

## Green activism at the supermarket



Local vineyards cover 8,000 tumoli and provide practically the only shade of green in the parched summer rural landscape.

Supermarkets and other retail outlets, which are often seen as the incarnation of rabid consumerism, do not immediately spring to mind when one thinks about green activism. However, by making informed choices at such outlets, they can very well become another arena contested by the green lobby.

The phrase 'carbon footprint' has become a cliché in recent years and has been adopted as a marketing tool, with many car brands, for instance, prominently featuring their vehicles' supposedly reduced carbon footprint.

*A culture change which promotes local agricultural products needs to be ushered in*

**- Alan Deidun**

Carbon footprint refers to the impact in terms of greenhouse gas emissions that a particular activity has, ranging from car manufacture to travelling on an aircraft.

With globalisation and the lowering of trade barriers our refrigerators may very well be stocked with a wide range of produce from all over the world all year round, but is also the culprit behind gallons of jet fuel being guzzled to bringing the produce to supermarket stalls.

By joining the dots, one realises that reducing one's individual carbon footprint will result in a collective shrinking of greenhouse emissions, which in turn fuel climate change. Western countries are especially duty-bound to reduce their carbon footprint in view of their disproportionate contribution to climate change.

To give just one example, while the world's average stands at roughly six tons of carbon dioxide emitted per year for each individual, every American emits 22 tons.

Cutting down on such sobering statistics is easier and closer to home than one might think, and include the mundane household choices we make every day, the products we opt for and the period of the year we choose to consume them in.

In Din I-Art Helwa's fisheries conference last March, the need to consume fish caught in season was underpinned by Fish4tomorrow.

Besides the seasonality factor, there is the issue of the produce itself. Take wine, for instance. Since Malta's EU accession, local wine drinkers have been regaled with a mesmerising array of different wines coming from places as far as Chile, South Africa and Australia, to mention a few.

Many, including myself, are drawn by the novelty and, without many second thoughts, go for the exotic rather than for the Maltese brand, and in the process we spike up our carbon footprint, with the bottles we consume being ferried from the most outlandish places on earth.

For instance, drinking a bottle of Australian wine raises your carbon footprint by 400g, which is equivalent to driving a medium-size, fuel-efficient car for a short trip of say five kilometres. For reasons that extend beyond simple geographic rationale, a bottle of Californian wine would translate into even higher emissions.

Opting for Maltese brands of wine and other produce has other implications, of course, which go beyond the preserve of carbon footprint.

For instance, the recent surge in vine-growing around the islands, mainly spearheaded by EU funding, is an additional promoter of land stewardship. It offers a buttress against land abandonment which, in turn, generally paves the way for speculation on that land and for insalubrious processes such as desertification and soil erosion.

This point might seem frivolous, until one realises there are currently 8,000 tumoli of vineyards registered with the Viticulture and Enology Unit of the Agriculture Department, which is equivalent to 9 km<sup>2</sup>, or roughly 2.8 per cent of Malta's surface area. This is equivalent to well over 1,000 full-sized foot-ball pitches. This percentage is invariably surging further still.

These are manicured to perfection by about 1,000 farmers employed in the viticulture sector, and provide practically the only shades of green in an otherwise parched summer Maltese rural landscape.

Since vines yield just one crop annually, they are not very demanding on soil resources and under EU obligations the amount of pesticide applied needs to be logged by farmers and is monitored by the Malta Standards Authority.

Delving further into the subject, I realised that the environmental ramifications of simply opting for a Maltese brand of wine are wider still.

For example, it transpires that most Maltese wine bottles are collected and re-used, while foreign wine glass bottles are not. Here again, the statistics stand tall – for instance, on average, a Maltese wine glass bottle is re-used 10 times, cutting down consumption of glass bottles in no mean way.

Incidentally, the 'disposable' mentality that has crept into Malta with the advent of soft drinks in plastic bottles has had detrimental impact on the number of wine glass bottles returned by the public to retail outlets, which has decreased in recent years.

The promotion of Maltese wine also has a multiplier effect which extends beyond environmental issues.

For example, Sicilian wine producers have taken the issue of exclusively promoting their produce so seriously that some Sicilian restaurants, like those in the town of Enna, stock only on produce grown in the area immediately surrounding the restaurant.

Syracuse restaurants would obligingly serve you the trademark Nero d'Avola. They would never think of serving you a wine from the provinces of Ragusa or Catania.

They are obviously motivated by a rationale which goes beyond the environment. It revolves mainly around cherishing and promoting their immediate heritage.

In Malta, the aura associated with viniculture is also gaining greater traction with tourists, especially those from the UK and Scandinavia. They cherish the opportunity to tour a winery, an aspect of local tourism which is probably underrated.

Having listed most of the green spin-offs from consuming Maltese wine and produce, one may be forgiven for feeling aggrieved at seeing so many local restaurants prominently featuring foreign wines on their menus, with Maltese wines relegated far away from pride of place.

The well-established observation is that the Maltese generally drink foreign wines and foreign diners generally consume Maltese wines, with Maltese wines still being incorrectly perceived as parochial and the drinking of foreign wines as being hip.

Now that the novelty of foreign wines and produce has worn off, a culture change which promotes local agricultural products needs to be ushered in. For this to happen, laudable initiatives promoting local produce, as has been done for Maltese pork, for example, need to be cranked up.

The situation is, obviously, not completely bleak. Maltese olive oil, tomatoes and a host of other produce are basking in well-earned respect by the Maltese public and are bolstered by a sustained high demand.

It is high time that we extend this respect to all local produce, including wine, which has certainly come of age and whose quality has improved greatly, environmental considerations aside.