

Cultural Foodscapes of an Island Nation

Dr. Noel Buttigieg, Dr. Marie Avellino, Prof. Dr. George Cassar

University of Malta

Abstract

Sourcing an argument put forward by Clifford Geertz, 'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,' what applies for the individual applies no less, to the collective identity of a group or a nation. The series of symbolic and mythical mental representations activate a mind map that locates and maintains cultural meanings. The emphasis on what constitutes a nation and its culture, forms an integral part of the broader interest in defining identity. The construction of national identities has attracted increasing attention among researchers over the past four decades, generating a panoply of views on the theme and its permutations. This study continues the debate, focusing primarily on a Maltese case-study. An attempt will be made to explore those vectors that generate some of the meanings surrounding Maltese food and particularly the way in which food is used in shaping the wider meanings attached to Malteseness. Food carries with it an emotional baggage. It is a fantastic background for storytelling, an inspiration for the narrative of an individual, a group or a nation. Whether it is the result of an "imagined community" or "banal nationalism" or "cultural hybridity", food and food culture is as well rooted in defining otherness. Among the reasons underlying food choices, such labels as "traditional", "authentic" and "quality", are today used interchangeably as blueprint terms to simplify an arguably rather complicated matter. Just as defining what constitutes a nation is in itself difficult to establish with precision, so also is the concept of a national culinary identity.

Key words: Foodscape, Valletta, culinary identity, food culture, Maltese cuisine.

Introduction

Food is a signifier. Existing scholarship on food and food culture, recognizes food as 'good to eat' but also 'good to think'.¹ Food provides more than physical sustenance. Food is loaded with meanings. As a 'total social fact' it marks special occasions, draws boundaries, differentiates and distinguishes.²

Food carries with it an emotional baggage. It is a fantastic background for storytelling, an inspiration for the narrative of an individual, a group or a nation. Whether it is the result of an 'imagined community' or 'banal nationalism', food and food culture is as well rooted in defining otherness. Among the reasons underlying

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

² Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 3.

food choices, popular terms such as ‘traditional’, ‘authentic’ and ‘quality’ are today used interchangeably as blueprint terms to simplify an arguably quite complicated matter. Just as defining what constitutes a nation may at times prove difficult to establish with precision, so also the concept of a national culinary identity.

This study will continue in line with such debates, focusing primarily on a Maltese case-study. An attempt will be made to explore those vectors that generate some of the meanings surrounding Maltese food and particularly the way in which food is used in shaping the wider meanings attached to Malteseness. This study aims to explore the confluence between culinary heritage, foodscapes and the regeneration of cities and discuss its relevance as a tool to help further understand determinants of food-behaviour generated by out-of-home eating foodscapes. Furthermore, this study aims to employ foodscapes as a tool to understand and describe how out-of-home environments can further attest to food-related behaviours as indicators of the culinary identity of a place.

Foodscape is here employed as an analytical tool to present a study of the types of restaurants in Valletta as part of the regeneration process leading towards the Valletta European City of Culture 2018. Food identities evolve simultaneously with the geography of a location, opening a window onto an exploration of the character of the foodscape.

The foodscape approach allows for an alternative view to uncover aspects of Malta’s culinary identity, including insights into consumption and class. The research of Johnston, Rodney and Szabo indicates how consumption patterns are shaped by both neighbourhood and social class, and that ‘cultural capital is located not only in social but in physical space too.’³ Food retail outlets located within an area impacts both the identity of the neighbourhood but also the status of the residents. Apart from displaying and perpetuating class differences, the choice of particular out-of-home food retail outlets provides interesting insights into Malta’s evolving culinary culture, especially when considering the facilitation of this process as part of the regeneration developments leading towards Valletta’s undertaking as a “city of culture”.

Foodscapes

Foodscapes contribute towards the provision of a conceptual framework which lends itself to understand and describe those vectors influencing food related human behaviour. The idea of a “scape” is now being considered by researchers in different fields as an effective tool. As an analytical tool the humanities and social sciences have explored the complex physical, social and cultural contexts within which human behaviour manifests itself. The term “foodscape” is used by researchers in

³ Josée Johnston, Alexandra Rodney and Michelle Szabo, “Place, Ethics, and Everyday Eating: A Tale of Two Neighbourhoods,” *Sociology* 46, no.6, (2012): 1092.

geography-related studies,⁴ urban agriculture, social science and public health,⁵ where the term highlights the human generated relationships between food environments and the geography of food in what concerns policy, identity, location of food outlets and the human response to associated behaviours such as food-related diseases. The study of Sonnino presents the term foodscape as a method of ethnographic research of senses, meanings and materiality.⁶ From a theoretical perspective, foodscapes generate a discourse of policy and power relations, production and consumption issues generating social injustice, economic inequalities, discrimination, and unequal opportunities towards adequate nutritional health.⁷

The notion of foodscape offers several advantages when seeking understanding and studying cultural and societal behaviours. As Brembeck and Johansson argue, it allows the researcher to observe human behaviour that is ‘unevenly distributed in space and appear in a variety of shapes and contexts.’ Burgoine also concurs about the effectiveness of foodscapes as an analytical tool since ‘the actual sites where we find food allows the researcher to explore those opportunities available for consumers when obtaining food within a given region’. Furthermore, Johnston et al. signify the importance of the built environment as well as the food service setting and defines foodscape as ‘the spatial distribution of food across urban spaces and institutional settings.’⁸

Pollock considers ‘foodscapes’ as an integral part of Appadurai’s ethnoscapes which he defines as ‘the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and individuals who constitute an essential feature of the world...’.⁹ Furthermore, ‘mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ideoscapes and foodscapes present us with those irregular shapes, imagined in their complexity, and the product of deeply perspectival constructs’.¹⁰ Therefore, foodscapes allow us to gain insights into the shifting world of modernity and identity.¹¹ Moreover, the ‘scape’ approach

⁴ Michael K. Goodman, “Food Geographies I: Relational Foodscapes and the busy-ness of being more-than-food,” *Progress Human Geography* 40, no.2 (2016): 257-266.

⁵ Thomas Burgoine, “Collecting accurate secondary foodscape data: A reflection on the trials and tribulations,” *Appetite* 55 (2010): 522-527. See also Bent E. Mikkelsen, “Images of Foodscapes: Introduction to foodscape studies and their application in the study of healthy eating out-of-home environments,” *Perspectives in Public Health* 131, no.5 (2011): 209-216; Helen Brenbeck and Barbro Johansson, “Foodscapes and Children’s Bodies,” *Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research* 2 (2010): 797-818.

⁶ Roberta Sonnino, “Local Foodscapes: place and power in the agri-food system,” *Acta Agriculturae Scandinavica* 63, no.1 (2013): 2-7.

⁷ Maggie Roe, Ingrid Sorlöv Herlin and Suzanne Speak, “Identity, food and landscape character in the urban context,” *Landscape Research* 41, no.7 (2016): 1-16

⁸ Josée Johnston, Alexandra Rodney and Michelle Szabo, “Place, Ethics & Everyday Eating” 1091-1108.

⁹ Nancy Pollock, “Food and Transnationalism: Reassertions of Pacific Identity,” in *Migration and Transnationalism. Pacific Perspectives*, eds. Helen Lee and Steve Tupai Francis (Canberra: The Australian National Press, 2009): 103. See also Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large. Cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996):33.

¹⁰ Pollock, “Food and Transnationalism,” 103.

¹¹ Ibid.

provides a modicum to understand complex social behaviours in which humans, objects and environments interact.

Valletta is a melting pot of international cuisines. Malta's historical past, and particularly the case of Valletta, indicates how foodways became a reflection of the various 'scapes' since its inception in the late sixteenth century. To further understand the association of foodscapes with historical overview is just useful. Taking heed from advice offered by S.W. Mintz, 'it is analytically useful to link up what is happening now to what has already happened'.¹² Tracing transnational influences through foodscapes provides opportunities to explore concepts of continuity and change as communities choose to adopt (and reject) culinary practices that enhance their identity further, particularly through an understanding of the food and beverage industry.

Malta – An Archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea

The group of islands sited in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea are collectively and politically known as 'Malta'; yet the archipelago is composed of a number of islands with the three main ones being Malta, Gozo and Comino – in that order according to size and population. None of the others has any permanent residents.

While the total area of the Maltese Islands is that of 316km² and has an estimated population (2018) of more than 475,700, the largest island is called Malta; it is the most urbanised with an area of 246km² and hosts most of the archipelago's population. Gozo, the second island, covers 67km² and though still more rural, the urban sprawl is undoubtedly on the advance. Comino, which measures 3.5km² had three residents in 2018.

With a geographical location flanked on the northern side by Europe and on the southern side by Africa, Malta and the Maltese can actually say that they have been living between 'two worlds' all through their history. Sicilian and North African influences have permeated the way of life of the population from time immemorial. Features of this reality have been evident and identifiable up to this day in Malta's social, linguistic, economic and religious environments. Not least affected is Malta's foodscape – a rich and varied accumulation of food and foodways from two continents. These have been turned into something more local by the Maltese who have adopted and adapted what came to their island; and is now being termed as 'Maltese cuisine'. Furthermore, with Malta joining the British Empire when it became a colony of Great Britain from 1800, an Anglo-Saxon food repertoire continued to season and extend the Maltese kitchen and recipe book.

¹² Sidney W. Mintz, "Food, history and globalization," in *Journal of Chinese Dietary Culture* 2, no.1 (2006): 4.

The Food of the Maltese

Being an island, and a poor and arid one at that, the supplies of foods and ingredients have proved to be perennially problematic. The people had to be fed but to do so required as fertile a land as possible; and Malta was not one such island. This meant that the government of the archipelago, whoever it was, could not bank solely on local agricultural produce. Bread was a staple from time immemorial for a people who could afford little more. The Middle Ages were already a difficult time and food was an imported commodity, much was imported. The staple food product was of course wheat, which with other cereals and pulses was imported regularly from Sicily, to which Malta politically belonged. To make the imports expenses as bearable as possible for a people who were generally far from wealthy, export duties were waived by the Sicilian authorities. In years when local harvests were more generous, the Maltese could export quantities of wheat and barley and thus gain some much needed foreign income.¹³ Other food products were also imported and were used to create Maltese dishes of all sorts.

Malta's donation to the Order of St John by Emperor Charles V in 1530, was accompanied by the offer that Sicily would continue to supply grain at privileged prices to help meet Malta's needs as bread was the main food item on the people's tables and the central commodity which had no substitute. The supply and use of wheat was always under the scrutiny of the authorities who wanted to make sure that millers and bakers were abiding by the strict laws by which this commodity was regulated.¹⁴ However, with the Order came a wider European foodscape of ingredients, tastes and recipes which slowly seeped into the Maltese kitchen of the well-to-do with the consumption of such novelties as ice cream, coffee, and chocolate. The peasants and poor folk however continued to eat what they could garner from the fields and from the markets according to their purse and means.¹⁵

After the Order lost Malta to the French – a short interlude – the island was taken over by the British in 1899. Grain remained a government monopoly so that supply could be better assured and administered as closely as possible. Such control did not, however, guarantee good quality bread – just its availability. In the first decade of the nineteenth century the traveller John Galt did not miss pointing out that, 'The bread in Malta is the worst I ever tasted'.¹⁶ With supplies being stored in the granaries, which consisted of underground silos or excavations in the rock along the

¹³ George Cassar, *What they ate: Food and foodways in Mdina and beyond – from Roman times to the Middle Ages* (Malta: Heland Project, 2015), 28.

¹⁴ Joan Abela, *Hospitaller Malta and the Mediterranean Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2018), Ch. 2.

¹⁵ Kenneth Gambin and Noel Buttigieg, *Storja tal-Kultura ta' l-Ikel f'Malta* (Malta: PIN Publications, 2004), Ch. 5. Pamela Parkinson-Large, *A Taste Of History – The Food of The Knights Of Malta* (Malta: MAG Publications 1995).

¹⁶ John Galt, *Voyages and Travels, in the years 1809, 1810, and 1811; containing Statistical, Commercial, and Miscellaneous Observations on Gibraltar, Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, Serigo, and Turkey* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, Strand, 1812), 117.

Valletta ramparts, the oldest grain was always given to the bakers first, and thus these had to make their bread with what they had. As could be expected, the quality was generally poor. The Maltese passed with little. Galt noticed their frugality ‘a little garlick (*sic*), or fruit, with a small piece of bread, is their common repast,’ while eating butcher’s meat was a rare luxury.¹⁷

In his observations of life in Malta, Thomas MacGill notes that the Maltese peasantry baked their own bread at home and ate it with a ‘*companatic*, or relish’ which included cheese, olives, onions, garlick (*sic*), dried fruit, salt-fish, and oil. Other food items on the common people’s tables were those products found in season – melons, prickly pears and vegetables eaten raw. MacGill added that they drank wine ‘in moderation’, while in the evening, after a day’s hard work, peasants and commoners would help themselves to a hot meal consisting of a *minestra* (Maltese: *ministra*) made with cooked vegetables and made tastier with some oil or grated cheese.¹⁸ MacGill was speaking from experience and direct observation as he had been one of the first Englishmen to settle in Malta in 1806 and lived on the island until his death in Valletta in 1844.¹⁹

Though butcher’s meat was not part of the daily repast, and a rare occurrence left for the special occasions, yet MacGill continues to recount, Maltese *caulata* (Maltese: *kawlata*) was ‘an appetite stirring dish’ made with a mix of vegetables boiled in a little water and relished with a piece of pork. The traveller could not miss Maltese *ravioli* (Maltese: *ravjul*) either. He noted that these were considered by the high-fed to be a ‘dainty dish’. *Ravioli* were made with fresh cheese, *ricotta*, beaten eggs and chopped parsley. This mixture was stuffed in a thin pastry which was then boiled and then stewed in a savoury sauce made with tomato juice. MacGill was so fascinated by these Maltese specialities that he had to exclaim: ‘...what are all your *vol-au-vents*, or fried frogs when compared with the savoury *caulata* and *ravioli* of the maltese (*sic*), but they must be cooked by a country girl; they would be ruined by the first *maitre de cuisine* of Paris.’²⁰

For those who wanted to find food items for any desired dish, one only needed to go to the Valletta market. In his *Guida* (guidebook) of the 1840s, written in Italian for the foreigners who wished to visit the colony, J. Quintana describes what he calls the small marketplace situated in the centre of the city flanked by the three streets *Mercanti*, *San Paolo* and *Teatro*. The author notes that though small in line with the number of inhabitants, yet it is this same smallness that rendered it remarkable. In a space measuring 124 ft on each side, one could find ‘*ogni genere di vettovaglie*’ (any type of provision) – all sorts of meat, poultry and game, fish, fruit,

¹⁷ Ibid., 118.

¹⁸ Thomas MacGill, *A Handbook, or Guide, for Strangers visiting Malta* (Malta: Luigi Tonna, 1839), 34.

¹⁹ Albert Ganado, “Bibliographical notes on Melitensia – 2,” *Melita Historica* 14, no. 1 (2004): 93.

²⁰ MacGill, *A Handbook*, 35.

vegetables, bread, biscuit, flour, pasta, legumes and seeds, coffee, sugar, tea, groceries, butter, sheep cheese, and an assortment of cured meats. Quintana informs the visitor that any food one craves for may be found in abundance here, at discrete prices and at any time of the day from dawn till dusk.²¹

An eye-witness account from the early twentieth century picks up more popular food in an ever-growing Maltese foodscape. Frederick W. Ryan's 1920 publication looks among other things at the feasts and feastings of the Maltese. He recounts the festive atmosphere in Valletta on the day of a religious festival. The Maltese came to the capital city and primarily attended to the spiritual part of the feast – procession, high mass and benediction. When the requirements for their soul had been observed, they turned to the needs of their bodies – eating, drinking and making merry. They congregated at the Upper Barracca which in the past was a roofed public space. Here the people from the villages would settle down to rest and picnic. Along the streets and in the squares outside the churches, booths were set up selling street food including pastries and confectionaries, cheesecakes (Maltese: *qassatat* and *pastizzi*), nougat, and high piled pyramids of honey and almonds. Other stalls sold a variety of fruits. To quench their thirst especially on the hot Maltese days, boys would go round selling tumblers of iced water poured from a barrel slung across their shoulder. Wine was also available, which, according to Ryan, was however of the very cheap and sour type. Yet this alcoholic drink, sold from the cask, was synonymous with these celebrations and had thus a fixed and expected presence. On normal days the Maltese peasant was however much more frugal – eating as a rule bread or pasta, some olives, a little oil and goat's cheese (Maltese: *gbejniet*).²²

Throughout the twentieth century, though affluence has penetrated among a wider portion of the population, yet the Maltese have continued to hold on to many dishes which are widely considered to be local and traditional. Pies include that filled with ricotta and broad beans (*torta tal-irkotta*), that filled with pumpkin and rice (*torta tal-qargħa hamra*), and the more seasonal, filled with a mixture of dorado fish, onion, tomato, cauliflower and potato (*torta tal-lampuki*). The Maltese have also developed over the years a way how to use leftover vegetables. These are mixed with tuna and then fried in oil. These fritters are known in Maltese as *pulpetti* and in more recent years these are served with fried eggs and potato chips.²³

However, with the island becoming increasingly globalised, and further internationalised with the surge in tourist numbers (around 2.7 million in 2018), coupled with the tens of thousands (amounting to about 100,000 in 2018) coming from all over the world to settle or work, Malta's foodscape has grown out of its more

²¹ J. Quintana, *Guida dell'Isola di Malta e sue dipendenze* (Malta: the author, 1844), 189–190.

²² Frederick W. Ryan, *Malta* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1910), 108-109.

²³ Ken Albala (ed.), *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2011), 234-235.

traditional, typical and staple foods and recipes, which had been so much in evidence up to the early 1970s. The Maltese are now much more likely go for a pizza, a burger, chicken nuggets, noodles, and the wide spectrum of food from across the world. Eating out for a Maltese family would include a choice of restaurants covering all sorts of international and ethnic cuisine – from Chinese to Indian, African to Mexican, Greek to Japanese to Eastern European to Turkish, just to mention some – or else go for fusion outlets; eat in or take away.²⁴

Indeed, as Elise Billiard has observed, Maltese food culture ‘gathers together tradition and modernity and plays inconsistently with this dualism.’ She continues that it is interesting to note how ‘the Maltese have managed to remain a people after having integrated so many different civilisations’.²⁵ This succinctly denotes the ability shown by the Maltese in managing the diversity of cultural influences through time up to the present and adding them to the island’s food repertoire. Some cultural elements have been integrated, others have been adapted, while the more recent ones, are more probably just tolerated.

The Valletta Restaurant Foodscape.

An analysis of the licensed food outlets in Valletta reveals that there are 126 snack bars and 38 restaurants. According to the legal notices a “restaurant” is ‘a catering establishment accessible to the public, where the primary purpose is the sale of food for consumption on the premises, on a table service basis in accordance with the standards as set out in the Second Schedule’. A “snack bar” on the other hand is ‘a catering establishment accessible to the public, where the primary purpose is the sale of food for consumption on or off the premises, on a table or counter service basis, in accordance with the standards as set out in the Third Schedule’.²⁶

Although licensing falls under the remit of the Malta Tourism Authority, there is no indication that applicants are obliged or encouraged to open up catering establishments which reflect what may be considered as “Maltese food culture”. Since the license data does not indicate the type of food which is provided for, it was decided to carry out an analysis of the type of food that is offered in these establishments based on Trip Advisor categories. According to Trip Advisor there are 130 establishments amongst which some are restaurants that form part of hotels and

²⁴ Ibid., 235.

²⁵ Elise Billiard, “Lost in tradition: An attempt to go beyond labels, taking Maltese food practices as a primary example,” in *Eating Traditional Food: Politics, identity and practices*, ed. Brigitte Sebastia (London: Routledge, 2016), 49.

²⁶ Laws of Malta. Subsidiary Legislation 409.15, Catering Establishments Regulations, 1st January, 2005, Legal Notice 175 of 2004, as amended by Legal Notices 426 of 2007 and 290 of 2010. (Malta: Government of Malta), 1.

other types of establishments also offering accommodation facilities as well as coffee shops. If one filters restaurants in Valletta by food type it emerges that there are:

- 26 Seafood
- 26 Pizza
- 76 Italian
- 7 Chinese
- 4 Steakhouse
- 10 Healthy
- 11 Fast Food
- 40 Café

If then one searches for Maltese cuisine, not even one venue comes up, whilst if one searches for Mediterranean, then 150 outlets are indicated.

The filter for fine dining returns 11 restaurants all indicating a Mediterranean cuisine, and another 6 that offer a European kitchen.

Another filter applied was that for Local Cuisine resulting in 51 outlets, the majority of which featuring Italian, Mediterranean and European concurrently. Again Maltese cuisine does not feature as it has not been set by Trip Advisor as a filter category. So it was decided to go through the reviews of the Local Cuisine category and a number of what could be considered as local features were highlighted. These were: rabbit, Maltese bread, fish, and local beer and wine.

Another main feature that was mentioned referred to the venue itself.

Restaurants and Geography

Restaurants are primarily sites of production and consumption. Yet such foodways manifest themselves through dialogues staged between the chef and the diners. The restaurant becomes a staged performance as the chef creates a culinary experience, a micro ambience that allows diners to uphold their identity.

The development of bars, restaurants, cafes and other food-related outlets forms an integral part of the cultural process negotiating the regeneration of cities of culture. Undoubtedly, Valletta's gastronomic foodscape became one of the most democratised aspect of the cultural product enjoyed by both the Maltese and the thousands of tourists and other foreigners who visit Valletta every year.

Against this background, geography immediately communicates a foodscape that aligns with Zelinsky's conclusion that class and tourism are strong predictors of the most popular types of food restaurants.²⁷ Another interesting observation is related to the geography of mainstream cuisines versus the less-mainstream ones. Although Zelinsky's study might be considered passé, it is interesting to consider how particular cuisines, considered as rather unique and exclusive, such as Chinese,

²⁷ Wilbur Zelinsky, "The roving palate: North America's ethnic restaurant cuisines," *Geoforum* 16, (1985): 51-72.

are no longer exotic, unpopular or even marginalized. The internationalization of the Chinese cuisine has resulted in the incorporation of particular Chinese foods in the palate of the Maltese, also widely recognised by the westernized consumer who also visits the Maltese islands as part of the tourism experience.

The foodscape of out-of-home food services in Malta has recently been undergoing some interesting developments. One remarkable factor is related to the entrepreneurial flair of those investing substantial funds to provide a unique restaurant experience. In recent years, persons who have decided to migrate to Malta have also joined in such ventures.

A phenomenon that had been developing over the past five years or so, is that involving out-of-home food related services offered by immigrants hailing especially from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. These restaurants, rather limited in number when compared to the more familiar westernised culinary experiences, are providing a rather unique ethnic cuisine experience. Immigrants hailing from continental Europe have also been influencing the Maltese foodscape, and conspicuously the many coming from Sicily and other Italian regions intending specifically to provide an Italian culinary experience in Malta.

Distinguishing between mainstream and less mainstream cuisines is in itself an important aspect that is worth exploring further. For the purpose of this study, it is important to understand the role of the migrant communities, their culinary identities and the manner in which these are incorporated within the foodscape of a place.

Evidence of the nomenclature used to identify Italian cuisine restaurants in Valletta is immediately indicative of those mind-sets recognizing the acquired taste of the local and the visitor. The longstanding familiarity of Malta with Italian products and food provides enough justification to explain this process of culinary inculturation. The proliferation of Italian cuisine is a clear reflection of the incorporation of this foreign culinary practise into the Maltese palate. The integration of Italian culinary practices in other parts of the world further attests to the success of such restaurants within Valletta's landscape. Revered as one of the leading cuisines within the Mediterranean and beyond, Italian food culture also emanates from the current popular association of Mediterranean cuisine with healthy living. The sum of all brings together the confluence of culinary culture, the regeneration of Valletta and the foodscape through the geography of migration.

Food travels with people, and the spread of culinary cultures is influenced by demographic movements and settlement patterns. Yet, in Valletta a total lack of cuisines representative of immigrants hailing from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East is starkly evident. The most obvious reason is squarely influenced by an economy of scales. The regeneration of Valletta witnessed the exponential increase in the value of property. Property rent and prices vary according to the location within

the city streetscape, and this is generated a hierarchy of restaurant classes, service and experience. Distinction is immediately communicated between one culinary culture and another through the financial capacities of the investor, which as yet has not attracted any interest to tap into the Valletta market from entrepreneurs from the regions discussed here.

The absence of a sustainable market for such cuisines brings forth other considerations related to settlement patterns and the acquired taste of the Maltese with respect to cuisines from Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria and Lebanon, among others. A concentration of immigrants hailing from such countries have settled in the towns of Hamrun, Marsa and Qormi – situated within a ten-kilometre radius from Valletta. As these individuals pour into these neighbourhoods, they also bring with them their cultural experiences, including culinary practices and tastes. Although such culinary experiences have, up till now, failed to become part of the Valletta foodscape, the main street in Hamrun became a main focal point of various restaurants and other food outlets run by these immigrants. Therefore, apart from economic considerations, the concentration of particular nationalities within a geographical space provides an opportunity for a particular foodscape to develop within a settlement.

Ray explains how ethnic restaurants provide immigrants with various opportunities that transcend economic advancement.²⁸ As a direct experience of home-away-from-home, such eateries offer opportunities for the immigrants to communicate their cultural identity also through food. The supply side is also squarely dependant on the consumer and the consumer's appropriation of the offered experience.

Food Trends

The adoption of food experiences by a wider audience depends on trends and trend setters. From long ago food became a symbol of power and authority. Humans consider food as another currency defining status within a society. Reminiscing of repasts triggers food-related memories that could narrate a person's identity.²⁹ As an intangible form of cultural heritage, food generates its own social life. Depending on time and place, humans assigning food meanings and imagine related food trends.³⁰

The recognition and integration of mainstream and non-mainstream cuisines brings forth another complex issue associated with the main proponents of cultural capital. Bourdieu defines taste as a system of classificatory schemes that are barely conscious. Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills and tastes that help signify one's status in society. Park argues that tastes are inextricably linked to one's

²⁸ Krishendu Ray, "Dreams of Pakistani Grill and Vada Pao in Manhattan: Reinscribing the immigrant body in metropolitan discussions of taste," *Culture & Society* 14, no.2 (2011): 243-273. See also Krishendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

²⁹ David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts. An anthropology of food and memory* (Indiana: Berg Publishers, 2001).

³⁰ Alessandra Guigoni, "Tradizione, innovazione e vintage nei foodscapes contemporanei. Il case study dei dolci sardi," *ANUAC* 1, no.2 (2012): 40-56.

social status and economic background, producing a ‘taste of luxury’ or a ‘taste of necessity’.³¹ Along the same thinking, Bourdieu considers consumers with high cultural capital as the diners who experience ‘the world freed from urgency and through the practise of activities which are an end in themselves, such as ... the contemplation of works of art.’³²

Foodies could be considered as consumers with high cultural capital. Foodies approach food as an object of study and aesthetic appreciation. For Johnson and Baumann the interest of foodies in food is manifested in their cultural capital through ‘education, identity, exploration and evaluation’.³³ Like food critics, consumers with a high cultural capital can also influence what is hierarchically categorized as mainstream and less mainstream cuisines. This cultural classification also differentiates between “foreign cuisines” and “ethnic cuisines”. The former enjoys a high-ranking position, including Continental, Mediterranean, Italian, French and more recently, Chinese cuisine.

Culinary hierarchy is not necessarily a clear-cut binary high and low, simply categorised as mainstream and less-mainstream cuisines. Michael Pollan’s reflections on the ‘omnivores’ dilemma’ is enough to indicate how food consumers also differentiate themselves when choosing to consume foods that distinguish them from others within the same group.³⁴ During such processes, groups decide to adopt and value particular foods over others. Such behaviour is neither a continuum as relegated foods could be rediscovered and reinvented.

Maltese Cuisine

Malta’s culinary culture is quite eclectic, one may describe it as a fusion cuisine. Malta’s dependency on large quantities of food imports and the cosmopolitan nature of the harbour area generated an environment of sharing and adopting various culinary practices. However, as already indicated above, food provisions were not always readily available to meet the basic needs of a growing population. Hunger was an omnipresent fear, since general conditions only started to improve very slowly during the post-World War Two period. Significant improvements in the general standard of living was experienced during the closing decades of the twentieth century.³⁵ The regular and abundant availability of food, coupled with a growing interest in restaurant food, made it possible for the Maltese to finally start to liberate

³¹ Kendall Park, “Ethnic Foodscapes: Foreign cuisines in the United States,” *Food, Culture & Society. An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 20, no.3 (2017): 368.

³² Pierre. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 46.

³³ Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010).

³⁴ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma. The search for the perfect meal in a fast-food world* (London: Penguin Press, 2006).

³⁵ Kenneth Gambin and Noel Buttigieg, *Storja tal-Kultura*.

themselves from the shackles of the past. This mindset was best manifested in the way several sought new foods and tastes, partially abandoning foods that have formed part of the regular fare of the Maltese, especially among those living in rural areas. Malta's culinary culture experienced an exogenous shock as culinary practices changed rapidly and in an incomprehensible manner.

During the past two decades Malta's culinary culture is again enjoying "front burner" status. While at home the Maltese still prepare foods considered to be an integral part of their culinary heritage. On the other hand, there is a lesser likelihood that these Maltese would seek to eat "traditional" food in a restaurant setting. Without engaging into the complexity of defining what might constitute "authentic" and "traditional" Maltese food, the Valletta regeneration project presents the interested diner with one opportunity of choice.³⁶ As the Maltese have developed a taste for cuisines ranging from Mediterranean to Continental, from French to Italian, the Valletta product provides them with ample opportunities for choice.

Influenced by Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Billiard also attributed Malta's attention to traditional cuisine to a high cultural capital aficionado.³⁷ Almost two decades later, the Maltese are increasingly becoming cognisant of the impact of globalization on their island's culinary identity. This growing awareness is the product of a "trickle down" effect, in Bourdieu's words, 'downclassing and upclassing'.³⁸ The availability of restaurants offering a Maltese culinary experience outside of Valletta, mainly located in towns still enjoying some connotation with "rural" life, provides elements for further consideration.

The quasi-absence of Maltese cuisine from the Valletta regeneration product could arguably be considered a missed opportunity both on the local as well as on the international level. Gezici and Kerimoglu explain how 'cultural heritage is the main attraction of cities; cultural heritage conserves the cultural values of the place and connects people to their collective memories'.³⁹ Since cultural resources form an integral part of the making of a place, then tangible and intangible cultural assets should be celebrated to reflect both the place and the experience.⁴⁰

Several researchers have drawn their attention to problematic practices when mobilizing urban cultural resources employed for the regeneration of cities. Harvey

³⁶ Noel Buttigieg, "Towards a Maltese culinary identity: Some considerations," *Melita Historica* 16, no.3 (2014): 69-80.

³⁷ Elise Billiard, "When tradition becomes trendy: social distinction in Maltese food culture," *Anthropological Notebooks*, no.12 (2006): 113-126. Also, Elise Billiard, "Searching for a National Cuisine," *Journal of Maltese History* 2, no.1 (2010): 47-58.

³⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction*. 163.

³⁹ Ferhan Gezici and Ebru Kerimoglu, "Culture, tourism and regeneration process in Istanbul," *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 4, no.3 (2010): 252-265.

⁴⁰ Soren Smidt-Jensen, "The roles of culture and creativity within urban development strategies: Scandinavian cities," *Centre for Strategic Urban Research*, no.8 (2007).

describes regeneration as a ‘carnival mask’,⁴¹ Ritzer as ‘cathedrals of consumption’,⁴² Amin and Thrift refers to ‘selling places for pleasure’,⁴³ and Berg considers the economic drive behind prestigious projects as exercises leading towards a ‘citadel of spectacle’.⁴⁴

While culture-led regeneration projects play a significant role in the reconstruction of urban economy and image, financial goals, property development and entrepreneurship take priority over the protection of local identities and quality life. The “trickle down” effect through foodscapes within the regeneration process bring forth also possibilities of gentrification as people feel the lack of social justice or inclusion. The attention on some flagship projects is enough to attest to those developments that bypass the local community.⁴⁵

Space and place: Is-Suq tal-Belt (The Valletta Market)

The preparation and consumption of food is also tightly connected to place. Lefebvre, a leading theorist, has articulated the tripartite formulation of the production of space. He proposes the concept that space is socially reproduced through three modes that exist in dialectical tension – (material) spatial practices; (mental) space of representations; and (lived) representations of space. In his famous *The Production of Space*⁴⁶ Lefebvre argues that: ‘An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d’être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one’.

By way of an explanation one may compare *Halles Centrales*, Paris and *Is-Suq tal-Belt*, Valletta. Both were inspired by leading architects. *Les Halles* Market was designed by Victor Baltard. Hector Zimelli, the Superintendent of Public Works in Malta, was inspired for his design of the Valletta market by Baltard, and by Sir Charles Fox of Crystal Palace (London) fame. The final building erected in the open space, which during the time of the Order of St John was known as the Piazza del Malcantone, was completed under the direction of the ubiquitous Maltese architect Emanuele Luigi Galizia in collaboration with British architects Scamp and Barry.⁴⁷

⁴¹ David Harvey, “From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance in late capitalism,” *Human Geography* 71, no.1 (1989): 3-17. See also David Harvey, “Voodoo cities,” *New Statesman and Society* 1 (1988): 33–35.

⁴² George Ritzer, *Enchanting a disenchanted world: Continuity and change in the cathedrals of consumption*. (California: Pine Forge Press, 2010). See also, Greg Richards and Julie Wilson, “Developing creativity in tourist experiences: a solution to the serial reproduction of culture,” *Tourism Management* 27 (2006): 1209-23.

⁴³ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, “Cultural-economy and cities,” *Progress in Human Geography* 31, no.2 (2007): 152.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Berg, *Positively Birmingham* (Birmingham: Birmingham Picture Library, 2003).

⁴⁵ Beatriz Plaza, “Evaluating the influence of large cultural artefacts in the attraction of tourism: the Guggenheim museum Bilbao case,” *Urban Affairs Review* 36, no.2 (2000): 264-74. See also Graeme Evans, “Measure for measure: evaluating the evidence of culture’s contribution to regeneration,” *Urban Studies* 42, nos. 5 and 6 (2005): 1-25.

⁴⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) – this book was originally published in French in 1974, and later published in English in 1991, translated by the ex-situationist Donald Nicholson-Smith.

⁴⁷ <https://issuqaltbelt.com/about-us/>

In the case of *Halles*, this building was re-appropriated in the late 1960s whereby from a wholesale produce market it was ‘transformed into a gathering-place and a scene of permanent festival – in short, into a centre of play rather than of work – for the youth of Paris’.⁴⁸

Lefebvre observes that ‘The diversion and re-appropriation of such spaces are of great significance, for they teach us much about the production of new spaces’. *Is-Suq tal-Belt* was the space which in the public eye was similar to how Emile Sola described *Les Halles* – ‘the belly of the city’. Though on a smaller scale it was, nonetheless, the space where food was concentrated and then distributed throughout the city.⁴⁹

In 2015 the Government of Malta declared that the former market building was to be restored in preparation for the Valletta ECOC 2018. In 2016 Arkadia Co. Ltd was granted a 65 year lease. Today *Is-Suq tal-Belt* or Valletta Food Market, is promoted as ‘The New Destination in the City’,⁵⁰ which from an iconic Victorian-era structure in Valletta it slowly became a derelict rundown structure, and then was transformed ‘into a state of the art destination, where one can grab a bite, shop for food and relax in the city’. The website claims that ‘The new and restored is-Suq tal-Belt brings to life a site which was neglected for years and was in danger of collapsing, returning this masterpiece to the public to enjoy while preserving the iconic Suq tal-Belt for future generations’.⁵¹

On the one hand it can be argued that providing an international choice of cuisines is not promoting Maltese heritage and does not portray the Maltese cultural identity; on the other hand one can also counter argue that it is the activity which is performed in the space and the product of the activity which gives a place or a space its meaning, and by extension a sense of identity.⁵²

At this point one may conclude with a question or two: Does *Is-Suq tal-Belt* and other spaces used for the consumption of food in a social context embody Maltese culture? What does this re-appropriation mean?

⁴⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 167.

⁴⁹ Sarah Bonnemaison and Christine Macy, *Festival Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008), 296.

⁵⁰ <https://issuqtaalbelt.com/>

⁵¹ <https://issuqtaalbelt.com/about-us/>

⁵² Marie Avellino, “The Maltese Gift: Tourist Encounters with the Self and the Other in Later Life,” (PhD diss., London Metropolitan University, 2016).

Bibliography

1. Abela, Joan. *Hospitaller Malta and the Mediterranean Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2018.
2. Albala, Ken. ed. *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2011.
3. Amin, Ash, and Thrift, Nigel. "Cultural-economy and cities." *Progress in Human Geography* 31, no.2 (2007): 143–161.
4. Appadurai, Arjun. "Introduction: Commodities and Politics of Value." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
5. Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at large. Cultural dimensions of globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
6. Avellino, Marie. "The Maltese Gift: Tourist Encounters with the Self and the Other in Later Life." PhD diss., London Metropolitan University, 2016.
7. Berg, Jonathan. *Positively Birmingham*, Birmingham: Birmingham Picture Library, 2003.
8. Billiard, Elise. "When tradition becomes trendy: social distinction in Maltese food culture," *Anthropological Notebooks*, 12 (2006): 113–126.
9. Billiard, Elise. "Searching for a National Cuisine," *Journal of Maltese History* 2, no. 1 (2010): 47–58.
10. Billiard, Elise. "Lost in tradition: An attempt to go beyond labels, taking Maltese food practices as a primary example." In *Eating Traditional Food: Politics, identity and practices*, edited by Brigitte Sebastia, 48–66. London: Routledge, 2016
11. Bonnemaïson, Sarah, and Macy, Christine. *Festival Architecture*. London: Routledge, 2008.
12. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
13. Brenbeck, Helen and Johansson, Barbro. "Foodscapes and Children's Bodies," *Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research* 2 (2010): 797–818.
14. Burgoine, Thomas. "Collecting accurate secondary foodscape data: A reflection on the trials and tribulations," *Appetite* 55 (2010): 522–527.
15. Buttigieg, Noel. "Towards a Maltese culinary identity: Some considerations," *Melita Historica* 16, no.3 (2014): 69–80.
16. Cassar, George. *What they ate: Food and foodways in Mdina and beyond – from Roman times to the Middle Ages*. Malta: Heland Project, 2015.
17. Galt, John. *Voyages and Travels, in the years 1809, 1810, and 1811; containing*

18. *Statistical, Commercial, and Miscellaneous Observations on Gibraltar, Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, Serigo, and Turkey*. London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, Strand, 1812.
19. Gambin, Kenneth, and Buttigieg, Noel. *Storja tal-Kultura ta' l-Ikel f'Malta*, Malta: PIN Publications, 2004.
20. Ganado, Albert. "Bibliographical notes on Melitensia – 2," *Melita Historica* 14, no.1 (2004): 67–93.
21. Gezici, Ferhan, and Kerimoglu, Ebru. "Culture, tourism and regeneration process in Istanbul," *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 4, no.3 (2010): 252–265.
22. Goodman, Michael K. "Food Geographies I: Relational Foodscapes and the busy-ness of being more-than-food," *Progress Human Geography* 40, no.2 (2016): 257–266.
23. Graeme, Evans, "Measure for measure: evaluating the evidence of culture's contribution to regeneration," *Urban Studies* 42, nos.5 and 6 (2005): 1–25.
24. Guigoni, Alessandra. "Tradizione, innovazione e vintage nei foodscapes contemporanei. Il case study dei dolci sardi," *ANUAC* 1, no.2 (2012): 40–56.
25. Harvey, David. "From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance in late capitalism," *Human Geography* 71, no.1 (1989): 3–17.
26. Harvey, David. "Voodoo cities," *New Statesman and Society* 1(1988): 33–35.
27. Johnston, Josée and Baumann, Shyon. *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2010.
28. Johnston, Josée, Rodney, Alexandra, and Szabo, Michelle. "Place, Ethics, and Everyday Eating: A Tale of Two Neighbourhoods," *Sociology* 46, no.6, (2012): 1091–1108.
29. Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Totemism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
30. Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.
31. Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Totemism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
32. MacGill, Thomas. *A Handbook, or Guide, for Strangers visiting Malta*. Malta: Luigi Tonna, 1839.
33. Mikkelsen, Bent E. "Images of Foodscapes: Introduction to foodscape studies and their application in the study of healthy eating out-of-home environments," *Perspectives in Public Health* 131, no.5, (2011): 209–216.
34. Mintz, Sidney W. "Food, history and globalization," *Journal of Chinese Dietary Culture* 2, no.1 (2006): 1–22.
35. Park, Kendall. "Ethnic Foodscapes: Foreign cuisines in the United States," *Food, Culture & Society. An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 20, no.3 (2017): 365–393.

36. Plaza, Beatriz. "Evaluating the influence of large cultural artefacts in the attraction of tourism: the Guggenheim museum Bilbao case," *Urban Affairs Review* 36, no.2 (2000): 264–74.
37. Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma. The search for the perfect meal in a fast-food world*, London: Penguin Press, 2006.
38. Pollock, Nancy. "Food and Transnationalism: Reassertions of Pacific Identity." In *Migration and Transnationalism. Pacific Perspectives*, edited by Helen Lee, and
39. Steve Tupai Francis, 103–114. Canberra: The Australian National Press, 2009.
40. Quintana, J. *Guida dell-Isola di Malta e sue dipendenze*. Malta: the author, 1844.
41. Ray, Krishendu. "Dreams of Pakistani Grill and Vada Pao in Manhattan: Reinscribing the immigrant body in metropolitan discussions of taste," *Culture & Society* 14, no.2 (2011): 243–273.
42. Ray, Krishendu. *The Ethnic Restaurateur*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
43. Richards, Greg, and Wilson, Julie. "Developing creativity in tourist experiences: a solution to the serial reproduction of culture," *Tourism Management* 27, (2006): 1209–23.
44. Ritzer, George. *Enchanting a disenchanted world: Continuity and change in the cathedrals of consumption*. California: Pine Forge Press, 2010.
45. Roe, Maggie, Sorlöv Herlin, Ingrid, and Speak, Suzanne. "Identity, food and landscape character in the urban context," *Landscape Research* 41, no.7 (2016): 1–16.
46. Ryan, Frederick W. *Malta*. London: Adam & Charles Black, 1910.
47. Smidt-Jensen, Soren. "The roles of culture and creativity within urban development strategies: Scandinavian cities," *Centre for Strategic Urban Research*, no.8 (2007): 2–22.
48. Sonnino, Roberta. "Local Foodscapes: place and power in the agri-food system," *Acta Agriculturae Scandinavica* 63, no.1 (2013): 2–7.
49. Sutton, David. *Remembrance of Repasts. An anthropology of food and memory*. Indiana: Berg Publishers, 2001.
50. Zelinsky, Wilbur. "The roving palate: North America's ethnic restaurant cuisines," *Geoforum* 16, (1985): 51–72.