

Spirited Wines—A Tutorial on Fortified Wines  
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Sherry, Porto, Madeira, and Marsala are important categories of wines different from table wines because they are fortified with grape alcohol, i.e. brandy. Fortification was undertaken in the first place to assure the stability and durability of base wine that might tend to fail otherwise, but it determines the style of the wines too. In general, these fortified wines have well defined, memorable aromas and flavors. They can be vigorous or delicate, bold or subtle but as a class they leave the taster with strong impressions. One drinks these wines before or after dinner, with light refreshments or dessert, but less often with a main course itself. These wines are often used as ingredients in recipes, too.

Sherry is the most complex category of fortified wines. Sherries are produced in a region of Andalusia in southern Spain primarily from the white-skinned palomino grape, grown in calcium-rich, clayey soils called albariza. Sherries can be classified rather simply into fino and oloroso, but each of these categories contains numerous components. Finos are wines created through the action on the ageing sherry of a film of yeast cells called flor. With the yeast nutrients replenished by the addition of young wine to sherries ageing in cask, the flor thrives and gradually changes and enhances the flavors of fino sherry over time, leading to the characteristic nuttiness of these wines. The style of fino called amontillado is wine whose flor mat diminishes in ageing. Amontillados are not necessarily sweeter than finos, but they are deeper amber in color and less delicate in flavor. Finos from the town of Sanlucar de Barrameda are called Manzanillas, and are particularly light and delicate.

Oloroso sherries are ones made of wines grown in heavier soils and ones heavily fortified with grape brandy. Strong fortification retards the development of flor yeasts, and olorosos develop through oxidization and wood contact. Olorosos can be sweet or dry, but all commercial cream sherries are based on oloroso wine. Cream sherries often include sweet wine made of the Pedro Ximenez grape as well as palomino.

Fino sherries, including Manzanilla, are excellent aperitif wines and they are excellent accompaniments to light meals and snacks too. Finos are delicious with consommés, savory shellfish and snails. Their nutty and green flavors, always slightly bitter, are appetizing and interesting. Serve them slightly chilled. Amontillados are versatile, good to drink by themselves before dinner. They are also very good with pastries flavored with nuts or nut pastes. Amontillados are

particularly popular in North America, perhaps because of their versatility.

Rich, dry Olorosos are fascinating as drinks by themselves, but sweet Olorosos and cream sherries as such come into their own with desserts. Their sweet flavors (often raisined) and syrupy textures cause them to be good companions to sticky pies and pastries and any really sweet desserts flavored with honey. That said, cream sherries are often enjoyed by individuals who simply enjoy sweet beverages.

Shoppers in North America usually buy sherries according to their preference for sweetness and familiarity of brand, drinking them without regard to their suitability for the foods they are eating. Reliable, inexpensive brands include Savory & James and Hartley & Gibson. The wines marketed under the Barbadillo brand are superior, and scarcely more expensive. The sherries of Emilio Lustau are in a class of their own, on the other hand. Lustau offers delicious, characteristic finos, amontillados, and olorosos as well as a large variety of wines from individual growers. These wines, called almacenistas, are of the full range of styles and are usually distinctive. None of them are truly expensive, given their quality. Ask your wine merchant to discuss these exciting wines when you're shopping for sherry.

While sherries are white (or brown) wines, port is mostly red wine grown in the upper Douro River valley in northern Portugal from a large number of grape varieties. Port vineyards are terraced plots on steep hillsides, embracing rather poor, stony soil. Port is almost always consumed after dinner, by itself or with ripe cheeses, dried fruits, and sweets. The most familiar dichotomy of port is ruby/tawny: ruby port is bright purple, fresh and sweet, while tawny is paler, drier and woodier. A more helpful classification of port, however, informing decision-making about its selection and use, is wood-aged port and bottle-aged port. The wood-aged wines include standard shippers' rubies and tawnies, age-designated tawnies, vintage character port, and late bottled vintage port. These wines are filtered before bottling, and are ready to drink then without further ageing. Ten and twenty year old tawnies (even older ones are available) are aged in oak casks the stated number of years, losing color and developing subtlety of aroma and flavor in the process. These wines are relatively light bodied and are quite delicious by themselves. Vintage character ports are blended from wines of designated vintages, aged about five years. These wines are designed to have the qualities of vintage port as such--rich flavor, deep color, and smooth texture. Late bottled vintage port is wine from a specific year and spend about twice as much time in wood (five years or so) as the vintage

wine itself. These wines, having the style and appeal of the vintage wine, give the taster insight to qualities great vintage portos will have at maturity and are very good values too. (They cost about one half as much as vintage wine in general.)

Bottle-aged ports are either crusted port, single quinta port, or vintage port. Crusted ports, much less seen in export markets now than formerly, are blends of wines of different years, bottled unfiltered when young. Single quinta wines are produced in specific vineyards in the Alto Douro, easternmost vineyards in the district. These wines are produced in years not designated vintage years generally, when harvests in the specific vineyards are particularly promising. Vintage ports are selected by shippers from the best lots of wine grown in the greatest years. Handled specially at every stage, these wines demand long ageing in bottle to reveal all their complexity, and are usually expensive. Great examples will improve in bottle during forty years or longer, but in some very good vintages are accessible when young too. (1992 is such a vintage.)

Buying port is not at all difficult. There are several port shippers-- producers-- whose products are eminently reliable. Graham's, Dow's, Taylor Fladgate, Fonseca, and Croft are shippers with impeccable standards. Other reliable shippers include Smith Woodhouse, Delaforce, and Ferreira. Ask your wine merchant to recommend wines among these or others he stocks for sale.

Madeira and Marsala are fortified wines that are similar in an important respect: each includes a component of cooked wine, wine concentrated by slow heating. The wines have similar roles as ingredients in brown sauces, and the drier or sweeter grades have similar uses as beverages too. Madeira is grown on the island of the same name in the South Atlantic Ocean. No Madeira is fully dry, but the drier grades can accompany light meals because of their high acidity as well as mildly sweet dishes. Madeiras are named for the primary grapes constituting them. These are, in a hierarchy of increasing sweetness, Sercial, Verdelho, Boal, and Malmsey. Another style, called Rainwater, usually is intermediate with respect to Sercial and Verdelho.

Madeira wines are the most ageable of all fortified wines. Wines well over one hundred years old are regularly in retail distribution, albeit at very high prices. With only ten years or so in cask, the various styles come into form: Sercial-- racy, dry, with a flavor of almond or hazelnut; Verdelho-- brooding, floral, smooth and acidic; Boal-- deep brown, nutty, and raisined; and Malmsey-- rich and super sweet, with marked acidity. The most readily available products available are cask-aged less than ten years and,

while affordable, are less interesting than the older wines. Look for products from Cossart, Blandy's, or Sandeman.

Marsala is grown near a village of the same name on the west coast of Sicily. The product has much shorter lineage than sherry, port, or Madeira, having been invented by a couple of English wine merchants in the nineteenth century. While changes are occurring in the industry to improve the wines, most commercial products available at present are wines without glamour or distinctive style. Identified merely as dry or sweet, wines from houses such as Lombardo or (better) Florio are brown in color, somewhat rich, winey, a little raisined, with woody flavors in the finish. These wines are good with soups or casseroles featuring winter squash, for examples. Zabaglione, a classic simple dessert, consists of one Tablespoon each of sweet Marsala and sugar, beaten with one egg yolk. Cooks keep Marsala on hand for preparing brown sauces for veal and pork, too.