

# Masquerading in Malta



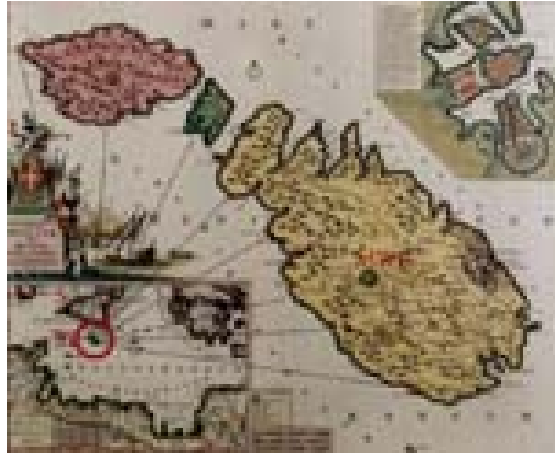
Allow me to be brutally honest, if I was asked a month ago to locate Malta on a map I would quizzically scratch my head and ultimately



say, *what's Malta?* And if you really pressed me to guess in, say, a multiple choice fashion, I would likely decide that Malta was a type of grain long before realizing it's a full-blown European country. Obviously geography is not one of my strong points (unless tied directly

to food and wine) but I wonder how I had managed to spend 30 something years completely oblivious to this fascinating little country located just South of Sicily.

So why Malta as a destination? Whenever it's time to plan a vacation, I first plan a visit to Gulliver's Travels Books in Portsmouth. The owner led me straight toward this tiny Mediterranean Island far removed from the rest of the world with just a few determining questions. If you're ever in need of unbiased travel advice, make this place a priority. We were torn between Peru, Baja, Chile, and Malta/Sicily and decided to make a go of the Southern European route while Europe was still European. (Say that fast three times before another McMall opens up somewhere in France!)



A bit of further research indeed divulged the essentials of travel encapsulated in this tiny country with an added bonus - fluency in English! No clumsy translation guides, uncomfortable verbal exchanges, or wandering into the wrong public restroom because I didn't know the difference between Damen and Herren. It's proximity to Sicily made it a great jumping off spot, culminating in a small Sicilian adventure as well (Sicilian wine report arriving soon!)



But all things aside, you're here to learn about the wine. So let's just say we chose this destination because of a deep and complex history, a budding food and wine culture, many layers of multicultural and multi-ethnic influences (Malta has been controlled by nearly all the major world players until recently, so the culture is very diverse and unique), access to the Mediterranean waterfront, and English as a second national language. Part of the EU (but not yet adapting to the Euro) made it a wee bit affordable – but certainly no bargain – yet a unique place that I could brag to friends that they hadn't been to, but I had.

And finally, *onto the wine!*

Let me begin by offering the first major disappointment up front – I do not believe you will find many (if any) Maltese wines here in the



States, let alone the great State of New Hampshire. The simple fact is that this tiny island consumes practically every drop it produces to the point where grapes are sourced from Italy to make Maltese wines to meet demand. Even though Malta imports 10 times the amount of grapes they

produce there is clearly a preference for Maltese grown wine. The Maltese wine industry is still in it's infancy, but is certainly beginning to come into it's own, making itself known in international wine competitions. Some internet searches promise the availability of Maltese wines, but I tend to doubt that getting a case of Maltese juice would be logistically possible outside the EU, or marginally affordable. Perhaps someday! Rumor has it the Brits have some on their shelves, but they seem to have every good wine imaginable in their discount groceries, so that doesn't surprise me in the least.

Malta is layered in some serious history, so it's no surprise their winemaking history also has deep roots (pardon the pun!) Wine was originally made by the Romans some 2000 years ago and later influenced by the Catholic Church (Malta is also the most Catholic country in the world) and, of course, influenced by the British 'thirst' for great wine.

So small is this country, it is said that some bars in Gozo (Malta's sister island) stock wines made straight from the bishops own vineyards. You (and I) will have to find ourselves lost



on Gozo someday to see if this little factoid is actually true!

It wasn't until Malta achieved its own independence (in 1964) that the winemaking 'industry' began to take form. In recent years, farmers are encouraged to enter the wine trade and turn their land to planting vines in hope of an economic payoff down the road. It seems to be working as vines are appearing more and more across the countryside, with the number of producers somewhere around 75 and foreign investment beginning to appear. The most prominent producer of



Maltese wines appears to be Delicata (<http://www.delicata.com>) who have been making Maltese wines since 1907 and have been major players in developing the industry as a whole. They sum up the modern Maltese wine industry and their contributions in a nutshell here:

"In the early 1990's Delicata embarked on an innovative project to increase the amount of land under vine, taking into account all the problems inherent with Maltese agriculture, such as land fragmentation and abandonment, owner diversity and antiquated growing techniques. Some agricultural plots are as small as a tenth of a hectare and a large amount of the available plots are not owned by skilled farmers. Delicata's 'Vines for Wines' project was thus launched with the aim of providing the land owner with all the knowledge and expertise required to set up and operate a successful modern vineyard, according to each individual vineyard's specification and its particular requirements. Financial support was also made available, along with free vineyard management consultancy services throughout the year by Delicata's team of viticultural experts.

More than a decade into the project this pioneering approach to Maltese viticulture has not only positioned Delicata as the island's largest wine grape grower but has trained and educated over 350 Vignerons in the process. Today a whole army of dedicated skilled grape growers are growing premium quality grapes for the Delicata family winemaker on an on-going basis. These 'pocket sized' boutique vineyards are scattered throughout the islands and produce newly introduced grape varieties such as; Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Syrah, Grenache, Carignan, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. The success of the Delicata 'Vines for Wines' project has also led to the introduction of a similar scheme by the Maltese Government as the way forward for Maltese viticulture in general, which has now been identified as one of three strategic crops for the future development of Maltese Agriculture. In addition to the increasing amount of land being planted with these international varieties, the largest area of land under vine is planted with the two unique indigenous Maltese grape varieties, Girgentina and Gellewza. These indigenous varieties play a vital role in the winemaking philosophy of Emmanuel Delicata who have been championing their existence and revival for many years. The harvesting of these indigenous varieties takes place at the end of August. The international varieties are harvested earlier in the month. Modern vineyard technology is used along with drip irrigation and all of Delicata's grapes are hand picked."

Delicata is definitely the most widely distributed, mirroring American Mondavi marketing complete with billboards, displays in restaurants, and menu inserts everywhere you go. Sometimes bigger is better, and the country owes a lot to the folks at Delicata for helping the wine industry take off. Another great producer is Marsovin, most notable for a great quaffing Rose (about 3 Bucks a bottle) and a Cab Franc/Syrah blend that was quite nice: <http://shop.marsovinwinery.com/index.asp>. Their Atlantis Grillo (A Sicilian Grape) was a delicious alternative to Chardonnay and went smashingly with pan fried fish.



But probably my absolute favorite Maltese Producer was Meridiana: <http://www.meridiana.com.mt/> whose Nexxus Merlot (of all things, a Merlot!) was straight on the mark and found itself a home in my cellar here in the States (alongside their Bel Syrah, I couldn't help myself). Meridiana boasts New World flavors in an Old World style with a strict vision to produce true Maltese wines (low alcohols, big flavor) Meridiana wines are of particular interest to me because they elicit a kind of vague spiritual mystery that is

reflected in Malta (Malta is rip with ancient temples of unknown origin that pre-date the pyramids as well smattered with numerous sites of Biblical Christian importance) Another oddity is the [vineyard](#) itself – it's



drained by a herringbone system laid by the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. The water flows into a large underground cistern which is used to supply the vineyard's 91,000 individual drip-feed irrigators. Great wine plus a few peculiarities are a perfect combination.

This winery is still in its infancy (the first vintage ever was in '96 so I expect great things to come – if I ever make it back to Malta that is...

Large scale production aside, much of the wine made comes from small local plots vinified into familial wines that are often consumed by the locals. Luckily for us just off the Dengli cliffs area is a little dive called '*Bobby-Land*' frequented by locals for their terrific rabbit sauce. When we asked where the house wine came from, the waitress merely pointed to a gentleman a few tables away and said "it's his" It just doesn't get more local than that.

As previously mentioned, the traditional grapes of Malta are Gellewza and Ghirghentina, of which I found to be interesting but understandably not as 'noble' as, say, our beloved Chardonnay or Syrah. The white varietal Ghirghentina



produces excellent quality refreshing dry white wines with good flavor and depth of character, that are commercially blended with Chardonnay to add body and roundness. The red variety Gellewza produces medium bodied easy drinking red wines and roses, and produce a wine that is best described as a cross between a Beaujolais and Merlot. The hot weather, clayish terrain and lack of rain give Maltese wine a character of its own, so it is hard to generalize the flavors of the wines. My guess is Gellewza was the wine being offered at *Bobby-Land* judging by its earth richness and basic fruit components, but it could have been anything as it did not display any of the flavor characteristics I have been trained to recognize – and it came in a carafe so label reading was out of the question.

All Maltese wines tend to complement the wine-friendly bar snacks of Peppered goats cheese, chewy bread, periwinkles (yes snails), raw air cured sausages, and a bit of rabbit-sauced spaghetti. Maltese cuisine is simple, traditional, and involves a lot of braising and slow cooking, so finding wines to pair with the cuisine is generally a simple task. Anything but the California Fruit bombs (Mondavi was actually the American wine readily available here) would work just fine.

And finally, when our palates were screaming for relief from attempting to sample every Maltese wine we could find, we stumbled upon another Maltese tradition: a nice beach, a good book, and a cold Maltese beer...

