

Malta Calling!

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Great! It's that time of year again when Eurovision Song Contest fever runs high. Chances are you will be watching the box, get angered by the litigious block voting, and even cast your own vote – perhaps whilst sipping a glass of wine (or two).

Most likely, though, it won't be a wine from Malta, that tiny archipelago in the heart of the Mediterranean that traditionally reciprocates the UK's vote for best song.

Despite the lovefest between the UK and its former colony in the Med, wine producing Malta doesn't seem to be able to attract the attention of the powerful supermarket buyers for its limited quantities of quality wine. Whist you can pick up any bottle of any kind you like from any wine producing country in the world - from Sweden to Tasmania, China to Ecuador - Maltese wines are practically unavailable in the UK.

It isn't that Maltese winemakers haven't tried to tap into Britain's enormous wine market. The Island's leading, family run and oldest established producer, Emmanuel Delicata, for example, experienced a short spell supplying Asda with a range called 'Bay Labels' in the 1990s. The wines were well received; even Britain's notorious wine critic Malcolm Gluck liked them!

But, purely because of scarcity, tiny Malta simply hasn't got the clout to turn out 'superplonk'. With less than 800 ha of arable land under vine and an annual production even smaller than 0.01 percent of France's output, there's no chance of producing huge volumes required to stock hundreds of outlets at tightly defined price points and surrender to loss-leading deals.

The tiny sun-kissed Maltese archipelago, known for its heroic past, must be the tiniest independent state in the world to produce quality wine. Here, making wine is a legacy that goes back to Phoenician times. The vinescape has changed dramatically over the last two decades, though, and Maltese wineries are producing fresh wines of unprecedented, new character. Against all odds and unfavourable economies of scale, skilled winemakers are forging a growing respect for their wines. Narrow terraces smaller than a football pitch and poor rocky soils typify what is best described as uneconomical labour-intensive, heroic winegrowing by a handful of family run wineries.

“Virtually unavailable in Britain, specialist merchants can fill the void and offer discerning wine lovers championing Maltese wines that have picked up numerous awards and medals in the UK but alas no representation in a country where supermarkets dictate choice.”

GETTING ACQUAINTED

Given the marginal export quantities, for the time being at least, ‘doubting Thomases’ will have to pack their bags and travel to sunny Malta to convince themselves of the worth of Maltese wines that appeal in quality and price. And, many British holidaymakers do so, of course. More than one million sunseekers from all the leading consumer countries of Europe flock to Malta each year contributing to the ready-made home market to which Maltese winemakers sell nearly all their wines.

But business isn’t always easy, at least not for Maltese vigneron and winemakers. The archipelago may be located in the Old World, but deep-rooted traditions have constantly been challenged and winemakers have had to adapt with the swiftness of New World rivals. When Malta joined the EU in 2004, protective importation levies were removed. Faced with the new realities of a liberalised Maltese market place, Malta’s wine producers had to learn how to compete head on with tidal waves of cheaper, much cheaper imports.

Reassuringly enough, discerning consumers have for the most part remained loyal to Maltese wines. Of course, for their novelty factor and their sudden prevalence, Maltese wine drinkers have mopped up the newly imported, generic brands that have washed ashore, too. But, with healthy sales of Maltese wine in the on- and off-trade at the middle and premium price brackets staying pretty level, the mix of producer’s reputation, provenance, price and packaging has proven to remain attractive for Maltese consumers and wine drinking visitors alike.

The Maltese wine industry has come a long way in many aspects in recent years. Until the late 1980s, Malta, the rock in the heart of the Mediterranean, was as much in touch with modern viticulture as Alcatraz with San Francisco. Today, however, quality Maltese wines made from grapes from well-tended vineyards are a testimony of the Island’s intent on claiming its speck on the wine map. The major companies have shrugged off the banes of bulk mediocrity and are judiciously growing quality grapes for modern wines.

At the country’s handful of wineries, modernisation in the cellar is complete, expert control maintained throughout the entire process of vinification, and winemakers are producing wines to make the rest of the world, even the UK, sit up and take notice.

Maltese wines have ‘small is beautiful’ written all over them. If anything, this is what makes them an attractive proposition for specialist merchants who can fill the void and offer discerning wine lovers in Britain championing Maltese wines that over the last 15 years have picked up numerous awards and medals in the UK but alas no representation.

“What are their trump cards?” I hear you ask.

THE G-FORCE

Well, firstly, Malta can boast of commercially viable indigenous grapes, namely the white wine grape Girgentina and the black Ġellewża varieties. These old-time favourites have been around since time memorial and come in handy at a time that the 'ABC' fad rages high.

Okay, granted: the Semitic tongue twisting slant on the variety names does not make them the easiest around to pronounce or to spell, but the same can be said of either Gewürztraminer or Gaglioppo, for that matter. Besides, just like New World wines, Maltese wines may be sold by engaging and easy to understand brand names.

If anything, Maltese wines made from Girgentina and Ġellewża seem to have a hat trick appeal of being easy to drink as well as offering good value-for-money and, most importantly perhaps, an enigmatic food-friendly quality. 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. I confess to be biased, but who wouldn't agree that Girgentina and Ġellewża have something going for them; otherwise wouldn't they have disappeared a long time ago?

Girgentina and Ġellewża

The wines made from Girgentina and Ġellewża are made from grapes from ungrafted, Phylloxera resistant bush vines of indeterminate age - probably 35-50 years - grown in small parcels, often dry farmed and probably largely organic by default.

In the cellar, the indigenous Girgentina, which retains its acidity well in the warm Mediterranean climate, is often blended with the much fleshier Chardonnay. It gives crisp, fruity white wines of average alcoholic strength. When well handled, this white wine grape produces fresh varietal wines with a gentle bubblegum aroma and a perfume of green apples and talcum powder with a faint flavour of cashew nuts and a fresh finish. With yields kept in check, Girgentina can be made into an attractive style that hints of young Hunter Sémillon, which is low in alcohol at around 11.5 % and starts life in the bottle thin and sharp. The current school of thought is that Girgentina is too pure to be smothered with oak and is best enjoyed young.

Like most native varieties, the other indigenous grape, Ġellewża, is also well adapted to the local conditions and a late ripener - which helps it develop delicate aromatic qualities. It's less pliable for the making of bold red wines than for easy-drinking reds and fruit-driven rosés.

When vinified carefully into a red wine, with never more than a background whisper of oak (if any), even a featherweight, straight cherry-flavoured Ġellewża will surprise with a nose of boiled candy overlaid on a perfume reminiscent the scent of violets. This trait is also apparent in easy drinking, yet fuller-bodied blends with Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Its fresh summer red fruit, strawberry like hallmark shows best in off-dry and vibrant pink semi-sparkling wines: a popular Island speciality that's also sold as a luxury, lifestyle BOB in Sweden.

International Currency

The world wine market shows an ever growing interest in wine produced from 'autochthonous' varieties. 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.

It's not unimaginable that someday Ġirgentina and Ġellewża 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 cared for, old indigenous vines and more concentrated wines made from their grapes?

I believe so, but unfortunately, Maltese authorities are reluctant to undertake competitiveness initiatives directed toward the improvement of the business strategies of their national wine and vine sector in this respect - unlike governments in surrounding European countries.

In neighbouring Italy, for example, help and support from the authorities has been available for a while to wine producers who advocate indigenous Italian varieties. There is 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 Pugnello, a previously undocumented grape variety found growing on a farm in Chianti.

In Malta hardly any such initiatives have been witnessed since the on-site study by the late Dr. Harold P. Olmo from the University of Davis, California, in the 1960s. So, I can't help but think that the promotional budget for Malta's 3 minute song for Europe, is sadly disproportionate to the meagre funds available for researching the enigmatic Maltese native varieties and promoting vinous 'Brand Malta'.

OTHER GRAPES ON THE BLOCK

Geographically Malta is clearly positioned in the Old World of wine. From a winemaking standpoint, though, it's sometimes said that the term New World implies a certain state of mind of the winemaker's rather than a geographical definition. As is the case in most New World countries, the modern Maltese wine industry, too, has only recently enjoyed a great revival in the cellar and vineyard whilst enjoying the same refreshing freedom and manoeuvrability to produce consumer friendly wines. Around 22 or so international grape varieties, grafted on suitable American rootstocks, have meanwhile claimed their own on Malta's vineyard block.

In the early 1990s, mainly red Bordeaux varieties and Chardonnay were planted, following a first pilot project with Cabernet plantings in the late 1970s by Marsovin, the Island's second largest wine producer. Of the usual Bordeaux suspects Merlot is coming into a class of its own as a mono-varietal.

Red Rhône varieties, too, thrive especially well in a number of Maltese soils. Of all the wines hailed as Malta's greatest ever, the best ones made from Syrah (sometimes labelled as Shiraz), might very well turn out to be potential candidates for the sacrosanct title of 'super-maltese'. All four major wineries, namely Emmanuel Delicata, Marsovin, novice Camilleri Wines and the much smaller Meridiana Wine Estate, now produce one or more wines from this variety, either as blend or a stand-alone varietal.

"For such a small pebble in the Med, the Maltese vinescape that also embraces native grape varieties is wonderfully diverse."

Vineyard plots are privately owned and, given a few exceptions, often no larger than a football pitch. Some are also planted out with trellised Carignan, Grenache Noir, Tempranillo and Sangiovese which is very promising indeed.

Besides Chardonnay, other international white varieties include Chenin Blanc, Viognier, Pinot Bianco, even Sauvignon Blanc, and of course Muscat, which is coincidentally a Maltese family name. The variety is here, a stone's throw away from Pantelleria, also known as Moscato or Zibibbo and vinified as a sweet dessert wine or occasionally as a crisp, dry white together with Vermentino.

Whilst Marsovin and Meridiana Wine Estate try to keep up their privately owned and expensive to run estates, they too now source grapes from small private holdings and hundreds of vigneroni as has always been the philosophy of Delicata.

A striking difference between the wineries is their take on indigenous varieties. Delicata resolutely advocates championing the native grape varieties which always have had a natural place in Malta as well as the newly planted international ones. The smallest producer, Meridiana (in which Marchese Antinori allegedly has got participation), on the other hand, dismisses a priori the use of Girgentina and Gellewża. Marsovin and Camilleri Wines have reluctantly come round to using the natives too although they value them less than the international varieties.

THE APPELLATIONS

In the last years especially, Malta's quality driven winemakers have increased all strategies to differentiate their respective wine portfolios and asked for a protection system to guarantee high investment and commitment. For that it was important to fit the rules of a self-regulating Maltese wine industry to new laws and international scenarios.

So, with the 2007 vintage, the Maltese appellation system got introduced which has since been received as a major step forward for the trade. Malta's wine industry now abides by an appellation classification which is very much based on the Old World blueprint and mimics the Italian DOC(G) system. Similarly it sets out to 'control' the making of quality wines by means of protocols. It recognises designations for the production of Q.W.P.S.R., namely D.O.K. (Denominazzjoni ta' Origini Kontrollata) besides I.G.T. (Indikazzjoni Geografika Tipika).

This endorses what already was a value proposition with unique selling points, namely most established Malta grown brands. As said, for the moment, repeat sales will depend on wine-loving foreign visitors and the vinous self-awareness of Maltese consumers.

Meanwhile the first wines of the 2008 vintage are hitting local retail shelves. The harvest conditions were ideal for the production of structured white and red wines of character with potential for the making of the country's first 'reserves' ever. One can also expect to find (more) 'superior' wines of increased alcoholic strength.

Generally speaking, the wines offer an appealing balance between innovation and authenticity. They are food friendly, interesting without being intimidating. It will be fascinating to see how the styles will be developed even further to please the palate of today's discerning wine enthusiasts. In any case, well-made wines from grapes grown in one of the tiniest winemaking regions in the world seems a terribly exciting value proposition to any true wine lover.

Offered a skilful blend of unique varietal content combined with the romantic allure of heroic winegrowing by forward thinking family-owned wineries, it's plausible that markets overseas will help shape the future of Malta's 'new heritage' wines.

If you are a UK merchant, rest assured Maltese winemakers eagerly await your vote of confidence in their wines.

“Hello London, this is Malta calling!”