

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

September 2007

CLASS A – APERITIF SHERRY

Presented by John S. Wrinch (Victoria Chapter)

After completing this session you should know the following:

1. The definition of an aperitif sherry and the qualities that characterize it from other types of sherry.
2. The differences between sherry and Madeira.
3. How a 'solera' functions.
4. The differences in the fermentation, fortification and aging process for the different types of sherry and Madeira.
5. The definition of a 'copita'.
6. The name of the TV character that has been credited for increased sherry sales in recent years.
7. All the answers to the quiz that accompanies this presentation.

WHAT IS AN 'APERITIF SHERRY'?

This class is intended for dry and not-too-sweet sherry, Madeira and related type wines.

Aperitifs of any sort are meant to stimulate the appetite and awaken the digestive enzymes, in order to best enjoy a meal. The word aperitif comes from the Latin 'aperire', meaning 'to open'. Sherry is a fortified wine. It differs from other wines in how it is treated after fermentation. It comes in different styles, based on sweetness. Aperitif sherry is not the typical sweet after-dinner drink that is occasionally found on a restaurant list; it is dry, delicate and is often characterized by the name 'Fino'. The two other types of sherry, Amontillado and Oloroso, are both meant to be consumed after a meal and at room temperature. Amontillado sherry has a nutty flavour, is sweeter, softer and darker in colour than a Fino. Oloroso sherry is fuller in flavour and darker yet than the medium sherry Amontillado. It is sweetened by the addition of PX grapes. Cream Sherries are sweetened Oloroso Sherry.

Madeira also has a number of styles: the two drier types come from the Verdelho and Sercial grapes. Verdelho is medium dry and has a golden colour, while Sercial is very dry and has a lighter colour. The sweeter styles use either Malvasia or Bual grapes. Malvasia creates a sweet chestnut brown. Bual is a more medium sweet, velvety Madeira that is a dark gold to brown colour.

Before the phylloxera infestation in 1894 there were other varieties of grapes used in Spain for the production of sherry; however, now there are only three white grapes grown for sherry-making: Pedro Ximenez (PX), Palomino and Moscatel.

The grapes used to make Madeira are Verdelho, Sercial, Bual and Malvasia. Terrantez, Bastardo and Moscatel are also used but are more rare since the phylloxera infestation. At present, the workhorse variety is a red grape called Tinta Negra Mole (said to be a variety of Pinot Noir). Bastardo is the only other red grape of the bunch, and the rest are all white.

TECHNICAL CHARACTERISTICS:

This class is intended for dry and not-so-sweet sherry, Madeira and related wine types. The very sweet wines of these classes belong to the after dinner class.

Alcohol: 15.5 % - 20%
Colour: No restrictions
Sugar: 0% - 10%
Specific Gravity: 0.980 – 1.007
Acid: 4.0 g/l – 5.5 g/l
PH: 2.9 – 3.3

HISTORY:

Aperitifs are believed to have started out as medicinal beverages prepared from spirits that had been infused with herbs and spices. The curative purpose of these drinks evolved over time. The pre-dinner drink became fashionable in Europe both as a palate primer and as a social tradition. This custom traveled to North America about the time that cocktails were becoming popular in the 1900's. Compared to cocktails, aperitifs are lighter, less sweet and meant to be enjoyed with small bites of food.

Sherry was a dark and powerful wine until the mid nineteenth century. It was often sweetened and heavily fortified to endure round-the-world shipping. It was in Sanlucar, encouraged by the cooler and moister air, that the winemakers noticed that a thick coating of flor would develop on top of some of the wines. The wines that were covered with the flor were prevented from oxidizing and thus stayed clear and developed a crisp almond-like nuttiness.

Jose-Angel del la Pena was one of the first pioneers for the Fino sherry. He had his nephew, Manuel Gonzalez, set up business in Jerez. The nephew and his business partner in London, Robert Bypass, were convinced by the Gonzalez to try to sell some of the wine in the UK. A small enthusiastic following ensued. Thus formed the beginnings of the first commercial Fino, named after Gonzalez' uncle, 'Tio Pepe'. This is now the world's best selling Fino.

In earlier times, sherry was known as sack, a rendering of the Spanish Caca, meaning a removal (from the solera).

Madeira was originally an unfortified wine; however, it was found that the addition of grape spirit would increase its ability to survive long voyages. In fact, the process today is meant to replicate the effect of aging barrels on a long sea voyage through tropical climates.

GEOGRAPHY:

Genuine sherry is only produced in the southernmost part of Spain, near the town of Jerez de la Frontera (hence, in Spanish, is called 'vino del Jerez'). According to Spanish law, sherry must come from triangular area of the province of Cadiz between Jerez, Sanlucar de Barrameda and El Puerto del Santa Maria. Jerez is in the center of the region, El Puerto del Santa Maria is on the coast and a little cooler. Sanlucar del Barrameda is at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River and is cooler yet. The Finos from Sanlucar are called Manzanillas, which means 'crabapple'; Sanlucar was the location for the beginnings of the modern Fino wines.

The best vineyards have very chalky soil (known as albariza) that has high concentrations of lime and magnesium.

Madeira is made on the Portuguese island of Madeira. It is 575 kilometres from the coast of Morocco in the south Atlantic. It is 57 kilometres long and 23 kilometres wide, with steeply sloped, terraced hillside vineyards.

HARVEST PROCEDURE:

The grapes are picked, beginning in September for approximately three weeks, and the harvest is done entirely by hand. The grape bunches are then laid on straw mats to decrease the moisture content and to concentrate the flavours.

FERMENTATION, FORTIFICATION AND AGING:

The style of a sherry (the sweetness level) is decided during fermentation. All sherry starts out being very dry. Palomino is the predominant grape. If the wine in a cask is affected by a local yeast (flor) then it will develop into the dry style known as Fino. If the wine is not affected by flor, then it will be a much sweeter style, Oloroso. It is easy to determine if a cask has been affected, as the flor will develop a layer on top of the wine; this flor will protect the wine in the cask from oxidizing and therefore keeps a delicacy. Without the flor layer, the wine is not protected and will begin to oxidize. The flor feeds off the residual elements in the wine; it forms anything from a very thin film to a thick crust on the surface. Oloroso wines will be matured in contact with the outside air. This controlled oxidation method produces darker, richer, mellower wines. PX grapes are added to Oloroso wines to increase the sweetness.

Later in the spring, once the initial fermentation has occurred and the classifications have been made, the sherry with the thickest crust of flor, is fortified to 15.5% ABV, an ideal strength to maintain the flor. The fortification is done using a grape spirit, destillado, made by distilling wine, usually from La Mancha. The distilled spirit is mixed with mature sherry in a 50/50 blend so that the effects of the strong alcohol will not shock the young sherry and spoil it. This grape spirit cannot be added too early as it stops fermentation and will thus produce a sweeter wine. The other wines without the dependable flor are fortified to 17.5%, which is too strong for the flor. These wines are to become Olorosos. At this point of the production process, the wines are from a single vintage. Very few single-vintage Sherries come to market, as most go into the solera system.

After fermentation and in trial classification as either Fino or Oloroso, wines are put in oak barrels to rest for approximately one year; after this time, the Finos are again classified; if the flor layer has disappeared, the wine will have undergone some oxidation and will be classified as an Amontillado. Thus begins the process of aging and blending in the solera system.

Soleras are racks of barrels, usually between 3 and 9, that are used to age the wine and to create a consistent taste; with this system, the wine is drawn for bottling from a set of barrels at one end and then those barrels are 'topped off' with wine from the next set in the rack. Each barrel is topped off with wine from the next; when the last set of barrels is reached, it is topped off with new wine that is just entering the solera. The barrels in the solera are called scales and so the process of moving the wine is called running the scales. The portion moved between barrels may be 5-30% of a barrel. Sherry is aged in the solera for a minimum of 3 years and up to 100 years. The end result, many years into the life of a solera, is sherry coming out that has complex and mature flavours (from the older wines) and a fresh crispness (from the younger wines).

The differences between Madeira and other fortified wines made in Portugal is not the vinification but the method used to speed up maturation. The wine is subjected to high temperatures of 35 degrees to

60 degrees Celsius (100 degrees to 140 degrees F) for several months in estufas, stone buildings specific to this purpose. The characteristic flavor of Madeira is due to its 'cooking' by hastening the mellowing and checking secondary fermentation (a mild form of pasteurization) The Madeira is exposed to air (oxidization) which results in a colour similar to tawny port; this is why wine tasters sometimes describe an oxidized wine as being madeiraized. Sweeter Madeiras are fortified with brandy before going into the heating chamber, whereas drier styles ferment out and the brandy is added after they have been in the estufa. Madeira is matured in a solera system, as used for sherry.

STORAGE AND DRINKING:

Once it has been bottled, sherry does not benefit from further aging. Sherries that have been aged oxidatively may be stored for years without losing their flavour. The bottles should be stored upright to minimize the wine's exposure to oxygen, and in a cool, dark place.

In Spain, Finos are often treated as North Americans would a white table wine (as well as an aperitif). They are traditionally drunk from a copita, a special sherry glass that is tulip shaped. Once opened, sherry will begin to lose its flavour and should be kept corked and refrigerated. Depending on the type, it may last from one week to a few months after opening. Fino has a life of approximately one week once opened, and should be consumed within six months of bottling, as it will then start to oxidize.

Unlike sherry, an opened bottle of Madeira can last unharmed for up to a year. Madeira is one of the longest lasting wines; they have been known to survive over 150 years in excellent condition. Madeira should be served cool, around 55 degrees to 60 degrees F, like a port. It is served in a port-style glass, small and thin.

An ice-cold aperitif sherry or Madeira would be the drink of choice when serving stronger or richer flavours such as olives, cheeses or a selection of nuts (usually almonds). Finos also go very well with seafood. Although it is a fortified wine, it should be fresh in the mouth and not feel weighty (despite its 15.5% ABV). The key words to describe the ideal aperitif sherry or fino would be the following: clear, crisp, fresh, bitter almond.

IMPORTANT MINUTIAE:

1. Falstaff, Shakespeare's character from his plays, Henry IV part 1 and 2, The Merry Wives of Windsor and Henry V, was an ardent fan of sherry (then called 'sack'). It is not known whether he favoured aperitif sherry over dessert sherry however, he was quoted as proclaiming the following:
In If I had a thousand sons, the first humane principle I would teach them should be, to forswear thin potations and addict themselves to sack.
2. Sir Alexander Fleming, credited with the discovery of the antibiotic penicillin, claimed the following:
If penicillin can cure those who are ill, Spanish sherry can bring the dead back to life.
3. Frasier Crane, the TV character, often drinks sherry, occasionally offering it to his brother Niles. Sherry sales reportedly increased as a result.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to express a special thank-you to Mr. Colin Nicholson for my interesting field trip to visit his solera system.

Quiz on this topic is located on the following page . . .

**HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR APERITIF SHERRY CLASS?
Take This Quiz To Find Out . . .**

1. What is the grape variety used in making basic dry sherry?
2. What is the grape variety used in making basic Madeira?
3. Describe the origins, colour, aroma and flavor of:
 - a. Fino Sherry
 - b. Oloroso Sherry
 - c. Bual Madeira
 - d. Malvasia Madeira
 - e. Sercial Madeira
 - f. Verdelho Madeira
4. Why are there no vintages for sherry?
5. What is a solera? Describe how it functions.
6. How are Sherries and Madeira's classified in the BC Liquor Store Guide?
7. What is the normal alcohol level of:
 - a. A fino or Manzanilla?
 - b. An Oloroso?
8. What are cream Sherries and how are they made?
9. What is the normal sweetness range of aperitif Sherries?
10. What is the normal sweetness range of an after dinner sherry?
11. What types of foods are served with each of the various kinds of Sherries and Madeira's?
Please give examples.
12. What are the serving temperatures for Sherries and Madeira?
13. What is an estufa?
14. What is albariza?
15. What is the role of oxidization in the fabrication of sherry and Madeira?