

7 STELLAR STOUTS | CHOCOLATE-FRAMBOISE FONDUE | WINE COCKTAILS

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## Holiday Drinks & Entertaining Guide

50 GREAT GIFT IDEAS

22 FESTIVE RECIPES

SAVING THE SAZERAC  
IN NEW ORLEANS

THE TRUTH ABOUT SHERRY

HOW TO ROAST YOUR  
OWN COFFEE

# Sherry on Top



Spain's other fortified wine isn't just for  
baking fruitcake anymore

Story by PAUL CLARKE  
Photographs by STUART MULLENBERG

Shot on location at Grolla in Portland, Ore.



## Bamboo

The crisp dryness of fino sherry meets the herbal elegance of vermouth in this suave, lower alcohol aperitif.

1 1/2 oz. fino sherry  
 1 1/2 oz. dry vermouth  
 2 dashes orange bitters  
 Ice

Tools: mixing glass,  
 bar spoon, strainer  
 Glass: cocktail, chilled  
 Garnish: lemon twist

Stir ingredients with ice and strain into glass. Garnish.

Adapted from *Cocktails: How to Mix Them*,  
 by Robert Vermeire, 1922.

*As a teenager, Fernando Moreno Castillo became a serious drinker. Not in the problematic way, though: “My dad owned restaurants, so I grew up in the business,” says the ponytailed, hoop-eared Castillo, with a rich accent that reveals his upbringing in southern Spain.*

Castillo is general manager of The Harvest Vine, a well-respected Basque restaurant in Seattle. He says that, in contrast to many of his peers, early on he became fascinated with a venerable—though often misunderstood—class of fortified wines from his native country. “As soon as I started to learn about wine, I took an immediate interest in sherry,” he says. “I was probably one of the few 19-year-olds who would be drinking manzanilla every day.”

The favored tittle of Shakespeare’s hard-drinking Falstaff and once a staple of every respectable British sideboard, sherry has fallen on hard times. Now typified in the U.S. market by low-end blends meant only for kitchen use, and by cloyingly sweet dessert sherries with little redeeming value, sherry would seem to be a product with little future. But as Castillo learned and as many curious drinkers are discovering, this distinctive class of wines has many levels worth exploring.

Finding a starting point, however, can be tricky.

“I don’t think sherry fits into any of the standard categories we use in this country,” says Craig Camp, a professional winemaker and sherry aficionado who writes the popular Wine Camp blog. “It’s not a red wine and it’s not a classic white wine, and there are so many different styles of sherry that it’s confusing for people.”

## Something old, something new

Despite the bewildering array of styles, the various types of sherry have several traits in common. The first is location: sherry is made in the southwestern Spanish province of Cádiz, in a triangular region defined by three towns: Jerez de la Frontera, which is inland, and Puerto de Santa Maria and Sanlúcar de Barrameda, both on the Atlantic coast. The second shared trait is the grapes: most sherry is made from the Palomino Fino grapes that grow in the region’s chalky *albariza* soil, which produce a wine that is low in acidity and sugar content. Sherry is also fortified with neutral grape spirits prior to aging, placing it in the same category as port, another Iberian fortified wine—though sherries are typically lighter and less sweet than port. Finally, sherry is aged using a distinctive *solera* fractional blending process in which younger wines are gradually added to barrels of mature wines, meaning that each bottle of sherry contains traces of wine that may be decades or even centuries old.

From these shared elements, however, sherry’s identity splinters into an array of different styles that fit, somewhat uneasily, into three broad categories. The first category is composed of paler, drier fino-type sherries, their character dependent on a thick layer of yeast, known as *flor*, that develops on the wine’s surface as it ages. The flor

reduces oxidation, producing a sherry that is light in color and crisp, light and aridly dry in flavor. Sherries in this category include manzanilla, from Sanlúcar, and puerto fino, from the region around Puerto de Santa María; the maritime climate keeps the flor reasonably stable, resulting in light, delicate wines with a distinctive salty tang. Also in this category is the eponymous fino, from the inland Jerez region, where the wider swings in temperature and humidity cause the thickness of the flor to fluctuate, resulting in sherries that are somewhat more oxidized than the coastal sherries, with a slightly nuttier flavor and a bone-jarring dryness.

The second class of sherry dispenses with the protective layer of flor for part or all of the aging, and utilizes the power of oxidation to change the wine’s characteristics. These sherries tend to be darker amber in color, and the flavor ranges from light and delicate to rich and robust, but the wines still manifest the distinctive dryness of finos and manzanillas. Oxidized sherries include amontillado—which is simply a fino-style sherry that has been allowed to age and oxidize after the flor has died (either because the alcohol level was raised above 16 percent, which kills the yeast, or by starving the yeast by not adding fresh wine to the barrel)—and oloroso, which is initially fortified at a higher alcohol level (most are bottled at more than 20 percent alcohol) so the wine never develops flor; this style is known for its heavier mouthfeel and richer body. Related to these is palo cortado, which starts as a fino, then loses its flor naturally.

At the far end of the spectrum are the sweet sherries, produced by blending dry sherries with sweet wines made from moscatel or Pedro Ximénez grapes. This category includes cream sherries, made with oloroso; pale cream sherries, made with fino; medium sherries, made with amontillado; and sherries made purely from muscatel or Pedro Ximénez, renowned for their rich, raisiny sweetness. Sherries have a complex, nutty flavor that becomes more pronounced as the wines age and oxidize. “When you talk about the flavor of manzanilla, you think almond kernels; amontillado is like toasted almonds and hazelnuts; and oloroso has more of a walnut note,” Castillo says. “This is simplifying it a great deal, but it’s a way to think of the flavor’s progression.”

## Hello, gorgeous

While a familiarity with sherry is common in Spain and among wine connoisseurs, American consumers often know little about the different types—a situation that isn’t helped by the quality of the main sherries in the marketplace. “The commercialization of sherry has been boom and bust,” says Stephen Metzler, president of Classical Wines from Spain, a Seattle-based importer that specializes in premium sherries. Metzler says the preponderance of low-end wines has harmed sherry’s image, obscuring the visibility of quality products on the market. “This is primarily because of the producer’s own tendency to cheapen their product through the sale of supermarket-level wines that form the basis of their distribution,” Metzler says, emphasizing that producers have an opportunity to change the situation for the better. “Whenever they’ve concentrated on quality and authenticity, they’ve been rewarded,” he says.

The mishandling of quality sherries in restaurants and bars has also depressed the market. “I think the biggest reason why sherry is misunderstood is that it’s handled so poorly,” Camp says. Many bartenders



## Tuxedo

This relative of the martini swaps vermouth’s herbal character for the distinctive nuttiness of fino sherry to create an intriguing and immaculately dry cocktail.

2 oz. Plymouth gin  
 1 oz. fino sherry  
 1 dash orange bitters  
 Ice

Tools: mixing glass, bar  
 spoon, strainer  
 Glass: cocktail, chilled  
 Garnish: lemon twist

Stir ingredients with ice and strain into glass. Garnish.

Adapted from *Old Waldorf Bar Days*,  
 by Albert Stevens Crockett, 1931.

## La Perla

The deep fruitiness of a reposado tequila meets the richness of an elegant pear liqueur, with the delicate flavor of manzanilla tying the ingredients together.

1 1/2 oz. tequila reposado  
1 1/2 oz. manzanilla sherry  
3/4 oz. Mathilde pear liqueur  
Ice  
Tools: mixing glass, bar spoon, strainer  
Glass: cocktail, chilled  
Garnish: lemon twist

Stir ingredients with ice and strain into glass. Garnish.

Jacques Bezuidenhout, San Francisco



treat sherries as they would a spirit like whiskey or brandy, keeping bottles stored on the bar for weeks or months after being opened. This can be a critical error: although sherry is fortified, the alcohol level of fino-type sherries is still only around 15 percent—in the same range as many non-fortified wines. As a result, these sherries are best kept refrigerated and should be consumed within days of opening. “Think how popular chardonnay would be if it was served out of these warm bottles that had been open for a long time,” Camp says. “People wouldn’t like that very much, either.” (With their higher alcohol content, olorosos, amontillados and sweet sherries can last several months after being opened, without refrigeration.)

Despite these hurdles, sherry fans such as Camp and Metzler see better days ahead, believing the public’s growing interest in quality food, wine and spirits may benefit sherry as curious consumers discover the wine’s charm. “True quality is an eye-opener for anyone,” Metzler says. “Good sherries have a lightness and freshness to them, which is surprising in something that’s been aged so long.”

Fortunately, quality sherries are not hard to find. Camp calls sherry the “world’s greatest wine bargain,” and producers such as Emilio Lustau and Hidalgo offer a number of different styles and bottlings that have earned respect among oenophiles.

“Lustau kind of cornered the market, because at one point they were the only sherry making any attempt at quality and authenticity, and you have to tip your hat to them,” says Metzler, who imports Hidalgo sherries. Founded in 1896, Lustau is one of Spain’s most respected sherry producers. In addition to its line of manzanillas, olorosos and amontillados, Lustau sells a well-regarded line of *almacenista* wines, made by small, family-operated *bodegas* which often produce sherries of exceptional quality.

Camp agrees that Lustau is “as good across the board as any producer,” but also gives high marks to Hidalgo’s La Gitana Manzanilla, the producer’s flagship wine. Sanlúcar-based Hidalgo has been selling sherry since 1792; in addition to its La Gitana, with its distinctive gypsy girl label, the company produces wonderful amontillados, olorosos and cream sherries. Hidalgo also markets a range of higher-end sherries such as Jerez Cortado Hidalgo, produced in a reserve solera more than 200 years old and which is said to draw some of its character from a rich sediment known as “La Madre” that lines its venerable

casks. Other notable producers include the Jerez-based Valdespino, which has produced sherry for more than 700 years; and González Byass, best known for Tio Pepe, a crisp, engaging fino that is widely available worldwide.

Many sherries pair remarkably well with food. In Spain, manzanillas and finos are often enjoyed with cured meats, shellfish, olives and hard cheeses, while amontillados work well with rich soups and white meats. Olorosos pair well with nuts and more robust meats and cheeses, and sweet sherries work wonderfully as dessert wines. Camp encourages sherry drinkers to think beyond tapas, and enjoy manzanillas and finos with fried foods and with pan-Asian and Japanese cuisine. “They’re wonderful with sushi,” he says. “Japanese food is so clean and delicate that fino is my favorite accompaniment with it.”

## Behind the bar

Sherry’s distinctive flavor and character has long played a small but important role in mixology, and many bartenders are rediscovering the fortified wine’s versatility. “Sherry gives me another flavor profile to work with, and stays in the really dry cocktail range,” says Jacques Bezuidenhout, a San Francisco-based beverage consultant whose recent clients include Kimpton Hotels.

Bezuidenhout won the 2005 Sherries of Spain Cocktail Contest with his La Perla, a cocktail that blends manzanilla sherry with reposado tequila and pear liqueur. Bezuidenhout says sherry offers him a number of flavor alternatives. “The dry finos or manzanillas lend themselves well to white spirits such as gin, vodka, tequila or Martinique rums,” he says. “In the cream sherry range, there’s a little of that sweet, nutty character that I like to have when working with American whiskies and even single malts.”

Bezuidenhout hopes that as bartenders come to understand sherry’s delicate nature, they’ll better realize the wine’s true potential as a cocktail ingredient. “Sherry gives me this unique path to go on with cocktails, and it surprises me that I don’t see it used more often,” he says. “Bartenders need to go back and look at things that give them more levels of flavor to work with.”

Castillo also hopes that more people discover sherry’s range of flavors, and hopes to soon organize a meal at The Harvest Vine that will pair a sherry with each course. “I think we’re coming a long way with the American public,” he says. “We still have to work on it, but I’m getting requests more and more.”

It’s too soon to tell if sherry will rise out of its long slump with American consumers, but fans of the fortified wine say that, while the misconceptions about sherry are nothing new, they think the public’s interest in quality products will eventually win out. “When I started in the wine business in the 1970s, my boss was trying to keep me busy and he told me to work with the sherries. But he warned me, ‘Whatever you do, don’t taste them—they’ll take the roof of your mouth off,’” Metzler says. “And this was a guy who’d been in the business a long time. That attitude still exists, and it’s not something that’s very convincing to the modern consumer. But when you give someone a fine manzanilla, and it’s fresh—that’s an incredible experience. It’s akin to enjoying a great glass of champagne.” ■

With its array of styles and multitude of different bottlings, sherry is a liquid topic that’s ripe for exploration. Here are a few to get you started. —P.C.

**González Byass Tio Pepe Palomino Fino**  
[gonzalezbyass.com](http://gonzalezbyass.com) \$\$

The world’s best-selling fino, Tio Pepe is a great introduction to sherry. Almost mineral in its dryness, this sherry is crisp and clean, with a deep, underlying richness. Good with charcuterie, shellfish and fried foods.

**Hidalgo La Gitana Manzanilla**  
[vinicola-hidalgo.es](http://vinicola-hidalgo.es) \$\$

Beautifully light and crisp, La Gitana has an intriguing dry complexity with manzanilla’s distinctive salty tang. Pairs wonderfully with sushi and pan-Asian fare.

**Lustau Palo Cortado**  
[emilio-lustau.com](http://emilio-lustau.com) \$\$\$

Deeply amber and with a gentle aroma, this palo cortado has a full, luscious nuttiness touched with leather and toffee, with a pleasantly round mouthfeel and a dry, refreshing finish.

**Hidalgo Napoleón Amontillado**  
[vinicola-hidalgo.es](http://vinicola-hidalgo.es) \$\$\$

Lean and sophisticated, this amontillado is redolent of wood and hazelnuts, and has an appealingly tangy dryness.

**Hidalgo Faraón Oloroso**  
[vinicola-hidalgo.es](http://vinicola-hidalgo.es) \$\$\$

Dark brown and deeply aromatic, this oloroso is fat and rich on the palate, with intricate notes of walnut and caramel.

**Lustau Moscatel Superior Emilin**  
[emilio-lustau.com](http://emilio-lustau.com) \$\$\$

Relatively pale and acidic for a sweet sherry, this moscatel strikes a great balance between a bracing tartness and the sweetness of figs and prunes.

### PRICING GUIDE

\$ - \$10 or less  
\$\$ - \$11-\$20  
\$\$\$ - \$21-\$35  
\$\$\$\$ - \$36-\$50  
\$\$\$\$\$ - \$51 and up

# Tasting Notes