

Malta

- an archipelago of islands, where ancient past blends into harmonious present

TEXT AMOR ENGELBRECHT PHOTOGRAPHS ANGIE LAZARO

From its remarkably rich history, magnificent architecture, diverse fusion cuisine to the romantically brave knights of St John, tanzanite-coloured water and traditional fishing boats; this tiny dot on the map offers unique postcard charm. Malta is a fascinating microcosm of the Mediterranean, a sponge that has absorbed waves of character from its neighbours and conquerors, while staying anchored in its own culture



Mdina

History

It is believed that the first inhabitants of the islands came from Sicily around 4000BC, but it is the Copper Age (3600-2500BC) that offers the most spectacular heritage. During this phase is the development of the Temple Culture, named for the abundance of megalithic temples erected in honour of the Fat Lady, a fertility goddess. Statuettes of her can be seen at Valletta's National Museum of Archaeology.

In 800BC Malta was colonized by the Phoenicians but in 218BC Rome took control, and in AD60 St Paul was shipwrecked here. According to legend, during St Paul's three-month stay, many of the islanders converted to Christianity. When the Roman Empire split in AD395, Malta seemed to have fallen under the sway of Constantinople. During the expansion of Islam in the 7th and 9th centuries, Malta fell into Arab hands in 870.

From 1090, for the next 400 years a succession of Normans, French and Spanish ruled. When the Knights of St John were driven from their island stronghold by the Ottoman Empire in 1523, Emperor Charles V gave them Malta hoping to contain the Islamic forces.

After arriving in Malta in 1530 they set about building fortifications and defended it successfully in 1565 against the Ottomans. Grateful Christian monarchs around Europe, relieved to be saved from further Islam expansion, then funded the building of the fortified capital Valletta.

The French revolution of 1789 had far-reaching impact on Malta as the islands were occupied by the French in 1798 and the knights forced to depart after 268 years in residence. Two years later, the British, with the help of the Maltese, took control. They ruled until 1964 when Malta gained independence. The island was declared a republic in 1974 and became part of the European Union in 2004.

T

he islands of Malta sit at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea. It is the most southerly European country, lying approximately halfway between the western and eastern ends of the Mediterranean and roughly equidistant from the shores of Sicily and North Africa.

Although it is only 316km² in area, its land has felt the ebb and flow of the most influential ancient cultures, and has witnessed first hand many pivotal moments in history. Malta's amazing natural harbours coupled with its geographical position, made it a key port as developing seafaring allowed greater mobility and new shipping routes. This began a long tradition of control from abroad by the dominant maritime power in the Mediterranean of each successive era (for more about the history please see block).

Six islands comprise the archipelago of Malta but only three are inhabited. Malta,

the largest, is home to around 350 000 people, while Gozo, which can be reached by car ferry, has one-fifth of this population on an island a quarter of the size. Comino has only a handful of houses, the two St Paul's Bay islands see only day visitors, and tiny Filfla is a nature reserve where no visitors are allowed.

Of late Malta has become known as a beach-holiday destination, and its 300-yearly sunny days and warm water certainly justify such marketing. But what makes Malta truly unique is that so much of its intriguing past is visible today – from 500-year-old temples to immense 16th-century fortifications built by the Knights of St John. Couple the history, beaches and moderate climate with friendly locals, good restaurants, scenic landscapes and first-class diving opportunities; and you've got a pocket-rocket destination offering drawcards out of all proportion to its size.



Traditional Maltese fishing boat



Typical urban Maltese street



One of the many beautiful beaches



Tanzanite-coloured water



HIGHLIGHTS AT A GLANCE Valletta – Malta’s genteel capital

Located on the northeastern shore of Malta, Valletta offers splendid Baroque architecture. Named after Grand-master Jean Parisot de la Valette when the walled capital was founded in 1566, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is less than 1km wide and 1.5km long. It is also one of the first cities in Europe to use a grit street system.

Among the city’s many highlights is **St John’s Co-Cathedral**, which was constructed between 1573 and 1577. Its simple, sober façade gives no hint of its lavish interior – inside it is a magnificent decorative masterpiece. Small chapels off the main nave are dedicated to each language group among the knights, and the floor of the church consists of tombs of these soldier/monks, laid out in coloured marble. A personal highlight was seeing up close the most famous of all Caravaggio’s paintings, *The Beheading of St. John*, which hangs in a private room in the cathedral.



St John’s Co-Cathedral

The **Palace of the Grand Masters**, once the official and private residence of the Grand Master, was constructed between 1572 and 1580. A visit to this treasure with its 100-metre façade will bring to life the wealth and power of the Order of St John. It also houses the armoury with its collection of 6 000 pieces, including arms used during the Great Siege of 1565.

If you are interested in the pre-history, the **Museum of Archaeology** will not disappoint. Both the Neolithic and Bronze Ages are brought to life and even finds from the Roman era are on display. Of particular interest are the statues of the so-called ‘fat ladies’, the supposed fertility goddesses dating from the Temple Culture period.

The **Upper Barakka Gardens**, once the private garden of the knights, offers spectacular views over the Grand Harbour; the biggest and busiest in Malta. Across the water you get a view of the Three Cities. The perfect picture-taking spot.



Palace of the Grand Masters



St John’s Co-Cathedral



Detail, St John’s Co-Cathedral



‘Fat lady’ sculpture



Knight’s tombs, St John’s Co-Cathedral



Upper Barakka Gardens



Upper Barakka Gardens

The Order of St Johns

The story of the Order of St John begins in the 11th century, when Italian merchants set up a Christian hospice in Jerusalem. In time more hospitals followed along the pilgrimage route from Italy to the Holy Land and their status was raised to that of an independent religious order – the Hospitallers.

The calling of the Order was principally to care for the sick, but in time the emphasis shifted to a military role, that of fighting for the faith. When the armies of Islam captured the Holy Land in 1291, they set up home on Cyprus and Rhodes, hoping to reconquer Jerusalem. In 1530 they moved to Malta after being driven out of Rhodes by the Islamic armies.

The Knights of St John were European noblemen who lived the lives of monks and soldiers. The order was financed by the revenue of properties and estates spread throughout Europe (often belonging to the knights themselves), or from donations.

The knights took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Their head, the Grand Master, was elected for life and was subject only to the authority of the Pope.

The eight-pointed Maltese cross which is the emblem of the knights, is said to represent the eight virtues which the Knights strove to uphold: to live in truth; to have faith; to repent sins; to give proof of humility; to love justice; to be merciful; to be sincere and wholehearted and to endure persecution.

As the years passed, corruption and internal dissension undermined the effectiveness and reputation of the order. However, the role they have played in history and their bravery in war have ensured their lasting fame.



The Grand Harbour as seen from Senglea (The Three Cities)

The Three Cities

The trio of towns, Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua, situated on the Grand Harbour, is shaped like two 'fingers' pointing into the water. They are bound together in a huge fortification built in the 1680s when Grand Master Nicola Cottoner commissioned a massive protective wall. It is 3km long with five entry gates. A walking tour through these medieval cities will transport you centuries into the past.

What I found amazing is that these are 'working' cities that would, in South Africa, be museums! The tip of the Vittoriosa peninsula, Fort St Angelo, has been fortified since the 9th century, but it was rebuilt by the knights in 1530. The town of Vittoriosa sits behind the fort and facing this jumble of cobblestone roads and alleys, also jutting into the harbour, is Senglea. Once heavily fortified by the knights as well, it is protected by an ancient stone vedette decorated with an eye and ear motif, indicating that it is all-seeing and all-hearing. The third city, Cospicua, occupies the land linking Senglea and Vittoriosa at the base of the two 'fingers'.

Mdina

The walled city of Mdina is one of the few architectural treats in Malta that did not result from the activities of the Knights of St John. It is the oldest city, built in 1000BC by the Phoenicians as a protective wall. They called the settlement 'Malet' meaning 'place of shelter'. Later the Romans built a large town and called it 'Melita'. It was given its present name, Mdina meaning 'walled city', by the Arabs.

During the medieval times, it became the chosen residence of the Maltese aristocracy, which it has stayed until the present day.

Try to visit this UNESCO world heritage site in the early morning or in the evening, as we did, to truly experience its charm. When we first arrived it was still crowded and did not seem to be the 'Silent City' as it is known. Then, as the tourists departed, I walked around the empty streets with the setting sun colouring the ancient buildings. It was so quiet, I could almost hear history speak.

Active Malta

Malta's location between Sicily and North Africa, away from the pollution of big cities and silt-bearing rivers, means its water is often cleaner with visibility of 40-50m. It boasts a rich marine life and a good chance of spotting the maned seahorse, common off the Maltese coast. There are also many wrecks to explore. Other popular activities are rock climbing, with over 1 200 established routes, jeep safaris and of course sailing in the friendly waters of the Mediterranean.



Three Cities



Fort St Angelo



Mdina



Amor in Senglea (The Three Cities)



The Three Cities



Mdina



Scenic rock climbing



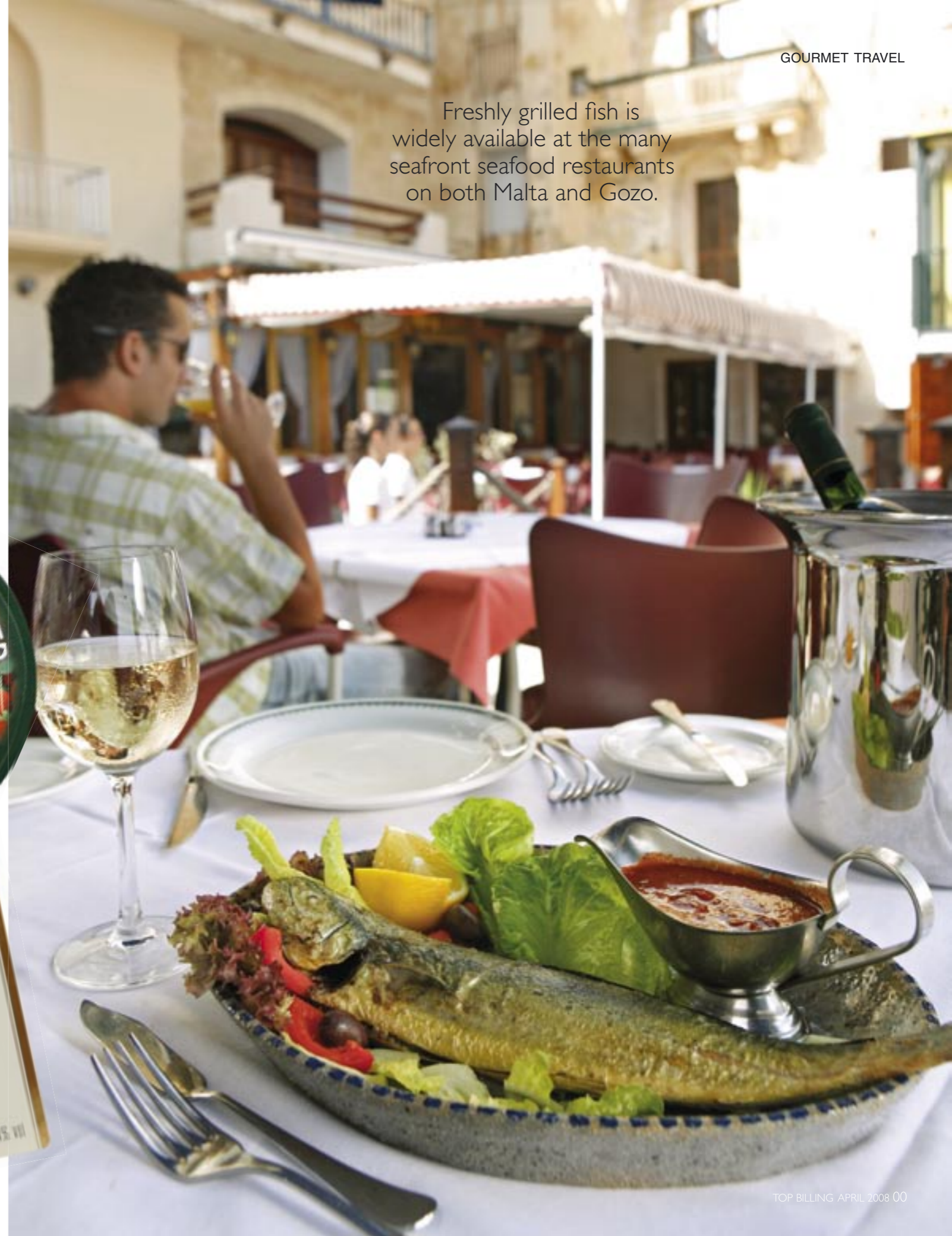
Cathedral of St Paul, Mdina



Hobz biz-zejt



Pastizzi



Freshly grilled fish is widely available at the many seafront seafood restaurants on both Malta and Gozo.

Malta — a cuisine of natural fusion

Maltese traditional cuisine is the result of centuries of interaction with its neighbours (especially Sicily) as well as the influence of the numerous foreign dominations. At its base however lies a loyalty to local, seasonal produce and the fisherman's catch. A good example of this is the dolphin fish (*lampuki*) which occurs in abundance in Maltese waters and is the main ingredient in *lampuki* pie (recipe pxx) and many other dishes during the season which lasts from August to November. Another traditional seafood dish is a marjoram-and-garlic-flavoured fish soup, *Aljotta* (recipe p xx).

Blessed with an abundance of fresh fruit, the locals take advantage of seasonal abundance to preserve; so all kinds of preserved fruits are also popular.

Due to the lack of firewood ovens in centuries past (the island's tree population was soon wiped out), food was cooked slowly in communal village ovens. To this day stews stay popular, especially an octopus stew, *stuffat tal-qarnit* (recipe p xx) and a national favourite, rabbit stewed in wine — *fenek biz-zalza* (recipe p xx). As the land historically provided very little meat, this is their national meat. I realized that I would have to try it, and did so on my first evening there when we were lucky enough to eat at Xara Palace in Mdina (see pxx). It tastes a lot like chicken and once I could get past the memory of my childhood pet

rabbits, I actually liked the flavour.

The Sicilian influence on Maltese food is arguably the biggest. Being so close together, the climate, soil and fish are very similar. Pasta is therefore the staple food of the Maltese family, with homemade filled ravioli the most popular.

A snack sold virtually on every street corner is a pastry called *pastizzi* which is probably Turkish in origin. It is a small and delicately boat shaped, normally filled with ricotta cheese, although you could also try a pea, meat or anchovy filling. The pastry is something between phyllo and puff — rich but delicious!

Another snack to try is the *hobz biz-zejt*, slices of bread rubbed with ripe tomatoes and olive oil until they are pink and delicious, topped with tuna, onion, capers, olives, garlic, black pepper and salt. Sometimes anchovies are added with fresh basil or mint. Most restaurants serve this as their complementary bread before your meal.

Another interesting factor is that because Malta belonged to Britain for 150 years, the restaurants developed a leaning towards English food to satisfy the high proportion of British visitors to the island. However as the interest in true Maltese food is growing, this is changing slowly. Today there are a good number of restaurants, that, if not specialising in traditional dishes, will at least have some on the menu for you to try.



The downstairs 'casual' restaurant at Xara Palace, Mdina



Ta'Frenċ, Gozo



Amor



Products of Ta'Mena

COURMET TRAVEL

MALTA FOR FOODIES – HOT SPOTS

Ta'Frenċ restaurant and wedding venue

If you want to try rabbit, Ta'Frenċ (www.tafrencrestaurant.com) is the place to go. Situated in the beautiful countryside of the island of Gozo, in a 600-year-old farmhouse, this is sophisticated dining at its best. Surrounded by original paintings from celebrated local artists, the tables are adorned in classic style with elaborate touches like original French decanters. The menu is based on in-season fresh ingredients, supported by the extensive organic herb and vegetable garden on the grounds with products like salt and honey sourced locally. Food is in line with continental trends, but still honouring their roots.

Other restaurants

Arguably the best seafood restaurant on Malta is **in-Rizzu** which is situated on the water's edge in the village of Marsaxlokk. Here we enjoyed two local specialties, *stuffat tal-qarnit* (octopus stew) and *aljotta* (traditional fish soup) and with a bit of cajoling, managed to squeeze the recipes out of the chef (see p xx). Don't leave without trying this place or any other of the lovely authentic seafood restaurants which are scattered along the coastline of both Malta and Gozo. Visit www.ir-rizzu.com.

The **Xara Palace** (www.xarapalace.com.mt) is a five-star hotel in a 17th century 'palazzo' in the ancient capital of Malta, Mdina. It has 17 individually designed suites which are filled with antiques and original artworks. The rooftop **de Mondion** restaurant provides spectacular panoramic views in an elegant, classical setting. The menu offers modern French food as well as a few Maltese specialties.

Products of Malta

Although land available for agriculture is limited, we did however find two enthusiastic producers. Joseph Borg produces organic olive oil on Malta under the **Ta'zeppi** label from about 2 500 trees of 42 varieties which he started planting 20 years ago. Visit tazeppi.atSPACE.com for more information or to arrange a farm visit.

Ta'mena Estate (www.tamena-gozo.com) is a small farm on the Island of Gozo which practices agro-tourism. People are encouraged to visit and pick their own fruit. They also offer cooking lessons, hosts functions and walking tours. The shelves in their small shop are filled with culinary treasures, from marmalades, olive oil and wine to candied fruit and the best sundried tomato paste I've ever tasted. They also preserve the capers which grow wild in the area.

Local wines

Malta's viticulture, like its history, dates back thousands of years but owe its revival and promulgation to the Knights of St John. Today the island's largest wine producer is **Marsovin** whose range includes red, white, rose and sparkling wine. Their cellar was originally built by the Knights in the 17th century. For a tasting or guided tour contact them on cellars@marsovin.com.mt. When visiting do try their Antonin Blanc, a barrel-fermented Chardonnay as well as some of the wines made from local cultivars of grape.

Another interesting estate is **Meridiana** (www.meridiana.com) scenically situated below the ancient walled city of Mdina. Their range is considerably smaller and their focus is on creating 'world-class wines of Maltese character'.



Caper bush



Joseph Borg from Ta'Zeppi



Marsovin's ancient cellar

We spend a lazy afternoon with one of the owner of Ta'Mena Estate, enjoying this delicious lampuki pie. The sauce is prepared with their delicious sundried tomato paste, made according to their late mother's recipe. She always had a dream turning her small farm into an agro-tourism destination, something her two sons' achieved after her death. They honoured her inspiration by putting her picture on their label.



Torta tal-lampuki (Dorado/Dolphin fish pie)
Recipe on page xx



White wine rabbit stew
as served at Ta'Frenc Restaurant
Recipe on page xxx

These blue, red and yellow traditional Maltese fishing boats have become one of Malta's national symbols. They all have the watchful 'Eyes of Osiris' painted on the bows to ward off evil spirits. This picture was taken in the village of Marsaxlokk

Stuffat tal-qarnit (Octopus stew) (serves 6)

800g octopus, cleaned
3T olive oil
3 onions, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, chopped
2T tomato paste
2 tomatoes, chopped
8 olives
1T capers
1t curry powder
½ cup walnuts, chopped
½ cup sultanas
1 cup red wine
salt and pepper, to taste
4 potatoes, cubed
1T chopped fresh mint or basil

Chop the octopus into bite-size pieces. Heat the olive oil and fry the onions and garlic until lightly browned. Add the octopus and cook for a few minutes. Add the rest of the ingredients (except the potatoes and herbs). Cover and simmer for 1 hour. Add the potatoes, and simmer for another hour. Just before serving sprinkle with the herb of your choice.

Torta tal-lampuki (Dorado/dolphin fish pie) (serves 8)

Lampuki is the most popular fish in Malta. It is in season from September to December. If fresh fish is unavailable the Maltese replace it with tinned tuna.

800g–1kg lampuki (or similar fish) fillets
1T olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, chopped
1T chopped fresh mint
1T chopped fresh basil
1T chopped fresh marjoram
2T tomato paste
3 tomatoes, peeled and chopped
1t sugar
salt and pepper, to taste
15–20 green olives, pitted
2T capers
400g shortcrust pastry
2 potatoes, boiled
1 egg, lightly beaten

Preheat oven to 200°C. Dice the fish. Heat the oil and fry onions until golden. Add the garlic and fish. Fry for 2 minutes. Add the herbs, tomato paste, tomatoes and sugar.

Season and simmer for 5 minutes. Add the olives and capers and remove from heat. Roll out the pastry and line a baking dish with half. Skin the potatoes, cut in slices and arrange on the pastry. Top with the cooled fish mixture and cover with the remaining pastry. Brush with egg and bake for 30 minutes, then reduce the heat to 180°C to brown. Serve with a reduced sundried tomato sauce and green salad.
Tip For a more traditional filling, coat 500g of fish fillets in seasoned flour and fry in olive oil until just cooked. Then soften 1 onion in olive oil. Add 2 chopped tomatoes and cook for a few minutes. Add 1 cauliflower (broken into pieces), 800g chopped spinach and 1 cup boiling water. Cook until the vegetables are tender, then add 8 black olives, 1T sultanas and 6 chopped walnuts. Season with salt and pepper, add the fish and use as filling (no potatoes in this recipe).

Fenek biz-zalza (Rabbit stew) (serves 4-6)

Although rabbit is available in South Africa, some might feel squeamish about eating it, so feel free to substitute with chicken. The customary way of serving rabbit stew in Malta is to enjoy the sauce with spaghetti as a starter, and the rabbit meat as a main with remaining sauce and chips.

2 rabbit (or 1 chicken), cut into pieces
3T flour, seasoned with salt and pepper
4T olive oil
2 onions, chopped
2 carrots, sliced
4–6 cloves garlic, crushed
2 potatoes, peeled and diced
1 cup red wine
1t salt
1t peppercorns
2t chopped fresh rosemary
1 cup frozen peas

Dust the rabbit (or chicken) with the seasoned flour. Heat the oil and fry the meat until golden. Reserve. In the same pan, fry the onions, carrots and garlic until light brown. Add the potatoes, wine, seasoning and the reserved rabbit (or chicken). Cook for 1 hour or until the meat is tender and the potatoes soft. Add the peas and cook until the peas are warm.

Tip For another version, replace the red wine with white, leave out the carrots and potatoes and double the amount of peas.

Aljotta (Traditional fish soup) (serves 8)

This soup takes its name from the Italian 'aglio' (garlic), and is one of the best soups on the Maltese menu. If the garlic is omitted or reduced it is, although still tasty, not an *aljotta*.

Stock

1.5kg whole fish*
1 lemon, quartered
2t salt
10 black peppercorns
5 parsley stalks

Soup

3T olive oil
2 onions, finely chopped
10 garlic cloves, chopped
6 tomatoes, chopped
3t tomato paste
1 bunch fresh marjoram, chopped
1 cup cooked rice
salt and pepper, to taste
lemon wedges, to serve

Place your fish, preferably with the head, in a fish kettle or large pan. Pour enough water in to just cover the fish. Add the rest of the stock ingredients and poach gently for 20 to 30 minutes depending on the thickness of the fish. Remove the fish and allow to cool before breaking into pieces (making sure you remove all the fish bones). Strain the stock and reserve. (If you wish to leave out this step, buy good-quality fish stock and add cubed raw fish and stock about 15 minutes before adding the rice). For the soup, heat the oil and fry the onions until soft, then add the garlic and fry for a few minutes. Don't allow the garlic to brown. Add the tomatoes, tomato paste, marjoram and a little water. Cook gently for 30 minutes, then add 8 cups of stock (or more for a thinner soup), the fish pieces and rice. Season to taste. When all the ingredients are hot, it is ready. Serve with lemon wedges and crusty bread.
*Use fish like mullet, John Dory, bluenose or hake; they are all on the SASSI green list.

**NEED COPY
FROM TERSIA
AT ITT**