

Sherry

DO Jerez-Xérès-Sherry

DO Manzanilla-Sanlúcar de Barrameda

“all drinks stand hat-in-hand in the presence of Sherry” (Pasquil in Shakespeare’s ‘Palidonia’)

‘Sherry’ is a catch-all term for a variety of fortified wine styles produced in a small region near Cadiz, on the Atlantic coast in south-western Andalucía. Sherry production centres on the inland town of Jerez de la Frontera, so named as it has often been the ‘frontier’ of battles for land and cultural-economic supremacy.

When we say ‘Sherry’, we are not really specifying what kind of a drink we might be talking about, save for it being a fortified wine from ‘Sherry Country’, based on white grapes, and aged in wood for an extended period. Beyond that, we need to refer to specific styles of Sherry to give meaning to the type of drink in question:

“Would you like a Fino, sir? Or an Oloroso, perhaps?”

Sheries cover a wide range of styles, from light to dark, from bone dry to unctuous and sweet.



Anytime ‘Sherry’ is used generically, assume it to indicate a flinty, dry Fino – the primary Sherry style. Finos are light-coloured, tangy white wines, only lightly fortified: at 15% abv or so, they are more “a slightly twisted version of white wine as we know it”, than “whoa, man, you’re freaking me out, that’s soooo strange”. Finos come at you with a chalky crunch in apple-almond fruit rimmed with sea breeze or olive brine, and perhaps some camomile in the ozone. Finos have plenty of flavour and are persistent in mouthfeel and line, yet are also fine (hence, ‘fino’), light, dry and delicate. And, yes, there is a bit of otherness: the ‘Sherryishness’ of Fino is a slightly abstract volatile alcohol-acid thread, a zip-line within.

What might a Sherry be, then?

Three white grape varieties are used to make sherry:

- Palomino
- Pedro Ximénez
- Moscatel (Muscat of Alexandria)

These sort themselves into the two base categories of Sherry:

- naturally dry wines made from Palomino
- naturally sweet Sherries from PX and Moscatel (these are white grapes with high natural sugar levels and also high levels of potential colour pigment in their skins, characteristics which, given ageing time will caramelize to give the desired sticky, unctuous mouthfeel and deep burnished olive colour)

If we want ‘Sherry’ to generically mean naturally dry wines made from Palomino, then this sector divides into two natural dry styles:

- Finos, aged biologically under the protection of Flor yeast
- and Oloroso, or fragrant wines, aged oxidatively

At the outset, from fruit classification through fermentation and into the process of nurturing Sherry styles in the bodega, Palomino wines are either Finos or Olorosos. Later on, some of the former are re-trained as Amontillados or perhaps (d)evolve into Palo Cortados.

Here is the taxonomy of ‘natural’ Sherry styles:

- Fino: dry Palomino, biologically aged
- Amontillado: dry Palomino; a Fino which is given a second, oxidative, ageing
- Palo Cortado: dry Palomino; a Fino or Amontillado which diverges from style and is given a second, oxidative ageing and is ultimately defined as ‘not Oloroso nor Amontillado either’

- Oloroso: dry Palomino, oxidatively aged
- Moscatel: sweet Muscat of Alexandria, oxidatively aged (more than 160 g/l residual sugar)
- 'PX': sweet Pedro Ximénez, oxidatively aged (more than 210 g/l residual sugar)

Any of these can be re-purposed through blending into proprietary brands which go by names like Medium, Pale, Cream ... and a host of others, usually referring to sweetish sherries in between naturally dry Oloroso and naturally sweet PX. It's possible that these are simply blends of 'prime' or natural Sherries: the better producers blend around 20% PX into a natural dry Oloroso to concoct an off-dry 'Cream Sherry' (about 100 g/l residual sugar). Most 'Creams', however, are made by blending very simple, inexpensive young Fino or Oloroso with 'Arrope' (young sugary grape juice boiled up in a copper): the cooked must is blended in to achieve the desired level of caramelised colour and sweetness.

Production factors in Sherry-(growing and)-making

It's impossible to tell the story of sherry in a linear fashion.

As above, we can draw the line of styles from lighter and drier to heavier, darker and sweeter.

However, along the way we also need to stop and consider other, possibly quite arcane, matters:

- Terroir and climate effects
- Fortification and barrel ageing
- Fractional blending – the 'Solera' system
- Biological versus oxidative ageing

We will discuss the complexity of Sherry in this order:

- Appellations and origins: the history, location and climate of Sherry Country
- Fino sherry: its variant styles in the 3 main towns of the Sherry Triangle
- Biological ageing: the 'miracle' of the flor yeast, which allows us to age these wines oxidatively and yet avoid oxidation or volatility
- Albariza, the chalky soils which promote 'Fino'
- Fractional blending: the method of barrel-maturation which allows nutrient to flow to the flor yeast in 'Soleras' of Fino Sherry, and which allows us to "have our cake, and eat it too", to be able to bottle wines of, say, 20 years' barrel age and still maintain that age in barrel
- The other, non-Fino styles of sherry, and more oxidative ageing methods

Sherry: appellations and origins

As well as not pointing directly at a certain style of wine, 'Sherry' also does not precisely reference a DO. The bulk of 'Sherry Country' is appellationed as 'DO Jerez-Xérès-Sherry' (this linguistic combination of Castellano, Moorish and English recognises the 3 historical colonisers of the region, whose collective legacy is 'Sherry'). However, a small part of the region is a separate appellation, 'DO Manzanilla - Sanlúcar de Barrameda'. On a day-to-day basis, both appellations are summed colloquially as 'Sherry'. These appellations are co-operatively organised from the same offices in downtown Jerez. The DOs are separated because of slight, but definitive stylistic differences between the Finos of Sanlúcar and those of the rest of the region. This equates to determining Chablis as a stylistic and geographical appellation apart from Burgundy.

The term, 'Sherry' is commonly thought of as an Anglicisation of Jerez, the central town of 'Sherry Country'. In fact, its probable origin is the Moorish term 'Sherish', which was applied to the town in the 8th century (re-naming it from 'Ceret', as it had been termed under Roman occupation). In its time, the region has been invaded by Ottomans, Romans, Huns and Moors. While these left splendid architectural traces and pretty ceramic work, the 400+years of relatively recent British merchant dominance has celebrated, entrenched and refined the production of the diverse group of lightly fortified wines which today we call 'Sherry'.

British soldiers invaded (the thief, Francis Drake attacked Cadiz in 1587 and nicked 3,000 kegs), caused havoc, drank lots and stayed. British merchants established trade links, bought bodegas, formed partnerships with Spanish Dons and traded on behalf of themselves and the Jerezanos. Sherry was popularised, a range of styles were developed and a global market was established during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Sherry region today is owned and managed by a complex post-colonial amalgam – Spanish and British names intermingle at every level of ownership, management and promotion. Although it's a

Spanish wine, the mix of economic vested interest and mad passion for Sherry on the part of the British has been instrumental in keeping the region economically viable and a part of the world market in fine wine.

The Finos of 'The Sherry Triangle'

The vineyards which grow Palomino grapes for Fino production are chalky Albariza soils found in the triangle between inland Jerez and the coastal towns, Sanlúcar de Barremeda and el Puerto de Santa Maria. Rio Guadalquivir, which enters the Atlantic at Sanlúcar and Rio Guadalete at Puerto are the (approximate) northern and southern borders of 'Sherry Country'.

Each of the 3 towns of 'The Sherry Triangle' has its own variant of, and official name for, Fino Sherry.ⁱ

- Fino as such comes from Jerez and is the fullest-bodied style, usually a degree stronger in alcohol.
- Fino from Sanlúcar is termed Manzanilla, and is very delicate, briny, chamomile-scented wine.
- Fino from el Puerto de Santa Maria is called Fino del Puerto. Raised near the Atlantic, Finos del Puerto are moderately briny and sit stylistically between Manzanillas and Finos.

Nowadays, el Puerto de Santa Maria, or 'Puerto', is an extremely popular holiday and marine sporting destination, ideally situated atop the Bay of Cadiz. Due to economic pressures on land, Puerto's status as a sherry town has declined over the years and there are few dedicated Puerto bodegas left. The big house, Osborne, has its factory in the town but doesn't release a Fino del Puerto. Lustau occasionally release an Almacenista wine called 'Obregon' as a Fino del Puerto, and an Amontillado del Puerto from another Almacenista, Jose de la Cuesta. Sadly, nowadays Gutiérrez Colosía is the sole day-to-day commercial flag-bearer for the 'third Fino', where once 50 or so such were in production. It would indeed be sad to see the Sherry Triangle collapse to a mere 'Sherry Line' (the road from Jerez to Sanlúcar de Barremeda).

Manzanilla is the appellation name for Fino which is raised at Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a relatively cool, humid Atlantic village, a couple of km inland along the estuary of Rio Guadalquivir. The resultant Sherry has a definite tang of the sea, green apples (Manzana) and a suggestion of chamomile flower (Manzanilla is Spanish for chamomile). Manzanillas are much finer and more delicate than Finos from Jerez, inland, and are usually bottled at about 15% alcohol (as are Finos del Puerto). The Finos of Jerez are bolder, bottled at 16% abv with olive brine in place of sea tang, and a hit of nuttiness.

Biological ageing: the miracle of the Flor

The Fino style depends on a 'miracle'.

Finos are aged for around 3 years in large, old, neutral butts (American oak barrels of about 600 litres). These don't add any oak character, but are simply moderately oxidative holding vessels. When one looks at a fresh young fino, however, there is usually no sign of oxidation – in fact, a bright, clear and almost water-white appearance is how we reassure ourselves that the Fino we are observing is in fact fresh and in good condition.

It's oxidised, but doesn't look oxidised, and is only any good if it's not oxidised!! How can this be??

The palomino base wine is 12-13% natural alcohol, a dry and relatively bland base wine, without much in the way of richness or aroma. It's a blank page, marked by the chalk soil in which it's grown and then fleshed out in the bodega (in very much the same manner as Champagne). The look, smell, flavour and texture of a fine Fino is the result of several moderations and enhancements.

In the bodega, the first enhancement is fortification. 95% pure grape spirit is added, in order to protect the wine somewhat against oxidation while it ages, gaining character and depth in barrel - the second enhancement. The third, critical factor is 'biological ageing' under a 'velo de Flor' – a veil of yeast cellsⁱⁱ. These simple cells form a vast colony on the surface of the wine (the butts are not filled right up – about 1/6 of the barrel is air space in the head of the butt, allowing room for the yeast to flower – flor! – on the surface of the wine, with a pocket of air to live and breathe in). A thick raft of yeast cells (somewhat like an insulation batt in the roof of your house) covers the surface of the wine, living and dying in situ, all the while breathing in the air of the bodega and feeding on trace nutrients (sugar and glycerol) in the wine. The raft of yeast functions like a one-way mirror, or valve: it mediates the effect of oxygen, oxidatively enhancing and transforming the wine, possibly as far as a sense of nuttiness, but without any apparent oxidation. This 'biological' ageing is an aerobic (necessary to feed the flor) but non-oxidative transformation process. As well

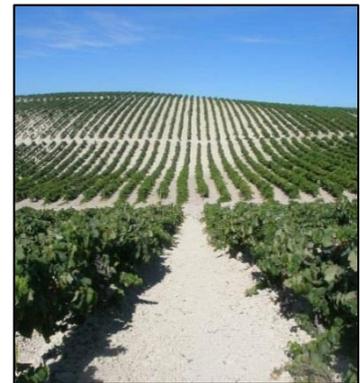
as glycerol, flor also eats VA, and the wine benefits finally from the death of the flor: just as with champagne, the dead yeast cells of the colony sediment into the wine adding floral yeasty flavour and texture. The final result: a delicate white wine gains a steely tang from alcohol, floral traces of the yeast, nutty oxidative enhancement and depth from moderated barrel ageing, yet with hardly any colour development, let alone yellow-orange oxidisation, and without volatility!

For all this to work, the flor yeast(s) need a humid, mild environment, with minimal light, noise, vibration or smell. The bodega (winery building) designed to facilitate this is unlike wineries elsewhere. High-ceilinged, with large windows in the upper half of walls at either end of the building, shuttered by rush mats to allow air in but to control heat and light; and soil floors, which are regularly watered to humidify the chamber.

Albariza chalk soils and the Bodega as terroir

Ordinarily, we get very caught up in talking about soil and terroir – the notion that in some circumstances the particulars of soil and other environmental factors combined with the right local grapes can engender wines with a special identity. Not all soil is ‘terroir’ however: many of the world’s wines taste more or less like one another; the special ones are distinct, thanks at least in part to ‘terroir’.

Sherry Country has a very distinctive soil: much of The Sherry Triangle is ‘Albariza’: a blinding white chalky limestone marl with pale clay, laden with sea fossils. There are other soil profiles: Arenas (sand) and Barros (clay), but Albariza is the key. This soil is planted largely to Palomino, with Moscatel and PX more likely to be planted on the sand and clay soils.



Now, the ‘click’ of chalk and a fine false sweetness attributable to the Albariza is evident in the finest Finos. A clear terroir tell, si? Well, yes, indeed. However, there are other important factors which determine the final character of Sherry. Palomino is not a particularly characterful grape, despite the characterful soil in which it grows, so we add character in the bodega. Finos are wines with subtle secondary, developmental characters, thanks to long ageing in wooden barrels. All Finos share certain characteristics based on the generalities of soil, fruit and process in Sherry-making. Yet, there is something which creates definitive stylistic variance between the 3 village-specific, differentially-named Finos ...

Finos, Finos del Puerto and Manzanilla share the entirety of the Sherry Triangle as fruit source. Yes, Manzanillas, for example, draw on pagosⁱⁱⁱ within the municipality of Sanlúcar, but they also commonly source from pagos in the broader Sherry zone. There is no sub-regional, village or pago tell which determines the fine but significant differences between the variant Fino styles. Especially with Finos, the air in the bodega is a significant contributing ‘terroir’ agent^{iv}. The alternations of heat and cold in the air of a bodega in Jerez makes both summer and winter struggle time for the ‘Flor’ yeast which protects the Fino. In blazing heat or deep chill, the yeast covering is thin and lacy, less perfectly protecting against oxidisation. Less protected, Jerez Finos tend to be bolder, nuttier and tending towards the brassy notes which suggest the beginning of conversion to Amontillado. Manzanillas are identical to Finos in terms of production – the stylistic difference is the qualitative effect of the mild, humid and briny air. A key to the delicacy of Manzanilla is that the flor yeast grows more thickly and consistently year-round in Sanlúcar. As a result, Manzanillas are more lightly fortified, bottled at 15%, rather than 16% for the Finos of Jerez, where the flor requires a little extra assistance to avoid premature oxidisation and loss of style. Finos del Puerto sit between the two, but are nearer to Manzanilla in style, sharing similar locations on estuaries near to the Atlantic and typically bottled at 15% abv.

Solera production and ‘fractional blending’

After fermentation, the base wine (dry Palomino or residually sweet PX and Moscatel) is fortified with an addition of neutral grape spirit to raise the alcohol to between 15% to 20% abv, depending on the style to be made. The wine is then transferred into very large old barrels (commonly called butts) for ageing. If flor yeast is to be introduced in order to nurture a Fino, the butt is not quite filled. Otherwise, most sherries live in full butts, fortified to around 20%. They are then aged to an optimal degree before bottling. If these were

'normal' wines, it would be a simple, analogue process: put wine in barrel, age wine, when ready take wine out of barrel, fill bottle, barrel empty.

Sherry barrels are never emptied.

Instead, only part of the wine in a barrel is removed for bottling at any given time, giving rise to a "have my cake and eat it too" scenario, which goes like this. If I have a barrel of wine aged 20 years, and another aged 15 years, and I withdraw only a part of the 20-year gear and replace it with the 15yo, the younger material will soon assimilate the dominant, 20-years' age character: I now have bottles of 20 year character wine to sell and a full barrel of 20 year character wine ready for my next bottling. This is called 'fractional blending'.

To achieve this magic pudding effect, sheries are arranged in 'criadera': collections, called 'nurseries' (criadera) of barrels sharing the same aged character. The oldest such collection, the mature criadera which represents our desired final sherry style, is called the solera. To bottle, we withdraw from the solera (the oldest, representative criadera), replenish the solera from the next oldest (called the first criadera), replenish that from the next oldest, and so on and on until we reach the youngest, barely aged criadera. This process is called 'running the scales', blending backwards from the oldest to youngest, and the whole construct is referred to as 'The Solera System'. Outside of this are 'añadas' – young vintage wines, fermented and fortified, held in tank waiting to enter the solera system.^v

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. Criaderas can range from just one barrel to tens of thousands. 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.

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. Fractional blending in the solera system is a couple of hundred years old.

THE OTHER (non-Fino) STYLES OF SHERRY

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.

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.

ⁱ The notional 'sherry triangle' is in fact somewhat of a generalisation, and there are other key wine villages within the region. Up the coast from the bay of Cadiz between Puerto and Sanlúcar are Rota and Chipiona. Inland from Sanlúcar and north of Jerez are the border villages, Trebujena and Gibalbín.

ⁱⁱ The 'Flor' yeast is in fact 4 related fungi strains of *Saccharomyces*, most commonly *S. chereyensis*. These yeasts 'appeared' first in Sanlúcar during the 18th century.

ⁱⁱⁱ A 'pago' is a form of place name used in Sherry country. It is equivalent to Partida, Paraje, Lugar ... lieu-dit, indicating a vineyard district, or cluster of vineyards in a coherent area and more-or-less of like type.

^{iv} There is currently a 'terroirist' movement attempting to go deeper into understanding and representing the Albariza. This has several aspects: understanding Albariza as a typology of soils with varying levels of calcium carbonate, of sand and clay and of drainage/compaction. We understand the impact of soils on wine as the result of a range of factors (composition, nutrient, structure, minerality, drainage ...), and that of Albariza is particularly complex. A complex explanation of the differences between the finos of the 3 villages would read in subtle effects of various Albarizas, however the proximate explanation is the 'air in the bodega' model. Albariza as a varied terroir is something now being explored closely by a new wave of table wine producers working with unfortified Palomino wines (with and without flor).

^v A curiosity with numbering the Criadera is that the Jerezanos count backwards. If you have 5 scales in a Solera, the oldest criadera is called the Solera, the second-oldest is the 1st criadera, the next youngest is the 2nd and so on with the youngest in this instance being the 4th criadera. In which case, Añadas wines are the equivalent of pre-schoolers, the 4th criadera are in kindergarten, the 3rd criadera are in primary school, 2nd criadera equates to high school, the 1st criadera are at university and the solera barrels are graduates, ready to make their mark on the world.