

## **21st Century Sherry, New start or false dawn?**

**An article by Liam Tait**

### **In from the cold**

It's November in Manchester, a chilling north wind strikes my bones, the rain feels like cold steel needles piercing my skin, gloom seems to abound. This is the time of year one needs warmth, the luxury of central heating is sometimes not quite sufficient, warmth from within is required, which is when I turn to wine. Perhaps a hearty red from rugged Priorat may suffice, or something from the Barossa, no, tonight is a night for Oloroso. It's colour is tawny brown, it looks old, it most likely is, aromas leap from the glass, roasted nuts, dried fruit, I'm reminded of my grandmother's lovingly made fruit and nut loaf and the linoleum clad kitchen it was cooked in. I can smell dried spices, a suggestion of nutmeg, perhaps cinnamon and certainly orange rind. The palate is dry, almost searingly so, the fire of fortification that brings warmth and comfort is balanced by the rich, full flavours of camp coffee essence, and bitter coco beans. This wine looks, smells and tastes of the past, it's aroma and flavour makes one picture images of dark halls stacked high with dusty barrels waiting in solemn, dignified silence for the opportunity to share their hidden treasure.

As I look up my gaze flashes across the steel clad gas fire, past the wide-screen television and foot high stack of DVD's, my mind has been transported in time yet I have not moved, my eyes come to rest looking at the glass of wine my house mate is enjoying, it's colour is lemon with flashes of youthful green, it is well chilled, so much so that condensation is forming on the machine blown crystal glass it sits in. It is a Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough, it's creation could not be more different from that of my Oloroso. A quick crush, six hours skin contact and then into a giant steel tank for a swift, cool fermentation, there is no long rest for this wine, a couple of months will suffice before being bottled, boxed, palletised and shipped. This is clinical winemaking, precise and engineered towards mass production and mass appeal. Its flavour is fresh, clean cut with piercing acidity that both cleanses and refreshes, dry, yet sweet fruited it requires no effort nor thought to be consumed, it demands no reflection, asks for no contemplation, it's sole purpose to provide instant satisfaction on demand.

Two wines from different continent's on opposite sides of this world are currently looking at very different futures. Sherry, born from years of tradition and the toil of centuries of work is seeing it's global sales fall, squeezed by the success of wines like Marlborough Sauvignon, a child of modernity and technical progress that has grown into a giant in a little over a decade. How is Sherry as a traditional product steeped in history yet viewed by many of today's consumers as a drink of former generations to survive, grow and prosper in today's fashion fuelled and vanity obsessed market.

### **Hearts and minds**

To change an image is no mean feat. Image by it's nature is organic, it grows from the views of the media, experts, colleagues, friends and family. Image is embedded in our thoughts and experiences, indeed it feeds off these and strengthens according to such thoughts and experiences. To change an image you need to give people an experience of a product or person that they have never seen or felt before. With most young people today, indeed most people under the age of forty, Sherry is something that their grandmothers drank. They may have tasted Granny's Sherry and been put off for life, it may not even have been true Sherry, it may have been a lookalike produced in the United Kingdom, it may have been a true Sherry, yet it had gone stale after several months sitting proudly in a mock crystal decanter.

The taste of true, quality Sherry is most likely unknown to a large segment of the wine buying public and it is to these people that bodegas, industry representatives, agents and retailers must reach out to and endeavour to change the image of Sherry. Business can be a complicated matter but many aspects are obscenely simple, if the market is not coming to you, then you must go to the market. Potential customers that have not had the want nor the opportunity to taste and experience quality Sherry have to be given the opportunity and desire to do so. This can only be achieved by going to the market, resting on laurels will not achieve anything.

Picture the scene, it's July, hot, humid and your doing the most mundane of activities, the weekly family shop. Stepping into the supermarket you have the grim realisation that there is no escape from the heat, your heart sinks and the mind wanders to that holiday last year a world away from your current situation. Then, unexpectedly a kind young fresh faced lady with rosy cheeks and a welcoming smile offers you a sample drink, it is a pale liquid, lime and limpid green, glimmering in the light, you can feel that it is cool, your'e thirst is almost quenched just looking at it. It's unique aroma is one of subtle lemon with the fullness of yeast and a faint whiff that is reminiscent of the sea, you taste, it is light with the freshness of crisp green apples and a brisk mineral streak with the subtle twang of salt. To accompany this enlivening drink you a given a canapé of serrano ham and manchego, suddenly you are back on holiday, memories revived and feeling refreshed, you carry on with the shop, and leave with a bottle of Manzanilla. I suppose this is the most perfect of scenarios, idealistic perhaps, yet it is this kind of promotional activity of getting people to try Sherry and celebrate it's versatility that will change people's perception of the product.

This particular method of promotion is already carried out to a certain extent by several Sherry bodegas, but in order to change the image of Sherry such promotional horizons must be broadened and activities increased. In the past five years I can remember trying port, whiskey, fruit juice, beer, gin and dozens of other products at sample stands in supermarkets, not once have I had the opportunity to try any Sherry, this is a situation that must be addressed. What is clear is that such activities should concentrate on the versatility of Sherry as a drink of many guises suitable for many occasions, it should also include the widest range of Sherry's covering all major styles from the most delicate of Manzanillas to the unctous dessert wines produced from Pedro Ximenez and Moscatel.

### **In the line of sight**

Browsing the wine shelves of supermarkets today is a lesson in brand building and product placement. Standing in pride of place are the wines, hundreds of them, sumptuous Shiraz from the Barossa, crunchy Pinot from Burgundy, ripe and racy Riesling from the Mosel, the range is huge, the choice great. At first glance it simply looks like they are assembled in order of colour and then country, very rarely are they in price order, but take a closer look. At eye level we see some familiar names, big brands, I don't need to name them, we all know who they are. A little below or above we may find some lesser brands and some popular geographic brands, the ubiquitous Chianti at £4.99, perhaps a Cotes du Rhone or a "specially selected" Rioja Reserva at a bargain price.

Product placement is a key to the success of many wine brands, eye level is buy level are words commonly spoken in the retail world, but it is no coincidence that wines from the major world brands happen to be shelved in these areas, this privilege has to be paid for. Realistically there is no way that most Sherry producers would ever be able to compete with the payments made by the worlds major wine brands but there is certainly a case that sherry can be better placed on the shelves of supermarkets. Sherry in most of

the supermarkets I visit can be difficult to find, it seems to me that it struggles to find its place amongst its vinous peers. Sometimes it is tucked away in the no man's land between the spirits and wine, other times it may be in a completely different section, alienated like an unfashionable cousin. Both Sherry producers and the Consejo Regulador have to convince retailers to give Sherry a more prominent position in supermarkets and shops, this alone will not up sales yet when combined with other measures discussed here could have a positive impact on sales.

### **Dressed for the kill**

Image sells, fact. Take perfume for example, when was the last time you saw an advert for perfume that actually told you how it smells? Yes, the smell is ultimately vital to any final sale but it is firstly the image presented in the advert and secondly the packaging that grabs your attention and creates the initial connection. If this is done correctly and well, you are already half way to a sale. Welcome to the 21st century, where being fashionable no longer costs the earth, the retail world is full of celebrity sponsored clothing and cosmetics, even food is heading this way. All products have a perceived image and this in many cases is derived from packaging.

The traditional image of Sherry is in the majority of cases reinforced by the traditional packaging of these wines that to the younger breed of wine buyers can appear dated, boring and in many cases confusing. If Sherry is to attract new consumers then many Sherries have to revamp the presentation of their wines.

The traditional view of Sherry is of a wine in a dark brown or green bottle with lots of writing in a swirling italic font with phrases and words that many wine buyers do not understand. There are several ways that bodegas could address this problem. The use of bold colours and new more modern bottle shapes would certainly help these wines to stand out amongst the crowd and bodegas must consider using a more minimalist approach to labelling. Some bodegas are already doing this, Harvey's Fino and Tio Pepe are prime examples but more bodegas must follow in order to change this image. This type of re-branding will of course not be suitable for all Sherries but should be concentrated on Bodegas major bulk products at entry level price points such as generic fino and oloroso wines. Several sectors of the drinks industry have shown how modern the presentation of a traditional product has made their products more accessible to consumers, Champagne has been doing it for years, some port shippers have followed suit and nobody can deny how spirit producers have mastered the art of re-branding and packaging.

### **A sense of place**

What is the role of a drink? What is its purpose? There is no real definitive answer to this, in truth a drink can suit many roles, it can be something to refresh, to comfort, something to accompany a meal or even a celebration. Where sherry can fit into any of these roles is important for its future as by establishing places where sherry can be enjoyed to its maximum will certainly encourage sales. It is unlikely that sherry could ever seriously compete with other celebratory drinks such as Champagne or cocktails so this is an area where sherry must focus on its strengths.

With the exception of celebration drinks, sherry can fit into almost any other role, Manzanilla is perhaps the perfect refreshing and appetising aperitif and its partnership with sea food is nothing short of awesome, the same could be said for fino yet it is perhaps more diverse as fuller examples from Jerez can be the perfect foil for lighter cured meats and milder cheeses. Amontillado and Oloroso can be wonderfully comforting drinks and excellent with richer foods such as poultry, game fowl, terrine and mature cheese. Cream

sheries and sweeter styles from Moscatel or Pedro Ximenez can be perfect with a wide range of desserts or savoury foods such as cheese or even foie gras. Cognac and Armagnac are the classic beverages for digestifs but with the right promotion and support there is no reason that Brandy de Jerez cannot obtain a greater share of this market. Establishing sherry as a wine for many occasions can only be done with accurate and targeted promotion together with support from retailers, chefs, sommeliers and food or wine critics.

To an extent work in this sector has already begun, Tio Pepe sponsor several food shows on television and initiatives such as ten star tapas have begun to advertise the versatility of sherry but there is more work that can and should be done. This promotion of the versatility of sherry from aperitif to food partner has to be continuous and carried out by retailers, producers and critics if the message is to be passed on to the consumer. Focusing on the real strengths of sherry in this field is very important, wines such as Muscadet and Albarinio will get worried if there is a real push to promote the glorious match of Manzanilla and sea food, however, Pinot Noir and Syrah would hardly bat an eyelid should bodegas begin to promote Oloroso as the perfect foil for fillet du boeuf, it is a good match, ive' tried it, but it doesn't come close to a mature Hermitage or a muscular Pommard from a good year.

This is certainly one area of real potential, public interest in food has never been higher and people are certainly becoming more experimental, the world is full of armchair food critics and wannabe gourmets so the promotion of sherry as a viable and versatile drink for many occasions is certainly a path that must be more extensively explored and exploited.

### **New start or false dawn?**

So listed above are four areas where sherry can look to exploit it's sleeping potential and begin to grow it's sales once more, but in truth this is only the tip of the iceberg, I can think of at least a dozen more potential areas but I have picked perhaps the most obvious four. I suppose the question that many people in Jerez and Sanlucar are asking is if this is an achievable goal? I for one certainly believe so, seven years ago I barely touched wine let alone sherry and now I'm a convert, there is no reason why thousands of other people cannot be converted in the same manor. Sherry must find a way to be treated once again by the majority of people as a wine, as that is what it is. Too many people, both consumers and retailers think of sherry as a separate entity and this point of view must be challenged and overcome in order to maximise any potential benefit.

There have been many false dawns for sherry over the past few years but the growing number of wine drinkers and foodies worldwide is a massive opportunity that sherry must endeavour to be a part of, it is a sad yet true fact that the traditional market for sherry is ageing. Today's new wine drinker is part of tomorrows traditional market and sherry producers must recognise this fact and begin to target this audience so in thirty years time this period can be seen as a new start for this grand old region rather than yet another false dawn.