



*Cooking and Cuisine*

**MALTESE**

**FOOD HABITS**





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# OVERVIEW

of

## MALTESE FOOD CULTURE

The Mediterranean food model has seen numerous variations across different areas of the “Great Sea”, and has been subject to many transformations in the course of time. Nonetheless, it has managed to preserve some basic characteristics which have become identified with the Mediterranean.

The lands bordering the Mediterranean share common agricultural products such as grain for the kneading of bread, vineyards for the production of wine, and olive groves for the pressing of olives to make olive oil.



the  
**TRINITY**  
of  
THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET  
*Bread, Olive Oil and Wine*



Simple. Nutritious. Wholesome. This trilogy of Mediterranean ingredients is an integral part of the Maltese traditional diet. Archaeological research confirms that the “Mediterranean triad” being wheat, olive oil and grapes dates back to ancient times.

Bread, made from barley, maslin or wheat, has always been central to the Mediterranean diet, of which Malta formed part, and the type of bread consumed often reflected the status of the individual that consumed it.

Thus, refined white bread was largely consumed by the upper classes, whereas the lower classes often consumed rather coarse, brown based maslin bread consisting of wheat mixed with barley. Bread has always taken first place in the Maltese kitchen.

In past times, the Maltese regarded bread with a great deal of respect. Indeed they followed a certain ritual when cutting a loaf.

In this ritual, which still exists among a diminishing number of Maltese, the sign of the cross is traced on the loaf before it is cut with evident connections to Christian beliefs.

Moreover throwing away left over bread was, until quite recently, almost considered sinful. Thus people would kiss the bread in an expression whereby the 'sinner' asks forgiveness.

Today, bread plays a much less important role than in the past. Nonetheless, the 'traditional' Maltese bread loaf continues to be associated with Maltese cuisine.

Similarly olive oil is an integral part of Maltese cuisine. It seems that it was thanks to the advent of the ancient Phoenicians that a large scale olive oil industry was initiated in Malta.



The Romans followed during their long stay in Malta when olive cultivation flourished as can be confirmed by the presence of a significant amount of olive crushers.

Place-names associated with olives in both Malta and Gozo, like *Haż-Żebbuġ*, *Għajn Żejtuna*, *Birżebbuġa*, *Bir-id-deheb*, and *Iż-Żejtun*, in Malta and *Iż-Żebbuġ* in Gozo, confirm that olive trees grew abundantly in those areas. Indeed, many varieties of olive trees are grown solely for the production of olive oil.

The terrace farming techniques which are often claimed to have been introduced by the Phoenicians may imply that they also introduced the local cultivation of vines.



the  
**GASTRONOMY**  
PROGRAMME

Maltese cuisine is a reflection of Maltese culture and history. However, the diet of the people varied depending on whether they lived in the rural or the urban/port set up. The ingredients one used and the mode of cooking one needed to go by varied accordingly. The local cuisine shows strong Sicilian and British influences but one cannot ignore influences from mainland Italy, Spain, France, particularly from Provence, the Maghreb, and other Mediterranean cuisines.

Due to Malta's position along important trade routes, over the centuries, most foodstuffs had to cater for the presence of residents that hailed from several parts of Europe and beyond.



Welcome Reception



**VILLAGGI MALTIN**



**A TASTE OF OUR REGIONS**

*Foods from different Regions of Malta*



Due to the geographical proximity of towns and villages, these are bound to influence each other in all manners of lifestyle and culture, even more so in food consumption. However, there are small varieties from the preparation of food from one region to the next. But these are often so small that they are overlooked.

So the inhabitants of different parts of Malta and Gozo tend to share similar food habits with the result that the major popular dishes can be found anywhere in Malta and Gozo.

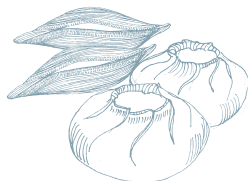
Among these are *fenkata* [rabbit], *minestra* [vegetable soup], *ġbejniet* [sheep's cheeselets] - all of rural origin, while *pastizzi* [savoury pastries], *lampuki* [mahi mahi fish] pie, and *patata l-forn* [baked potatoes with meat], are mostly originally urban and oven-baked.

Moreover, bread, wine, and oil, together with a variety of herbs, like mint, thyme, sage, fennel, parsley, celery and the like, vegetables and fruit, as well as chickens, eggs, goats' milk (for drinking) and sheep's milk for *ġbejniet*, butter and ricotta, could in the past be found all over Malta and Gozo. Peasants used to sell these products at the Valletta Market and there is evidence which confirms that this activity had been going on since the late 16th century. Obviously some areas of Malta produced more of one product than another.

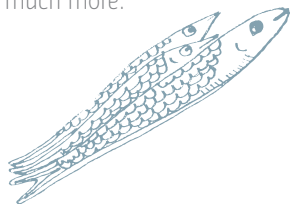


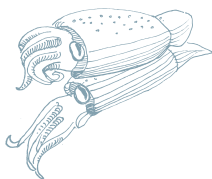


**VALLETTA**



Valletta was a melting pot where a variety of people with their own distinct culture and ethnic values met. One could find all sorts of fresh and preserved foods. It was also the place where the main abattoir of Malta stood. Until the 1960s, it was customary for people from rural areas to travel to Valletta where they would gather at the entrance of the Valletta market situated in the centre of the town centre. There the peasants would sell a wide variety of produce such as chickens, rabbits, eggs, gbejniet in their various forms, capers, herbs, sun-dried tomatoes, and much more.





Offal was particularly popular with the masses who could not afford the best quality meats. As a result, in Valletta, the vegetable soup par excellence was tripe soup. *Bigilla* (crushed beans with garlic, parsley, oil and chilli) was also sold on the streets as were *sfineġ*, ricotta and pea *pastizzi* and *qassatat*.

Herbs were widely used in soups, stews and other dishes.

The women of Valletta habitually kept herb pots in their kitchen.

Other popular meals were the *balbuljata* (green peppers, onion, eggs and later tomatoes were added to the mixture), *mazzit* [blood pudding] and pork sausages. Anchovies, sardines, salted cod, and cod fritters in oil [*sfineġ*] as well as stewed octopus, and calamari were popular on lean days.

Pork or chicken stews were also popular.





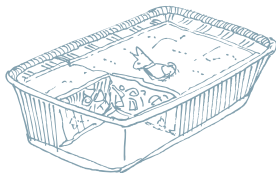
**MĠARR**



Mġarr is a relatively new village which grew steadily in the late nineteenth century. However, in earlier times it consisted of a number of small hamlets north of Rabat/ Mġina where the soil was fertile and waterlogged.

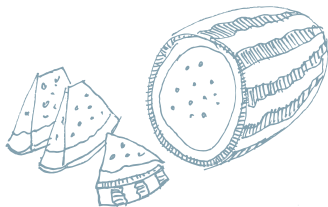
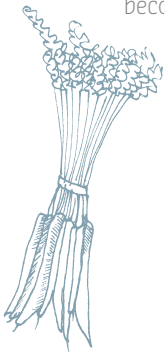






It is an area where watermelons and pumpkins grow particularly well, and so do a wide variety of vegetables like onions, potatoes, broad beans and other legumes.

Mġarr was also associated with rabbit hunting and the rabbit pie was a very popular peasant meal. Nowadays rabbit has become a speciality of the area where modern restaurants are known to serve rabbit fried in garlic and wine.





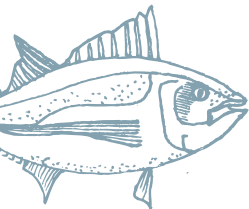
## MARSAXLOKK/ŽEJTUN



The village of Žejtun was originally associated with fishing activities. Over the last century however, nearby Marsaxlokk, has become Malta's fishing village par excellence. But

Žejtun is also associated with olive groves. In fact, the name Žejtun refers to the olive trees that grew in the area.

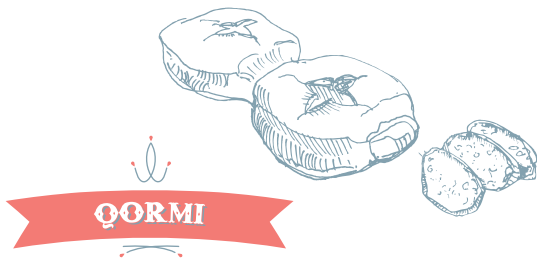
Olive groves also grew in nearby areas such as Bir id-Deheb (lit. cistern of gold – an indirect reference to olive oil), and Biržebbuġa (literally a well of oil).





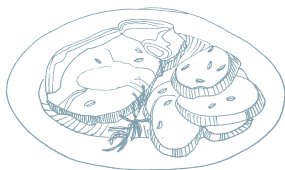
Blue fish soup (*aljotta*) and fish fritters were popular in Żejtun as was the *lampuki* pie. Wild herbs like fennel, and capers, as well as onions, potatoes and spring vegetables, which were abundant in Żejtun, make a good vegetable soup. The areas of Żejtun, and nearby Ghaxaq, were associated with the cultivation of potatoes for mass consumption in the early nineteenth century. A flat bread called *ftira*, which in the past, was cooked in a floor oven, must have been a popular form of bread in the Maltese villages, including Żejtun, before the spread of the normal stone-ovens found in the bakeries in the eighteenth century. *Ftira* is popular today and eaten with tomatoes, tuna, olives, capers and oil or with tomato paste - extremely delicious when devoured by the sea.





Nowadays Qormi is associated with bakeries that, over the last few centuries, have mushroomed in this village, and as a result of which it became known as *Casal Fornaro* [Bakers' village] during the eighteenth century. Qormi developed into a centre for baking activities because there were not enough ovens in the Valletta area to cater for the ever-growing needs of the urban centre. Due to the great number of ovens, it was common for villagers living in Qormi to prepare oven-baked food – which would be baked in the baker's own oven!



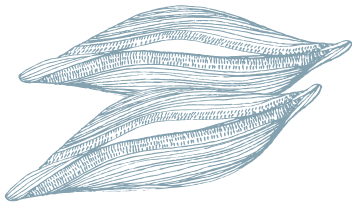


Thus apart from the freshly-baked bread, one comes across *patata l-forn* [baked potatoes with meat, often pork], *ross il-forn* [baked rice] and *imqarrun il-forn* [baked macaroni]. The farms with the irrigated gardens that surround the village grow a variety of vegetables as well as fruit trees especially citrus trees.

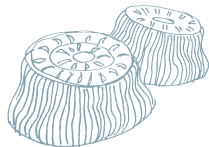


Yet, in earlier times the old village of Qormi, was apparently also known for its herds of sheep and goats. In fact a large area above Qormi, is known as Mrieħel (literally herds [of sheep]) which confirms the importance of the production of milk and milk derivatives in this area.





**GOZO**



Gozo is perhaps the region which has remained most attached to its rural past although this may not always apply to Victoria (Rabat), which has maintained strong and direct links with Valletta. Cheese *pastizzi*, which in Gozo were traditionally made with *ġbejniet* instead of ricotta, are very popular.





Even to this day, *pastizzi* are frequently served for breakfast along with coffee. Due to the large quantity of cheeselets, *gbejniet* pie is also a popular Gozo dish as the more recent, but very popular, *ftira Ghawdxija*. Sheep's milk, wine, honey, and grain products are widely consumed in Gozo as elsewhere. Nevertheless, the synonymous *gbejna* still remains the most obvious speciality of Gozo.

## *Lunches*

# **TAL-BELT U TAR-RAHAL** (URBAN AND RURAL)

### **TAL-BELT**

The tides of history that have flowed over the Mediterranean have left an indelible mark on the Grand Harbour and the city of Valletta as well as the Three Cities of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua, which cradle the Grand Harbour.

Pork, rabbit, chickens and eggs were readily available at the Valletta market but these were often not accessible to the poor who usually consumed the better quality meats on special feasts and occasions. They were often cooked in a soup, or broth although oven-baked food (baked at the baker's oven) gained popularity in the nineteenth century. The most common oven-baked dishes were baked potatoes with meat, baked macaroni and baked rice. Ricotta pies, fish pies, and minced meat pies were likewise very popular.



## TAR-RAHAL

Bread and cheese came to constitute the most basic elements of Maltese peasant food. The cheeselets made in the Maltese islands consist of sheep's milk, salt and rennet and are prepared and served in a variety of forms; fresh, dried, and or semi-dried. The semi-dried cheeselets are sometimes pickled, or salted or peppered. In the countryside, meat was consumed much less than in the Harbour towns.

The traditional dish in the countryside is the *fenkata* (rabbit meal) but *minestra* (cooked vegetables) cooked in a pot and allowed to simmer for several hours was the daily standard fare of the Maltese peasant family. Peasants often sold much of their produce at the Valletta market, an activity that went on, uninterruptedly, from the late 16th century. Wild herbs like fennel, and capers as well as onions, potatoes and spring vegetables likewise made a good vegetable soup.

— Closing Lunch —

**ZMIEN L-INGLIZI**  
(PRE TO POST WORLD WAR II)

Malta's strategic location in the central Mediterranean turned it into an excellent station for the British Armed Forces and many army and naval officers posted in Malta lived with their families. As a result, a large variety of foods imported to Malta and handled mostly by Maltese employed as housekeepers and cooks, found their way in Maltese cuisine. British dietary habits such as fry-ups, roast meat meals, custard, sponge cakes and puddings became staples in many local households.







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Carmel Cassar is a Cambridge trained cultural historian who has published widely on Maltese and Mediterranean culture and history. He is Associate Professor at the Institute of Tourism, Travel & Culture of the University of Malta, and Chairman of the Programme for Mediterranean Culinary Culture. He is also Malta delegate for UNeECC [the University Network of the European Capitals of Culture] and is a permanent member of the UNeECC board.



