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BRITISH COLONIAL MALTA: A MELTING POT OF CULINARY DIETS (1800–1900)

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In 1844, seven British subjects stopped at Malta on their homebound trip from India. Among the several observations recorded after a twelve-day period of quarantine in the Lazaretto detention quarters of Malta (Galea, 1966), one of the members of this group put in writing the reactions of some of his friends during a particular dining experience of a three o'clock dinner. These compatriots reacted with adjectives such as 'suspicion' and 'distrust' when this perspective, claiming the service to be good and clean, 'comprising of English and French modes *de cuisine* as well as could be desired.' He then lists the selection offered in this *table d'hôte*:

...soup à la *Julienne*, and a dish of horse mackerel; roast beef à l'*Anglais* (the beef comes to Malta from Tunis, and after serving quarantine, is fattened for the table); a *fricandeau* of sweetbread in a well-flavoured sauce; a stewed breast of mutton mashed potatoes, a macaroni, peas or French beans, or artichokes, an apricot tart, cheese and a salad. Oranges, cherries and strawberries compose our dessert, and we drink a pint of Marsala (Anon., 1844, p. 60).

This experience goes back to around four decades into British rule and clearly these men could identify familiar foods linked to their culinary culture. Nevertheless, some among them felt uncomfortable with consuming the food they found, an attitude which highlighted the critical

The ITTC runs a number of courses / units which deal with the culture of food. The article is related to this offer.

role played by food in the development of new tastes and the maintenance and limits of those ideas that influenced both the colonised and the coloniser. The observations recorded above are powerful reminders that the purchase, preparation, distribution and consumption of food cannot be assumed as a neutral cultural manifestation.

Food unites; food divides. Consumption patterns and food choices are functions of a cultural activity that produces and reproduces group and national identities, reflecting historical and cultural specificities (Wilson, 2006). In a colonial context, eating was one of the most subtle yet profound and regular behaviours that expressed the strong feelings between the coloniser and the colonised. Consuming the new foreign culture required constant negotiation since the coloniser could not merely impose its culinary culture, and force the colonised to change long-standing eating traditions. The intersection between foreign and local culinary cultures is a complicated affair, a ‘pleasurable and perilous process’ (Durmelat, 2015, p. 116). The veracity of this observation continues to be relevant in the postcolonial age. Whole nations continue to assess and reassess their culinary heritage in what is termed as culinary *métissage* (Poulain & Tibère, 2000, p. 238).

The nineteenth century context indicates how the table became more than just an exchange site for British and Maltese foodways. The Colonial government gradually inched into Maltese culinary habits; it attempted to control, regulate and facilitate a home-away-from-home environment so as to suit the British forces stationed at the geostrategic fortress colony. Beyond Malta’s strategic importance, the British colonial government had to fulfil the solemn obligation of providing the Maltese with the necessary food supplies and a decent livelihood. In part, this was a continuation of an inherited situation already familiar to the Maltese, and that could be traced back through Malta’s colonial annals from the beginning of history (Cassar, 2015). The locals thus came into contact and internalised culinary and other habits and ways of life from the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Angevins, Aragonese and the Order of St John (Cassar, 2000; Blouet, 2004). Likewise, the British brought over their own culinary cultural baggage: often relatively diverse and quite different from Malta’s Mediterranean dietary practices.

FOOD STUDIES AND COLONIAL FOODWAYS

As a topic of scholarly consideration, food has long been a subject of interest to anthropologists, historians and cultural heritage researchers.

The focus on the production, processing, distribution and consumption of various food products is considered by several scholars as a means by which to better understand aspects of colonialism linked to the globalisation of food and foodways. Foodways also serves to detect the permeating political and economic undertones of colonial governments within the colonies. The seminal work of the late Sidney Mintz (1985) about sugar and sweetness is testimony of a dual meaning: the power of food and food as power. As soon it became recognised by researchers for its significance towards the understanding of material culture, “food was an instrument for the study of other things” (Mintz, 1996, p. 3). Likewise, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains how food is another object that allows for a “history that has crystallised over time in things” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 71). In this case, the ‘objectification’ of food allows for a better understanding of sociocultural behaviour and expectations.

Colonial food studies are starting to enjoy ‘front burner’ attention, with more researchers becoming increasingly invested in studying the long-term impact of colonialism through food (Dietler, 2007). Constructing imperial history through food and foodways requires the use of different sources of information as well as scholars that need to be able to interpret archival material from different perspectives. Miller and Deutsch (2007, p. 7) recognise the multidisciplinary character of food studies, considered to be essential since researchers have to bring together “the social and cultural aspects of food, from production through consumption”. Recent publications indicate how, in several cases, the researcher would have to collate fragmented pieces of information. Amid such challenges, the study of food and empire refer to the diffusion of culinary cultures. Commensality is driven by that common denominator – exchange – which transcends any boundary. Rachel Laudan (2015) has also explored how food products, their preparation and consumption, carry implicit and explicit meanings when negotiated in a colonial context. While exchanges unfold, intimate social and cultural constructs are shaped and conveyed as daily food habits define social hierarchies, generate ethnic consciousness, emphasise gender differences and mark religious and national identities.

MALTA: A BRITISH CULINARY COLONY?

Few researchers have to date looked closely at Malta as a colonial culinary case-study.

The Maltese islands passed on to the British Crown nearly by chance.

After being given to the Order of St John by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the Maltese archipelago experienced Hospitaller rule from 1530 to 1798 (Mallia-Milanes, 1993; Freller, 2010). In that latter year, and with the effects of the French Revolution in full swing in many parts of Europe since 1789, revolutionary forces under their rising star General Napoleon Bonaparte, embarked on an expedition to capture Egypt, and on their way snatched the Maltese islands, prompted also by the islands' key position on the route to India. Malta capitulated to the French, aided by a combination of treason on the part of key members of the Order, a fifth column which included influential Maltese, and the mishandling of the situation by Grandmaster von Hompesch. After three months under the French, the locals decided that they had had enough of revolutionary reforms and orders. In a national uprising, the people of the countryside revolted against the occupiers and blockaded the French garrison inside the city of Malta. The two-year ordeal saw the Maltese, backed by Portuguese, Neapolitan and British forces, battle it out until the French troops, realising the impossibility of receiving relief from their mother country, surrendered. Though the British had come to Malta's aid as allies of the King of the Two Sicilies, having sent their officers to manage the blockade, they simply took over the surrender process and made sure of being the ones to receive the French capitulation (Testa, 1997). The British became the *de facto* new masters of Malta, and after some years under their protection, when they should have left Malta, this was declared a British Crown colony in 1813, and confirmed as such by the Treaty of Paris in 1814 (Gifford, 1817, pp. 399-404).

After moving into their newly acquired territory, the British sought to establish a modicum of familiarity for the thousands of British sailors and soldiers that were sent along the years to protect and garrison Malta. Moreover, the authorities trained local people so that they could serve these needs. Basically, the focus was on the transplanting of a sense of Britishness in Malta, whose colonial society embraced a fundamentally dissimilar way of life, and whose social texture was typically Latin and Mediterranean. The upper and educated classes were culturally Italianate in all aspects, including culinary tastes. The lower uneducated classes were, on the other hand, largely tied to the products of their fields and to unpretentious living. One description of the people of the villages was given by Henry Seddall, who felt confident that what he was about to state was known to "every Englishman who has lived in Malta" and could thus be corroborated. According to Seddall, "the natives of Malta are far

behind the times in all kinds of knowledge; ... and that, notwithstanding their almost daily communication with England, they are really as senseless and as stupid as the aborigines of Australia" (1870, pp. 294-5).

The Maltese countryside may not have possessed erudite men and women; however, it did yield abundant fruits and vegetables, typical of the Mediterranean region, some of which were however untypical for the British Isles. George Percy Badger (1838) observed that a stranger would have been astonished at the 'surprising sight' of the carts laden with the variety of products waiting in front of the entrance to the fortified capital city of Valletta, so that these could be wheeled in as soon as the gates were opened at sunrise. He continued that the market was thus well-stocked with strawberries, figs, pomegranates, grapes, apples, pears, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, melons and prickly pears. Oranges too were very tasty and these were exported to England and other countries. Yet, the production of food items was not nearly enough to feed the whole population of locals and foreigners.

Though largely tied to the soil and the farm, food was by no means a matter to be discarded. Thomas MacGill, writing for strangers visiting Malta in 1839, informed them that the peasantry ate vegetables in their crude state, melons and prickly pears, cheese, olives, dried fruit, salt-fish, and drank wine in moderation. Meat was reserved for a feast day however. Hot food included the *minestra* made from cooked vegetables and "strengthened with a little oil or grated cheese." A deserved mention, according to the writer, went to the *kawlata* (present-day spelling) in front of which "the most dainty (*sic*) palate desires to participate."

The *caulata* of the Maltese is an appetite stirring dish, composed of all sorts of vegetables, boiled together with little water, and a piece of pork to give it a relish. Their *ravioli* is even reckoned a dainty dish by the high fed: it is composed of fresh cheese, *ricotta*, beaten eggs and chopped parsley enveloped in a thin paste, first boiled, then stewed in a savoury sauce, with the juice of the love apple.

When health gives zest, what are all your *vol-au-vents*, or fried frogs when compared with the savoury *caulata* and *ravioli* of the Maltese, but they must be cooked by a country girl; they would be ruined by the first *maitre de cuisine* of Paris (MacGill, 1839, pp. 34-5).

The largely British male population, the majority of whom were uniformed personnel, had to be entertained, as much as it needed to be nourished.

The Maltese population also had to be maintained, especially since Malta's incapacity of producing sufficient quantities caused food supply to be predominantly dependent on foreign imports, especially grain. Bread was the staple food of the Maltese and was thus especially important, its consumption growing along the nineteenth century notwithstanding the increasing and doubling of its price (Cassar, 1988).

Imports could be considered an asset in view of the fact that the Maltese were not particularly attached to, or proud of, the local produce. Indeed, local products generated a lower price on the market when compared to imported similar items. The significance of imports should also be contextualised within an age-old mentality held by the populace and conditioned by a perennial fear of hunger linked to drought and other adverse eventualities.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the notion of Britishness had increasingly seeped into several aspects of the daily life of the Maltese. Evidence indicates that the Maltese gradually expressed an interest in, and indeed a disposition towards, the introduction of new foods and drinks, which became increasingly accepted within their diet.

The choice of consuming a particular 'colonial' food and preparing it in the correct manner was one of the behaviours communicating inclusion. It was also a sign of the acceptance of the political situation where the coloniser determined the day-to-day affairs of the colonised. Historians often note how the introduction of some food products in Malta was met with stark opposition and whose consumption immediately declared a person's orientation. Obviously, we cannot ignore the way particular foods have been endowed with meanings of empire, transcending their immediate nutritional value. For the culturally Italianate section of Malta's population, such goods were looked upon as powerful, even if at times relatively covert, symbols of the British Empire and treated as another element of imposition. However, evidence also suggests how, by the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, such products were being progressively incorporated by the Maltese within their culinary practices (Vella, 1894; 1903; 1936; Agius, 1938).

A CAUTIONARY APPROACH: CONSUMING POTATOES

The potato is one food item which has intrigued researchers of Maltese food and foodways. Malta seems to have had a love-hate relationship with this vegetable. The Maltese were initially, to say the least, undecided

about what to do and how to treat the potato. In a correspondence by a soldier stationed in Malta, dated 2 October 1810, to a friend who would soon join him in the colony, the writer first of all speaks about the difference between Gibraltar and Malta in that there was no resemblance between the two. Indeed, regarding Malta, the soldier admitted,

it is our own faults if we do not daily and hourly enjoy ourselves. It has amusements of every kind; everything is cheap; the climate delightful; the women pretty, if not elegant; and the people, not social perhaps, but obedient, submissive, and respectful (Anon, 1811, p.54).

The author did not miss commenting upon the vegetables available, remarking that these were abundant and cheap. Regarding potatoes, he observed that these “have not been so long known and are consequently not so much used as they are in England, though they are now cultivated in the island” (Anon, 1810, p. 58).

There appears to be consensus about the introduction of potatoes in Malta during the British Colonial period (Castagna, 1888; Bowen-Jones, Dewdney & Fisher, 1961). Historians have repeatedly quoted information from travelogues to sustain this development in Malta’s culinary culture. It is also at times represented as a form of struggle between the coloniser and the Maltese farmer, hinting at a peasant resistance towards Britishness. Arguably, one may hypothesise that the apparent lack of interest in the cultivation of potatoes could indeed indicate opposition to the consumption of potatoes by the general population. This circumstance is contextualised in a general understanding, suggesting a political stand by which the Maltese wanted to make a statement in favour of their Mediterranean roots, but who, eventually, had to succumb to pressures from the colonial power. These assumptions allow for an evaluation of the relationship between cuisine and empire and how food generates intimate experiences that transcend all forms of boundaries.

Of all the food imports introduced into Europe as a result of the Columbian Exchange, the potato made a rather late appearance. Parts of northern Europe would gradually elevate the tuber from a botanical curiosity to an emergency food by the end of the eighteenth century. Southern European countries, especially those regions shouldering the Mediterranean basin, remained quite conservative and continued to consider grain as the ‘staff of life’. For instance, the potato was cultivated on a small scale in the area

of seventeenth century Tuscany and small parts of Prussia (Smith, 2011; Reader, 2008).

In hindsight, the potato crop turned out to be one of the most important developments in farming and consumption patterns of the modern period. While an obvious regular food for parts of Europe, classic amongst these being Ireland (Anon, 1796; Coohill, 2014), potatoes became a fundamental crop, ensuring the survival of many during periods of hunger. The omnipresent danger of food shortages, especially grain, triggered the need to seek out solutions beyond traditional alternatives. The most important substitute was the potato, the crop which, by the closing decades of the eighteenth century, was cultivated in no less than forty varieties in Europe. Successful transition was a long-drawn process as its adoption lacked the necessary energy and conviction causing its spread to be unsystematic and sporadic. Even if scientific proponents including Adam Smith (2016) and Antoine-Auguste Parmentiere (1773) exalted the importance of this crop as a means to alleviate hunger, countries such as France, Spain, Italy and Portugal only started to gradually integrate potatoes into their culinary diet along the closing decades of the eighteenth century.

It is generally held that the Maltese, similar to several southern European nations, took quite a while before they brought themselves to consider the cultivation and consumption of potatoes. It is here suggested that this view requires some rethinking especially since cultivation is not necessarily a reflection of consumption patterns.

Evidence on the cultivation of potatoes in Malta is rather sparse and its attribution to the British colonial period rather than a follow-up to trends in other parts of the Mediterranean might require some consideration. Historians attribute the first reference to the crop as a botanical plant to Bali Argotti who in 1774 introduced the plant to Malta. There is no further mention of the plant until Malta became a British protectorate in 1800. In the absence of information, researchers have attributed the intention of the first small-scale cultivation of the plant to supply food for the British forces stationed on the island. However, one curiosity which has not been given enough attention so far, is the depiction of a number of potatoes spread on the floor in a 1762 painting found in the refectory of the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana. Incidentally, this representation is one of several found in the same hall, which comprise foods known to have been cultivated and consumed in Malta.



A depiction of the potatoe during the Order's period is found in one of the paintings at the refectory of the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana. (Photo courtesy: Daniel Cilia)

Potatoes seemed to lack recognition for their nutritional value among the Maltese, especially since the crop was regularly used to feed the animals. Thus, the fact that potatoes were considered to be a substitute food mostly fit for animals tainted this crop with several adverse sociocultural meanings. Feeding potatoes to one's family, rather than bread, was perceived as a sign of failure for the breadwinner. Moreover, as the crop never enticed the Maltese to seriously consider its nutritional value, it was quickly forgotten when times of food shortages subsided (Gambin & Buttigieg, 2004; Cassar, 2019).

Researchers also emphasise that the British colonial authorities had to work hard to convince the Maltese to cultivate the crop. In the absence of evidence about the cultivation of the potato crop, historians proposed resistance to the cultivation of the crop. We have no evidence that indicates how much animal fodder was being cultivated for the same period discussed here. Neither the authorities nor the farmers felt the need to record such information. It is thus being suggested that some consideration should be made to the fact that, if potatoes were primarily cultivated as animal fodder, then the evidence from travelogues could simply be misinforming. It is possible that the colonial government's main difficulty was in trying to convince Maltese farmers not to feed the crop to the animals but rather to sell it for human consumption. It is here argued that travellers' accounts that attribute the introduction of the potato in Malta are primarily referring to cultivation for human consumption, instead of the already known practice of growing potatoes for animal fodder. It is this process of education, and its concomitant economic return, that explains how within four decades of British rule, several Maltese farmers started to consider the potato as a cash crop cultivated for human consumption. Furthermore, the cultivation of a crop should not be considered as directly proportional to the Maltese market demand. On the contrary, the supply could not meet the demand to the extent that the British colonial government used to import large quantities of the crop (Malta Blue Book, 1828). It is documented that, around the late nineteenth century, the 'Champion' variety was in great demand in Malta. This was brought from Britain: a country that also exported other varieties to Europe and the world – 'King Edward' to Spain and North Africa; 'Up-to-date' and 'Majestic' to South Africa and Australia; and, 'Royal Kidney' to the Canary Islands, Portugal, Italy, Algeria and South America; besides smaller quantities of 'Epicure', 'Arran Banner', 'Great Scot' and 'Kerr's Pink' (Salaman, 1985, p. 406).

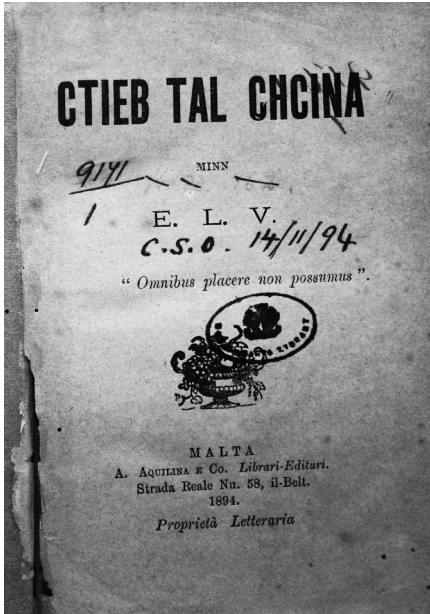
Rural inhabitants might have resisted the regular consumption of potatoes because of their direct association with the cultivation and use of the crop to maintain their herds and their attachment to other, more familiar, vegetables. Their lack of interest in consuming the crop was also influenced by market value, especially since this generated money to support their business. If these mental attitudes were employed within Malta's urban context, then the people of the harbour towns should have behaved differently. With several Maltese working side-by-side the British forces, potato consumption among the Maltese could have been rather popular in the harbour towns of Valletta, Cospicua, Senglea, Vittoriosa and Floriana. Although urbanites might have held a common opinion about the crop similar to their rural counterparts, the intense exposure to the product as a result of significant imports and its concomitant consumption may, arguably, have facilitated a process by which potatoes were increasingly adopted as part of their normal fare. Consequently, irrespective of cultivation interests, urban dwellers could have been more disposed to introduce potatoes, even if in small quantities, to their table.

Evidence is lacking when trying to specify the amount of potatoes consumed by the Maltese during the nineteenth century. However, the amounts of money spent on potato imports is indicative of the exposure the Maltese had to this crop (Malta Blue Book, 1828). Furthermore, several Maltese became acquainted with the different ways of how to prepare the potato, thus enhancing the quantity of food, and especially for the ones who struggled with the regular experience of hunger.

One should not consider statements based on statistics of potato imports as indicative of the level of integration of potatoes into Malta's dietary regime. However, it is difficult to conclude that such imports were exclusive for the British forces. Especially during the closing years of the nineteenth century, more Maltese were willing to emulate their British rulers and included the potato in several Maltese dishes.

EVIDENCE FROM COOKERY BOOKS

A cursory look at the first published recipe book in Maltese sheds light on how potatoes became a common ingredient in several dishes, and particularly in some that had been commonly consumed by the Maltese without the addition of potatoes prior to the coming of the British. References to *kawlata* [a vegetable soup] and *fenech la kampagnola* [fried rabbit, peasant style] are particularly revealing since today these



The front page of the first Maltese recipe book written by E.L. Vella and published in 1894

dishes represent some of the foods considered to mark Malta's culinary identity. Food transcends boundaries and, as part of a fusion cuisine, potatoes became an integral part in the preparation of these foods, even if the Maltese are constantly searching for a national cuisine they consider unique and representative of their identity (Cremona, 2010, pp. 103, 202).

The use of cookery as a reflection of the interaction of different culinary practices is rarely more evident than in a contemporary printed cookery book. The recipe book *Il Chtieb tal Chcina* [lit. The Kitchen Book] by E.L. Vella (1894) remains the first recipe book written in Maltese. In the introduction, the author indicates how the book was mainly intended to inform and educate the common woman and her servants, rather than important chefs, as had been the case for earlier books. Following the form and shape of some of the leading cookery books printed in Britain, Vella aspired to assist the user to navigate the increasingly diverse cookery products and practices by providing the latest recipes that could be prepared economically and with minimal difficulty. The author, aware of the several Maltese women employed as cooks in British households, emphasised how *Il Chtieb tal Chcina* would provide the necessary information to fulfil such domestic duties with ease, especially since most of the employers lacked the necessary culinary knowledge to prepare good and healthy dishes.

Il Chtieb tal Chcina is the first document that presents the researcher with the coexistence of British and Maltese culinary practices. References to beef steak, cottage pie and Irish stew are fused with soups, fish and meat dishes associated primarily with Maltese culinary customs. The collection of recipes is also a testimony to the integration of particular ingredients primarily associated with British cookery. For instance, out of a total of

114 recipes, twelve employed potatoes as one of the ingredients in the preparation of the dish. No other recipe, apart from potato fritters, has the word ‘potato’ included in the title. This changed significantly in the third edition of the same book (Vella, 1936), which included seven recipes specifically featuring potatoes in the title.

Although recipe books should not be simply considered representatives of a nation’s dietary patterns, they surely are descriptive of that section within society with a greater disposition to embrace change and innovation. *Il Chtieb tal Chcina* included several recipes which clearly related to those who exhibited traits of Britishness. The introduction to the book attributes the recipes to Malta’s culinary culture. In emulating the coloniser, Vella claims that this was a collection of recipes popularly known among the Maltese.

CONCLUSION

The insistence of the British authorities to make potatoes available to the British Forces is a clear manifestation of power. Irrespective of whether the Maltese favoured the crop or not, the colonial government continued to invest money to meet the demands of those interested to cultivate and consume the product. To a certain extent, this could be interpreted as one good attempt by the British to engage the Maltese with a foreign culinary culture that would serve to further assert the colonisers’ dominant culture.

The widespread consumption of the potato could be considered one opportunity for the British to display material wealth and sophistication. This was made possible because of a number of reasons. The British established a market for the product and were well prepared to pay good money for it. The influence of the market conditioned those Maltese farmers who sought to improve their activity to consider the potato as a cash crop. The potato also represented the dominant power, even if the main consumers were mainly British soldiers and sailors stationed in Malta. The fact that Malta was considered African and not modern was enough to create a social hierarchy: a divide between the ruler and the ruled. It is this same dichotomy that allowed for a sense of Britishness to exist. For a nation that had constantly been part of a foreign system, submissive behaviour was well engrained in the general Maltese psyche. Certainly, food sparked off conversations, and some Maltese could have chosen to experience the potato as a social occasion allowing for the exploration of an aspect of British culinary culture.

Assuming that the harbour towns became the first and main recipients of new products and new culinary practices, the fusion of Britishness into established Maltese culinary practices became inevitable. Rather than a struggle, this fusion should be considered as a learning process, allowing for the alien to become familiar as the Maltese explored new tastes and culinary practices.

Food consumption is, nevertheless, an integral part of material culture. Like other objects, food can carry shared meanings that are particular to a specific culture. When food products took on new and more widely shared meanings in society, the Maltese increasingly looked at the cookery of the British as more reflective of the same British culinary culture. The use of particular products and the replication of several dishes offered the Maltese, who lacked the means, an opportunity to taste another part of the world with which they were unfamiliar. By the end of the nineteenth century, cookery became a source of how to also emulate aspects of the British culinary culture and that of its Empire. It is important to note here that even Britain's exclusive culinary culture underwent significant changes from the eighteenth century onwards as a result of the borrowing process from the culinary cultures of Britain's own colonies and beyond (Panayi, 2008). The adoption of dishes from different parts of the Empire, such as Indian curry, and the assimilation of this food into Britain's culinary repertoire, took a new and widely shared meaning for the British. It is safe enough to claim that Malta had been exposed to a British Empire fusion culinary culture which it took up and adopted.

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