

# All About Sherry

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## ALL ABOUT SHERRY

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## INTRODUCTION

Sherry is a fortified wine, made in Spain from three grape types, they are: Palomino, Pedro Ximénez, and Muscat (Moscatel). Sherry-style wines made in other countries often use other grape varieties and are often very inferior.

Sherry is difernt to other wines because of the way it is treated after fermentation. It is first fortified with brandy and then, if destined to be fino style, a yeast called flor is encouraged to grow on the top of the wine. Oloroso style sherry is fortified, with brandy to a strength where the flor cannot grow. (In contrast, port wine is fortified to a higher percentage of alcohol than sherry, effectively preventing the growth of any kind of yeast.)

## JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA

JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA or JEREZ for short, the Scheris of the Moors, one of their fortresses in Spain, was long a walled city of great strategic importance. Today it is a busy town, and the hub of the Sherry Trade. It stands upon the main road from Seville to Cadiz, some 9 miles north of Port St. Mary at the top corner of the Bay of Cadiz and at the mouth of the Guadalete; and 12 miles east of Sanlucar, upon the left bank of the Guadalquivir, immediately before it flows into the Atlantic.

JEREZ has given its name to Sherry, the wine of Jerez (both names Jerez and Sherry being corruptions of the old Moorish name of the town, Scheris), which Shakespeare and all Elizabethans loved and praised above all others. To the Victorians, Sherry and hospitality were synonymous: few, indeed, were then the homes without a welcoming decanter of Sherry upon the mahogany, awaiting the pleasure of your company. Today, in spite of the notorious fickleness of fashion; in spite of high taxes and of bureaucratic controls, Sherry, the wine made from the white grapes of the Jerez vineyards, still is still first favorite among all the wines imported into Great Britain.

## ANDALUCIA

Andalucia no longer comprises three kingdoms as it once did, nor is it any longer the great Moorish Province that it was once, but still is the richest and sunniest part of Spain, stretching from Castile, in the North, to the Straits, in the South; and from the Mediterranean, in the East, to Portugal and the Atlantic in the West.

SEVILLE the capital of Andalucia, is one of the fairest cities in the world, but sea-going ships have long ceased to come up the Guadalquivir to its once busy quays with the gold and goods of the Indies. The inexhaustible wealth of Andalucia is in its fertile soil and genial climate, its wheat, oil and wine; its oranges, figs and other fruits; its light-hearted, hard-working people. Vines flourish and wine is made in many parts of Andalucia, but the vineyards which produce the finest and most distinctive white Spanish wine, Sherry, that which brings solace and joy to all men and women of taste and discerning thirst, are the vineyards scattered twixt Guadalquivir and Guadalete, during the last lap of their seawards run, the first reaching the Atlantic at Sanlucar de Barrameda, and the other the Bay of Cadiz, at Port St. Mary.

## THE VINEYARDS

There is in the soil of the 15,000 acres of vineyards of the Jerez country, lime, clay and sand, but in widely varying proportions, mixed quite differently, and 'peppered' in an erratic manner with small quantities of various minerals, the importance of which, as regards the quality of the grapes and of the wine made from them, is considerable.

The best Sherries all come from vineyards rich in *lime*: they are called *Albarizas*, from *albo*, white, their soil being chalk white. They are the vineyards upon which the ancient fame of Sherry was built and still stands. Carrascal, Macharnudo, Balbaina and Anina, within a few miles to the north-west and west of Jerez, are the largest and among the best of the *Albariza* vineyard districts; they are divided among a large number of owners. Nearly two-thirds of all the Sherry-producing vineyards are *Albarizas*.

The vineyards known as *Barros* (some 21 per cent. of total), are mostly to the south-east of Jerez; their soil contains a higher proportion of clay: it is richer and darker. Others, called *Arenas* (17 per cent.), are scattered here and there in what might be called sand pockets; they produce more 'grapes to the acre, but grapes fit only for making the lighter types of Sherry.

## THE GRAPES

Of the limited number of white grape varieties that flourish in the lime, clay and sandy soils of Jerez vineyards, one is outstanding, the white *Palomino*, also known as *Listan* amongst other names. It is grown in all *Albariza* vineyards, as well as in some others, and it bears large bunches of medium-sized, very sweet, golden grapes.

The *Canocazo* or *Mollar blanco* is also a very sweet grape that is cultivated in *Albariza* vineyards, but it is too shy a bearer to be popular. The *Pedro Ximenez*, the sweetest grape of all, is grown to a limited extent only, and in the folds of some *Albariza* vineyards which hold a little more moisture.

*Albillo* grapes are mostly grown in *Barros* vineyards, whilst the *Perruno*, *Mantuos*, *Beba* and the larger type of white *Moscatel (gordo)* are varieties cultivated chiefly in *Arenas* vineyards: they yield a greater abundance of grapes, quite sweet to the taste because of their lack of acidity, but most of them are actually not so rich in grape-sugar. Thus, whilst the alcoholic strength of a wine made from some of these grapes averages 11 per cent., that which is made from *Palomino* grapes reaches 12.5 to 14 per cent., and from *Pedro Ximenez* grapes 15 per cent. of alcohol.

## THE VINTAGE

September is *the* Vintage month when *Palomino*, *Pedro Ximenez* and all the finer species of grapes are ripe and must be gathered, whilst coarser grapes are usually picked in October. The pickers do not cut off all bunches indiscriminately, but the fully ripe ones only, going up and down the same rows of vines several times; there is little or no rest for the vintage workers between sunrise and sunset, but there is no sign of any feverish hurry among them, nor of un-Spanish haste.

The freshly picked grapes are conveyed in baskets or hampers to large holders set on the back of a patient mule, and when these holders are full, the grapes are delivered to the nearest farm, where they arrive fresh and dusty: the contents of each holder is then spread upon round esparto grass rush mats, and they are left there for twenty-four hours in the open before being brought to the *lagar* within, and pressed. The *Pedro Ximenez* grapes, for making

sweet wine, are left under the scorching September sun for a fortnight; they are covered at night with esparto grass matting to avoid any condensation of the morning dew upon them.

## LAGAR

The *lagar*, in which the grapes are trodden and pressed, is a rectangular wooden trough, 12 feet square and about 2 feet deep, with a 6-foot iron screw in the centre; its floor rests upon four legs about 3 feet high: it has a lip, with a funnel attached to it, through which the sweet grape-juice flows straight into tubs and then into casks, where it ferments away from grape stalks and skins.

The *lagar* is half filled with 60 hampers of grapes, 1,500 lb. in all, which are evenly distributed and sprinkled with 3 to 4 lb. of *yeso*, or *gypsum*. Then the *pisadores*, or treaders, usually four together, enter the *lagar*, shod with shoes studded with projecting nails. They goose-step solemnly and rhythmically up and down the mass of grapes in the *lagar*, from midnight to dawn, and when they leave off, the trodden pulp is heaped round the iron screw and held together by an esparto grass broad tape. The lid of the press is then screwed down on this heap, bringing up to 9° per cent. of the total the grape-juice trodden and pressed out of the grapes. The remaining 20 per cent. extracted later by an hydraulic press is, however, of distinctly inferior quality and never mixed with the juice of the first flow.

## CRIADERAS

A few hours after the grapes have been pressed, the casks are taken from the vineyards to the bodegas. There the sweet juice starts fermenting 'furiously', and it soon casts off a scum of 'undesirables' at the bung-hole of the cask in which it is lodged, in the dark and cool *Bodegas*. Presently the new wine settles down in peace to a slow, steady second fermentation during which the characteristics of its own idiosyncrasies are developed under the screen of thin *flor*, or yeast. Then it is that the experts taste every cask, containing no longer *mosto* but *vino de anada*, and they decide which *criadera*, or nursery, will be the right one for each wine to go to: that which possesses outstanding distinction is sent to the Palma *criadera*; that which has more muscle than breed goes to the Palo Cortado and the stoutest of all to the Rayas *criaderas*. After being racked off their lees and before being sent to their allotted *criadera* to age, the wines, which are by this time quite dry, are given a fair taste of brandy, about 4 gallons per butt, and this rules out all possibility of any further fermentation.

## ANADAS AND SOLERAS

There was a time when at Jerez, wines from different vineyards and years were kept apart, unblended; they were called *Anadas* or Vintages. With age the *Anadas* wines acquired greater body, higher strength, and darker color, making it difficult to build up and keep up constant and ample supplies of Sherry wines of those types and styles for which the demand was greater. Hence the Solera system, introduced long ago and now universally adopted.

The Solera is the Spanish method of equalization and rejuvenation of Sherry wines by the gradual introduction of younger wines to older ones. Butts of Sherry, containing wine of one and the same sort, are stacked in tiers, the younger wine above and the older below. To make up his blends, the Sherry shipper draws as much as he wishes from the butts of the bottom tier; the quantity drawn is replaced by wine from the butts immediately above, these are replenished with wine from the next tier, and so on until the topmost tier, the butts of which are filled up with wine from the right *Criaderas*, where the young *Palma*, *Palo Cortado*, *Rayas*, and oilier wines are kept during the early years of their development.

## FINOS, OLOSOS, ETC

FINOS are Sherries from *Palma* Soleras: they are pale, and dry without any trace of bitterness; they possess greater grace than strength, and are best before or between meals.

*Amontillados* are *Finos* which have acquired with age a greater alcoholic strength, a deeper amber color and a distinctive Montilla-like character. Best served before or between meals.

*Vinos de Pasto* vary greatly, but as a rule they are less dry than *Finos* and lack the somewhat assertive flavor of *Amontillados*; they may be served as white table wines.

*Olorosos*, the wines of *Palo Cortado Soleras*, range from golden to brown in color, and from 18 to 20 per cent. in alcoholic strength, reaching 24 per cent. when very old. They have more body and power than *Finos*, but less 'breed', and are best with soup or dessert.

*Amorosos* and *Brown Sherries* are among the sweeter and darker *Olorosos*, and are served as dessert wines.

*Pedro Ximenez* and *Moscatel* wines are made from varieties of grapes exceedingly rich in grape-sugar; they are more liqueurs than wines.

*Vinos de color* are made from grape-juice boiled to a thick syrup diluted with ordinary 'must', which ferments with it. *Vinos de color* are used to color and sweeten the darker and sweeter Sherries.

## **MANZANILLA, MONTILLA, PAJARETE**

Manzanilla is the chief and most typical wine made from the grapes of the Sanlucar vineyards; it possesses a distinctive character unlike that of other Sherries. It is pale in color, dry with a slightly bitter 'finish', 15.5 per cent. only in alcoholic strength, when young, but it does gather higher strength with years. It is best served cold before or during meals.

*Montilla* is an unfortified wine which may reach 16 per cent. of alcohol when completely fermented. It is made from the grapes of La Sierra de Montilla and Los Moriles vineyards, in the Province of Cordoba; it possesses great distinction and an attractive flavor of its own. It should be served cold before or between meals.

*Pajarete*, or *Paxarete*, from the Pajarete vineyards between Villamartin and Prado del Rey, is a sweet wine that was popular in England in Victorian days. It is shipped now to the U.S.A where it is known as *Blending Sherry* and used by Whisky Blenders.

The abortive miniature glasses in which Sherry is served in most hotels and restaurants are a disgrace and an insult. Sherry lovers must refuse them and demand wine-glasses for all Sherry wines, preferably narrower at the top so as to concentrate the bouquet of the wine.

