

Most under-appreciated wine? It's sherry, baby

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By Bill Ward

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For some reason, sherry brings to mind a lot of old ad slogans (not to mention a Four Seasons song):

"This is not your grandmother's sherry."

"It keeps going and going and going."

"Breakfast of champions" (Oops, scratch that one.)

But most of all: "Try it, you'll like it."

Seriously, this complex, long-finishing, food-friendly fortified wine from Spain might be the most misunderstood, under-appreciated beverage on the market. All too many retailers "just have a few bottles on hand for the crazy old person," said former Minneapolitan and current Spain-based wine blogger Ryan Opaz.

And sometimes those bottles are over the hill, said Annette Peters, World Class Wines import director and perhaps the Twin Cities' foremost sherry expert. "They're very misunderstood and often not worked with in the right manner," she said. "When I was selling sherry full-time, the bane of my existence was going into a restaurant and seeing the [fragile, short-lived] fino sherry next to the espresso machine.

So why bother?

"Because when people go to Spain and have their first experience with sherry, they are blown away," Peters said. "The clouds part, and they go 'Oh, I get it,' because the wines are fresh and lively and lovely."

Another aficionado, La Belle Vie sommelier Bill Summerville, said he always slips a sherry into his wine classes. "And people invariably say 'I never drink sherry' or 'I don't like sherry, but I like this sherry a lot.'"

Summerville and partners Tim McKee and Josh Thoma are passionate enough about this wine to have amassed perhaps the nation's foremost sherry portfolio at their Minneapolis eatery Solera. (The restaurant derives its name from the Solera system of blending and aging sherries in a series of barrels.)

On the retail front, St. Paul's Solo Vino and Minneapolis' South Lyndale and Surdyk's have strong selections and staff members who can provide some insight. And every little

bit of that helps, because like too many things in the wine world, sherry is a bit complicated.

The driest, most delicate sherry, which has a short shelf life in the bottle and should be refrigerated after opening, is called fino. One type of fino, manzanilla, comes from the seaside town of Sanlucar and has "salty, sea-brine characteristics, like sourdough bread," Peters said. Amontillado sherries combine the finesse of fino and a caramel-y aspect.

Oloroso sherries are darker and higher in alcohol (17 to 23 percent), while Moscatel and Pedro Ximénez are thick, rich dessert wines, made from grapes dried in the sun.

All of these can be sipped on their own, but sherries might be the most versatile food wine extant. "Fino sherry and sushi is a match made in heaven," Peters said. "Sherries go with anything that tastes like the sea, things that are salty or briny like olives. They work beautifully with wine-chokers like artichokes and asparagus.

"They just go to some places that wine will not, especially in Minnesota. A lot of the things on a Scandinavian smörgåsbord like pickled herring destroy wine, but sherry works great with that."

Sounds like an "uff-da" toast is in order.