

# CLASSIC WINE

*A conversation between Julian Jeffs and Richard Mayson, February 2015. Two big names in wine writing take time out to discuss the history, politics and culture of fortified wine, wine writing and the future of wine from the Iberian peninsula. Julian Jeffs, whose landmark book, Sherry, is now in its sixth edition (Infinite Ideas, June 2016) and Richard Mayson, author of Port and the Douro (Infinite Ideas, 2013, 2016) and Madeira: the islands and their wines, (Infinite Ideas, 2015, 2016), started with the history of their books and the way wine writing has changed since the first edition of Sherry was published 54 years ago.*

**RM:** What took you to Jerez in the first place?

**JJ:** I was reading for the bar in 1956. It was damn cold in England and I thought I'd go somewhere nicer so I went to Alicante, which has a very agreeable winter temperature.

My money was running out and I got introductions from my father's wine merchants in Birmingham to three of the sherry shippers. So I went from Alicante, to Cadiz, finally making it to Jerez. In 1956 Alicante failed to live up to its reputation for being warm and for much of my stay the temperature was only 4 degrees but the sun shone nearly all the time, so I sat out in it reading my law text books. I went from Alicante to Cadiz in a dirty, tossing tramp steamer by way of Melilla and Ceuta.

My first introduction was to González Byass, who took me for a tourist. I was rather miffed but we became great friends and he took me to Wisdom & Warter, where I met Jaime González who also became a close friend. After

this I went to Williams and Humbert, and met Don Guido, their managing director and one of the great figures in the sherry trade. I told him that I adored Jerez and would really like to stay for a long time. We hit it off immediately and after a lot of discussion he offered me a job as his English assistant, much to the annoyance of my father who felt that I was not behaving like a respectable law student. I read everything that had been written on the subject of sherry in both Spanish and English and from my own observations I could see that the whole lot was wrong.

**RM:** That's interesting because you mention in the introduction to your new edition of *Sherry* that Henry Vizatelly's *Facts about sherry*, published in 1886, was one of the best descriptions of sherry written.

**JJ:** Henry Vizatelly's book had been written about three quarters a century before and a lot had happened since then. Bodegas had come and gone. There was nothing really up to date to read on the subject. The use of sugar to sweeten the wine was never mentioned, and it has now become illegal. That was one of the many basic facts that I felt was wrong with all the accounts. This also applies to the defects which the wine was subject to, which I wrote a lot about in my first edition, and very little in the current one as they no longer happen.

**RM:** Also, a great deal more has been written about wine since then, which makes it much easier to read around subjects today.

**JJ:** Writing the first edition of *Sherry* was very difficult. I had to read books in many different languages to understand the process.

I tried to give a complete picture and found over the years that the appearance of bodegas in 1956 was much the same as it had been in Vizatelly's time, and so was the work done in them. But they were changing very rapidly and two of the biggest changes happened when I was there.

The rise of a group of families later described in someone else's book as the 'sherry nobility'. They all knew each other and they'd all been in the trade for years. Many were of English, Irish or Scottish origin. In those days people with English names were running many of the bodegas. I went round with all the top people



for eight or nine months and learnt an awful lot from them, and after a month or two I realised that I was going to write a book and I got on with it.

**RM:** Picking up the sixth edition of your book does make me want to reach for a glass of *fino* straight away. I think it's a great pleasure to be able to have a book and a glass of wine at the same time and drink what you're reading about.

One of the most wonderful things about the sherry region is that it's one of the places in the world that most lives, drinks and breathes its own wine as part of the day to day life. Those tapas bars at Sanlúcar are so much part of the local culture.

**JJ:** ... with local people in them.

**RM:** ... drinking their own wine.



**RM:** When I first went to Jerez on the Vintner's scholarship in 1987 I was given my first thorough introduction to sherry. I was taken on a 'sherry safari' by Rafael Balao of Lustau in late May. We drove through the vineyards with a bottle of *fino* sherry, finally ending up in the most wonderful tapas bars all around the sherry region. It was a perfect introduction to the drink.

It's interesting because Julian and I each represent two great fortified wines, sherry and port, as well as madeira. But the whole culture of sherry and the way of life is so different from Oporto, which is much more formal. You've been to Oporto many a time, and in fact I remember you telling me that you once drove your Bentley to the Douro and got it stuck in the drive at Quinta la Rosa.

**JJ:** Yes. I got out again, but it was a bit hairy!

**RM:** Driving a Bentley on those corkscrew roads in the Douro would be quite an experience today let alone all those years ago! But Oporto is a much more formal place, unlike the sherry towns, nobody dances in the streets and claps their hands there. It's not nearly as fun-loving or spontaneous.

**JJ:** I drove from Jerez to Oporto once, and I was wearing the clothes one wore in Jerez at that time, which was a bush shirt and tatty cotton trousers, and I was in the bar of the British Club where I met an old man from Smithwood

House. He looked at me and said, 'take a tip from me, an older man, and don't go up the Douro dressed like that; the natives still respect us, you know!' Well I did go up the Douro dressed like that. It was wonderfully old-fashioned, almost nineteenth century, in Oporto at that time, which it certainly wasn't in Jerez.

**RM:** But port is, in a sense, a more formal drink and so perhaps Oporto reflects that. Sherry, though one of my favourite drinks, is a more casual drink.

**JJ:** Yes, it is and I think none the worse for that. Tell us about how you got involved with port Richard.

**RM:** I came to wine and particularly to port, in my gap year in 1980 through a contact of my father's in the textile business. I was introduced to Jorge Ferreira of the eponymous firm, Ferreira, and he invited me to lunch. All the port bodegas have rather grand north-facing dining rooms overlooking the river Douro. We sat there drinking a lot of good tawny port and, by the end of the afternoon I remember deciding that this is something I would like to get more involved in. Part of my geography degree at the University of Sheffield was a dissertation, which could be done on any subject you liked. In those days there was even a grant available for it, which provided enough money for a flight out to Portugal. Using the contacts I'd made through the port trade I spent a wonderful month in the Douro digging holes in the ground and measuring soil temperatures, ostensibly to do my dissertation on the microclimate of Douro vineyards, which was totally inconclusive!

While there I drank plenty of port (and perhaps even more beer) while marvelling at the fantastic landscape, and probably the most dramatic wine region of its size anywhere in the world; marvelling also at the social structure of the region, which was still, even in 1982, still very much stuck in the nineteenth century. Portugal had gone through a revolution in 1974/5, but rural Portugal hadn't changed very much and I found this fascinating. On the port *quinta* where I stayed, there was still a strict hierarchy of who ate where and when at lunchtime, so that the labourers sat at a stone table in the shade outside and that the managers sat inside and we had a

dining room with a linen-covered table.

**RM:** Julian, you started writing *Sherry* during a similarly formative period in your life. How do you think that wine writing has changed in the last fifty years?

**JJ:** Wine writing has become enormously more professional. After Vizetelly, wine books were mostly written by gentlemen like the late H. Warner Allen, who used to write well-rounded prose for classical readers. André Simon's later books were written for the popular market and the first one that went into a certain degree of technicality and started a new range of wine-writing was my own, in 1961.

**RM:** ... which was the start of the much respected Faber & Faber series of books on wine?

**JJ:** Yes, after that I developed it into the Faber series but in those days I was by profession a barrister and I had to take a bit of time off to do the wine writing. Other people came along and applied themselves very diligently and had an enormous range of learning on wine. Jancis Robinson is one of the best of the lot, and Hugh Johnson.

**RM:** ... and he came up with *The World Atlas of Wine*, which is a very great formula.

**JJ:** It was a wonderful idea.

**RM:** So the Faber series was quite a landmark series when it started. Which books came along after yours on sherry?

**JJ:** David Peppercorn wrote a marvellous book about Bordeaux, and then there was the book by John Livingstone-Learmonth on the Rhone. Anthony Hanson on Burgundy was another real breakthrough.

**RM:** Yes, Hanson's Burgundy was a fundamental book when I joined the wine trade in the mid-1980s. Do you think these books themselves had an influence on the trade given that they were being quite honest: you talk about the use of sugar in sherry and I talk about elderberry in port. These books gave an honest appraisal of what was happening in the wine trade at the time, especially in the '60s and '70s. Do you think those books had an influence in tidying things up?

**JJ:** I think they did because many members of

the trade realised that they couldn't get away with the old waffle. Here were journalists who had made a real study of it and there were members of the trade who were writing about it too and they weren't going to get away with trash.

**RM:** I have recently taken on your former Faber role as series editor of Infinite Ideas' Classic Wine Library, which is a kind of reincarnation of your much admired and rather lamented series. Do you think the mission of my series is different from what yours was at Faber now that the trade has been largely tidied up?

**JJ:** No, I don't think so. I think the job is still just to keep the standards up and to tell the truth about wine in some detail to serious wine drinkers who want to know it.

**RM:** We were talking earlier about the cultural differences on the Iberian Peninsula; do you think there is a bigger political dimension in the differences between wine making in Spain and Portugal as well?

**JJ:** The sherry shippers sometimes used to have branches in Oporto because the two wines can be sold simultaneously in England. For instance Williams and Humbert had a branch in Oporto called Robertson's, which they sold off eventually

González Byass had their own lodge in Oporto, which they long since gave up. They have wine interests all over the place in Spain. They make everything from cava to sherry and with several excellent table wines along the way. But there was no connection really. People who went to Oporto to visit the other side of the business used to bring bottles of port back because you couldn't buy them in Spain.

**RM:** It was the same with sherry, which couldn't be bought in Portugal. Thinking about the political dimension, Salazar and Franco were in power at much the same time but were very different operators. Franco was a military man and Salazar was a civilian. He was an economist and an academic and hadn't come through a civil war in the way that Franco had. They shared similar politics yet Portugal and Spain, being neighbours, remained rather ambivalent about each other. Even nowadays when there's an east wind blowing in the Douro, the locals

say *nem bom vento, nem bom casamento vem de Espanha* 'neither good winds nor good weddings come from Spain'. The connections between the two countries are still fairly minimal. They share the same landmass but as I know from my own experience with a vineyard just 15km from the frontier, it is incredibly costly to send wine over the border to Spain from Portugal because nobody really goes there from Portugal.

The link between sherry and port is much less nowadays than ever. The multinationals that bought up some of the great brands like Croft and Sandeman have backed out and they've mostly gone back to family ownership again. The split is complete, which goes rather against the spirit of globalization.

**JJ:** One of the great catastrophes was Williams and Humbert. They were taken over and they went bust for the first time and were sold off again, fortunately to a Spanish interest and then the ultimate catastrophe, the take over of Domecq, which was a power in the land if not in the world, by Beam Global.

**RM:** I find it sad that some of those great names have gone. Going back to what we were saying about the political differences between the regimes, one of the areas where Salazar was more successful than Franco was in the control imposed on the port industry. Port didn't go through the dreadful boom and bust that sherry went through, largely due to the fact that the shippers were very much more controlled as to how much wine they could produce and how much wine they could sell. Sherry, on the other hand, was a free-for-all. Salazar's system in Portugal was brought in gradually from the 1930s onwards and it still keeps sales and production roughly in check. Whereas sherry never had that sort of control, did it?

**JJ:** No it didn't. Sherry had for quite a long time too easy a market in England. A lot of so-called *amontillado*, which wasn't *amontillado*, was sold at cheap prices and ultimately it undermined the whole reputation of Jerez, as I warned them that it would.



**RM:** Julian, the six editions of your book have spanned a period of huge change, of boom and bust in sherry. Do I detect a slow recovery again?



**JJ:** Yes, it's a very slow recovery but it's a very encouraging one. Nowadays, for example, the word '*amontillado*' can be applied only to dry wines that are aged *finos* and the term is no longer debased. You can still buy some pretty grim sherry but they're medium-dry or medium-rich. '*Amontillado*' is now reserved for fine wines.

**RM:** Has the European Union helped in that or is it the Jerezanos' own doing?

**JJ:** The EU caused the Jerezanos to tighten things up and I'm very glad they have. It will be to their ultimate benefit. There's a totally different structure of wine-growing now. The great old firms have, for the most part, gone and the Spaniards are making the wines now and owning the companies. For example, Williams and Humbert is now owned by a family of wine growers from Sanlúcar.

**RM:** So ironically, once again despite globalisation, Jerez is a much less multi-national place than it was a generation or two ago when you had so many Irish and English people there and, of course, the Anglo-Spanish families.

**JJ:** Well they of course still exist, the greatest of them being the González family, which is now the great traditional bodega in Jerez, still owned by the family that started it.



**RM:** Let's talk about the prospects for sherry and port over the next five to ten years. I think

port is an interesting story. Although I don't think the transformation of the port industry is quite complete yet there has been a big shake out in recent years, with the multi-nationals leaving and the companies going back to family ownership just as in Jerez. Five large groups formed within that, which means that you get a strengthening of brands that we all know.

With port it seems that different countries see the wines in different ways, so the British see port quite differently from the way that the French or the Dutch do. The French drink port as an aperitif, as a cheap wine. It's enjoyed by heavy drinkers in France and Holland because it's considered a cheap way of getting drunk. Whereas in the UK we see port quite differently, we almost look from top downwards rather than bottom upwards, which is why we get vintage port.

Although worldwide shipments of port have been going slowly down, it's actually becoming *more* popular at the top end. That's the only way for port to go because the port and Douro wine region is one of the most expensive places in the world to grow grapes. One wonders how people can make money selling port at the prices they do to continental markets. Eventually that's going to have to stop. Labour costs will go up and so will the price of port.

It's encouraging to see people turning to aged tawny ports which are back in fashion again. Port is beginning to be de-seasonalised as a drink so that people drink tawny port cool in the summer as they do in Oporto, and it's not just drunk around Christmas. This seems to be happening across all English-speaking markets. People are trading up, drinking less but better quality wines.

**JJ:** Do you think that port will win markets globally?

**RM:** Yes, I am optimistic about it. It is winning new markets and attracting new, younger consumers. People think of port as an old fashioned drink, sometimes a clubbable drink, but the statistics show that port is still being sold and being sold to younger consumers. Port has a fantastic ability to keep on reinventing itself and I think it will continue to do so.

**JJ:** Sherry too was regarded as an old lady's tippie in the nineteenth century when it was

much cheaper and you kept some for your grandmother and the vicar. Sales went down very seriously in the early twentieth century but in the 1920s cocktail era sales began to rise again and the enlightened found that, if you were going to have a drink before dinner, which in the nineteenth century you didn't really do, sherry was a much better drink than the alternatives, particularly for wine-lovers. Carl Williams, of Williams and Humbert, had the great idea of throwing a sherry party, which caught on.

**RM:** ... much like the madeira parties in America.

**JJ:** Yes indeed. There's always a parallel between the fortified wines. Sherry became very popular and was by no means confined to grandmothers, and sales went up and up with, it has to be said, some pretty abysmal wines. Now sherry is doing much the same as port and madeira. The sales of the top quality wines have been recently much greater than they were in the distant past and people have at last realised that sherry is one of the great wines of the world and, for what it is, also one of the cheapest. By buying the right sort of sherry you can drink one of the great wines for very little money.

**RM:** I think that fino sherry, for all the work that goes into it, is a great bargain, and a delicious drink. When I first joined the wine trade in 1984, a bottle of the Wine Society's fino cost £3.15 and it's now just £6.25. By contrast the third edition of your book, which I bought when I joined the trade in 1982, was £4.99, albeit a paperback, whereas the sixth edition is £35! Sherry really hasn't moved much in price.

**JJ:** I think it will go up; it has to. It is a total bargain and grandmother isn't tuned in to the finest dry wines so they'll be drunk more and more but treated as connoisseur wines, which they always were for a small minority of people.

**RM:** We were saying that one of the things that has changed and is very encouraging in Jerez are the number of small bodegas that have set up on their own in recent years.

**JJ:** There's been a similar thing happening in England with the beer trade and the wine merchants. The little firms thought that they had no future and sold out to the big ones or went to the wall. Now England is proliferating

with small wine merchants and boutique breweries making real ale. It's a very similar story in Spain. In the next five to ten years, I see a movement towards seriously good, more expensive sherry and drinking sherry much more with food. The tapas bars are coming in and are proving very popular. *Fino* sherry is a delicious drink to have with shellfish and the dessert *oloroso* sherries (they must be old) drunk with stilton cheese, is a magnificent experience. There are quite a lot of *bodegas* which are keeping the quality up despite having high sales.

**RM:** Of the three great fortified wines we've talked a lot about sherry and port so far but madeira sometimes tends to get a bit forgotten. Madeira, of course, is a fascinating wine in its own right and has very different traditions (although there is still a British influence there) from sherry and port. The nature of the wine, being the world's most resilient, means that you can do things with it that you can't do with any other wine. You can leave a bottle of venerable vintage madeira open for up to five years and it won't suffer, certainly not in the way that port or sherry will.

One of the big changes for madeira was when they suspended bulk shipments, which took quite a lot of the inexpensive wine out of the market, forcing shippers to drive up quality. The market for old madeira is remarkably strong. There's no other wine in the world where you can drink wines from the eighteenth and nineteenth century and almost guarantee that it will be in good condition. ●



Richard Mayson is the author of *Port and the Douro* (Infinite Ideas, 2013), *Madeira: the islands and their wines* (Infinite Ideas, 2015) and was Louis Roederer International Wine Feature Writer of the Year 2014.

Julian Jeffs is the author of *Sherry* (Infinite Ideas, 2015, sixth edition). As a barrister he became a QC, a Recorder of the Crown Court, Chairman of the Patent Bar Association and a bencher of Gray's Inn. He has written three books on wine and others on law. A past President of the Circle of Wine Writers, he was General Editor of Faber Wine Books.