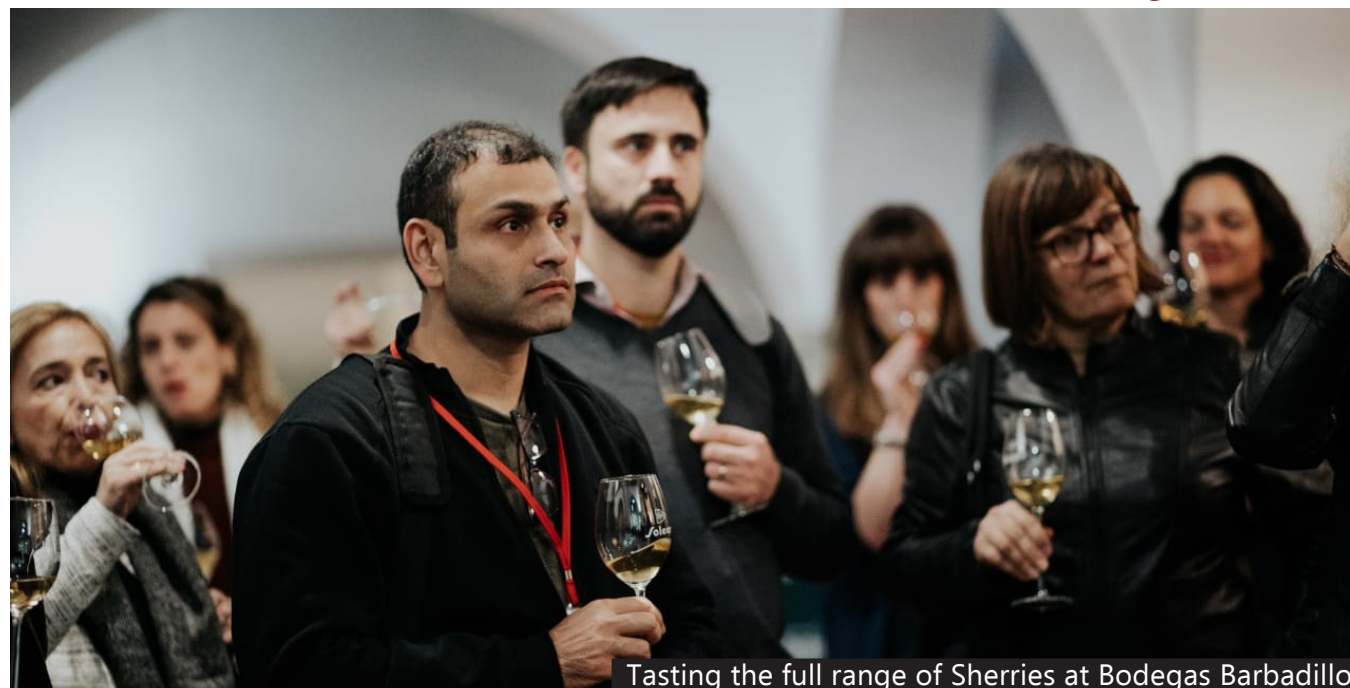


The many moods of Sherry



Tasting the full range of Sherries at Bodegas Barbadillo

Anyone who has ever been to Spain is familiar with the clout of Sherry, but rare is the soul who can do justice to describing its magic. Having been in the beverage industry for nearly 20 years and having tasted pretty much everything related to alcoholic beverages, I too was left baffled. Each time I took a sip, it was like a new revelation! Is it a wine, is it a spirit, is it something in the middle or perhaps a hybrid of some kind? Why does it come in so many colours, in so many styles? Just who is this mysterious lady of the wine world?



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I went to Jerez last year and came back reeling under the spell of this magnificent beverage with lyrical name called Sherry.

There was a time when you would expect to find a bottle of Cream Sherry in gran's larder, but those times are long gone. Sherry now plays a role in every wine connoisseur's repertoire. This has to be one of the most versatile and unique wines on the planet. The entire tale starts in the 'Sherry Triangle' - namely

between the towns of Jerez de la Frontera, Sanlúcar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa María. Viticulture has been here for the last three millennia and as in most cases around Europe, the Romans must be given credit for this.

The spirit of the wine is reflected brilliantly in the culture of Andalusia and its people, whose friendly and welcoming nature is the hallmark of this part of Spain.

Terroir's Influence

One of the most southerly wine regions in Europe, here the temperature can often climb up to 40 degrees centigrade. The vines enjoy roughly 300 days of sunshine with the year's entire rain coming in a very short duration in the winter.

Another characteristic during the growing season are two prevailing winds that pass through the area - Levante and Poinente. The former are hot and arid winds from the south-east funnelled through the Strait of Gibraltar, going on to Cadiz and up the region. The latter are cool and humid winds from the west that balance out the aftermath of the former.

Weather has always influenced the architecture of regions, and it is evident in the high-ceilinged Bodegas here. They also have rather massive windows on either direction for these winds to make way from there and to keep the area cool and breezy.

Another distinctive feature of this magnificent land is the soils that the vines thrive in. Albariza (Latin for white) is the kind of soil the powers that be themselves must have blessed this region with! This chalky limestone soil has the quality to absorb copious amounts of water when it rains in the short season here. Throughout the rest of the months, its rugged exterior develops a kind of crust in the summer heat, preventing the evaporation of water. Talk about the tremendous self-preservation techniques of Mother Nature!

The Genesis

Sherry is identified with three grapes - Palomino, Pedro Ximenez and Moscatel, the former for dry styles and the other two for sweeter styles.



Dry sherries began their journey with Palomino in the vineyard. The first pressing (Primera Yema) produces the best grape juice while the last pressing goes into being distillation for the region's brandy. The base wine is ready by the end of November.

This wine is then intricately classified at this stage for defining the journey ahead. The finest and most delicate batch would be fortified to about 15 percent for biological ageing, which transpires under the veil of yeast known here as flor. The less elegant batch will be fortified to 17 percent - 18 percent where flor will not develop and will undergo oxidative ageing.

These Sobretablas then enter Solera, an array of pyramid-style barrels arranged with the newest on top and the oldest at the bottom. Each layer is called a criadera and there can be up to 14 criaderas in a Solera system.

Each year, a proportion of wine from the bottom most criaderas (confusingly also called a solera!) is extracted and bottled (Saca), and the same amount of new wine is added to the Solera (Rocio), providing it with fresh nutrients in a rolling process of ageing and blending. Some Soleras go



back to the late 1800s and are still operational!

Biological ageing will produce Fino and Manzanilla (only in Sanlúcar de Barrameda) and oxidative ageing will produce Oloroso. Soleras generally have 600 American oak butts which are never filled to the top. This is so because there is enough room for the flor to develop. Sometimes, post the biological ageing, the wines can start ageing oxidatively after the flor consumes all the nutrients in the wine. This can occur either naturally or as a deliberately induced attempt by the winemaker. Amontillados and Palo Cortado are made this way.

Ahh, Now for the Tasting

Finos and Manzanillas develop a characteristic pale to straw yellow colour. Dry with aromas of almonds, dough, chamomile and a slight salinity in the case of Manzanilla. Fresh on the palate, perfect to pair with local Andalusian fish & seafood, it can be sipped with salted almonds or olives.

Some Favourites on my List

Manzanilla - La Gitana (Bodegas Hidalgo), La Guita (Hijos de Rainera Perez Marin, Groupe Estevez) and Solear (Bodegas Barbadillo).

Finos - Inocente (Valdespino), Tio Pepe (Gonzalez Byass), La Ina (Lustau).

Olorosos being aged oxidatively take up this dark amber colour, with the alcohol level sometimes rising to 20 percent due to evaporation during ageing. Olorosos are nutty, with notes of burnt caramel, bruised apple and leather. These are wines with complexity and a long finish.

Some of my Other Favourites

Cuco Oloroso 12 Years (Bodegas Barbadillo), Almacenista Oloroso 'Pata de Gallina' (Bodegas Lustau), Don Gonzalo Oloroso VOS (Valdespino).

Naturally sweet Sherries – Pedro Ximénez and Moscatel.

Here the grapes are left out in the blazing summer Sun for several days until the grapes lose moisture and sugar levels concentrate (Asoleo). Fermentation is stopped by addition of alcohol and these wines are aged oxidatively. Some of these beverages can be black and sticky sweet, reaching residual sugar levels of 450 grams/litre!

Food & Wine Pairing

There is a reason why Sherry is termed as the most versatile food-pairing wine. In the realm of Sherry, there is style relating to every occasion and every kind of food on the menu. The Finos and Manzanillas pair exquisitely with seafood, nuts, sushi & sashimi. Oloroso loves red meats



Some regional terminologies you find on the label

Añada

Extremely rare Jerez de Añada is a vintage style Sherry, which had a fairly common usage till the late 19th century.

En Rama

Rama essentially means raw, which translates into the Sherry being bottled straight from the cask, without going for any filtration or clarification. This refers only to the biological ageing styles.

Manzanilla Pasada

An older style of Manzanilla, where the flor has just died and there has been minimal exposure and limited oxidative exposure.

and game.

Amontillados and the elusive Palo Cortados are worthy companions to chocolate, cheese and walnuts. Cream Sherries are the partners in crime with foie gras, pates and fruit-based desserts. As for PX and Moscatel, you can practically spot them at the altar with dark chocolate, any chocolate-based dessert, bitter food and blue cheese!

Just pick a favourite from each category, and chances are you will never need to agonise over the wine list every time you are having friends over for dinner! **S**

Kunal Kaul is a seasoned hotel industry professional, a certified WSET educator, certified Sherry educator and a hospitality trainer. His passion for history has taken him on many a trail to deep-dive into a particular wine region's most important grapes.