

## She Sips Sherry on the Summer Sea Shore By Alton Long

Most of us have had the pleasure of enjoying one of the sweet cream sherries of Spain.

It may have been the most well-known cream sherry, Harveys Bristol Cream Sherry. This fortified wine is known for its rich creamy texture and smooth mouth feel as well as the sweet nutty flavor with hints of toffee, caramel, chocolate, hazelnuts, and raisins. It is the archetype of these famous wines and is often served at ladies' teas or brunches. But there are many gentlemen who enjoy a sip or two after their dinner or just before retiring. Actually, Harveys Bristol Cream Sherry can be served as an aperitif or a digestif, or even over ice with a squeeze of lime or orange. One of the best of the cream sherries, Harveys runs only about \$14 per bottle. In 1997, Harveys celebrated its 200th anniversary by introducing this sherry in a "Bristol blue" bottle, a color originating in Bristol, England, in the 1700's.

Just to review, so you'll understand what sherry is all about, classic sherries come from Spain. The name is derived from an English corruption of Jerez de la Frontera, one of the small cities in the center of the area of sherry production. (Jerez is pronounced something like "herrizth.") "Sherry" became the nickname for the very unique product produced in this city and its environs. The grapes used to make sherry are primarily the Palomino followed by the Pedro Ximénez. The sherry-making process is varied to produce the different desired styles.

Almost all variations use the "solera" method of oak aging. A solera consists of numerous barrels containing blends of the different years. Each year, only a part of the blend of the oldest harvests is bottled, allowing the new harvest to be mixed in with some of the more recently produced sherry in the top casks; and moving some of the previous years aged wine down to the lower casks. Thus the actual wine bottled may have wines from many harvests, including a bit from the very first harvest that was used to start the solera.

While cream sherries are popular, sherry comes in a variety of styles ranging from sweet to almost bone dry. Dry sherries have always been a great aperitif wine going well with many appetizer foods, especially the great variety of tapas of Spain.

Tapas, which are usually served in small round dishes, get their name from the

slab of ham or cheese or a slice of bread that was often served on "top of" the glass of wine as a noontime or afternoon snack in Spain. Now "tapas" have reached new epicurean heights both in Spain and in the U.S., and the wine most often served is "fino" sherry. Tapas range from grilled sardines to pickled squid, from little meat and sausage pastries to spiced shrimp, and include simple dishes such as hot roasted salty almonds and olives and pimento.

A fino sherry is usually pale, straw-colored, light-bodied, completely dry, and has a nutty flavor. Fino, like all sherries, is a fortified wine, running 14 to 16 percent alcohol; it should be consumed judiciously. The best are especially clean and delicate and are served well chilled. As they warm up in the glass, they retain their pleasant character. There are several good ones around. One of the most well known is Tio Pepe. This dry sherry made from the Palomino grape, is extra dry, and one of the favorites in many Spanish restaurants in the U.S. It runs about \$14 and is available in most good wine shops.

Another excellent fino is La Ina produced by Allied Domecq. It is dry but quite smooth and has a hint of an orange citrus aroma and flavor over the yeasty yet elegant sherry bouquet. La Ina is made from 100 percent Palomino grapes and aged an average of 4 years in oak. It is 15.5 percent alcohol. This fino runs about \$15 a bottle.

Occasionally, you may see a sherry in a burlap cloth wrap with the name "sack" associated in the wine's name. This is a reference to the use of "dry sack," a name used for such imported wines in Elizabethan England. But you may also find fino Sherries not in the burlap bag but trading under that name. Williams & Humberts, an English sherry exporter produces "Drysack Medium" a less dry fino made from a blend of Palomino and Pedro Ximénez and is priced at around \$17.

Fino sherry is the basis for producing several other forms of sherry including manzanilla and amontillado. The manzanilla is the driest of all the sherries and is essentially a super fine fino. It is only aged for a short time and is pale straw colored, light and tangy and must be served well chilled and consumed soon after its purchase.

Amontillado is named for the town of Montilla in the area in which it is produced. Amontillado is typically deep amber colored wine which is richer and nuttier than plain fino. This is done by allowing it to age for several years in oak. It is often sweetened and blended with additional wine. This wine achieved literary fame in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado."

Domecq's Amontillado is aged in oak, for an average of seven years and is sweetened by the addition of some Pedro Ximénez wine to a sweetness level they call medium dry. It has a good hazelnut and almond flavor and goes great with bisques and chowders, salted nuts and dry, mild cheeses. Allied Domecq's amontillado and manzanilla both sell for \$15 or less.

Oloroso is the second of the two major classes of sherry. Sherries based on the oloroso style tend to be a bit more alcoholic running 18 to 20 percent alcohol and include the famed cream and golden sherries. The closest to an oloroso I could find is a blended oloroso and Pedro Ximénez produced by Lustao and labeled Solera Reserva Deluxe Cream, Capañaz Andres. The wine is close to the character of the other great cream sherries and runs about \$11.

A most unusual sherry is Pedro Domecq's Viña 25 made from 100 percent Pedro Ximénez. It is dark mahogany in color with an amber edge and has a rich bouquet of raisins and nuts. These flavors come through along with hints of wood and spice from the five years average in the solera. This wine goes well with creamy blue cheese, coffee or even as a topping over vanilla ice cream. It's a bargain at \$9!

Consider having a sherry and tapas party this summer using small glasses for tasting several different cold finos along with a grouping of tapas, followed by an amontillado or a manzanilla with cheese and ending with a taste of the cream sherry for dessert. Just remember that the cream sherries tend to be high in alcohol; 18-20 percent, and that even the finos at 14-15 percent, are higher than most table wines. Also remember that dry fino-style sherries must be kept refrigerated after they are open, but a good cream sherry will keep at room temperature (and out of sunlight) for several weeks, if one rations the consumption.