



Stepping Stones

Resourceful as they are, the Maltese winemakers have broadened their provisions to make wines that are solely made from grapes grown in Malta and really worth discussing in terms of authenticity.



By Means of Scarcity

The real challenge for any winemaker is to bring forth excellent wines pronouncing 'typicity'. The taste of the vintner's most expressive wines will conform to a style that is typical for wines made from grapes grown in his country's soil and climate.

Some speak of 'terroir' (basically French for soil or terrain). This is a very meaningful term in the making of a true top-drawer wine. Some maintain that a truly 'great' wine should reflect just that: the character of the farmland feeding the vines, it should embody a particular place within the countryside, the dirt itself, the subsoil beneath it and everything surrounding it.

Alas, 'terroir' is the sum of many things and wine, as life itself, is never quite that cut and dried, however. Unquestionably, in Malta, the future of winemaking lies in the fact that the Maltese vineyards and the Maltese Islands, too, certainly have their unique 'terroir'. It is just that, without any fault of their own, the island's winemakers have suffered setbacks because of the number of years it has taken them to find it, mainly due to the shortage of raw material, namely grapes.

The Census of Agriculture for 2001 revealed that the total area under vine in the Maltese Islands stood at around 500 hectares at the time, with about 450 hectares in Malta and the rest in Gozo. This area was estimated to represent a national vineyard area good for just over 1,600,000 vines that rendered a table

and wine grape produce of just over 2,000,000 kilos in 2001.

At the time vineyards were concentrated mostly in the Northern District, which includes St. Paul's Bay, Mellieha and Mosta, covering an area under vine of 220 hectares. In the Western District, which comprises Rabat and Dingli, vineyards accounted for 180 hectares.

Today this is simply not a sufficient amount of Maltese acreage under vine to satisfy the increased demand for locally produced wine on the domestic market. Actually, there has been a continuous shortage of grapes to enable producers to keep pace with the increasing thirst for well-made wine that has been created by the influx of holiday makers coming from the European mainland since the 1970s.

Thankfully the Maltese people are renowned for their resourcefulness. The concept of 'lateral thinking' (a way of solving problems by rejecting traditional methods and employing unorthodox means) was not coincidentally thought up by Maltese professor and world authority of creative thinking Dr. Edward de Bono. Therefore, it should not surprise anyone that the entrepreneurial Maltese winemakers looked in the same direction the discerning, thirsty tourists started coming from.

For a long time, Maltese winemakers sourced the locally available grape varieties, mainly the white Girgentina



and the black Gellewża. But once faced with the fact that there simply weren't enough grapes available, neither the indigenous nor the international grape varieties, vintners came up with the idea of complimenting the scarcity of locally-grown native and noble varieties by trucking in fresh, often hand-picked Italian grapes.

Only in the late 1980s did the wineries actually manage to convince the Nationalist government, under the then leadership of Dr. Eddie Fenech Adami, to allow for the importation of fresh grapes to be free from duty and levies. From then onwards winemakers have been in a commercially viable position to produce wines made in Malta from grapes harvested in Italy.

Consequently, wines vinified locally have ever since been divided into two main categories according to the origin of the grapes they are made from. There are the wines made from locally-grown grapes, from either indigenous or international grape varieties, or other wines made from grapes that grow in a number of countries and which are imported.

But regardless the provenance of the grapes, commitment to quality should always begin with the selection of the grapes and is given attention at every step of the delicate process of winemaking, which explains the chilled transportation of the imported grapes in small wooden trays via refrigerated trucks.

To date, Malta still doesn't grow the total amount of wine grapes it needs as raw material for its domestic wine market. A certain quantity, at least for the time being, needs to be imported. The Department of Agriculture actively monitors the importation of grapes, ensuring that the grapes and grape musts that enter the country are of high quality.

As always, the final taste of the wine in question obviously depends largely on the skill of the individual Maltese winemaker whose task it is to transform bunches of grapes into a wine.

The three large wineries, Emmanuel Delicata, Marsovin and Camilleri Wines, all have been producing wines made from quality grapes harvested overseas brought in from a variety of Italian DOC regions which are often cooler grape-growing regions than Malta. The arrival of these imported grapes has always conveniently started as the harvest in Malta finishes, thus allowing the pressing of grapes to continue for around 10 to 12 weeks between August and mid-October.

When making wine from alien grapes, the winemakers are to abide by EU labelling regulations, which require specifically that the label on the bottles of this type of wine carries the words 'Wine Produced in Malta from Grapes Harvested in Italy'.

As a rule, the protective 'spirit' of the EU law only allows a wine to be labelled

as quality wine if the wine is made in the same country that the grapes were harvested in. Maltese vintners, however, have been granted permission to continue mentioning the names of the grape variety used and the vintage (or the year the grapes were harvested) on the labels of their varietal wines made from imported grapes for a limited period after succession.

This labelling issue was originally a hot potato but finally common sense prevailed with regard to the labelling issue of this type of 'Wines Made in Malta from Grapes Harvested in Italy' for sale on the domestic market only.

Actually, for some time now labels on such bottles offer a crystal-clear description and often even state the name of the particular region in Italy the grapes come from. The handpicked Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes as well as the Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco and Grigio grapes usually come from the Friuli region of north east Italy, whilst most of the Trebbiano crop is harvested in the Abruzzo region in central Italy. The Sauvignon Blanc grapes are usually sourced in Trentino and the Moscato in Piedmont in northern Italy.

Shaping A Taste For Variety

Many who have tasted these well-made wines have often come to the conclusion that most of these single-varietal wines reflect the goodness of the grapes they are made from as good as and possibly even better than when the grapes are left in the hands of many an Italian winemaker.

The fact that a wine is made from imported grapes does not preclude that wine from being of good quality. After all, nothing 'just happens' in the winery. A fine-tasting wine is the result of deliberate decisions and constant monitoring. Being able to control temperatures to enhance or conserve fruit both before and during fermentation, optimising skin contact and extraction, managing the pomace effectively, measuring the time of fermentation and the degree of maceration afterwards, the choice of barrel or tank aging, minimising uptake of oxygen, temperature and humidity of the cellar, the type of racking regime chosen... These are a few examples of the decisions that affect the quality of the end-product for any given lot of grapes.

In the past, international wine experts, professional tasters and wine writers have been very favourable towards some of these wines and in particular towards the 'Classic Collection' of single varietal wines made by Emmanuel Delicata. Actually, Delicata have won international awards at various levels, including gold: in France (Chardonnay du Monde) and (International Challenge du Vin), Italy

(Vinitaly) and the United Kingdom (International Wine Challenge).

Only but a few vociferous individuals on the local wine scene have unfairly tried to 'taint' this type of very affordable, easy drinking, likeable and correctly made wines, which have never actually made claim to the 'greatness' of some of the world's first growths. These critics should have 'placed' these wines according to the better judgment of their palates rather than by the stroke of their pen.

The reds made from Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon, especially, have always been like the wines produced at source from the grapes in Italy, full of sappy fruit. They sit astride the frontier between unoaked light-bodied and medium-bodied reds. The fact that they are nice when drunk cellar-cool and young, and simply brimming over with young fruit character without any taste of woodiness, makes them fall very naturally into 'the lively set'.

The whites have always matched good examples of light, dry wines that reflect Italy's straw-coloured wines such as some of the best Soave and Frascati. If anything, the dry, crisp and lean whites made in Malta from Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Bianco and Pinot Grigio are not as neutral as the regional Italian versions and show a more identifiable taste of the respective grape variety.



Modern winemaking techniques have constantly been applied to preserve and express the character of each individual grape variety and reflect the particular cooler local growing conditions of the region where the grapes are picked. Aptly applied technology has been used as a positive aid in reflecting and respecting each different grape variety's characteristics, rendering a recognizable wine as the final product.

Over time, these mono-varietal wines have become accepted by wine drinkers as well-made and enjoyable wines, equally comparable to imported wines sold at the same or higher price point. They have always appealed to palate and pocket. Any other distinctions, although possibly important, were always really secondary – most definitely from the consumer's point of view.

The reality is that these affordable wines made from one single grape variety have weaned the Maltese (wine) drinker on to better-made wine. It's the wines made from alien grapes that have gradually shaped the domestic demand for wine that can sustain the Maltese wine industry and upcoming viticultural development plan – albeit until recently protected by restrictive government levies on imported wines. They will probably not be around for ever since luckily enough more and more locally grown grapes become available as a replacement for the imported ones.

In fact, the interest of vintners in the wines made from imported grapes is broadened to these wines' ability to provide a solid financial foundation for the other bottlings that are solely made from grapes grown in Malta and which are really worth discussing in terms of authenticity.

In other words, examples like Delicata's Classic Collection, Marsovin's Varietals and Camilleri's Palatino Range have been successful means to an end. Imported Italian grapes have substituted the shortage of locally available grape varieties. The sales of the resulting single varietal wines in the Maltese marketplace have been providing in part the initial capital investment that was needed to finish the upgrade of cellar technology and winery facilities as well as the rationale to plant new vineyards.