

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

May 2019

Class A - Aperitif Sherry

Presented by Sheridan Scott (Victoria Chapter)

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

After completing this session, you should know:

- The description and technical characteristics of this class
- The 3 centers in Spain known for sherry maturation
- Grapes used for making sherry
- Three principal types of sherry
- How a solera functions
- Why there are no vintages for sherry
- The characteristics of some aperitif sherry
- Manner in which aperitif sherry is served.

BCAWA DESCRIPTION:

Class A - Aperitif Sherry:

This class is intended for dry and not very sweet Sherry, Madeira and related wines. The very sweet wines of these types belong in the After Dinner Class.

Technical Characteristics:

Ingredients: Commonly used grapes would include Palomino and Muscat. Herbs and other flavourings should NOT be used in this 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

INTRODUCTION:

This class relates to aperitif wines, namely those meant to be consumed before a meal, and not the typically sweet after-dinner drink that one often associates with sherry. As described in greater detail below, sherry comes in different styles, based on how it is treated after fermentation, resulting in different levels of sweetness.

Generally speaking, aperitif sherry falls into the "fino" category and is served chilled like a white wine and is drunk young; the two other types of sherry, "palo cortado" and "oloroso" are generally sweeter and meant to be consumed after dinner at room temperature. However, some off-dry versions of these types of sherry could also fall into this class.

GEOGRAPHY AND CLASSIFICATION OF SHERRIES

Genuine sherry is produced in a small part of southwestern Spain, on the Andalusian coast. According to Spanish law, the grapes must be grown within the triangular area defined by an inland point north of Jerez de la Frontera, and the two coastal towns of Puerto de Santa María and Sanlúcar de Barrameda. The best vineyards lie in the heart of this triangle, a region designated as "Jerez Superior" by sherry's regulating body, el Consejo Regulador.

The best soil type is called *albariza* and is generally located at somewhat higher elevations. It is composed of marine sediments mixed with chalky calcium carbonates, including limestone and pre-historic sea fossils. It has high concentrations of lime and magnesium and is stark white. Vines planted here often catch the sea breezes. Less desirable is *arena* (sand) soil which is located near the coast and *barro*, a brownish clay soil used for other crops as well.

Jerez is planted exclusively with three white grape varieties. Approximately 95% of all sherry is made from the widely planted Palomino Fino, a low acid, high-yielding grape with relatively neutral aromas and flavours. There are two other grapes grown in Jerez: Moscatel which is a relatively rare grape made into wine on its own and also used as a sweet blending wine and Pedro Ximénez (PX), which is also quite rare and is dried on mats in the sun to produce a highly prized dessert sherry.

These grapes produce basically two distinct types of wine, in a variety of styles. The first type is referred to as a "fino" and is light coloured and crisp, often with notes of almonds and yeast, and is only slightly fortified to 15-17% abv. The second type is called "oloroso" and is amber-mahogany coloured, with roasted nutty flavours. It is more fortified than fino, at 18-20% abv. A third type of sherry is often identified as well: it is called "palo cortado" and is discussed briefly below.

How the same grapes end up as one or the other depends partly on the soil in which they are grown and more importantly on the manner in which they are vinified following fermentation.

VINIFICATION PROCESS/SOLERA

The first step in determining the type of sherry takes place in the vineyard. Generally speaking, wines for the best finos are sourced from older vines growing on *albariza* soils. Olorosos are sourced from grapes grown on heavier clay.

The grapes are then transported for crushing and are subsequently subjected to relatively low levels of pressure to create a maximum yield of 70 litres for each 100 kg of grapes. The must is transferred to fermentation tanks, usually made of stainless steel, though some sherry firms still use the traditional system of fermentation in oak butts or casks. After fermentation, a different process is followed, depending on whether the base wine is destined to become a fino or an oloroso.

For finos, the base wine is fortified to 15 - 15.4% abv, but not higher, to enable to development of a foamy waxy film of *flor* on the surface of the maturing wine. This film consists of yeasts of various strains of *Saccharomyces* that form a continuous layer over the surface, protecting it from oxidation and at the same time forming acetaldehyde and other substances that produce the typical fino aroma and flavour. These yeasts bloom spontaneously in Jerez's humid air but *flor* taken from Jerez to other parts of the world quickly mutates or dies, limiting the production of true sherry to this part of Spain. The 600 litre butts used for fino are filled with 500 litres of

wine only, since the yeasts float on the wine, thanks to their waxy cells, protecting the developing fino from oxidizing by consuming the surrounding oxygen.

In the case of olorosos, the base wine is fortified to around 17.5% - 18% abv, a level which ensures that *flor* cannot develop and destroys any remnants of *flor* if it has begun to grow. Since the wine does not have the protective layer of *flor*, it will begin to oxidize, producing darker, richer and mellower wines.

After sitting in barrels for a period of 6 months to a year, both finos and olorosos are then progressively blended and aged in a complex network of old barrels, called a *solera*. To form a solera, multiple rows of 600 litre American oak barrels, called *botas* are lined up, often stacked one row on top of the other, generally to a height of four to five barrels. The barrels on the bottom contain the oldest sherry and it is from this row that wine is drawn for bottling, though no more than one third of the contents can be removed at any one time. These barrels are topped up from next oldest wine in the row above, called *criadera #1* (or the first nursery), which is topped from the row above, called *criadera #2*, which is topped by from the row above, *criadera #3*, etc. The new wine replenishes the barrels in the top row.

The process of moving the wines from one criadera to another is called *rocios* which means morning dew. Also, since the barrels in the solera are called scales, 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. Sherry is therefore not the product of any one year. By law, it never carries a vintage date, although it is not uncommon for a sherry label to designate the year the solera was formed.

DIFFERENT STYLES OF FINOS AND OLOROSOS

Sherry is in fact classified in more than two ways and can fall into seven distinct styles of wine, each of which is extremely individual. For the purpose of Class A - Aperitif Sherry, the following are relevant.

Manzanilla

Manzanillas are wines that are matured under a blanket of *flor* and by law come only from the tiny coastal town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. The close proximity to the ocean imparts a dry, salty tang as well as aromas of chamomile, which is the English translation of the Spanish word *manzanilla*. They are typically more fragile than other fino sherries.

Fino

Finos are all other wines from the Jerez area that are aged under a flor cover and like manzanillas are pale in colour, with notes of almonds and yeast. Manzanilla and finos go particularly well with olives, almonds, seafood, serrano ham and light cheese.

Amontillado

Amontillados are the result of both *flor* and extended oxidative aging. After four to six years moving through its fino solera, the wine is fortified so that its alcohol content is slightly higher than that of a manzanilla or fino and it is then placed in another solera where it will no longer be protected by *flor*. As a result, the wine oxidizes and develops rich nutty, dried fruit and spicy flavours in addition to the pungent flavours due to its exposure to *flor*. In the past, producers sometimes sweetened amontillado with PX to produce a medium-dry wine; however, the

Consejo Regulador now says that Amontillado should be naturally dry. It pairs well with white meat, chorizo, medium-heavy cheese or a pâté. Sweetened amontillados can still be produced but they should be labeled medium/cream sherry and do not fall into Class A.

Palo Cortado

Palo Cortado is a somewhat mysterious wine and is sometimes considered to be a third category of sherry, along with finos and olorosos. According to the Consejo Regulador, it should have the aromatic refinement of an amontillado combined with the structure and body of an oloroso. In the past, it originated as a fino but for some reason the flor failed to develop normally and the cask was taken out of the fino solera and its remaining flor was killed by fortifying the wine to 17-18 degrees. More recently, palo cortados are simply lightweight, delicate olorosos. These wines pair well with cured meats, soft blue cheese, foie gras and nuts.

Oloroso

As discussed above, olorosos are long-aged sherries that have not been protected or influenced by *flor*. They show nutty aromas, especially walnuts, as well as balsamic notes, dried fruits, tobacco and spicy aromas, often with hints of leather. The classic pairing is red meat and game though it also goes with well-aged cheese.

The remaining types of sherries, including Pedro Ximénez, Cream and Pale Cream, are generally too sweet to be included in Class A.

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 in a cool, dark place.

Once opened, sherry will begin to lose its flavour and should be kept corked and refrigerated. In Jerez, an opened bottle of fino is kept no longer than a single day, though it may last a day or two longer than that. Finos also begin to lose their freshness approximately six months after they leave the solera. Since sherry does not carry a bottled-on or drink-by date, it may not be possible to know how long a bottle has been on the wine store's shelf; dealing with stores that carry top quality brands and turn over their stock quickly may be the only answer.

Meanwhile, olorosos can last for several months after the bottle has been opened, with only a slight decrease in flavour, since they are already somewhat oxidized and are not as fragile.

REFERENCES

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- Sherry Notes web site: <https://www.sherrynotes.com/sherry-types/>

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