

## My Sherry Amour Sample fine wine in all seven sipping styles

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You may know it as Grandma's tippie, but in its native Spain, sherry is the drink of cigar-smoking macho men. In fact, in standing-room-only tapas bars, it is the food wine of choice in all its seven styles, from the driest, briny fino to the sweetest, nuttiest pedro ximenez.

Thanks to adventurous wine geeks and passionate sherry advocates, the fortified wine is gaining buzz in the Bay Area. It's certainly a good time. With the globalization of wine styles, it's more and more common for a cabernet sauvignon from Chile to taste eerily similar to a cabernet sauvignon from Napa or Australia.

But, sherry, in all its layered complexity, is distinctive and evokes a sense of place, says Kevin Hogan, wine buyer for The Spanish Table in Berkeley. "For those of us into wine, sherry has become a real revelation," he says. "There are a lot of wines you can make in a lot of places, but sherry has retained an authenticity and genuine character."

And, despite the sweet reputation, the majority of sherry produced in Spain is dry.

"We have finally gotten past the blue bottle," says Hogan, referring to Harveys Bristol Cream, a style of sherry originally created for the British export market. "It reminds me of the Lancer's reputation that first turned people off dry rose."

In terms of sherry's personality, another good comparison is Champagne. Both are grown in chalky, white soils amid extreme temperatures; both are best enjoyed with food and sipped from special, narrow stemware (copitas, in the case of sherry) that emphasize aromas and flavors; and both, to be blunt, are such a pain to make, it's a wonder the traditions are still alive.

Sherry is the English word for the wines made in southwestern Jerez, along the sea in the province of Andalusia. It starts out as one or a combination of three white grape varieties -- moscatel, palomino, and the sweet pedro ximenez, which are harvested, crushed and blended, then fortified with brandy to make sherry. Unlike most wines -- and because of the unique way it is made -- sherry has little, if any, fruit character.

Basically, the wine is progressively blended and aged in ceiling-high stacks of old barrels, known as a solera. At the very bottom is the barrel containing the oldest sherry. At the top of the solera is the sherry of the current vintage. A small amount of young wine is repeatedly drawn off and added to older wines.

Much like fine Champagne, sherry is not the product of any single vintage. Rather, it owes its complexity and unique, oxidated qualities to blending and the presence of flor, a yellow-foamed yeast that grows on the surface of the wine as it develops.

Yet, unlike Champagne or aged Burgundy, sherry is a bargain. At most wine shops, a good bottle runs \$15 to \$30. And because the alcohol content is higher (up to 22 percent) than traditional table wines, a little goes a long way.

"It's one of the greatest values in the wine world," says Sean Diggins, wine director of Gitane Restaurant & Bar in San Francisco. Gitane specializes in the Basque region, and Diggins has made it his mission to promote sherry and its versatility. He features 30 on the wine list, which can be sampled by glass or flight -- and always with food.

Sherry is so food-friendly that Chicago-based restaurateurs Cathy and Tony Mantuano dedicated a chapter of their cookbook, "Wine Bar Food: Mediterranean Flavors to Crave With Wines to Match" (Potter, 2008) to sherry-loving tapas such as Saffron-Pickled Cauliflower and Falafel Crab Cakes.

Cathy, a wine expert, likes pairing the latter with a manzanilla, the bone dry, straw-colored sherry with the salty, sea flavors reminiscent of the coastal hamlet, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, from which it hails. With the earthy cauliflower, she goes straight for a dry, tangy fino, the ultimate "tapas sherry."

"Fino is easy to drink with a variety of flavors, from fried fish to cured olives and all sorts of vegetables, like roasted and fried peppers, to this Moorish-influenced dish," Cathy says. "It is also low in alcohol, another good reason to drink it when starting a meal."

For people put off by sherry's oxidated qualities, Diggins skips the dry styles and starts folks off with an amontillado, which is an off-dry, aged fino, or an oloroso, a dark, nutty, and rich sherry that is sweetened with a little pedro ximenez, a grape that doubles as a type of sherry. In Spain, most people enjoy pedro ximenez poured over ice cream, Diggins adds.

Now, that's something everyone can enjoy, including grandma.