



THE LOVE SPAIN GUIDE N. 007

# Spanish Sherry

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Sherry is not a grape or a blend so much as a place: the word is an English corruption of Jerez, and under Spanish law only wine aged in the triangle between Jerez de la Frontera, El Puerto de Santa María and Sanlúcar de Barrameda may legally carry the name. Much of it is made from a single pale grape, Palomino, yet the same fruit can become a bone-dry Fino or a walnut-dark Oloroso depending entirely on how it is aged. This is Guide 007 in The Love Spain Guide series.

## A Wine Defined by Its Place

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The denomination is formally called Jerez-Xérès-Sherry, a three-language nod to its Spanish, French and English names, and it is overseen by the [Consejo Regulador del Vino de Jerez](#). The production zone sits in the province of Cádiz in [Andalucía](#), where chalky white soils called albariza hold winter rain through the dry summer. Sanlúcar de Barrameda has its own separate denomination, Manzanilla-Sanlúcar de Barrameda, for

the delicate wine aged in that coastal town's cooler, more humid cellars.

## How Sherry Is Actually Made

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After the Palomino is pressed and fermented into a plain dry base wine, the critical decision is fortification. Lightly fortified wines to around 15% alcohol develop a living layer of yeast on the surface called flor, which shields the wine from air and gives Fino and Manzanilla their saline, bready character - this is biological ageing. Wines fortified higher, to roughly 17% and above, cannot sustain flor and instead age in contact with oxygen, slowly darkening and concentrating into Oloroso. Amontillado begins life under flor and finishes oxidatively, while Palo Cortado is a rarer style that shows traits of both.

## The Solera System

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Sherry is almost never the product of a single harvest. Barrels are stacked in tiers called criaderas, with the oldest wine in the bottom row known as the solera. When wine is bottled, only a portion is drawn from the oldest barrels, which are then topped up from the row above, and so on up the chain. This fractional blending means every bottle carries a trace of much older wine and keeps a house style remarkably consistent year to year. Long-established houses such as [González Byass](#), maker of the Tío Pepe Fino, and Bodegas Fundador maintain soleras that have been running continuously for well over a century.

## Sweet Sherries and the Other Grapes

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Not all sherry is dry. Pedro Ximénez grapes, often laid out in the sun to shrivel into near-raisins, produce an intensely dark, syrupy wine traditionally poured over ice cream. Moscatel yields another naturally sweet style. The familiar "Cream" sherries are blends, typically dry Oloroso sweetened with Pedro Ximénez, a style developed largely for export markets. Producers including [Lustau](#), Osborne, [Barbadillo](#) in Sanlúcar and [Williams & Humbert](#) bottle the full dry-to-sweet range.

## Serving, Visiting and the Venencia

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Fino and Manzanilla are dry white wines and should be served well chilled and drunk young and fresh, ideally from a newly opened bottle; an open bottle fades within days much like any white wine. The tall narrow glass traditionally used is the copita. In the bodegas you may see a venenciador draw wine from the barrel with a venencia - a small cup on a long flexible handle - and pour it in a long thread into the glass below. Many houses in Jerez combine cellar tours with the city's horse culture; the [Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre](#) stages equestrian shows nearby.

## Myths Worth Retiring

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Myth: Sherry is always sweet. In fact the majority of styles - Fino, Manzanilla, Amontillado, dry Oloroso, Palo Cortado - are fully dry. The sweet reputation comes from Cream and Pedro Ximénez bottlings that were popular abroad.

Myth: Sherry is a cheap cooking wine for the elderly. Dry sherries are among the most food-friendly wines made, and a good Fino with jamón or fried fish is a serious pairing, not a relic.

Myth: Older always means better. Because Fino and Manzanilla rely on living flor, they are prized for freshness; it is the oxidative styles like Oloroso and Amontillado that genuinely benefit from great age.

## Frequently Asked Questions

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### Is sherry stronger than ordinary wine?

Yes. Because it is fortified with grape spirit, sherry typically runs from about 15% alcohol for a Fino up to around 20% or more for an aged Oloroso, compared with roughly 12-14% for most table wine.

### How long does an open bottle keep?

It depends on the style. Fino and Manzanilla are best within a few days of opening and kept in the fridge. Oxidative styles such as Oloroso and Pedro Ximénez are far more robust and can stay good for weeks or longer.

### What should I eat with it?

Chilled Fino and Manzanilla go beautifully with olives, almonds, cured ham and fried seafood; Amontillado suits soups and hard cheeses; and Pedro Ximénez is best treated as a dessert in a glass.

## Official websites mentioned

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Consejo Regulador del Vino de Jerez: [sherry.wine](http://sherry.wine)

Andalucía: [andalucia.org](http://andalucia.org)

González Byass: [gonzalezbyass.com](http://gonzalezbyass.com)

Lustau: [lustau.es](http://lustau.es)

Barbadillo: [barbadillo.com](http://barbadillo.com)

Williams & Humbert: [williams-humbert.com](http://williams-humbert.com)

Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre: [realescuela.org](http://realescuela.org)