



Upfront

The Maltese have grown vines and produced wine for well over 4000 years, since the arrival of foreign invaders such as the seafaring Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs and the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. The legacy continues.

Early Beginnings

“To take wine into our mouths is to savour a droplet of the river of human history”. These wise words by wine-loving radio and television entertainer Clifton Paul Fadiman certainly apply to the wines of Malta and the country’s action-packed past.

The tiny Maltese archipelago of three inhabited islands named Malta, Gozo and Comino lies at the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea between Sicily and North Africa. With an area totalling barely 316 square kilometres, the Maltese Islands may be small in size but they have been the playing field of foreign invaders for many centuries.

Due to its strategic position, Malta’s history has presented a constant struggle for the population that now stands at around 398,000 inhabitants. In fact, Malta’s history has always been a challenging one and so has the art of grape growing and winemaking in the Maltese Islands.

Malta’s connection with wine began when prehistoric peoples learned to store some of the abundant summer fruits to tide them over the bleak winter months. Some of these fruits would have been wild grapes, perhaps stored in a hollow rock. The sugary juice would have come in contact with the natural yeasts sitting on the skins of the grapes and, as if by magic, transformed into an alcoholic beverage: wine.

While the exact beginnings will probably never be known, the Maltese

Islands’ viticulture (the art of grape growing) has millenarian origins.

The Phoenicians, thought to have been one of the earliest wine-producing civilisations, probably arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean about 3000 B.C. For thousands of years, these fearless and seafaring people spread their influence throughout the Mediterranean, Europe and even beyond into the Atlantic.

Grape vines came to be introduced in the colonies in many coastal areas where the Phoenicians settled. As the Phoenicians were one of the earliest people known to have populated the Maltese Islands, from 800–480 B.C., the Maltese archipelago can boast of being one of the earliest places in the Mediterranean to actually cultivate grapes.

By classical times, vines were grown for winemaking in almost all the Mediterranean countries. From Spain in the West to Byblos in the East, from northern Italy to North Africa, the cultivated grape made inexorable progress, with amphorae regularly crossing the sea. Historically, the Mediterranean was indeed the hub of viticulture and most of the wines in those days came from the countries in the Mediterranean basin that were blessed with ideal climatic conditions.

By 218 B.C. Malta had become part of the Roman Empire. The Romans propagated the cult of their god of wine, Bacchus, to



all corners of their empire, developing a flourishing wine trade even beyond the Mediterranean shores. So sophisticated was their knowledge of viticulture and oenology (the knowledge of wine and winemaking) that their techniques were not equalled until the 17th or 18th centuries when the Italians, French and other Europeans began to regard the making of wine as science, rather than a mystery.

As the Roman Empire crumbled, winemaking slipped away into Maltese memory, along with much of the civilization the Romans had introduced.

People began to fight for survival. Indications show that there was a near-complete break with ancestral tradition, even in agriculture. Deforestation and soil erosion soon set in.

By the time the North African Berbers, spearheading the expansion of Islam, had taken over the Maltese Islands in around A.D. 870, the land had become barren. The Arabs brought with them citrus fruits and cotton, as well as the basis of the modern Maltese language.

Although they introduced innovative agricultural systems such as irrigation, it was difficult for the 'dielja' (Maltese for 'vine') to survive under the reign of the new rulers whose religious Muslim beliefs did not favour winemaking.

The dark Middle Ages were characterized by the invasions and pirate attacks that depopulated the islands. The spread of malaria, fever epidemics and the plague, as well as the emigration to Sicily and Italy eventually led once more to the abandonment of cultivated land. Every time Malta experienced a difficult period, winemaking suffered another setback.

In 1524, the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem sent their scouts to give Malta the once-over as a possible settlement. They had been thrown out of Rhodes and were looking for another place to make their base. But the isles had become no more than sandstone rocks, the surface of which was barely covered with five feet of earth. Although not very keen, the Knights had no choice but to come to Malta, and they were given the Islands from the Emperor of Spain in exchange for a rent of two Maltese falcons a year.

As they set about creating those aspects of civilization to which they had become accustomed, they tried to rehabilitate the abandoned agricultural areas. Wine, apart from being a necessary adjunct to Holy Mass, was also one of their daily staples and on their list of importation requirements.

It was during this time that the wine trade and winemaking in Malta made a comeback, once the Knights had established wine as a popular drink. The Order created land-leasing schemes for farmers in order to increase the number of cultivated fields to feed the expanding local population. More fields were created by means of terracing.

Another downturn for wine was on the horizon. The increased demand for cotton in the nineteenth century, when Malta was under British rule, and especially during the time of the American War of Secession, led to the grubbing-up of the Maltese vineyards and olive groves to make room for its cultivation.

Only towards the 1870s was the farming of vines resumed. Twenty years later there were considerable vineyards at Xaghra, Nadur, Qala, Żebbuġ and elsewhere in Gozo, as well as in the districts of Mdina, Dingli, Fiddien, Ġnejna, Bahrija and Mellieha in Malta.

Somehow, the vine has managed to survive in Malta through the Great Siege of the Ottoman Turks, followed by the arrival of Napoleon and the onslaught of World War II, when the Maltese met fearsome bombardment with bravery and perseverance, throughout the British regime and the turbulent early days of Maltese autonomy and independence. After all, winemaking is a legacy in Malta, it is in the blood, and, as always, it will go on.