

## Spurring Malta's Vinous G-Force

Georges Meekers

Italy claims to have 2,000 of them. Spain and Portugal have a particularly rich heritage of indigenous vine varieties. Galicia in north-west Spain alone is reputed to boast as many as 1,000 native sorts. In Greece as well several indigenous grape varieties can be found. And, even the good ol' USA has Norton which is arguably the only variety of American vine species origin making a premium quality wine. As we all know, France is home to many grapes, including of course the big six varieties Riesling, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Pinot Noir. But *la belle* France also offers quality wines made from around 220 indigenous grape varieties of commercial significance.

Leafing through wine trade magazines and listening to comments from winemakers and wine consumers, I'm convinced that the search for new excitement that indigenous varieties can offer will go on. If anything, the world wine market shows an ever growing interest in wine produced from 'autochthonous' varieties.

From a world perspective, Malta's neighbouring countries are making and promoting well-made quality wines made from their indigenous varieties, especially Italy. Looking north, we witness how the new emerging southern Italian producers represent the driving force behind a significant slice of Italy's wine exports. Their success in competing with New World wines is based on a good quality price ratio and the novelty of native varieties. For many, Italy's winning card is its diversity from region to region and its plethora of indigenous grape varieties unique to each region.

Malta, too, can boast of indigenous grape varieties, namely the white Girgentina and the black Gellewza varieties. It would be a shame not to safeguard these commercially viable grape varieties native to the Maltese Islands. Apart from patriotic reasons and an enigmatic 'food-friendly' quality, Malta grown wines made from Girgentina and Gellewza seem to have a dual appeal of being easy to drink as well as offering good value-for-money to the wine consumer. And, precisely this value proposition, I believe, may be the key to unlocking success on the international front for Maltese wine producers spurring what I have come to call the G-force.

It is not unimaginable that someday Girgentina and Gellewza will hold international currency like, for example, the red Italianates Negroamaro, Nero D'Avola, Primitivo, Aglianico and white varieties Falanghina, Greco Bianco and Fiano.

All these Italian indigenous varieties are asserting their place in the market whereas hardly any of these grapes did 20 years ago. Surely Malta's vinous future holds more in store in terms of well tended old indigenous vines and more concentrated wines made from their grapes?

But, more work needs to be done. First of all, neither Girgentina nor Gellewza have enjoyed the extensive research programmes that have been applied to some varieties from other countries.

In surrounding European countries, however, there are interesting examples of competitiveness initiatives by the government directed toward the improvement of the business strategies of their national wine and vine sector in this respect.

In Italy, for example, help and support from the authorities has been available for a while to wine producers who advocate indigenous Italian varieties. There's the case in point of Sandro Bosciani of Masi Agricola (*Wine Enthusiast's European Winery of the Year*) who received government funding to plant and study 48 little-known grape varieties and clones in an experimental vineyard. Italian winemakers, for instance, can thank a team of funded Tuscan agronomists for rediscovering more than 200 forgotten varieties in Tuscany alone such as Pugnitello, a previously undocumented grape variety found growing on a farm in Chianti.

The trade, too, can lend a helping hand. New trade shows have been established in Italy to meet the demands of indigenous grape producers and to help winemakers find a niche in foreign markets. There's the commendable event organised by Italy's Slow Food movement called *Figli di un Bacco Minore, rassegna nazionale dei vitigni autoctoni e di tradizione italiani*.

So, the global world of grapes and wine is a rather open-minded one when it comes to the choice of grape varieties. The current vogue for things native is a vote of confidence for something new on the market. However, market forces are set to ensure that a varietal Darwinism will prevail. The best-tasting and best-selling innovators will flourish but consumer preferences will dictate which wines endure.

The indigenous Maltese grape varieties are there to be rediscovered, producing a number of wines that offer an appealing balance between innovation and authenticity. It will be interesting to see how the styles of these wines will be developed even further to please the palate of today's discerning wine enthusiasts. In any case, well-made wines from unique grapes grown in one of the tiniest winemaking regions in the world seems a terribly exciting value proposition to any true wine lover.