

# Pulse Check: Sherry

## Has this Fortified Wine from Spain Finally Turned the Corner in the U.S.?

BY CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW



A criadera of barrels at González-Byass in Jerez

**T**he Sherry Triangle—an area in southwestern Spain between Jerez de la Frontera, Sanlúcar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa María—sits on the Atlantic Ocean just west of the Straights of Gibraltar. This arid Iberian Peninsula outpost is known for its *vinos generosos*, or fortified wines. Unsurprising for a region producing since Chaucer’s time (and perhaps before), Jerez has seen peaks and valleys. Today, Sherry is experiencing not only a resuscitation, but also a full-on, geek-fest in major wine-consuming cities.

Stocking and selling Sherry today can be a delicate balancing act: balancing traditional consumer tastes with emerging attitudes; balancing various styles; and balancing the apparent simplicity of the term “Sherry” with the fact that the category a broad spectrum of liquids.

### THE (MIS-)CONCEPTION OF THE PRODUCT

U.S. imports from Jerez, not unlike German wines, have typically been off-dry to sweet. Conversely, consumers in Spain and Germany mostly drink dry wines. Yes, this country has that Coca-Cola palate. The contrast of consumption merits a closer look. Worldwide, Fino is the most important style. In fact, Fino and Manzanilla comprise just under half of the world’s Sherry consumption and just over three-quarters of Spain’s consumption. Conversely, in the U.S., 75% of Sherry consumption is sweet.

Key today is the rise of wine consumers favoring savory wines. Though sweet versions have long settled into decanters in aunties’ living rooms, wine lovers are now embracing Sherry’s full spectrum of versatility.

### STYLE & PAIRINGS

More or less, two styles of Sherry exist, defined by how they are aged: either “biologically” or oxidatively. Biologically aged Sherries see the effects of flor yeasts, which form a layer on top of the wines in barrel, protecting them from oxygen, keeping them clear in color and rendering them bitingly dry on the palate. Oxidatively aged wines, intentionally exposed to oxygen, become brown-colored and rounder. Sometimes, when back-blended, they are even a bit sweet. Some wines actually began their



The notoriously hot and arid Sherry Triangle is inhospitable to most wine grapes. The best classic dry Sherries come from Palomino Fino grown soils called *albariza*, which refers to their white color.

Generally speaking, Jerez offers remarkable consistency thanks to its soleras. A solera is a pyramid of barrels where the lower, older tiers that have experienced evaporation are topped up with younger wine from the upper barrels. Nonetheless, boutique bodegas and *almacenistas*, who age special cuvées of wines, are changing the landscape and offering more individual wines.

A surprise to some, Sherry is highly versatile with foods. Tapas are an obvious starting point, but Peter Liem, co-author of *Sherry, Manzanilla & Montilla*, suggests trying these umami-driven wines with Japanese and Chinese cuisines, which emphasize this portion of the flavor spectrum.

Liem categorizes Fino and Manzanilla as white wines, best suited to lighter dishes. Both he and Talia Baiocchi, author of *Sherry*, a wine and cocktail book due out in 2014, liken dry Oloroso to red wine. While Olorosos don’t possess the tannins of most reds, they do have a similar body and alcoholic cut.

### SIPPING, STORING & SERVING

Finos’ and Manzanillas’ bright, fresh styles favor early—and rapid—consumption. These wines don’t store as well or as long as their counterparts once opened; opt for half bottles to ensure freshness. Amontillados last marginally longer. Palo Cortados and Olorosos have more staying power. Sipping them over a few weeks is fine, and some last a month or more when properly stored with oxygen-elimination techniques

## Sherry At A Glance

*Sherry types are presented from lighter/drier through richer/sweeter.  
Designations VOS, VORS, En Rama and Pasada can be used for multiple types.*

STYLE	WHAT IT MEANS	GOOD EXAMPLE
<b>MANZANILLA</b>	Dry and pale white from "biological aging" under flor. Lightest, most delicate Sherry. Akin to fino but aged in Sanlúcar de Barrameda.	Los Infantes De Orléans-Borbón Manzanilla
<b>FINO</b>	Dry and pale white from "biological aging" under flor. Similar to Manzanilla but very vaguely richer.	Lustau Fino La Ina
<b>AMONTILLADO</b>	Dry and pale brown. Begins aging under flor, then ages oxidatively.	Almocaden Amontillado Caletero
<b>PALO CORTADO</b>	Dry and light brown. Begins aging under flor, then ages oxidatively. Slightly fuller bodied than Amontillado.	Valdespino Palo Cortado Viejo C.P.
<b>OLOROSO</b>	Dry or lightly sweet and brown. Ages oxidatively without flor protection. Mouthfeel texturally richer from glycerol.	Bodegas Grant Oloroso La Garrocha
<b>CREAM</b>	Sweet and ranging in color from quite clear (pale cream, based on Fino) to brown (based on Oloroso).	Dios Baco Cream
<b>PEDRO XIMÉNEZ</b>	Significantly sweet and deep brown. Made from Pedro Ximénez.	Barbadillo Pedro Ximénez La Cilla
<b>MOSCATEL</b>	Sweet and gold. Made from Muscat d'Alexandria	César Florido Moscatel Especial
<b>VOS</b>	Vinum Optimum Signatum, or Very Old Sherry, at least 20 years old.	Fernando De Castilla Antique Oloroso
<b>VORS</b>	Vinum Optimum rare Signatum, or Very Old Rare Sherry, at least 30 years old.	Osborne Amontillado 51-1A VORS
<b>EN RAMA</b>	Only very lightly filtered, often leaving a slightly cloudy wine.	González-Byass Una Palma Fino En Rama
<b>PASADA</b>	Aged longer in barrel.	Hidalgo Pastrana Manzanilla Pasada

and proper temperature control. Some of these wines may even improve after opening, but if you are experimenting, monitor their evolution carefully.

In contrast, the sweet, even syrupy, Pedro Ximénez-based wines often favor development with oxygen. They can keep years after opening when properly stoppered and temperature-controlled, presuming they can be resisted so long.

Like white wines, Finos and Manzanillas—as well as sweet, blended wines—are best enjoyed lightly chilled. Amontillados, Palo Cortados and Olorosos work best at “cellar temperature.” Once the temperature is properly dialed-up, most Sherries show best in a medium-sized, white wine glass rather than the classic copita.

### THE TEST OF TIME

In juxtaposition to many other historic and heralded European regions, vineyards and grapes in Jerez are cheap—too cheap, in fact. Sadly, many bodegas have folded, leading to the marriage of singular solera systems with others, reducing the possibilities of eventual complexities in expression. At the very least, these barrels are kept alive in criaderas (*criadera* meaning “nursery,” referring to the wines being “raised” for years in these systems), even if today’s forced melting pot consumed their original features. Conversely, from a purchasing perspective, Sherry prices, especially high quality Sherry, remain ludicrously low.

In sum, the horizon is bright—with a rising versus setting sun—on higher quality Sherry. Though likely to remain a niche market, engaged consumers’ interests are clearly growing. As Antonio Flores, Master Blender for González-Byass, notes, “An important part of the Sherry revolution is young people’s interest in an ancient wine. And, this is something happening outside of the wineries’ influence. The consumers are asking for it.” ■