



Michele Marceca's manuscript which is at the National Library, Valletta

Food culture in Malta

in the 17th and 18th centuries



Simon Mercieca demonstrates how the art of making Maltese sweets was rediscovered in Sicily

La *Via del Dolce fra Malta e Sicilia – il ricettario di Michele Marceca (1748)* has just been published by Lombardi Editori in Sicily. It is about sweets in eighteenth-century Malta. It contains a number of articles written by various scholars and also includes the entire text or recipes of a certain Michele Marceca whose manuscript may be found at the National Library in Valletta. In his manuscript copy entitled *Secreti per fare cose dolci di varii modi*, Marceca focused on the use of these ingredients for the making of sweets. Contemporary chefs used similar ingredients for the preparation of main meat dishes.

The authors

The editor Marco Goracci contracted a number of scholars to carry out a study related to the history of food in Malta and Sicily. One of the leading Sicilian ethnographers Luigi Lombardo studied the importance of Sicilian sweets within the culinary tradition of eighteenth century Sicily as well as the presence of the Marceca surname in the Eastern part of Sicily.

Luigi Lombardi also delved into the history of sweets in Sicily and the role played by important seventeenth-century cuisiniers such as the French de la Varenne and before him, Diego Granado Maldonado and Juan de La Mara on the art of making sweets.

Chocolate, cinnamon and sugar became more abundant in the Mediterranean world during the eighteenth century and began to find a place both in sweets and savouries.

Amongst the other contributors to this book, one cannot fail to mention the late Dott. Memi Spadaro. Spadaro was an important authority in Sicily in the area of study which is today associated with folklore or popular customs. He discussed the

role that herbs played in the history of desserts. Furthermore, Spadaro studied the use of honey for the making of sweets and how this was eventually replaced by sugar.

Ivana Piccitto has written about the history of the different types of Sicilian cheese. Marilyn Mangion and myself undertook the task to write about Michele Marceca and food culture in Malta in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



The story behind this book

The involvement of Marilyn Mangion and myself in this book came about when Marco Goracci and Luigi Lombardo contacted me, as Director of the Mediterranean Institute, and in particular, in relation to my studies on Maltese families of the past. These two authors wanted to find out more information about Marceca and to establish whether he was Maltese or Sicilian.

In fact, in Malta, Lombardo also contacted Dun Gwann Azzopardi and discussed with him the idea of a book about Maltese cuisine. Then, Lombardo contacted me for assistance. At the time, I was working on agricultural production and the history of fisheries in Malta during early modern times. Simultaneously, the subject of Maltese cuisine at the time of the knights was being studied by Marilyn Mangion as part of her M.A.

degree in Baroque Studies. I had been appointed by the University of Malta to supervise Ms Mangion's work. The recipe book of Marceca happened also to form part of Mangion's subject of her dissertation.

Thus, when I met Mr Lombardo and Mr Goracci, I suggested that they should invite Marilyn Mangion to contribute to their book. Lombardo agreed to my suggestion and consequently, both Marilyn and I decided to write an article together which, we are proud to say, has appeared in this collection related to Marceca's work.



'The Banquet of Belshazzar' (detail) by Mattia Preti

The surname Marceca

Luigi Lombardo also tackled the issue of the origin of the surname Marceca. He shares my view that, most probably, this particular 'pâtissier' hailed from Sicily. The surname Marceca was common in the eastern part of Sicily, in particular at Ragusa. In the city of Vittoria, for example, one finds a marriage act containing the name of a Michele Marceca who got married in this city in 1756. However, it is very difficult to conclude whether this Michele Marceca is the same person who wrote the manuscript of sweet recipes.

For example, in a document to be found at the State Archives of Palermo, the surname Marceca is found written in a different way from that of Marceca but is very similar to the one currently used in Malta. In a document of 1792, it is registered as Marciecha. The fact that the author used 'ch' seems to indicate that the

pronunciation of this particular surname was also similar to the one in current use in Malta. Thus, the 'cha' had a similar pronunciation to the Arabic 'qaf' which is still present and in use in the Maltese surname.

The manuscript of Michele Marceca was also the subject of an interesting study undertaken by Prof. Joseph M. Brincat and entitled *Fare dolci e gelati nel Settecento. Uno sguardo sull'italiano di Malta*. This study will appear in the Proceedings of the *Associazione di Storia della Lingua Italiana* (ASLI) conference on *Storia della lingua e storia della cucina*, (Modena, 20-22 settembre 2007), C. Robustelli & D. Proietti (eds.).

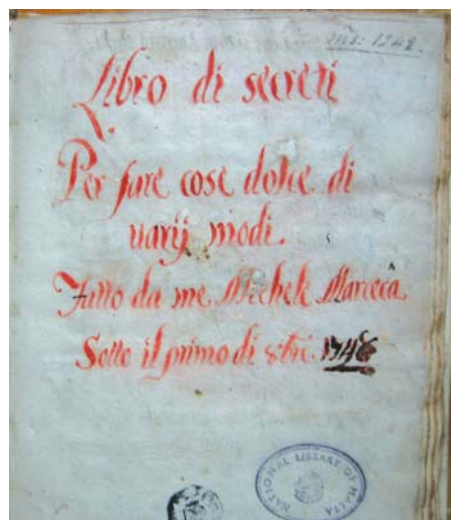
Judging from the many Maltese words written in Italian format or 'maltesismi', Prof. Brincat is of the opinion that Marceca was in fact Maltese.

The commercial aspect

Working on Maltese cuisine has brought about the discovery of documents related to Maltese history, in particular the history of food culture, preserved in Sicily. Some of these documents are discussed for the first time in this book. They warrant further research in order to show the wider spectrum that food has in the study of history. One such aspect is that of commerce. Other aspects that I shall be sharing with readers, for the first time, concern the making of what were then considered to be secret recipes.

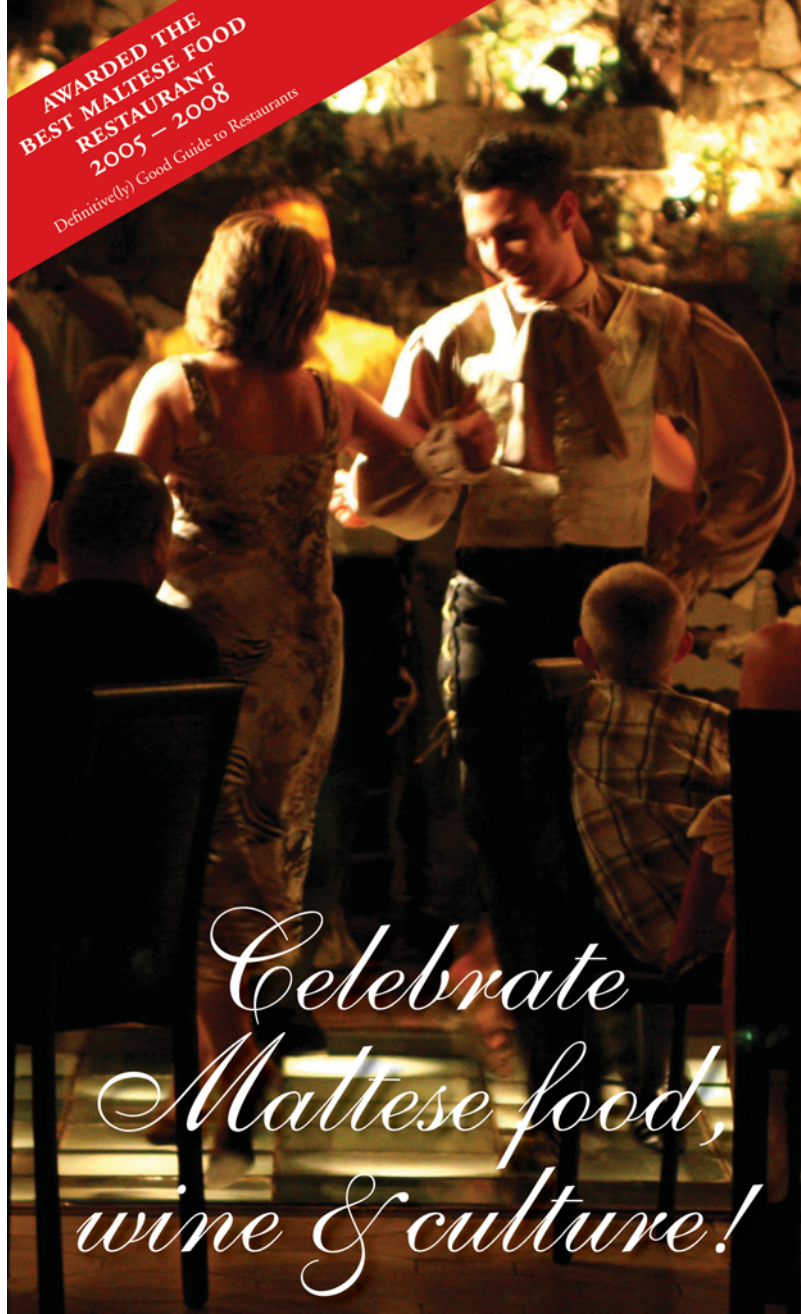
In fact, until the eighteenth century, a number of sweet recipes were considered the exclusivity of particular institutions, in particular cloistered nuns. All over the Mediterranean, cloistered nuns had their own particular recipes for the making of particular sweet biscuits. Without doubt, such exclusivity helped them to earn some money so that they could make a decent living. It is a known fact in history that there was a lack of resources prior to the Industrial Revolution. Sweets were a luxury that could be afforded only by the few. Ingredients were expensive to buy. For the poor, the only sweet taste came from the eating of seasonal fruits.

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Ice-Cream with Parmesan cheese

These recipes bring to the fore past commercial activities that have long since disappeared. One of these past realities is the importation of ice into Malta. The recipes do not speak about commercial relationships and importation of goods, but implicitly refer to such facts in particular when the author speaks about the making of ice cream, chocolate cake and other type pastries. One such ice-cream was that made with Parmesan cheese. Such a recipe shows that around the middle of the Eighteenth century Malta imported this type of Italian delicacy that nowadays is associated with Northern Italy and the Reggio-Emilia region.


Ice-cream also required ice. In this period, ice had to be imported and its use was very restricted. It was employed in medical operations as an anesthetic. Otherwise it was a luxury offered to special guests in the form of a refreshing drink in summer.

One of Malta's commercial nexus was Sicily. During this time, ice was sold in Sicily at anything between three to six grani (a currency in use at the time of the Knights) a *rotolo* (circa 800g.). This price was the official price established in Sicily by the *Real Patrimonio*.

Conclusion

This book has two principal characteristics. It was written within the limits of scientific rigour where the contributors presented valid and solid academic articles but at the same time, the editor kept in mind the need that the book reaches the general audience or as the Italians say, its *divulgazione*. It was sponsored by a Sicilian organization called CORFILAC of Ragusa. This company works in the production of different types of cheese and products derived from milk. This book cannot be sold but can only be given or distributed for free as a promotion of Sicilian milk products in particular those produced by this Ragusan company.

- Dr Simon Mercieca's interest in the history of Maltese food has been the subject of a back page article on the historical development of the Cottonera, with special emphasis on the demographic growth of the town of Bormla from 1587 to 1815 published in the influential French newspaper *Le Monde* in 2003.

Dr Mercieca is a Ph.D. graduate from the Sorbonne and his thesis received the highest marks that a Jury can allocate to a Ph.D. thesis in France. He is Director of the Mediterranean Institute and also Demographic Historian. 

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