

Life just got sweeter for sherry lovers

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SOMETIMES you taste a wine that reminds you why you became obsessed with fermented grape juice in the first place.

This wine is so extraordinary, so mind-blowingly good, that it causes your pupils to dilate, your pulse to race and the hairs to stand on the back of your neck. This is the way of the wine junkie: we're all chasing that next hit of vinous magic. My latest pupil-dilating moment came halfway through a tasting of the amazing Spanish sherries from Equipo Navazos. Established in 2005 by sherry-obsessed academics, wine writers, winemakers and merchants, the Navazos group searches for outstanding barrels of fino, manzanilla, amontillado and other sherry styles lurking in the cellars of old wineries, bottling small batches -- from just a few hundred to perhaps 5000 bottles at a time -- under the La Bota label.

Each numbered bottling is unique, and the prices reflect this scarcity: these sherries cost between about \$60 and \$200 each. But they are worth every cent, as they are simply some of the most incredible wines in the world.

The sherry that really blew me away was the Navazos 30, La Bota de Manzanilla Pasada (about \$90, and due to arrive on our shores about now). This comes from a batch of just 15 barrels that have been carefully maintained by an old cellarmaster, Rafael Rivas, since they were filled in 1986. Normal manzanilla is a pale, bone-dry style of sherry aged in barrel under a thick layer of flor yeast, which prevents the wine from oxidising and contributes characteristic light flavours of fresh bread and sea-spray. The layer of flor in this manzanilla, by contrast, is so old and weak that it's barely there, and for many years the wine has been teetering on the edge of oxidising. The result is a sherry of incredible concentration, almost briny in its deeply savoury dryness, with extraordinary salty popcorn and brittle, sesame-snap intensity. A sherry unlike any other I've tried, and a wine that would taste incredible with the umami-rich flavours of Japanese food.

Other Navazos sherries that I particularly adored were the No 27 La Bota de Fino Macharnudo Alto (about \$60), full of flavours of blanched almond and bruised apple and brine; the No 24 La Bota de Fino Amontillado (about \$90), with its perfume of spices and exotic timber followed by intense chalky dryness; and the 2009 Navazos Casa del Inca Pedro Ximenez Montilla (about \$60), a stunning sweet PX that combines the mouthfilling intensity of raisin juice with a warm, spirituous, lingering glow.

You will find the Equipo Navazos sherries being poured in a few restaurants and wine bars and sold through independent retailers such as Rathdowne Cellars in Melbourne and Five Way Cellars in Sydney.

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