



# My Sherry Amor

IF THERE IS ONE DRINK THAT TYPIFIES SPAIN THEN IT HAS TO BE SHERRY. CHRIS BARNES TAKES A LOOK AT ITS HISTORY AND URGES US ALL TO GET RE-ACQUAINTED WITH THIS DELIGHTFUL DROP.

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Imagine a warm summer afternoon: before you lies a plate filled with olives, spicy sausage and well-aged cheddar, a bowl of almonds and walnuts and a glass of chilled Fino. Then think of another picture: it's a chilly autumn Sunday and lunch is being served, a bowl of wild mushroom soup or some grilled sardines, now the tableau completed by another glass of Sherry, but this time a pale golden Amontillado that you sip before pouring a splash into the soup.

And now the picture is mid-winter and it's after dinner, beside the fire where real conversation begins. There's a platter of cheese and some bread. This time the scene is completed by a glass of burnished bronze liquid, an Oloroso or even the extraordinary green-black of an ancient Pedro Ximénez. All these moments are when we should rediscover the great joys of a drink entwined in history, Sherry. Or, as we'll find out, what's now known in Australia as Apera.

## HISTORY OF SHERRY

To most Australians the word 'Sherry' is synonymous with either little old ladies or the drink no-one accepts when presented on a tray at their second cousin's wedding reception. In short, Sherry has a pretty poor image. But happily that's changing.

From the 15th century onwards, the Spanish were a major trading partner of and adversary in war with the English. Somewhere around that time the first fortified wines of the Jerez region in south-west Spain around the port of Cadiz began to arrive in England. These were fortified white wines, quite unlike the rich red wines of Oporto. The name given to these wines was either Sack, or more commonly, the name of the region, Jerez, which was corrupted into 'Sherry'.

Australia, being the good British colony it was, adopted Sherry as one of its favourite drinks right from the start of European settlement. The climate of Jerez in southern Spain is hot and dry, and early English settlers found no shortage of sites that were similar in climate to that. So the grape varieties of Sherry, Palomino and Pedro Ximénez were planted enthusiastically.

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## FINO – THE FINEST

Sherry comes in a number of different styles but will fall into two broad categories, sweet and dry. Sherry is the only fortified wine we drink in Australia that may be completely 'bone dry'; in other words, totally sugar free. This style is considered the best and thus given the name in Spanish of 'Fino', or the finest. To make all Sherries the starting point is the same: take white grapes and allow fermentation into a white wine, but arrest the ferment early. In Sherry, neutral or flavourless grape spirit is used to kill the yeast. It is not considered that the additional flavour of brandy spirit will add to the finished wine.

After fortification the wines are placed in oak barrels; the best wines of the vintage will be kept apart in a separate set of barrels and earmarked to produce Fino wine. In all cases, however, sweet or dry, the Sherry goes into a solera, so that when final blending takes place the finished wine is always representative of the entire age of the solera. The Fino solera, however, has one major difference, which is the presence of flor yeast.

## THE DRY

Flor is a strain of yeast that is so important in the character of Fino Sherry that the two terms are often interchanged to describe this style of wine. One bottle may say Flor Sherry; the next will say Fino Sherry. Flor yeast is quite extraordinary. It will thrive in the oxygen-rich environment of a barrel's headspace and form a film which looks like a scum on top of the wine, sending small tentacles of the micro-organism down into the wine in search of sugar to eat, making sure that you have not only a fortified, but completely sugar free, and therefore bone dry, wine. Fino Sherries are not only completely lacking in sugar sweetness but also take on a distinctive character from the yeast itself. This is best described as nutty and aromatic with the additional complexity of volatile acidity (VA), or the sharpness of nail polish remover.

To the uninitiated this sounds extraordinary – it smells like nail polish remover, has no sweetness and tastes a bit like old roasted almonds. This, however, is what these Fino Sherries are all about: complexity and power of flavour. These are the perfect wines to drink slightly chilled before a meal or as the Spanish do, with spicy tapas dishes such as chorizo, octopus or anchovies.

## ...AND THE SWEET

When Sherry is made without the introduction of flor yeast the wine will be sweet. The amount of sugar at fortification and the age of the wine govern the degree of sweetness. The older the wine, the more luscious and intense the flavours. The easiest way to see this difference is in the colour of the wines. The Fino will be a pale, very slightly golden wine, while on the other hand the oldest and most intense of the sweet Sherries, the Oloroso style, will be a dark almost tawny colour. This wine of middle age and some flor yeast character is usually called an Amontillado.

However, in Australia many Sherries labelled Amontillado may in fact be young or 'middle aged' Oloroso and thus sweet. There are other styles rarely seen here, such as Manzanilla, another version of Fino Sherry where the flor yeast dies prematurely. The Pedro Ximénez wines are concentrated in both taste and sugar content after many, many years of evaporation through ageing and are almost black and syrupy in appearance.

The most accessible and one of the very best producers in Spain is Tio Pepe, while Hidalgo 'La Gitana' Manzanilla is a treat in the half bottle. The most famous local is the Seppelts DP117 Fino Sherry, now under the label Seppeltsfeld, and all the styles are good wines.

The last word though has to go to the government. Due to changes in Australian wine labelling the word 'Sherry' is now banned in this country, as it's considered to be a region in Spain, thus only applicable to wines made there. So now we have to call the drink 'Apera'. Don't argue, just chill a bottle of Fino, dig out a bowl of nuts and relax! ■