



## BOB TYRER ON THE BOTTLE

This column is going to be about the joy of sherry made among the sea breezes of Andalusia, but it starts in Kent, where vineyards have nudged aside the hop gardens of my childhood. One of them, Hush Heath estate, belongs to Richard Balfour-Lynn, a hotelier whose companies own, among other things, the Malmaison and Hotel du Vin chains. His top wine is a prize-winning sparkler, Balfour Brut Rosé, that I'm fond of — it has a lovely salty freshness — but can't afford because it costs an ear-whistling £35.

Earlier this month, I went down to Marden for the opening of his new winery and, overwhelmed by the beauty of his estate, told him I could see why his rosé is so expensive. Not at all, he said, price is not necessarily related to cost: the purpose of a high price is to give the buyer confidence that it is a worthwhile purchase.

Which brings me back to sherry. The wine trade has wrung its hands for decades over Britain's aversion to a drink that was once almost ubiquitous. We have embraced tapas, but not the palate-tickling manzanilla or fino that ought to go with them, which is a bit like a Spaniard gobbling up the crisps while refusing the pint. The reason is obvious: to Britons of a certain age, sherry is a reminder of parental moderation, small glasses, parsimony. It is almost an anti-drink; nobody (barring a few desperate students) has a wild night on sherry. Pass the rioja, but not the fino.

As a result, one can buy a bottle of appetising manzanilla — stone-pale, evanescent and bracing, not the cloying brown stuff of memory — for less than £9. Is this a suitable case for the Balfour-Lynn declaration? Would sherry be more popular if it had a luxury price? I put this to Esme Johnson and David Campbell, who run From Vineyards Direct, the online boutique retailer. They were adamant that, on the contrary, good value is what drives customers. (Their Torrebrea Manzanilla, bursting with savour, costs £6.95 a half-bottle.)

The French are masters of luxury-pricing — look at the £1,000 a bottle Chinese zillionaires are paying for Bordeaux's 2010 top growths — and it's to our advantage that the Andalusians are not, for the moment. So do have a go, before you can't afford it.