



Felipe Gonzalez-Gordon, President

The Gonzalez Byass Story

This 175-year-old firm offers a delicious array of Sherries.

ELEANOR AND RAY HEALD

At the mention of Sherry, many Americans think sweet; yet the most popular and best selling wine of Gonzalez Byass is Tio Pepe Fino, a very dry, delicate yet pungent wine designed to accompany a wide range of foods. Making some of the best and most popular Sherries in the world, Gonzalez Byass celebrated its 175th anniversary in 2010. Located in southwest Spain's Jerez de la Frontera, known for its laid-back lifestyle and magnificent Andalusian horses, Gonzalez Byass expertly produces an extraordinary range of wines from bone dry to lusciously sweet.

BRIEF HISTORY

Gonzalez Byass was founded by 23-year-old Manuel Maria Gonzalez in 1835. He saw a growing demand for Sherry and a developing market in the United Kingdom. To make the wine, he sought the counsel of his uncle José Angel, who was particularly fond of the fino style (Sherry that develops a floating yeast called *flor*) which he named Tio Pepe (in Spanish *tio* is uncle and *pepe* is a familiar form of José). Today, Gonzalez Byass is still a family company owned by Gonzalez descendants.

Robert Blake Byass, an English importer of Tio Pepe, became a shareholder in the company and his name was added to the brand. Although no Byass descendent is associated with Gonzalez today, the brand name remains. "My family," says Gonzalez Byass President Felipe Gonzalez-Gordon, "is seeking to produce expressive wines, at the highest possible quality and at a reasonable price."

FINO OR OLOROSO?

Gonzalez Byass master blender Antonio Flores cited the five pillars of Sherry production: (1) chalky soils, (2) grape varieties, especially Palomino (95 percent), but also Pedro Ximenez and Moscatel, (3) oxidative aging, (4) biological aging and (5) the solera aging system.

In December, following fermentation and racking, the winemaker decides which path the young wine will follow — biological aging with *flor* or oxidative aging without *flor*. This is the important distinction between Sherry and other fortified wines. In Jerez de la Frontera, fermentation goes to completion, to dryness which means less than one gram per liter residual sugar remains after fermentation. "In order to decide which path the wine will take," explains Flores, "I look for young, fresh wines with citrus and floral notes to become finos that are stored in an environment encouraging *flor* yeast growth. This means controlling the temperature and humidity as well as fortifying the wine to 15.5 percent alcohol. Barrels of 600L capacity are filled with wine to 500L, leaving 100L of air in the barrel.

"After anaerobic fermentation is complete, the *flor* requires oxygen to survive, so it floats to the wine's surface in the barrel to get oxygen, forming a yeast blanket, that protects the wine and prevents oxidation. As the *flor* grows, it feeds on the nutrients in the wine (amino acids, residual sugars and glycerol including about 0.5 percent alcohol). The wine is pale gold with green reflections described as bottled Andalusian sunshine."

Flor converts some alcohol to acetaldehyde, the pungent aroma characteristic of fino Sherry. Citrus and floral aromas of



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the young wine have been transformed into those of baked bread, brioche and almonds. The *flor*, having consumed glycerol (glycerine), makes the wine dry and intense with a salty finish and refreshing bitter hints. The wine is stored in a 20,000 barrel solera (a four layer stack of barrels) from which about one-fourth the volume is removed each year. Most of that wine is bottled as Tio Pepe and the rest is the beginning of the next wine known as Viña AB Amontillado Seco.

Tio Pepe Extra Dry Fino, \$19, is bone dry with aromas of nuts and baked bread. It is crisp, brisk and refreshing with a long finish; a perfect aperitif to serve well chilled with salty tapas, oysters, thinly sliced Iberian ham, nuts, caviar, Parmesan and olives. As a first course, it pairs splendidly with scallops sautéed in herb butter or zarzuela (Spanish fish stew).

About ten percent of wine taken from fino solera then enters the Viña AB solera, where it is aged in contact with air to enable oxidation for a period of eight years. Alcohol increases to 16.5 percent and the *flor* dies, due to a lack of nutrients and higher alcohol. So Viña AB is a Sherry that has undergone both biological and oxidative aging. It becomes amber in color and takes on notes of oak, almonds and hazelnuts. **Viña AB Amontillado Seco, \$20**, is dry, structured, savory and long on the palate with thirst-quenching

bitter notes. Oak notes are acquired from eight years aging in seasoned American oak barrels. Serve slightly chilled with toasted hazelnuts, ham, roast chicken and Manchego cheese.

Some of the Viña AB Sherry becomes the foundation of **Del Duque Amontillado Muy Viejo, \$49/375mL**. A portion of Viña AB enters the Del Duque solera to complete 30 years of oxidative aging and attains 21.5 percent alcohol. Further oxidation yields more depthful reddish-amber color, is dry on the palate with hints of cedar, leather and walnuts. It's intense, structured, elegant and smooth. This is the third stage in the life of Tio Pepe. Match it with roast beef, casseroles, roast quail and mature cheeses.

CONTINUING THE CYCLE

After fermentation, wines showing the best structure and aromas enter a solera for eight years to become **Alfonso Dry Oloroso, \$20**, fortified to 18 percent alcohol and allowed to oxidize. The wine develops a mahogany color, vanilla notes from the oak, spice aromas and nutty flavors. Even though the wine is dry, the concentration of glycerol gives a broad palate impression. Try it with light cheeses, nuts and paté.

Apostoles Palo Cortado, \$49/375mL, is a blend of Palomino and Pedro Ximenez grapes, each fermented separately, then

blended and aged a total of 30 years to produce a Very Old Palo Cortado style Sherry, deep amber in color with aromas of figs, raisins and other dried fruits, smooth caramel flavors and sweet finish from the inclusion of Pedro Ximenez. Pair with dried fruits, nuts, spicy sausage and prosciutto.

Solera 1847 Sweet Oloroso Cream, \$20, is a blend of Palomino and Pedro Ximenez aged eight years to yield a residual sugar of 13 percent, a reddish-brown color, notes of dried fruits and concentrated sweetness; a complement to soft cheeses, figs and Spanish flan. **Matusalem Oloroso Dulce Muy Viejo, \$49/375mL**, is the Solera 1847 after 22 years of additional barrel aging. It has similar sweetness, dark mahogany color with dried fruits, cinnamon, spice and old oak. Try with mature cheeses, cakes and rich desserts.

Nectar Pedro Ximenez, \$20, is very sweet without being cloying at 37 percent residual sweetness and surprisingly low in alcohol at 15.5 percent. Its color is best described as ebony with caramel, molasses, dried fruits, figs, nuts and spice on the palate. Chilled Nectar is frequently paired with chocolate, poured over ice cream or dense cakes. **Noe Pedro Ximenez Muy Viejo, \$49/375mL**, is Nectar with a total of 30 years aging, adding additional concentration and complexities; a very old and rare dessert in a glass. ☞