

General Notes on Sherry

D.O. Jerez

Sherry is an Anglicisation of Jerez, the central town in the south-west corner of Spain. In its time it has been invaded by Ottomans, Romans, Huns and the Moors. While these left some splendid architectural traces and pretty ceramic tile work, 400 years of British merchant dominance has celebrated, entrenched and refined the production of the diverse group of lightly fortified wines which today we call “sherry”.

Sherries come in sweet and dry, rich and elegant styles. They’re made from both brown and predominantly white grapes. But what they all share is an extended period of barrel maturation (4 years minimum for decent wines) in a solera system, and fortification with three or more degrees of clean, neutral alcohol.



The Sherry Region

Sherry is produced in the province of Andalusia, in the south-west corner of Spain, in a quadrilateral area running north-west up the coast from Cadiz, near the Gibraltar Strait, and diagonally inland. It is centred around the inland town of Jerez de la Frontera, so named as it was often the “frontier” of various battles for land-ownership and cultural-economic supremacy.

Like it or not, the history of sherry is inextricably linked with war. British soldiers invaded, caused havoc, drank lots and stayed. British merchants established trade links, bought bodegas (wineries), formed partnerships with Spanish Lords and Dons and conducted trade on behalf of themselves and the Jerezanos.

The Sherry region today is owned and managed by a complex Colonial amalgam – Spanish and British names intermingle at every level of ownership management and promotion. Although it’s a Spanish wine, geographically speaking, the weird mix of economic vested interest and mad passion for a very particular wine by the British has undoubtedly been instrumental in keeping the region economically viable and a part of the world market in fine wine.

Solera, Flor, and Production

Three main varieties are used to make sherry: Palomino, Pedro Ximénez and Muscat of Alexandria. After fermentation the wine is fortified with an addition of neutral grape spirit to raise the alcohol to between 15% to 20% a/v, depending on the style. The wine is then transferred into very large old barrels (commonly called butts) for ageing.

All Sherries share a parental link to the “solera”. A sherry solera comprises of a number of groups of butts, each of which is called a “criadera” – these are nurseries of like-aged material (think literally of one room full of just born babies, the first criadera; another of toddlers, second criadera; another of pre-schoolers, the third; primary school kids the fourth criadera; and high school graduates ready to make their way in the world the solera criadera.

When the Bodega (wine house) needs sherry for bottling, it is drawn out of the oldest criadera (which is also called the solera). Rarely would more than 30% of the solera criadera be drawn off in a single bottling. The solera criadera is replenished with wine from a younger criadera, which in turn is replenished by an even younger criadera, and so on and so on. Simple soleras are fed by three or four criaderas while more complex systems may run up to fourteen. The whole solera is fed with new wine from each harvest. This method ensures the consistency of house style and standards are maintained. Criaderas can range from just one barrel to tens of thousands.

Sherry butts are kept ullaged – usually about 80% full. This allows oxygen to feed the flor yeast for fino style sherry, and for oxidation of amber styles. The basic stylistic differences of sherry revolve around the flor yeast (literally, flower), which grows like a carpet across the surface of the sherry in the butt and defines its character. Oxidation is minimised because of the blanket effect of the flor, and the yeast cells that die impart a gentle nuttiness. Richer, broader base wines have the natural flor growth stopped, and instead of the fine, edgy styles raised under flor, develop a deeply nutty, rich, brassily-oxidised character.



The solera system is particularly important to flor-based styles – regular movement through the criaderas of different aged wines refreshes the flor by adding fresh nutrients from younger barrels. Nevertheless, the carpet of flor is far from constant – the temperature of spring and autumn is most conducive to a full, thick yeast carpet; in winter and summer it can become alarmingly sparse. If the flor dies off, the tang, vigour and finesse which defines good fino will be lost.

An interesting side-note to sherry has to do with indigenous yeasts. Flor is far from the only such strain in the Bodegas: *mycoderma aceti* (vinegar yeast) also abounds, and the two are constantly at war. In a healthy solera, however, the flor yeast will almost always win out, and only a few barrels are lost to vinegar (which go on to become sherry vinegar).

While the solera system is a seamless intermingling of vintages, to the point where the year of origin and average age are more or less incalculable, “Anada” (single-vintage) wines are made, but are extremely rare and expensive. However, this is a relatively recent evolution. Until the early part of the 19th century, nearly all sherry was “Anada” wine – the product of a single vintage, held in a row of barrels of the same provenance.

The Range of Styles

The common processes of fortification and barrel ageing within a solera system nevertheless yields many distinct types of sherry, and subtle variations within each type. The majority are based on the white grape Palomino, while a small percentage come from the brown grapes Muscat of Alexandria and Pedro Ximénez (PX). The later become sweet, rich, alcoholic wines much akin to the Muscat and Tokay produced in Rutherglen. Most sherry, however, is the product of the virtually characterless Palomino, which gains its actual style and character from the solera-ageing process, not from the grape. Two things which can be said of Palomino is that (a) it faithfully exhibits the character of the earth in which it is grown – the barren, chalky-white soils (termed “albariza”) of the region between Jerez and the coast; and (b) it has terrific acidity for a warm growing region.

Fino: Literally meaning “fine”, it is a bone-dry white wine, grown under a fairly constant covering of flor yeast. With delicate hints of nut and chalk, these are remarkably fine, delicate wines considering their heightened alcohol content in the 15-16 % a/v range. The slightly oxidative regime of barrel-aging imparts a gentle textural breadth and depth, and alcohol adds warmth and mouth-feel, but the green, acidic fruit at harvest cuts its way through all of this, leaving a clean final impression of lightness and delicacy. As mentioned, all flavour and character are imparted in the butt. Hence the location of the cellar becomes influential. Sherry bodegas inland (Jerez), in estuary waters south (Puerto de Santa Maria), and the Atlantic coast west of Jerez (Sanlúcar de Barremeda) produce notably different Fino sherries. This is entirely due to the microclimate of the Bodega in which the butts are stored, for all the fruit comes from a single growing region of chalk soils triangled between the three towns.

The cooler, humid, maritime climates of the coastal towns produce much finer, more delicate and tangy sherry. The relative stability of temperature compared to the blazing hot/cold alternation at Jerez, is also conducive to a less lusty wine, thanks to the more even growth of flor yeast which is facilitated. While this is true for **Fino del Puerto**, it’s doubly so for the wines from Sanlúcar. The astonishingly light, pale and pretty Fino here is not even called Fino – its appellation

name is **Manzanilla**. The sea air imparts a definite sea tang, redolent of oyster shells and the twining sweet-sour crunch of sea salt. Manzanilla, in Spanish, also is the word for chamomile, whose floral character is clearly suggested in the delicate aromas of this sherry. In keeping with its delicacy, Manzanilla is often slightly lower in alcohol than other Fino styles. As a result, an open bottle will oxidise and lose its fresh vitality at quite a rate.

No matter their origins, Finos at maturity (three-plus years in barrel) are delicate, nervy, and nutty with an agreeable tension between softness and tang. They have an overall savouriness, and are utterly bone dry. They are a perfect aperitif or accompaniment to seafood or tapas and are always consumed chilled. After 6 years, technically a fino enters a transitional stage, due to the flor beginning to fail and a degree of oxidative effect becoming apparent: such wines will be called fino-amontillado (jerez) or manzanilla pasada (sanlucar).

Note: there is a term occasionally associated with Finos, ie '**Fino en rama**', or raw sherry. To date, there are no authentic Finos en rama in Australia - those which have been seen are merely less filtered and are mis-using Fino en Rama as a marketing tool. Raw sherry will redevelop flor in the bottle – most unattractive. At present, there is a small emerging market in London whereby authentic Finos en Rama are sold very quickly. We'll wait to see if this can translate here (at the time of writing – July 2012, we are awaiting a trial by Delgado Zuleta, to see if La Goya Extra en rama will in fact travel and keep here). Now, there is a point with the 'en rama' thing, despite it not being shown by brands using it as bogus marketing. Fully developed raw sherry in barrel is golden, rich and full like young Montrachet, and bloody attractive! We'll just have to see if it can be made to translate ... In the meantime, the 'en rama' thing does shine a light on the technological nature of Fino and Manzanilla as we know it – light, white, clear and nervous, these styles are a technological artefact of the modern era of temperature control, sterile filtering, stainless steel and so on. Romate's delightful 'Fino Perdido' is a response to this dichotomy – see above.

Amontillado: Amontillados evolve naturally when the flor has exhausted its supply of nutrients, or the style may be induced if the flor is killed off by fortification to 18% or above. A top Amontillado will have spent sixteen years or so in oak, about half of which time is oxidative, post-flor, although commercial styles start at a minimal 6 years' age. Amontillado is Fino in style and flavour, but amber in colour, and the Fino flavours are overlaid with a brassy richness, enhanced nuttiness and depth, with extra warmth from the higher alcohol levels.

Oloroso: Since only the most delicate Palomino wines are designated to become a Fino, broader, less vibrant base wines are used in the production of Oloroso (Spanish for fragrant). Oloroso is sherry raised from the same Palomino grape, in the same solera system, but the flor yeast is killed off. It is in an oxidative regime from the start, and so has even greater richness, brassiness, warmth and a different form of nuttiness. Olorosos also have a roundness, and silken texture absent in flor-related sherry (since flor survives on the glycerol of its host wine).

Most good Oloroso remains as Seco (dry) but some is sweetened to Abocado (mildly sweet) by the addition of sweet base wines. Oloroso Seco is dry, amber to mahogany coloured with a pronounced aroma of dark, old walnut characters. It is quite full-bodied and velvety, should be served cool and complements rich winter foods such as consommés, pâtés, game and mushrooms.

Pedro Ximénez: The darkest and sweetest of all sherries are the PX styles, where very ripe grapes are further concentrated by raisining on mats prior to vinification and barrel maturation. PX is a dark mahogany colour wine with deep raisin aromas and is smooth and sweet in the mouth. It is full, vigorous and often extremely viscous. PX best served cool, and is one of few wines which match well with chocolate desserts. It's delicious over ice cream.

Other Styles: And then there is the black sheep of the family: **Palo Cortado**. Some sherries just refuse to play by the rules. A Palo Cortado is a rare and accidental sherry – the product of a barrel designated as Fino but in which the flor fails to take, and the wine remains stranded in a stylistic half-world, in-between Amontillado and Oloroso, and sharing characteristics of both.

Moscatel is a sweet wine made from the Muscat of Alexandria grape. It is raisiny, smooth and has a delightful clean acid finish, which means it is not as rich as a Pedro Ximénez. Having much higher acidity than PX, it's a cooler, fresher style, and very versatile with food.

Cream sherry was originally produced for the British market; this is dark with a rich, sweet flavour. Obtained from a blend of Oloroso and Pedro Ximénez, it is usually preferred as an aperitif, and much like Moscatel and Oloroso can be served anywhere from room temperature to fairly cool, depending on ambient temperature, food to match and personal preference.

Delgado Zuleta “La Goya” Manzanilla, D.O Sanlúcar de Barrameda



Delgado Zuleta

Established in 1719 Delgado Zuleta is the oldest family owned sherry house and has its cellars and vineyards situated around the town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Delgado Zuleta has become specialist in producing Manzanilla and their market leading wine is a Manzanilla labelled as “La Goya” which is named after the famed flamenco dancer from the region. This brand first appeared in 1918. Over the past 25 years, they have moved bodegas from down in the town to the breeze-swept hilltop above Sanlúcar, into a new purpose-built bodega. They took 20 years to ensure this humid, clay-soiled bodega has exactly the right conditions for flor before finally moving in the La Goya solera. Butts in the solera average more than 100 years’ age, and require repair every 30 years or so.

Delgado Zuleta “La Goya” Manzanilla

Manzanilla is the appellation name for a Fino Sherry which is raised at Sanlúcar, a relatively cool, humid seaside village. The resultant Sherry has a definite tang of the sea, and perhaps a suggestion of camomile flower (Manzanilla is Spanish for camomile). Much finer, and more delicate than Finos from Jerez, inland, and usually bottled at about 15% alcohol.

“La Goya” is a Manzanilla pasada, meaning it has been aged for a relatively long time (8 years, compared to Manzanilla standard of about 4 ½). The wine is bottled, however, before the flor yeast can die off, thus avoiding any Amontillado characters. The oyster shell suggestion in normal Manzanilla becomes a richer scent of abalone, and the wine has a fabulous builders’ lime streak which directly reflects the flavour of the chalky ‘albariza’ soils in which it’s grown.

It is most important that Fino/Manzanilla Sherries are consumed fresh (within a year of bottling, and within a day or two of the bottle being opened). To this end, “La Goya” is bottled the week prior to shipping, and shipped regularly in small volumes. Further, the use of screw-top stubbies is designed to promote freshness.

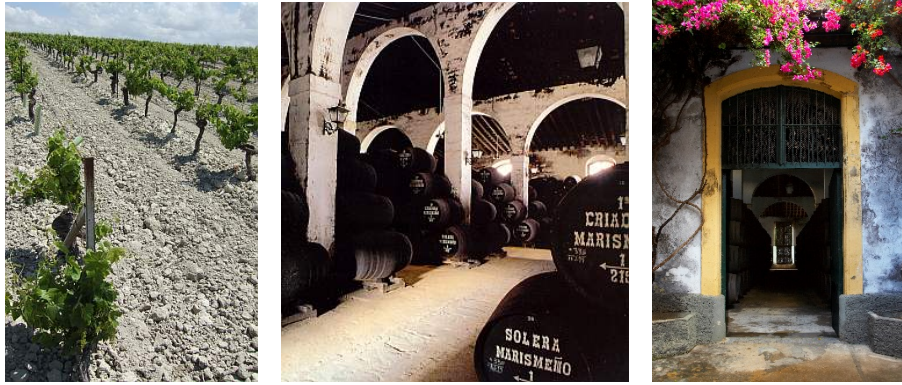
“La Goya” carries an importer's label in clear English which specifies the date on which each individual batch was bottled. In the back of the bodega is a small solera labelled ‘Bota no’, not for bottling, which is a designated reserve of Manzanilla older than normal La Goya, which is used for back blending and typification when the solera is stressed by demand. DZ also own and make a second Manzanilla brand, Barbiana, which is sold locally in Sanlúcar but not commercialised for broader domestic or international consumption.

Delgado Zuleta ‘La Goya XL’ Manzanilla En Rama

In 2012 Delgado Zuleta released ‘Goya XL’ Manzanilla En Rama. It’s an extraordinary wine. Having spent more than 10 years under protection of the flor yeast (unimaginable in any bodega other than DZ), this wine is usually dedicated as a reserve wine which serves as insurance for the La Goya Solera. If the Solera is taxed and there’s any chance of the wine becoming a little weak, a special reserve of older La Goya is used to blend the wine up to spec.

Straight from the barrel, it is literally an extraordinary experience to taste – rich and golden, all Mersaulty and totally glorious. When Scott visited Delgado Zuleta in January 2012, he asked them to trial bottling this wine as a version of ‘en rama’ or raw sherry. The first Saca (withdrawal from the solera) was made on September 27, 2012 and another in December. There are no further plans to bottle this wine, it’s a one-off adventure in the possibilities of sherry.

Sánchez Romate, D.O. Jerez



Sánchez Romate, D.O. Jerez

Sánchez Romate was founded in the late 18th century by Juan Sánchez de la Torre, and today is one of the few D.O. Jerez wineries to still be in the hands of local owners. Over time the winery has grown and adapted to modernisation and technology, whilst maintaining their respect for traditional viticulture and winemaking. In Jerez, the main Romate Bodegas are 230 years old. They are a significant producer of Brandy and Vinegar as well as Sherry wines.

Romate's a middle sized sherry house, with 70 hectares on the best white *albariza* soils of Jerez de la Frontera soils at Pago Balbaina, about 8 km west of Jerez, towards Sanlucar. This is an area of gentle rolling hills, with situation being critical – altitude and aspect are highly influential in the possibility of growing truly 'fino' fruit. The friable chalk soils are very deep and humid, retaining moisture like a sponge, allowing un-irrigated Palomino to grow roots up to 20m deep (the first 6 or so being *albariza* chalk).

All Romate's wines come from these holdings, save for Moscatel which comes from the coastal town of Chipiona, west of Jerez and south of Sanlucar. PX is another matter: although sold as "Sherry" and hence implying it's from Jerez, virtually all Jerezano PX comes from another D.O. - Montilla-Moriles, inland north-east towards Cordoba. Romate buy young PX wine on long term contract from a single grower and transport it to Jerez to mature (see detailed note later).

Sherry wines are aged in two phases: initial winemaking and ageing is at a processing bodega right in the vineyard, and then before the next vintage the wines are sent into town for blending and ageing in the various soleras of Jerez. Each of the three main classifications (Fino, Oloroso and PX) which Romate plans to produce are pressed separately at different pressures to get more or less 'body' from the fruit, depending on the classification being produced.

The Palomino Fino is picked in early morning, into small baskets to avoid fermentation, bruising and browning, then destemmed, pressed as whole grapes and fermented under temperature control in stainless tanks. The first press is aged as fino and the second pressing becomes part of the selection for oloroso (later, tasting in barrel will see some of the fino re-classified as oloroso or perhaps palo cortado). After fermentation the wines (12% a/v) are filtered, racked into another stainless deposit and fortifying spirit is added, then to barrel (the 500 litre 'bota') where flor yeast in the bodega auto-innoculates and spreads over the wine. The base wine, tasting of chalk and lemon, spends a year in the vineyard winery gaining it's first layer of 'sherryishness' in barrel under flor before transfer to the Jerez bodega. On arrival, the young sherry is re-filtered and held in tank as *añada* – young wine ready for solera maturation. As needed, it's introduced into the first criadera of whichever solera it's destined to inhabit.

Note, 4 distinct Fino-Amontillado systems are maintained in separate Jerez bodegas: Romate Fino solera produces the basic Romate Fino which in turn feeds the distinct Romate Amontillado solera. Likewise, the Fino Marismeno Solera is bottled as such, and also is the exclusive source material for Amontillado NPU. A Third distinct feeder system of other old Amontillados is maintained to feed the separate Old+Plus Amontillado Solera. The 15 bota which comprise the Fino Perdido are a 4th distinct system.

SANCHEZ ROMATE SHERRY TASTING NOTES



Reserva Range

Romate 'Fino Perdido' 1/15: This is an 8 year old Fino-Amontillado from 3 tiny soleras totalling just 15 bota; Perdido refers to a 'lost style' of Fino, largely forgotten since the advent of modern technology. Ultra-white Manzanillas and Finos as we know them are technological styles only possible since the 60's with the advent of sterile chill filtration and stainless steel handling. Prior to that, all 'Finos' were darker and more oxidative, brassier and nuttier ... a little like this new example. Being very lightly filtered, it's also as close to a commercial 'Fino en rama' (raw, ex barrel) as is possible. Honey-gold-brass in colour, it smells of fine old toffee, gingerbread, wattle grove. The palate of toasted almond & wattle toffee is gently liquorous and very dry - plush at the centre with great sherryish snap at the rim.

Romate Amontillado 'N.P.U.': 20 years old (inc 7 years as Fino). Pretty and elegant - mahogany, hazelnut, roast almond in a dry, spicy palate with trace of green olive. Long++. In our judgement, a close to perfect Amontillado, achingly dry and spare; fine, elegant, lingering, precise ... JOY.

Romate Oloroso 'Don Jose': 15 years old. Rich, woody-nutty, with walnuts and quince fruit. Soft, round middle is given grip by oak. Delicate, languid, round but not fatty, with a light spicy dry finish and ripe walnuts releasing at back. Very good example of the dry-but-glyceric richness of Oloroso.

Romate Palo Cortado 'Regente': Palo Cortado is the weirdest of Sherry classifications: a mixture of Oloroso aromatics and the lean drive of Amontillado, formed when Fino barrels fail to conform to style. A great Sherry to serve with meats. 15 years old, only 30 barrels in production. Has a golden syrup rich nose, the mustard fruits on palate at entry becomes increasingly lean and dry with an ultra salty-flinty finish ... the memory of the Fino it so-nearly was.

Romate Cream 'Iberia': Oloroso plumped with 15% PX. Walnuts meet prune juice, with delicious honey bear biscuits and anise lollies - very good balanced sweetness. Really excellent wine to serve cool with mixed cheese plates.

Romate Moscatel 'Ambrosia': Very old, but nervy material, thanks to Moscatel's lovely fresh natural acidity. Rich and heady, with dried fruits and fresh motor oil. Balanced, silky back palate, drying finish.

Romate PX 'Duquesa' 9 yo blended with 15% oloroso. Not shipped to Australia.

Romate Pedro Ximénez 'Cardenal Cisneros': Raisiny, prune juice, chocolate dates—rich, sweet, viscous, with spice and a persistent through-line, gentle grip to off dry finish. Far more than simply sweet, it's quite outstanding! 20 years old.



Old+Plus' Range (30+ years average solera age)

These wines bear the new VORS appellation tag—Vinum Optimum Rarum Signatum, which colloquially means Very Old Rare Sherry. Classified as 'over 30 years' age, they are based on material well in excess of 40 years of age. Each have been skilfully freshened and they really dance!

Romate Amontillado 'Old+Plus': Made from Palomino fino grapes, the Amontillado 'Old+Plus' is aged in an oak cask solera for more than 30 years. Exceptional smoothness and intense aromas of toasted nuts, olive and age are its defining characteristics, yet it is typically Romate in its weightless, clean ease. Splendid wine with a deep, open nose of adobe, brandy snap, macadamia, acacia wattle, dried posy flowers. Sere, ultra-elegant, akin to very old cognac, saline.

Romate Pedro Ximénez 'Old&Plus': Pedro Ximénez grapes are picked very ripe and then left out in the sun to attain a higher sugar concentration, yet the 16% alcohol belies the heady concentration of this wine. Pedro Ximénez 'Old&Plus' has been aged in solera for more than 35 years. Layers of deep prune fruit, with mace and sweet spices. Essence, for sure - but almost ethereal in its dancey, light-hearted finish. Remarkably refined PX.

NOTES ON PX, Bodegas Galan, Montilla-Moriles

Galan have been PX supplier to Romate for 35 years, as EU exceptions to normal DO regulations allow Montilla-Moriles wine to be aged in Jerez and sold as Sherry. Montilla is a solely PX appellation. Covering 17 villages, it's about the same size as the Jerez/sherry zone. Increasingly, the Montillanos also produce red wine, but these are VDT. Finos from Montilla are made from PX, are about 15% natural alcohol, dry with no fortification, but aged biologically (ie under flor). Amontillados etc are fortified slightly so as to kill off yeasts and bottled at 18% +/-

PX is hand-picked and sun-dried on carpacho mats in the vineyard for 8 days or so. Picked in late August, they are 13.5-15 beaume at harvest, and 24 bé after drying. In the winery, the bunches are destemmed, broken in the press and then fortified to 9% with distillate from La Mancha Airen grapes. This young Mosto of PX is delicious, with the appearance of cloudy honey, a slightly greenish golden tan, and tastes like honeyed plums. This part-fortified, un-fermented mosto is cold-stabilised, but un-filtered. It's held in stainless for 3 months or so, after which Romate collect it, truck it to Jerez, finish the fortification and add to their PX soleras as required. Bodegas Galan produce PX to several grades, and Romate purchase according to the dictates of the solera to which it is destined. Sanchez Romate only take the free run PX – the second pressings are sold as Montilla, and 3rd pressings make Orujo Arguardiente.

BRANDIES de JEREZ

(note rules: solera brandy DO rules 6 months' minimum; solera reserve 12 months; gran reserva 36 months)

Romate Solera Reserva 5yo, young and raw

Uno en Mil 10yo (being a single cask selected for bottling from the 1000 barrels produced) a bit like raw single malt

Cardenal Mendoza Solera Gran Reserva 15 yo, full note below

Cardenal Mendoza Solera Gran Reserva 'Carta Real' 25 yo; is fine and elegant a revision of CMB as we know it, spicy around a nutty centre, languorous and reserved, very beautiful

Cardenal Mendoza Solera Gran Reserva 'NPU' 50 yo, in magnificent decanter set - old couches and plum liqueur, very nice indeed

CARDENAL MENDOZA Brandy de Jerez Solera Gran Reserva

This amazing value super-old brandy is from a Solera commenced in 1871. It has a 'linear' age of 15 years. It begins life as white Airen grapes in La Mancha, which is then distilled via pot stills and aged statically (no blending or movement) for 2 years in old barriques. The eau-de-vie is now at an in-between stage called 'Holandas', although it technically qualifies as brandy. However, SR do not call it brandy until it has been blended into the Cardenal Mendoza Solera (3600 barrels in 8 Criadera plus the Cardenal Mendoza Solera itself). Brandy in butt is 36 % a/v.

Brandy is bottled from the Solera up to five times a year, each bottling required the 9 scales to be run, culminating in new Holandas entering the first Criadera and immediately beginning its transformative inheritance, assimilating the enormous aged character of this extraordinary Solera. This is the same pain-staking labour-intensive drill that occurs with bottling and running the scales for Sherries. The bodega which houses Cardenal Mendoza (in fact two whole bodegas adjacent to one another) measure 2.5 hectares.