

(review)



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Equipo Navazos La Bota Sherries: a tasting

by Peter Liem

In a region as traditional and as steeped in history as the Sherry country is, it might come as a pleasant surprise to find anything original. Yet with its extraordinary series of limited-release bottlings selected from some of the region's finest soleras, some of which have lain untouched for many years, Equipo Navazos has indeed succeeded in creating something new, drawing upon the vast resources of Jerez tradition while reinterpreting these classic wines through the lens of contemporary erudition and experience.

Equipo Navazos is the brainchild of Jesús Barquín, renowned Sherry expert and professor of criminology at the University of Granada, and Eduardo Ojeda, technical director of Grupo Estevez, the group that owns, among others, the bodegas of Valdespino and La Guita. When I asked Ojeda about the origins of Equipo Navazos, he said with a laugh, "We wanted to bottle wines for us, wines that we wanted to drink ourselves."

The story begins in December 2005, when Barquín and Ojeda found an old solera of Amontillado in the bodegas of Sánchez Ayala that had not been drawn from in two decades. On tasting it, they wanted some of this extraordinary wine for themselves, but of course it was not being commercialized. They arranged to purchase the equivalent of one barrel (600 bottles), tasting through the entire solera to select wines from only the finest butts, and they contacted a

number of wine connoisseurs from around the world to invest in the project. The result was La Bota de Amontillado ("The Cask of Amontillado," with a nod to Edgar Allan Poe's chilling 1846 short story of the same name), and the wine was distributed among these initial members of what essentially became a private wine club.

Privy to many of the region's hidden treasures, the duo continued to unearth further offerings: La Bota de Fino from Valdespino, La Bota de Pedro Ximénez from Pérez Barquero, and La Bota de Manzanilla from Sánchez Ayala. Like the original Amontillado, each of these was not only from an already remarkable solera but was also a rigorous selection of the finest barrels within it.

While the first several wines were available exclusively to the original group members, later editions became commercially available as demand for



these unique wines began to grow. At the time of writing, there are 21 wines in the series. Each release is numbered in sequence, with the original La Bota de Amontillado being number one, though the particular numbers have no significance other than being the order in which the wines were bottled. In addition, each wine carries the date of the *saca* (the withdrawal from cask), allowing the consumer to know how long the wine has aged in bottle. In certain instances, this permits a comparison of different editions of the same solera with varying degrees of bottle age—for example, numbers 16, 8, and 4 are different bottlings of a Manzanilla solera of Bodegas Miguel Sánchez Ayala, composed exclusively of wines from the Pago Balbaína. (For more on the historically validated Sherry vineyards, see Jesús Barquín, “Terroir in Two Senses and None: Vineyards and Crus in the Land of the

Bodegas,” *WFW* 25, pp.88–95.) Similarly, numbers 18, 15, 7, and 2 are all examples of Fino from Macharnudo Alto drawn from the same solera at Bodegas Valdespino. Naturally, all of the wines are bottled in very limited quantities, averaging around 2,500 bottles of each of the biologically-aged wines (Finos and Manzanillas) and fewer than 1,000 bottles of each edition of the other styles. The largest bottling to date has been the No. 15 Manzanilla, with 4,400 bottles; the smallest was the No. 5 Amontillado, of which just 200 half-bottles (375ml) were produced.

Character formation

The superlative quality and individuality of La Bota Sherries is due in no small part to the exceptional experience, knowledge, and skill of the two partners, yet they prefer to give credit to the bodegas themselves and to the cellar masters who tended

these individual soleras over the years. “We want to be in the background as much as possible,” says Barquín. There is no mention of the partners’ names on either the wine labels or the Equipo Navazos website—and in fact, when talking about the project, Barquín and Ojeda insist that Equipo Navazos includes the 30 to 40 initial members who helped make the project possible.

Barquín and Ojeda, however, are the two who are responsible for selecting the wines. In choosing a particular wine, they are looking for a solera that has a distinctive character—which is created not only by the base material used to replenish it and by the way that the barrels have been handled over the years, but also by the geographical location of the bodega, which determines the level of activity in the *flor*. As Barquín says, “In Jerez, terroir has two meanings. One is the soil, but one is the bodega as well.” (See also Jesús Barquín, “Space



Image courtesy of Equipo Navazos

and Time: The Form and Function of the Great Sherry Bodegas," *WFW* 7, pp.56–61.)

In addition, they seek complete freedom in making their selections, choosing only the barrels that they want and blending them according to their precise specifications. Since most of the bottlings come from soleras that contain very old and rare wines, it's not possible to do this at every bodega. "We work only with bodegas that we know very well and that we are friends with," says Ojeda. "We have to be very comfortable in selecting the wines that we like."

In the selection itself, individuality is a prized asset. "The solera system is designed to promote consistency, but each barrel has its own character," says Ojeda. "Wines that seem similar in their youth can develop in completely different ways." When I tasted different barrels of the La Guita Manzanilla solera with Ojeda in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, for example, I found surprisingly wide variations between the wines in different casks, even when comparing those in the same *criadera* or within the solera itself. Some are more lemony and brisk; some show more pronounced acetaldehyde; others have less *flor* character and are moving toward Manzanilla Pasada. For Ojeda and Barquín, these differences are very valuable, and butts that show an extraordinary character will be selected to contribute to a blend or, in some instances, even be bottled unblended. "We're working to emphasize the differences in character rather than trying to standardize a product," says Barquín.

As well as the unique nature of their blends, another major factor that makes La Bota Sherries distinctive is the fact that they see little or no filtration, in contrast to the heavy fining and filtering that the majority of Sherries receive today. This results in a dramatically different character in the bottle and certainly contributes to the complexity, intensity, and suavity of texture found in these wines.

Regardless of the bodega from which it is sourced, a La Bota wine is

unusually assertive in flavor, reflecting its provenance from a very old solera, yet it doesn't rely on concentration alone, combining it with a tremendous sense of refinement, detail, and finesse. While every La Bota release is indisputably among the very finest Sherries available on the market, the biologically aged wines are the ones that are the most radically different from other wines of their type, their deep colors and richly complex aromas often worlds apart from what we think of as Fino or Manzanilla today.

In January 2010, I tasted the following wines in London with Jesús Barquín. This tasting represented a nearly complete history of Equipo Navazos from its inception to the present day—excepting only the original No. 1 Amontillado, the No. 12 Pedro Ximénez, and the No. 13 Brandy de Jerez—and was the most comprehensive tasting of these wines held so far. It is worth noting that many of the wines—especially the Finos and Manzanillas—were tasted not only from Riedel Chianti/Riesling glasses but also from Riedel Sommelier Montrachet glasses, Barquín insisting that such a wide bowl often allows a fuller appreciation of the bouquet. Similarly, his recommended serving temperature is much closer to that for top white Burgundy than to the customary chilly prescription. Another unconventional aspect relating to the storage of these wines is that they benefit from bottle age and need not be consumed shortly after opening.

The wines appear here not in numerical order but in the order in which we tasted them.

2008 Navazos-Niepoort Vino Blanco

In addition to its Sherries, Equipo Navazos has teamed up with Dirk Niepoort to produce a white table wine, of which the 2008 is the first release. Made entirely of Palomino from a renowned Sherry vineyard, it was fermented with wild yeasts in 30–40-year-old Sherry casks and aged under a layer for *flor* for five months. Its aromas are creamy and waxy, wound up in a bright core of silky, subtle fruit that finishes with sleek and salty length. Curiously, it seems to have put on a little more weight over the year following its release, its flavors mellowing and integrating, and while I wouldn't necessarily hold it further, I think that it's benefited from

a few months of bottle aging. "Our main worry was that the wine would fade very quickly," says Barquín. "We didn't know if it would last more than six months. But it's evolved very well." It's a highly individual and keenly instructive wine, and ultimately I feel that it helps me understand Sherry better, not least in harking back to the original style of these wines, which was unfortified.

La Bota de Manzanilla No. 8 Las Cañas

(saca of October 2007)

This comes from a solera of M Sánchez Ayala in Sanlúcar, made exclusively from two parcels in the Pago Balbaina. More than two years after bottling, it's developed a round, burnished richness, its flavors of toffee, salted cashews, and almond butter contrasted by tangy, mineral salinity. Compared to the more recently bottled No. 16, it feels much more mellow and velvety at this stage, though it retains Manzanilla's distinctively salty pungency.

La Bota de Manzanilla No. 4 Las Cañas

(saca of January 2007)

The predecessor to No. 8, made from the same solera, this feels mature in its dark, concentrated notes of brown butter, walnut skins, and menthol. It's intensely savory, its umami-like flavors turning exotic and East Asian in tone, and its pronounced oxidation amplifies its sense of power and breadth.

La Bota de Manzanilla No. 16

(saca of January 2009)

This is from the same solera as No. 4 and No. 8, though it no longer says Las Cañas on the label. In its profound complexity, completeness, and length, it promises to surpass either of the previous editions, unfolding on the palate with a pungent, fiery energy and kaleidoscopic detail. The contrast between the sweetness of fruit, saltiness of minerality, and savoriness of the *flor* creates a lively and perfectly balanced tension.

La Bota de Fino No. 18 Macharnudo Alto

(saca of December 2009)

From a very old solera of Valdespino, this is racy and energetic, its deftly balanced flavors showing complexity while still feeling tightly wound. There's a slight butteriness—which Barquín says is from autolysis due to the age of the solera—persisting throughout the long and salty finish. This should become even more complex with time, adding a silky finesse to the power and intensity demonstrated by previous editions such as No. 7 and No. 2.

La Bota de Fino No. 15 Macharnudo Alto

(saca of June 2008)

Of the four Macharnudo Finos released so far, this is the most subtle and discreet, though like the others, it exhibits a dark, salty pungency. It builds in quiet and

unhurried concentration on the palate, feeling feral in its intensity and nuanced in its layers of flavor. This feels as if it still has room to grow with further aging, and while it seems as if its flavors will move in the savory direction of the No. 7 and No. 2, I don't think it will ever be as overtly muscular.

La Bota de Fino No. 7 Macharnudo Alto

(saca of April 2007)

This has continued to gain in body over the two years since it was released, and today it asserts itself with authoritative presence on the palate, marked by a powerful salinity and warm, visceral flavors of almond and browned butter. It's thrilling for its individuality, and its patinated richness seems to have little in common with what we call Fino today, feeling old-fashioned to the point of anachronism.

La Bota de Fino No. 2 Macharnudo Alto

(saca of June 2006)

As the Finos from this single-vineyard solera age in bottle, they seem to become darker in flavor and more concentrated. After three and a half years, this one is so intense and gripping that it requires tasting in very small sips. It's dense and savory, with a powerfully heady and complex fragrance, exploding on the palate with savage notes of meat broth and roasted game that stand in sharp contrast to the silky texture and elegantly refined build. Utterly original wine.

La Bota de Manzanilla Pasada No. 10

(saca of January 2008)

This singular wine is from an old solera that was not drawn from for more than 20 years and was only sparsely refreshed to prevent it becoming an Amontillado. It's marked by a tangy salinity that identifies it as Manzanilla, and though it's unusually rich in body, it also maintains a marvelous clarity, its softly oxidative notes of salted caramel, butter cookie, and dried apple feeling expansive and highly detailed. It evolves a great deal in the glass, gaining even more complexity while remaining impeccably focused and precise, so that even two years after bottling, it retains a fresh, lively vigor.

La Bota de Manzanilla Pasada No. 20 Bota Punta

(cask sample)

This is drawn from the same solera as No. 10, housed in the cellars of La Guita, but this edition is even more unusual: It comes from a single barrel that was topped up not with *criadera* wine but, instead, with wine from other butts in the solera. This has given it an unbelievable resonance and intensity of flavor; yet for all of its concentration, it hardly seems to have any weight at all. It hints at oxidative, Amontillado-like complexity without the torrefaction, unfolding on the palate with crystalline clarity and pungent, evocative aromas that seem never to end.

Even in a lineup of extraordinary wines, this stands out for its striking personality.

La Bota de Amontillado No. 9

(saca of October 2007)

Barquín describes this as "a Manzanilla from Sanchez Ayala 25 years on," and indeed its briny salinity and knife-like focus remind you that it originates from Sanlúcar. It's intensely rich at the same time, its aromas of roasted nuts, marzipan, and fresh caramel feeling heady and intense. The average age of the wines here is about 30 years, giving this a breathtaking finesse and complexity, and the perfume on the finish seems to envelop your entire body in its expansive presence.

La Bota de Palo Cortado No. 21

(cask sample)

It's not easy to find wines today with true Palo Cortado character, and tasting an example like this one can be a revelation to some. Made from wines averaging 25 years of age, this combines the rounded, butter-caramel aromas of oxidative wine with a hint of the edgy raciness imparted by *flor* vinification, feeling voluptuously creamy and brightly citrusy at the same time. It's superbly balanced and extremely long, finishing with aristocratic refinement and grace.

La Bota de Palo Cortado No. 17 Bota Punta

(saca of January 2009)

This is not only an authentic Palo Cortado, but also a *bota punta*, meaning that it comes from a single barrel, topped up with wine from other butts in the solera rather than from the *criaderas*. It's a wine of pleasing contradictions: headily fragrant yet elegantly discreet; intensely complex while also feeling ethereal and nearly weightless. The subtly textured, multidimensional finish seems to go on forever, thriving on finesse rather than on power.

La Bota de Palo Cortado No. 6 Bota Punta

(saca of April 2007)

Like No. 17, this is a *bota punta*, yet it's from a completely different bodega. This is from a solera of M Gil Luque, whereas the later edition is from that of Rey Fernando de Castilla. This is creamy and rich, showing a bold, darkly toned fragrance. It obviously contains very old wines, as evidenced by its nutty, alluringly oxidative array of aromas, and its finish is nearly Oloroso-like in its depth and scale.

La Bota de Amontillado No. 5 NPI

(saca of January 2007)

This is from the oldest barrel in the cellar of M Sánchez Ayala, believed to contain wines averaging nearly 100 years of age. It is incredibly concentrated, like a reduction of Sherry, demanding and almost aggressive in its fiery intensity. The dense, darkly savory flavors seem straight out of a Chinese apothecary, yet they're kept buoyant by a

steely backbone of oxidation that seems to knit all of the components together seamlessly. This is a wine to savor slowly in very small amounts.

La Bota de Oloroso No. 14 Bota NO

(saca of June 2008)

From a very old Valdespino solera that was already renowned in the late 19th century as being one of the house's finest, this is drawn from a single cask marked "NO," meaning that it was not to be touched due to its extraordinary quality. The expansively fragrant flavors are so complex that they become difficult to describe, hinting at such things as caramel, leather, walnuts, dried fruit, aniseed... It's estimated at an average age of 50 years (though obviously portions of it are much, much older), combining a creaminess and generosity of texture with the steely intensity of old wines and feeling practically endless on the crystalline and exquisitely detailed finish. This is a monumental wine, its kaleidoscopic complexity, razor-like balance, and gripping depth of character setting it apart from any other Oloroso commercially available today. Few wines, of any sort, are as profoundly moving as this one.

La Bota de Viejo Cream No. 19 Bota NO

(saca of September 2009)

Cream Sherry is rarely taken seriously by connoisseurs, but this is no ordinary cream. From a Valdespino solera that has blended top-quality Oloroso and Pedro Ximénez since its inception more than a century ago, this is expressive and refined, balancing rich flavors of black walnut and dried plums with a golden raisin sweetness. It feels surprisingly taut and lively for such an old and complex wine, showing a superbly integrated harmony and elegantly fragrant length.

La Bota de Pedro Ximénez No. 11 Jerez

(saca of January 2008)

A pure Pedro Ximénez from Jerez, this was made in an oxidative style, giving it deep, tar-like notes of toffee, walnuts, licorice, and blackcurrant jam. It is dense and viscous, showing a heady richness, yet where many versions feel heavy or cloying, this maintains an admirable harmony and clarity of flavor, combining power with finesse.

La Bota de Pedro Ximénez No. 3 De Rojas Montilla

(saca of October 2006)

In contrast with the No. 11 from Jerez, this is remarkably low in alcohol (11%), and despite being of older average age, it's less oxidative, because this solera at Bodegas Pérez Barquero was kept fully topped up. It veers toward honeyed, fig-like flavors rather than being intensely raisiny, and even with its dense concentration and thickly velvety texture, it still feels lively and focused, showing a deft balance.