



‘Each La Bota
selection is a jewel;
a way of relishing the
inheritance hidden in
the bodegas of Jerez’

– Josep Roca, El Celler de Can Roca

ONE, TWO, THREE, FLOR

They go by such names as no9 and no20 but the La Bota limited Sherry bottlings are anything but simple. They're five-star, says **MAGGIE ROSEN**

Some people love a particular wine so much, they will go to extremes to find it. Others want to help create it themselves. This is what happened when a group of Sherry-mad friends – consumers and wine professionals – knowing that the best Jerez has to offer is more than the sum of its parts, decided to find the very best parts, then blend and bottle them themselves.

Their story started in 2005. Always on the lookout for something interesting to taste, the friends happened upon some butts of unsold Amontillado at Bodega Sánchez Ayala in Sanlúcar de Barrameda that they couldn't pass up. (Bodegas often have butts of Sherry not yet ready for commercial use, or whose small volume makes it commercially unviable.) Six hundred bottles later, the group – until then an informal bunch of 40 Sherry lovers from around the world, including Eduardo Ojeda, technical director of Grupo Estévez (owner of Bodega Valdespino and La Guita Sherry) – had acquired the first in what has become an ongoing series of limited bottlings dubbed the 'La Bota de...' project.

'When we started this crazy adventure, we didn't have a goal other than to enjoy ourselves,' says Dr Jesús Barquín, director of the University of Granada's criminology division and a wine writer. 'All we knew was that there's a lot of amazing, high quality wine that never makes it to the public. We think it deserves to be shared.'

They formed a company called Equipo Navazos to manage the administrative and logistical aspects of bottling, labelling

and distribution. Fans have since spread from the initial band of friends to include a few top wine merchants and restaurants, but the wines are still hand sold.

Numbers game

The Sherries are drawn from several bodegas, and represent a variety of styles – from Manzanillas and Finos to Palo Cortados, Olorosos, Pedro Ximénezes, Creams and even a brandy (see box, p84). To date there are 27 bottlings – 24 numbered Sherries (some still unreleased), and three un-numbered special editions: vintage wines, not Sherries, made from scratch rather than selected from barrels. One is Casa del Inca, a sun-shrivelled, unfortified Pedro Ximénez blend of the 2005, 2006 and 2008 vintages. It is made by Pérez Barquero in Montilla-Moriles exclusively for Equipo member and distributor Ramón Coalla

The other wines, the 2008 and 2009 Navazos-Niepoort – table wines from the Palomino grape – are a joint venture with Dirk Niepoort of Portugal's Douro Valley. Unsurprisingly, he has taken things in a whole new direction, coaxing into this low-sugar, low-acid Sherry variety an element he feels is under-represented. 'Champagne and Jerez have similarly great terroirs based on chalk, but with different problems,' he says. 'Champagne is too cold, and Jerez too warm. In Champagne they solve this with bubbles and adding sugar. In Sherry, it's done through the flor (a benevolent yeast that forms on the surface of the maturing wine) which is a fantastic catalyst for the

FOR THE LUCKY FEW

If you've ever tasted Fino sherry straight from the cask, loved the intense flor taste, and fantasised about keeping your own butt, González Byass has come up with the next best thing. Tio Pepe En Rama is bottled not from the cask but from the blending vat used to homogenise the wine from the five or six soleras that fuel the brand. (A solera is the vessel used to store wine of various vintages that will be used to 'top up' new sherries, to achieve greater consistency.) The wine is not filtered, so if you keep your bottle longer than the recommended 10 weeks, flor may regrow. Only 175 cases were bottled – Wine Society members may already have tasted it, otherwise just a few London restaurants stocked it. And yes – that's in the past tense. By the time you read this it will be over. En Rama was a one-off bottling for González Byass's 175th anniversary; but they might do it again in 25 years. If not, you'll just have to go to Jerez...

chalk.' Niepoort had dreamed of taking advantage of the calcareous albariza soils to make a table wine from Palomino grapes: these wines are fermented quickly and naturally in wood (with no cultured yeasts) and kept for five months on flor, then bottled as soon as possible.

'I was afraid the wine would taste good for the first three weeks and then



Above: La Bota Sherries are as distinctive in taste as they are in packaging

oxidise,' Niepoort admitted. 'But it seems to get better and more complex as it ages.' He compares its maturation and taste profile with Savennières, but finer and lighter; neither quite like a Jurançon, nor really a Sherry, but still reminiscent of it. 'This is the advantage of Palomino being an otherwise useless grape,' he said. 'It really is an expression of the terroir.'

Once the bottles for each La Bota release are spoken for, there are no more. So if a similar style is drawn from the same bodega, it will be from a different solera and have a different bottling number. The maximum production is about 4,500 bottles of standard size, yet No5, La Bota de Amontillado NPI yielded just 200 375ml bottles.

'Each La Bota selection is a jewel; a way of relishing the inheritance hidden in the bodegas of Jerez,' says Josep Roca, co-owner of El Celler de Can Roca, a Michelin three-star restaurant in Girona, Spain, and a member of the group. 'It's a luxury to have access to such amazing wines, which show the world something so exceptional and unique.' His favourite is No10, La Bota de Manzanilla Pasada from Hijos de Rainera Pérez Marín in Sanlúcar de Barrameda – the bodega that makes La Guita. 'It has the most perfect balance of power, elegance, dryness and harmony I've ever tasted in a white wine.'

Roca calls the friends behind the La Bota project 'romantics, who, thanks to their knowledge are the best ambassadors Jerez has had in the last 50 years'.

Its founders are adamant that the La Bota project is not elitist, and while none have yet quit their day jobs, they insist it must continue to be sustainable and self-funding, which means attracting a wider audience. 'Right now these Sherries are for the selective, the curious,' said Roca. 'It's about showing off the grandeur of Jerez by putting it in a bottle.' **D**

Maggie Rosen is a freelance wine writer

Margaret Rand enjoys 20:20 vision...

It's not often I write: 'One of the finest wines I've ever tasted'. But I did just that for La Bota de Manzanilla Pasada, no20 in the series of Sherry bottlings released by Equipo Navazos.

Is it the very light filtration or total lack of filtration that makes this and the Equipos Navazos's other wines so extraordinary? It's simple, says Jesús Barquín, one of the founders: 'If we had filtered this,' he says describing another Sherry, 'we would have lost half the wine.' There are a great many excellent commercial Sherry brands, but Barquín says they are 'like going to Montrachet and saying, "This has too much character; let's strip it out to make it acceptable"'. The difference between La Bota Sherries and any standard brands you've tasted is that big.

This character shows most strongly in the Finos and Manzanillas. The flavours are wild, extreme: more in common with single malt Scotch than with wine. The Amontillados, Palo Cortados, the Oloroso, the Cream and the three PXs they have bottled are superb, in a familiar mould but with another dimension added. But the Finos and Manzanillas are revelatory.

MAGIC NUMBERS: MY TOP 10

For the 'drink by' dates I am indebted to Barquín. He reckons the Manzanillas and Finos improve for at least a year, maybe five. He likes mature wines but admits others may prefer them before they are affected by bottle age.

No 9, La Bota de Amontillado

★★★★★ (20/20)

The second release of Equipo Navazos's first wine. It started as a Manzanilla, then had 25 years of oxidative ageing without flor. For 22 years it was not topped up. Amazing toast and cream notes. Searing, searching, austere, vibrant and complex. Detailed, very long and concentrated. Now–2030.

£45* (see below for UK stockists)

No 17, La Bota de Palo Cortado, Bota Punta

★★★★★ (20)

Austere, classic nose; palate serious and concentrated with toasted nuts. (Sorry: it's not my job for words to fail me, but I've kept repeating 'so long, so amazing, so complex'.) Now–2020. £90 (375ml)

No 19, La Bota de Cream

★★★★★ (20)

Not very sweet, this is a blend of

probably 25% Oloroso and the rest Pedro Ximénez, aged together for many years. Peaty, complex, austere and quite extraordinary. Now–2030. £90 (375ml)

No 20, La Bota de Manzanilla Pasada, Bota Punta

★★★★★ (20)

Gamey, buttery olive nose; intense, concentrated, invigorating, fresh palate. Hugely complex, with a wonderful texture. One of the finest wines I've ever tasted. The UK will get about 60 bottles of this. Now–2025. £50 (500ml)

No 18, La Bota de Fino

★★★★★ (19.5)

Quite dark in colour for a Fino. An extraordinary nose of burnt toffee, green olives and black chocolate on a silky palate. Now–2018. £25

No 16, La Bota de Manzanilla

★★★★★ (19)

Green olive and brine nose; silky and uncompromising palate, austere and soft at the same time. Burnt notes, olives, nuts, meat, smoked fish... A very long, earthy finish. Now–2015. £25

No 10, La Bota de Manzanilla Pasada

★★★★★ (19)

A savoury, smoky nose, almost feral and gamey. Fresh palate of olives, smoked fish, marinated anchovies. This was bottled in January 2008. Now–2018. £35

No 21, La Bota de Palo Cortado

★★★★★ (19)

This started life as a Fino. Weird, earthy, green olive nose. Austere and deep, very pure, deep and rich, with huge length. Now–2025. £50

No 11, La Bota de PX

★★★★★ (19)

Finesse with a lot of alcohol. Elegant, and immensely thick and rich. Powerful, but not obviously so. Savoury and nutty, with huge length. Now–2030. £36

No 8, La Bota de Manzanilla

★★★★★ (18.5)

A soft nose of smoked fish, and an austere palate, softer than no. 16, just as silky. This was bottled in October 2007. Now–2014. £20

**The following UK merchants may stock one or all of the above Sherries: Gau, HgD, Hgt, L&W, P&S, Smp, The.*

For full details of stockist codes, see p154

Margaret Rand was named the 2009 Louis Roederer Feature Writer of the Year for her articles in Decanter