

Sherry

A Life's Journey

Philip Rowles

Foreword by Joe Wadsack



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Foreword

I remember, perhaps more clearly than for any other wine, the first time that I tried sherry. My parents owned a gastropub in the eighties, a time when these chalky, slate dry wines weren't celebrated to the extent that they are today. One of my holiday jobs in my teens was to set up the bar for morning opening hours. This, amongst other things, required setting the fires, stocking up the bottles, checking the beers on draught and the opened house wines from the night before. Finally, I had to place a huge brass fire-pot on the corner of the bar and fill it with ice and, without fail, one bottle of La Ina, Tio Pepe and La Gitana sherries, along with an assortment of French aperitifs. I must have looked at those bottles a thousand times before curiosity finally got the better of me and I tried them. That arresting, ice-cold, savoury, sourdough hit of a freshly-opened bottle of Fino left my neck-hairs standing on end. I'm not even sure whether, at that moment, I even liked it, but it started an intrigue and eventually a love affair with the amazing liquids of Jerez that has transcended any other wine fascination that I have enjoyed over the past thirty years.

It is an honour both to know Philip and to be asked to write this foreword. He knows everyone in the sherry industry and everyone knows him. I met him through the strangest of connections. A dear friend, Eleanor Smyly, who I met years ago, while going through the throes of my divorce, asked me if I had met her godfather 'Felipe'. He was a close friend of Eleanor's now dearly departed father, also named Philip, possibly the coolest man in London. I said I hadn't. On meeting Philip Rowles with Eleanor, I realised that I had already met him as a lecturer at the headquarters of the world-renowned Wine & Spirit Education Trust. He was the most charming, inspiring and eloquent of lecturers on a subject shrouded in ambiguity and complex law. On hearing that he was compiling a definitive book on the topic of sherry, I was excited. Philip not only knows everything about this endlessly diverse and magical wine, but he knows how to teach. The wine industry has been crying out for a book like this for two decades. It is clear, technically

precise and extremely easy to read. It clears up many misunderstandings about the genre, fills in huge gaps in common understanding, including where and how the raw materials are grown, and what terms like 'Palo Cortado' actually mean (something that took me years to fully understand), and is wonderfully easy to read. I endorse this book wholeheartedly.

Joe Wadsack – Wine Journalist, T.V. Presenter and Blogger.



Introduction

There are many great intellectual works on this subject, whose insight of the historical detail and description of the origins of the Sherry Trade are much superior to mine. Among those I would count “Sherry” by Julian Jeffs, an initial source of inspiration, along with that of the late Manuel González Gordon, also entitled “Sherry”.

In addition, there are various works by Beltrán Domecq Williams, who at the time of writing is now the President of the Consejo Regulador de Jerez – Xérès – Sherry, and who joined the family company – Williams and Humbert, straight from University in Madrid, at more or less the same time as I did. I have counted him as a lifelong friend ever since.

I cannot fail to mention here, the late and dearly missed John Radford, who I first met in Jerez in 1971 when he was working in a sales capacity for a UK wholesaler based in Nottingham. His book *The New Spain* has, I am sure, been a source of great pleasure for many a lover of Spanish wines.

My intention with this book is not to try to emulate any of those immensely learned works, but to set out for lovers and students of Sherry alike, a simplified and at the same time commercially focused account of how these wonderful wines are made, exploring their uniqueness, charms and mysteries in a way that will hopefully allow readers to take even further enjoyment from drinking them.



Final Thoughts

Having lived and worked in Jerez towards the end of one of the so called “Golden Ages”, and having been commercially involved with Sherry in some way for most of my working life, I have seen some of the best and the worst of the fortunes of these exceptional wines.

It is now pleasant to see that there is a sense of cautious, but determined optimism and hope. The sector is now more or less back in balance in respect of production, stocks and sales. Although the last of these three areas is still in decline, there is rather more than anecdotal evidence that profits are increasing as more and more, better quality is being sold, consumed and written about. Whilst researching and writing this book, I have encountered scores of young bloggers, drinkers, sellers and winemakers who are not just ambassadors for Sherry, but who live and breathe the wines.

There have been many mistakes made along the way, and several false dawns. By way of just one example In the early 1990s I was working as an EU Wine Inspector in Brussels and saw at first hand the very sad grubbing up of some of the area's best vineyards. EU rules meant that more money was to be paid for grubbing up the most productive areas of vineyard. Unfortunately those vineyards with the highest yields were those on the finest Albariza soils, producing some of the finest base wines, but as their owners had not seen much in the way of payment for years, it was too big an opportunity to resist.

Fortunately under the rules of time lapse, some of those vineyards have now been able to be replanted. Also, very fortunately, some of the vineyards which should never been planted to Sherry vines in the first place, especially those well on the way out towards Arcos de la Frontera and beyond La Barça de la Florida further south, will never again now be replanted.

We are seeing a resurgence of Sherry at high retail values, which is very exciting for all Sherry lovers. Their sales are minuscule as a percentage of total sales, but they act as standard bearers for the entire Sherry Trade, which lest we forget still sells close to 50 million bottles per year worldwide.

Sherry has its stocks to sales ratios as close to balance as is possible, at something like 3.9 years stock to sales, as of 2016, compared to an untenable position of almost 5.5 just 5 years previously. Given that most Sherry is sold at the minimum legal age of 2.5 years, that still leaves plenty of scope for the higher value, lower volume Sherries such as VOS, VORS and some of the magical Almacenista and Single Release Sherries which are catching the eye and the wallet of fine wine lovers around the world.

Most of the world's great winemaking areas are judged by their top end offerings – Vintage Port, Premier and Grand Crus in Burgundy, First and Second Growths in Bordeaux, Gran Reserva Riojas, yet all of these areas balance their books by selling huge quantities of everyday wines.

It is to be hoped that the new wave of single cask, limited edition, age dated and VOS and VORS Sherries can help consumers and Trade alike to disabuse themselves of the idea that Sherry is an old fashioned, inexpensive commoditised wine.

Palomino is the mainstay of Sherry production. There is no other region in the world of wine which makes so many different styles and complexities of wine from just one single grape variety.

Sherry truly is The King Of All Wines.

