



The International Wine Review

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Report #52: The Best of Sherry

A Tenth Anniversary Special Report

The International Wine Review celebrates its tenth year of publication in 2015. To celebrate, we revisit many of the regions we've reported on over the past decade. Our focus in this series of special reports and articles is our favorite producers and their wines.

Introduction



The Albariza Soils of Valdespino's Macharnudo Vineyard

Sherry is one of the world's most complex wines, made in a unique way similar in respects to Champagne. The Sherry soleras yield a consistent house style, much like a non-vintage house Champagne. It's also one of the world's most special, old wines with soleras dating back a hundred years or more. In recent years, several Sherry aficionados have bought up many of these very special old soleras and have begun gradually releasing them for sale. These old soleras have been given their own classification, VORS (*Vinum Optimum Rare Signatum*), indicating wines from exceptionally old soleras. While expensive, these are unique wines, rare masterpieces in the wine world, and, in our opinion, usually well worth the price.

Sherry is also one of the great wine values of the world, with wines from very old soleras available at bargain

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prices, although not for much longer. Renewed interest in Sherry (at least in London and New York) combined with reduced vineyard plantings suggest prices may rise soon.

A few years ago we wrote a report titled *Introduction to Sherry* (also, in Spanish as *Introducción al Sherry*) in which we discussed the special climate, soils (the limestone albariza, especially) and grapes—Palomino, Pedro Ximénez, and Moscatel—of the Sherry Triangle, as well as the unique solera aging system, the techniques—biological and oxidative aging—used to produce the wines, and the diverse styles of dry and sweet Sherries sold in the market today. We followed up that report with reviews and articles of specific bodegas. Perhaps in some small way, this body of work has contributed to today's renewed interest in Sherry¹. It now seems timely to revisit the best producers of Sherry and their wines. In this Special Report, we identify our favorite producers by type of Sherry and give profiles on the producers in the tasting notes.

¹ See, also, our review of the superbly researched book *Sherry, Manzanilla & Montilla* by Peter Liem and Jesús Barquín at www.iwinereview.com/blog.

Introduction

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The world of Sherry is varied with wines ranging from the super dry, biologically aged Fino and Manzanilla to the equally dry Amontillado and Palo Cortado wines that benefit from both biologic and oxidative aging to the intensely sweet Pedro Ximénez made from dried grapes. In between are the sweet Oloroso and Cream Sherries that still sell in large volume.



These wines are produced in Andalusia in southwest Spain bordering on the Atlantic. The region's summers are hot and dry, but the Atlantic has a moderating influence and is the source of the Poniente wind that brings coolness and humidity to the vineyards. Most vineyards are located in the Jerez Superior with its albariza (clay and sand) soils. Jerez includes two denominaciones de origen (DO), the Jerez-Xérès-Sherry DO where the Palomino Fino grows, and the Montilla-Moriles DO where mostly the sweet Pedro Ximénez white grape is found. After harvest, and a short drying period in the sun for Pedro Ximénez, the grapes are made into a base wine that is fortified with alcohol. The raisined fruit results in a mahogany brown wine that further darkens with age. While almost all Sherries are fortified, a small group of winemakers is attempting to resuscitate the unfortified, flor-aged wines of old.

Sherries are generally matured in oak casks called butts in tall and well-ventilated cellars or bodegas where extremes of temperature are avoided without the need for air conditioning. The humidity is also kept stable by frequent watering of the floor, often made of albariza soil. The young wines are allowed to mature unblended for about a year.

They are subsequently blended with older vintages of the wine (i.e., the solera system) resulting in consistency and

uniformity in the wine over time. Depending on the blend, sherries are classified into two broad styles—dry (Fino, Manzanilla, Amontillado, Oloroso, Palo Portado) and sweet (Pale Cream, Cream, and Pedro Ximénez); these are described in more detail below, along with lists of our favorite producers for each type.

For more on Sherry, see our report on *Introduction to Sherry* (also available in Spanish as *Introducción al Sherry*). We also recommend the book *Sherry, Manzanilla & Montilla* by Peter Liem and Jesús Barquín.

The Solera System Sherry butts (500-600 liters) are divided and stacked into tiers or units; each unit is comprised of a specific age, or maturation level of



Barbadillo's Arboledilla Bodega

wine. These like-aged units are called *criaderas*. A fraction of wine from this *criadera* is then added to the next *criadera*, which is in turn added to oldest wines in the lowest level of the *solera*. Each year, producers take wine from the *solera*, bottle it and then replenish it using this system. No more than 1/3 of the *solera* level may be removed for bottling at any one time. In this way, some of the oldest wine is always in the *solera*. The wines have a fantastic consistency over many years, and a Sherry lover will be sipping a wine containing an equal contribution of Sherry from several decades.

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