-aunt’s sideboard for an afternoon tipple.

You will not find cream sherries in tapas bars or on wine lists in Seville, Barcelona or San Sebastián: the sweet stuff is made primarily for export to England and the United States.

But now, with Spain’s food and wine more popular than ever here, the spotlight is moving toward finer sherries. The timing could not be better because, in addition to being food-friendly, sherry is a bargain. A nice bottle of fino, which should be anyone’s introduction to sherry, can cost as little as \$10 in a wine shop. Even well-aged amontillados and olorosos rarely climb above \$40.

“Sherry is like riesling was in the ’90s, which also had to outgrow misconceptions,” said Roger Kugler, the wine director for the Spanish restaurants Boqueria and Suba in Manhattan. “But times are changing.

We used to have to beg people to come to our sherry tastings. Now we sell out.”

Sherry is taken seriously at a greater number of restaurants, and not just Spanish ones. In New York, Dovetail, Veritas, WD-50 and Aquagrill have commendable sherry lists. Outside New York, Coi in San Francisco, Cru Café and Wine Bar in Chicago, and Harvest Vine in Seattle specialize in sherry.

A younger generation of drinkers, sommeliers and bartenders are game to try anything new, and they are insisting on authentic, high-quality products.

“There is more interest in fortified wines,” said Lorena Ascencios, the wine buyer at Astor Wines and Spirits, which carries more than 30 sherries. And lately, the Spanish government has been working hard to interest Americans in the glories of its sherries.

Those glories include the pale finos and manzanillas; amber-hued, nutty-tasting amontillados; the more complex palo cortados, and the deeper, richer olorosos. They are all made from the palomino grape. Only sherries made from the Pedro Ximénez and Muscat grapes, and labeled with the names of those grapes, are truly sweet.

Since most Americans are new to sherries, here’s a short primer: Sherry is a fortified wine, finished with a dose of brandy to stabilize it by bringing the alcohol content to 15.5 percent for finos, and several degrees more for amontillados and olorosos.

It is a wine with centuries of history: casks of it were loaded onto the ships of Columbus and Magellan.

Its home is a corner of Andalusia in southern Spain, around the small city of Jerez de la Frontera. The region’s weather helps explain why sherry is not expensive.

“The generally good climate and harvest conditions produce good yields year after year,” said Marc Destito, the director of the Sherry Council of America, a newtrade group in Washington.

Making sherry is complicated: wines from various vintages are blended in cavernous sherry bodegas, and left to age three years and usually much longer. Sherries do not have vintage dates, though ages are given on the labels of some.

But except for the sweetest ones, they do not last forever, so it is best to buy sherry in shops where there is good turnover. Finos and manzanillas must be very fresh. Once opened they should not be held for more than a day, even in the refrigerator. For home consumption, smaller 500- and 375-milliliter bottles are convenient and practical.

Unopened bottles of amontillado and oloroso can be kept for a year or more, but once opened, they have just a few weeks before they deteriorate.

Drink a fino or manzanilla as an aperitif. Amontillados and olorosos can be drunk with first courses, especially garlicky ones and rich meats like foie gras.

“Sherry is amazing with [cheese](#),” said Mani Dawes, who owns Tinto Fino and the tapas bars Tía Pol and El Quinto Pino. At the tasting, she was serving cabrales, a blue cheese, with her array of sherries.

Cheese is a good place to start. Paul Greico, the wine director and an owner of the restaurants Terroir, Hearth and Insieme, likes to serve sweetbreads with palo cortado, an amber sherry with hints of grilled almonds.

He is so devoted to sherry that at Terroir in the East Village, where there are about 20 sherries on the wine list, customers receive a free glass of fino when they are seated.

“These days to have a complete wine list you have to have sherries,” he said. “But you have to really sell it, put it in front of people.”

When you do, you may have made a friend. At the tasting at Tinto Fino, Ben Pogue, a photographer, was sipping fino for the first time. His reaction was typical. “Totally unexpected,” he said as he asked for a refill. “Refreshing.”