



Fostering Quality

Maltese wines need to be fostered and the lawmaker also has a role to play in assuring wine drinkers get quality from the vineyard to the table.

You, The Consumer

Nature is not the sole factor in determining the quality of wine. The creation of quality wine is the result of careful grape growing (viticulture), and skilful winemaking (vinification), the conversion of grapes into wine. Viticulture and vinification are complementary. Neither is more important. 'Winegrowing' is the best possible term to refer to the entire process whereby the vigneron is committed to growing the best possible grapes from his vineyard as raw material for the winemaker who is devoted to the making of the best possible wine from those grapes.

Besides the vigneron and the vintners, the country's government also has a vital role to play in improving the standards that are strengthening the true revival of Maltese wines.

To begin with, the authorities of European Union member-state Malta have to ensure that those wine laws common to all EU countries are adhered to. Like in other wine producing countries, the Maltese lawmakers need to pass certain laws and regulations that are country specific and provide for further control.

In Malta, the national Wine Act of 2002 regulates the production, importation, marketing and advertising of wine in Malta. This new Wine Act is (as are all EU member-states national wine laws) based on the principle of the fundamental EU wine law, which categorises a wine as: a table wine, a

wine from an intermediate level, or a quality wine that may be labelled as a Quality Wine Produced in a Specific Region (QWPSR).

Most countries have their own translation of QWPSR and national scheme to classify wines according to specific production requirements and the provenance of the grapes they are made from. Often (abbreviated) designations such as 'Appellation Contrôlée' (AC) in France and 'Denominazione di Origine Controllata' (DOC) and superior 'Denominazione di Origine Controllata Garantita' (DOCG) in Italy, rubberstamp a quality wine and make it carry more commercial pulling power.

Although neither designation system really guarantees the quality of the liquid in the bottle, the AC or DOC(G) endorsement at least guarantees the consumer a wine's geographical provenance, its varietal make-up and certain details of production such as yield of grapes per hectare, percentage of wine per given weight of grapes, minimum sugar (grape) and alcohol (wine) levels, minimum acidity, and possibly length of ageing.

Maltese authorities are in the process of implementing their own pecking order to classify Maltese wines of 'particular reputation and worth' officially referred to as 'Denominazzjoni ta' Origni Kontrollata' or DOK. This system mimics the Italian quality DOC(G) system based on the Italian law of 1963 updated in







1992. DOK attempts to warrant that the location indicated on the label is indeed the origin of all grapes used in making that particular wine. Superior wines will receive a quality seal issued by the Department of Agriculture.

Endorsement by the authorities by means of a kind of standard Maltese appellation system that charts appellations, under whatever name or guise, will help in bestowing Maltese wines with consumer trust and enticing those discerning wine imbibers who are not familiar with Maltese wines.

And, let's not forget, unlike many other wine producing countries, Malta has a ready-made home market, made up of residents as well as quality conscious tourists from all the leading consumer countries of Europe, to whom to sell its wines. There are three 'thirsty consumer' tourists for every Maltese resident in the island during the course of the tourist season.

The blueprint of the Maltese DOK system has been put forward. But, by the looks of things, just like in Italy, there is a long way to go before the earth moves enough for the final set of DOK rules to bring smiles to the faces of all the country's wine producers. However, increasing pragmatism is present on both sides and everybody seems to be aware of the lessons to be learnt from the neighbouring Italians.

The first Italian appellation laws were originally drawn up by bureaucrats to

prevent fraud. Today's quality-minded Italian winemakers, who aim to make top wines, find them something of a straitjacket. That's why since the 1970s many vintners deliberately threw out the DOC rulebook and downgraded the denomination of their quality wines to the lowest category of *Vino da Tavola* in order to make finer, modern wines. This has given birth to the likes of the so-called 'Super Tuscans'.

Maltese authorities should be aware of the huge difficulties the Italian lawmakers have had with pulling these wines back into the official fold. They needed to broaden traditional DOC's and introduce a new higher grade of *Vino da Tavola* called *Indicazione Geografica Tipica* or IGT (comparable with the French *Vin de Pays*).

One of the Italian (and French) wine law's fundamental aims is to protect tradition, and this is laudable. However, one can carry tradition too far, trying to drag it back to life when it scarcely exists anymore, imposing something that only came into being a short while ago.

When introducing a similar system in Malta, one must realize that the DOC - or DOK - restrictions can strangle invention and imagination. The DOK system needs to make sense. And, since the Italian likes of Villa Antinori have chosen to sometimes drop out of the DOC to enjoy the flexibility of lesser status certification by Italian wine law, the question being begged is that vintners in Malta might come to confront

similar unpalatable home truths once the DOK system is up and running.

On the whole, though, a policed DOK system plotting the developing Maltese national vineyard will help Maltese wine producers sell their wines in the international market. On the other hand, as for most European wines of genuine 'quality', the name of the producer will remain at least as important as which tier of the quality ladder it comes from.

There definitely is sufficient motivation for the Maltese producers to deliver the best quality and most appealing style of new Maltese wines. Since 1st May 2004, the day Malta became a full member of the European Union, there is no longer any protection from imported wines for local wines on the home front. They have to compete directly with cheaper wines from other EU countries that washed ashore when the protective levy system was removed. Similarly, free access to the enormous wine market in Europe is available to Malta grown wines.

However, given the marginal export quantities, for the time being, doubting Thomases will have to pack their bags and travel to sunny Malta to convince themselves of the drinkability of Maltese wines that appeal in both quality and price. However, it will not be long before more of these wines will be put on wine lists and shopshelves, not only in the home market where quality tourism is being actively encouraged, but also in the main export markets



such as The Benelux, the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Germany and Scandinavia.

Malta is fast learning that today's consumers are drinking less, but a very much better quality than they did in the past, and that wine enthusiasts are willing to pay considerably more for a good-quality bottle of Malta grown wine. This is borne out in the statistics showing the average prices paid for Maltese wines over the last five years.

The average ex-cellar price of Maltese wines has risen because a completely new range of premium Malta-grown wines has come about, thanks to the viticultural advancement. Surprisingly,

perhaps, there is a definite swing back to drinking wine, and this has partially been nurtured by the interest and exposure of the better-quality Maltese wines now available on the market.

Wine consumption per capita in Malta is still low, at an estimated 17 to 20 litres per annum, but the good news for the wine producers is that the younger age groups with spending power are regaining an interest in wine.

As the move toward wine drinking gains momentum in Malta, it will be interesting to see how the influx of wine imports levels out – which would be a sure sign that the consumer excitement has also been roused by the new-wave quality wines produced at home.

It is also encouraging to witness the efforts of Maltese winemakers in maintaining quality control throughout the entire manufacturing process. Thanks to the natural preservative quality of alcohol, wine is classified as a low-risk produce in the world of food quality, health, hygiene and safety. However certain winemakers are so diligent they incorporate the principles of food safety and quality management systems such as HACCP (Hazard Analysis at Critical Control Points) into the process anyhow.

With the enactment of subsidiary legislation and financial incentives, the Department of Agriculture is actively promoting the production of high quality wine grapes for Malta grown wines, which are gaining recognition and credibility.

As mentioned earlier, a new Wine Act came into force in Malta on June 21, 2002, replacing the outdated one of 1969. As in other EU countries, this new Wine Act is in line with international wine laws, with special emphasis on EU wine regulations.

This will underscore the integrity of the Maltese wines, as will the fact that Malta has also become a member of the International Organisation of the Vine and Wine (OIV), in order to be part of the international wine scene. The OIV is an international organisation, which currently includes around 50 member countries.

Its scope is of a scientific and technical nature, working in the field of vine and vine-based products. Its main objective is the contribution to the international harmonization of practices and norms to improve the trade conditions in the vine and wine sectors, dealing with matters of vine selection, winemaking technology and economic analysis. After a period of apprehension regarding OIV membership, Malta now actively participates in sub-committees such as the one that caters for small wine producing islands and is striving to promote local wine made from indigenous grape varieties.



