

# Reflections on Jerez

By Tim Triptree

I was especially pleased to win the Sherry Institute Scholarship for a number of reasons; I am a massive fan of all styles of Sherry; one of my favourite restaurants in London is Fino, (owned by the Sherry and all things Spanish-enthusiasts, the Hart brothers); and I had never before been to Jerez de la Frontera, Puerto de Santa Maria nor Sanlucar de Barrameda (the so-called Sherry triangle). So this was an opportunity to fulfil a dream of visiting the area and drinking one of my favourite wines.

I arrived in Jerez in late September 2008, and on the first evening I was taken to a restaurant, El Gallo Azul by Juliana who works for Fedejerez (the Spanish based arm of the Sherry Institute) and was able to taste the main types of Sherry; Fino, Amontillado, Palo Cortado, Oloroso and Pedro Ximenez, as well as eat an incredible amount of delicious tapas which was a perfect match for the accompanying wines. A torrential downpour followed which turned the streets into rivers and soaked me on the way back to my hotel and got me thinking about the future for Sherry in the UK; whether it's a bright future or are storms approaching?

It is common knowledge that the sherry industry is facing some tough challenges. Sales have suffered declines and the image of sherry, particularly amongst younger consumers, is of a drink suitable for an older generation. The disappearance of some famous bodegas and derelict buildings in Jerez is testament to the problems facing the industry. This raises the question: How can sherry improve its image and sales in the UK?

I was privileged to visit five bodegas during my three day stay in Andalucía; Bodegas Harveys, Gonzalez-Byass, Fernando de Castilla, Gutiérrez-Colosia and Hidalgo La Gitana. It was interesting to gauge some thoughts from the people I met during my visit.

Mr Beltrán Domecq who gave me a superb tour of Harvey's believes that consumers should be encouraged to treat sherry as an everyday wine that should be drunk in a wine glass, and that the schooner that was associated with our grandparent's generation should be consigned to the scrap heap. The perception of sherry as a wine needs to be reinforced, so that it becomes associated not only with being drunk at meal times but on normal occasions when consumers drink wine i.e. to increase the frequency of drinking occasions. If consumers can be educated that sherry can be drunk in the same manner as a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, or a Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon, then sales should increase accordingly.

Next was a visit to Gonzalez-Byass which is also a major producer, with its world famous, Tio Pepe brand of Fino. The strength of brands is vital for these types of bodegas which compete in the high volume sector. They have to spend large sums of money on marketing and promotion, such as sponsoring Gordon Ramsay's TV show. An interesting area that they are exploiting is wine tourism,

with hundreds of thousands of tourists visiting the bodega each year which can only strengthen the brand.

In contrast was Fernando de Castilla which focuses on boutique premium aged Sherries, small volumes with high prices. Their aim is not to get listings in supermarkets (although they do have a PX selling in Waitrose) but aiming to produce high quality sherry that is destined for top restaurants and wine shops. The quality of their Sherries was confirmed by tasting direct from cask, such as their incredibly intense and complex Amontillado and Oloroso muy Viejo, and also a range from bottle, such as an unusual Fino Viejo (aged Fino) which Heston Blumenthal has rated in his top three Sherries.

At both Gutiérrez-Colosia in Puerto de Santa Maria and Hidalgo La Gitana in Sanlucar de Barrameda, I was able to taste many of their wines from cask. Gutiérrez-Colosia has three of their wines (2 Sherries and a brandy) on the wine list of the award-winning El Bulli in Barcelona. It was interesting to taste two Finos; one bottled on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2008, which had a stunning aroma of sea air, seaweed and was very tangy and fresh, compared with a Fino that had been bottled nine months previously which had a completely different aroma and flavour profile. This brought to my attention the fact that Finos should be drunk young; Juan Carlos Gutiérrez-Colosia told me that the best time to drink a Fino is when they have been in bottle for 2 months. Consumers and retailers need to be educated on this, as drinking or serving a Fino when they are past their best is damaging to the perception and image of sherry. The Hidalgo wines were also stunning, all of them characterised by an amazing freshness despite their long ageing in the solera system and incredible complexity. It was amazing to taste the subtle differences between bodegas located in different areas within the sherry triangle and the effect on the wines.

### **The Future?**

I think the future is bright for the niche producers of high quality sherry, where the retail prices charged reward and justify the time, effort and labour intensive production process. Sherry production is not a simple or quick process, and wines need to spend years in soleras to develop their characteristic intensity and complexity. Sherry is not a FMCG that some of the large volume wine brands such as Blossom Hill have become. Sherry cannot compete with these wine brands. It is incongruent to try and have sherry as a low cost/high volume product. Bodegas attempting to compete on a low cost basis must cut corners to keep costs down and quality will suffer as a result. Only the very largest producers can compete with the large volume brands. The focus for the majority of producers should be on producing smaller volumes of higher quality products and charging higher prices, such as the VOS and VORS categories. Vintage dated sherries should also be a focus, as consumers like to be reassured by knowing which year the wine was made in.

What also struck me when visiting the bodegas was the vast number of barrels; bodegas have vast resources that are tied up in stocks of wine. The Consejo Regulador need to change the restrictions on how much bodegas can bottle, so that the bodegas can adapt to changing market demands and get a better balance between supply and demand. Bodegas should reduce stocks by aiming for smaller volumes of higher quality sherry at the same time as driving sales. Hopefully this will

safeguard the future for the bodegas and ameliorate against the threat of bankruptcy from cash flow issues.

Sherry is a drink for knowledgeable consumers and aficionados rather than the mass market. Sherry is an acquired taste and persistence is needed to convert consumers, especially as a Fino/Manzanilla is often the first type of sherry that consumers try. These Sherries are unlike any other white wine; salty, tangy, yeasty and very dry and can put off first-time consumers who are not expecting a white wine to taste like this. Educating consumers is key; what to expect; the differences in styles; matching with food; temperature to serve; how long a bottle keeps once opened, etc.

The image of sherry needs to be rejuvenated. Perhaps even to disassociate from the name Sherry, as this has negative connections amongst younger consumers. The focus should be on promoting the individual types; Fino, Amontillado, Oloroso, Pedro Ximenez. This will also have the benefit of educating consumers as to the different styles as the versatility of sherry should be a major theme for consumers to understand. There are styles of sherry to suit all occasions.

A modern image of sherry is vital to encourage a new generation of consumers, otherwise the category will continue to decline. Consumer's tastes changed over the last decade, with consumers preferring fruit driven, approachable wines. Perhaps a more fruit-driven style of Fino will have more success with the younger consumers and the large volume sector?

### **Conclusion**

The future for high quality premium sherry among knowledgeable wine consumers is bright. However I think those producing large volume brands will struggle to compete.

### **Thanks**

Many thanks to the Sherry Institute, Fedejerez and especially Beltrán Domecq, Jan Pettersen, Claire Henderson, Juan Carlos Gutiérrez-Colosía and Javier Hidalgo for their kind hospitality and delicious wines. I for one will be trying to keep up consumption of sherry as I think it would be a crime to lose this diverse, unique and delicious style of wine.