

Bottles in suitcases, jugs on floors. Wine, tourism, the European Union, and Cultural identity on Gozo, Malta

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S U M M A R Y

On the island of Gozo, wine is an avenue for cultural identity. Gozitans create identity for themselves through practices associated with wine, while at the same time there are also forces associated with wine that create an identity of Gozo that is perceived by the outsider. Tourism and Malta's recent induction to the European Union are currently two factors that have a significant position regarding culture change on Gozo. Tourism and the EU both have aspects that affect practices associated with wine. Therefore this article will look at wine in the lives of Gozitans and what influence tourism and the EU have on wine in Gozo.

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Wine in the Lives of Gozitans

In Gozo wine is an everyday part of life, and it has been for centuries. There are sayings, superstitions, poems, and parables about wine, along with reports of wine making and grape production from the illustrious times of the Knights of Malta. Wine in Gozo has the ability to connect generations through homemade production and weave communities together through networks of interdependence. Shops and bars usually have discrete reserves of homemade wine that have been procured from a local maker, which act as recognizable social and cultural symbols. Having a glass of wine after work, at dinner, or in the context of mid-day socializing stands for slowing down and taking time to enjoy life, something that Gozitans are very good at. Although wine in Gozo is presently being effectuated, both socially and economically, by tourism and Malta's recent induction into the European Union, the following are characteristics of wine that make it culturally meaningful from a Gozitan point of view.

Wine in Gozo has always been considered the traditional drink (Attard, 1995). In the late 16th century, Giacomo Bosio, a historian for the Knights of Malta, noted that the knowledge possessed by the Maltese for grape growing and wine production was ancient (Attard, 2001). Later, in the 18th century, Maltese historian Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar reported as many as 300 barrels of wine being produced per year (ibid). The long history of wine on the Maltese Islands that spans several centuries may account for the attitude of wine being such a commonplace item in Gozitan culture. Wine for Gozitans is certainly not boring enough to be considered banal, but it is ordinary enough that a Gozitan not directly involved with wine production, might express puzzlement about extended interest on the subject because it is viewed as such an obvious part of Gozitan culture from the insider's perspective.

The cultural significance of wine in Gozo is also expressed through the presence of sayings, parables, poems and superstitions that are associated with wine. Such folklore is very important because the knowledge of them, even if it varies slightly between individuals, is known by many and can give good insights to objects' meanings. One superstition about wine is that pouring it on the ground is a gesture to appease the gods in hopes of keeping the ground fertile. Some Gozitans say this is true, others will tell you they never heard of it, while still others might tell you that the story is somewhat true though slightly misrepresented. It is not a matter of fertility, for some, but good luck, and it is not an action done on purpose but only by way of unintentional spilling. Either way, the importance here is focused on the fact that there is a superstition at all.

One thought that is widely accepted without dispute is that a glass of wine a day is good for your health. While wine consumption is an everyday occurrence for some, wine is considered by Gozitans to be something done in moderation. The collective agreement on the health benefits of one glass of wine per day, at dinner or maybe after work with friends, is far from an open invitation to get drunk. There is a known distinction between enjoying a glass of wine and just drinking to get drunk. The social ideal of proper wine consumption for Gozitans puts drinking to get drunk and drinking to enjoy wine on a continuum of low to high class, respectively. A Gozitan woman recalled a time in her youth when a priest advised her friend not to marry a certain man because "he was a drinker of wine" (Galley, 1993). It is interesting to note that a priest gave this advice because wine is usually present after religious ceremonies when merrymaking takes place.

The wine making that takes place in the homes of Gozitans also functions as a cultural object, which integrates different aspects of Gozitan life. One of these cohesive characteristics is that the hobby of homemade wine production will stay in a family for generations. Families are brought closer because, even though it only takes one person for production, the entire family can take pride in, and benefit, from having such a person in the family. New technologies have taken the production of wine in the homes from stomping grapes with the feet to the use of machines, but the methods and the ingredients remain fairly constant, maintaining wine's role as a mode of Gozitan culture. A woman recalled her grandfather using his feet to press the grapes, and how her brother currently uses a machine now for the same process.

Certain techniques and trade secrets of production used within the home by individuals are highly esoteric to outsiders. Older style Gozitan homes have very few windows facing the outside, favoring windows that look inward to open courtyards. This construction of public versus private space is symbolic of how secretive the process of wine making in the home can be. Wine hobbyists are likely to discuss trade knowledge and individual information about production among themselves, but as one Gozitan put it, "They would rather give you a bottle for free and have you be on your way than tell you anything." The use of public and private space in Gozo is a topic that could be entirely its own paper, but the privacy of wine making and the social exchanges between Gozitans using wine is one example of the division of public and private spheres.

Some of this homemade wine ends up in local bars, usually in the form of large jugs that are kept on the floor or in the back. The wine will usually come from the producer as some sort of favor. The wine producer may be friend or relative, but either way the transaction between homemade wine producer and the bar that the wine goes to is usually an informal one. When homemade wine is sold to a bar it is at a minimal cost and rarely becomes a means of profit. Often times these exchanges are based mostly on reciprocating previous or ongoing personal exchanges. Homemade wine is not limited, on the basis of these exchanges, to only bars; butchers, farmers, clergy and any other Gozitan may become part of this loop of social reciprocation that serves as a structure of cultural cohesiveness.

Presently, homemade wine consumption for Gozitans at local bars is not as prevalent as it once was. Certain bars and cafes become specific Gozitan social places where Gozitans spend their leisure time. Throughout the day

local patrons congregate, socialize, and then disperse in loosely rhythmic cycles. Rather than observing the majority of the people drinking glasses of homemade wine, the tabletops of bars especially frequented by Gozitans will usually be populated with bottles of imported beer, sodas, or coffee drinks. Some Gozitans will still have a glass of homemade wine in this situation, but homemade wine is not the standard.

The European Union Several aspects of both tourism and being a part of the European Union affect wine in Gozo. Tourism is, of course, a major part of Gozo's identity. For this reason wine becomes valued for its ability to attract tourists and takes different forms in the pursuit to do so. The European Union then, is responsible for affecting Gozo by the imposition of certain mandates that govern agriculture, methods of production, quality, uniformity of product, and laws regarding imports and exports.

When wine in Gozo is to be publicly sold it must fall in line with a rather extensive list of certain characteristics to legally carry a label that states the wine was made in Gozo ("Gozo wine" for the purposes of this paper). To those that sell Gozo wine the EU provides a document that describes what the necessary characteristics of the wine must be. Each type of wine, red, white, and rose, must have proper "sensorial characteristics", such as certain colors and smells. There are also guidelines including, but not limited to, the wine's minimum alcohol content and the use of certain adjectives on the labels. The most important stipulation for a wine to carry a "made in Gozo" label is that the grapes for the wine be grown on Gozo and not imported. This stipulation is in place for other European countries as well to protect against anyone falsely profiting by making untrue claims about having "French", or "Italian" wine for example. It is advantageous then to have "Gozo" wine, as it is attractive for tourists who are seeking authentic experiences.

In an effort to balance economies and not have certain sectors of the market get oversaturated, the European Union regulates aspects of agricultural production of Gozo wine. For example, No more than 1,000 hectares of land on Gozo may be used for the growing of grapes used for Gozo wine. The European Union also provides subsidies to start vineyards that are going to be used to produce Gozo wine. Demonstrating the EU's desire to balance markets is the fact that in other countries monies are allocated to take away vineyards where there are many.

The EU recognizes Gozo as a place where Gozo wine has room to grow as a commercialized product. The onus is then on Gozo wine to make a name for itself because other European Union regulations, namely those that control the importation and exportation of wine to Gozo, have made Malta and Gozo a dumping ground for surplus wines from other EU countries and abroad.

Tourism Gozo wines, once they are on the market, play a major role in the tourism industry. The Malta Tourism Authority considers wine a craft, and part of cultural tourism. The MTA recognizes several categories of tourists, such as those who vacation for the purposes of sitting on a beach, or tourists who want to learn more about culture and heritage. While the desire to drink local wine could potentially come from any category of tourist, the "heritage and cultural" tourists are the ones who are most likely to seek it. Roughly 13% of tourists fall into the MTA's category of "heritage and cultural", but the MTA says that this number is on the rise because tourists are seeking more authentic experiences.

Presently, homemade wine is not often prevalent in locations that tourists are most likely to visit. With the exception of recent tourist opportunities to partake in traditional aspects of Gozitan life such as wine making or agriculture (Thompson, 2006), Gozo wines dominate the tourist scene. Wine tasting shops that are popular on the tourist circuit do not have homemade wine. Rather, intervals of busloads of tourists looking for local products are introduced to Marsovin or Delicata Gozo wines.

A search for homemade wine in the bars of Gozo's central city, Rabat, also illustrates the public perception of wine and tourism. In places where public space is occupied by both tourists and locals, homemade wine is likely to not be sold at all. As a tourist, a request for homemade wine will usually prompt the bartender to reach for a Gozo wine. At one bar in particular I sat at a table outside the bar and asked the waiter for homemade wine. He replied that they did have homemade and brought me a glass. Upon finishing it I went inside to ask if I could see what he had given me, assuming that he would point out some jug on the floor as most homemade wines in bars are kept. The waiter was initially flustered by my question but quickly came to terms with the fact that he had been caught with the cork out of the bottle, so to speak. He had given me a Gozo wine, not a homemade wine, and explained that actual homemade wine is too inconsistent in its quality, and along with occasionally having the moniker 'diesel', not worthy of being sold.

Conclusion

The Malta Tourist Authority must be aware of the images and meanings associated with homemade wine if it is to be utilized as a cultural resource for tourism. The MTA's current goal is to "brand" Malta for its niche in the tourism market and carry out a subsequent media campaign to express this image. The MTA recognizes that local support is vital for their desired tourism image to exist and thrive, so the current status of homemade wine and Gozo wine becomes an issue for them. The perceptions some Gozitans have that homemade wine is inferior to Gozo wine may point to an understanding of current cultural change on Gozo. The interesting thing to note here is that the Gozo wines, the wines that are geared towards tourists, are regulated in many aspects by the European Union. If for Gozitans, the induction of Malta to the EU represents progress and the greater opportunity for prosperity, homemade might have a hard time finding its place in the tourism industry. If homemade wine cannot function as a commodity for the tourism industry, it should be interesting to observe the future of homemade wine as a social structure for Gozitans' identity separate from outsiders. I will end with a passage by Gozitan poet Gorg Pisani. Pisani urges taking solace in wine as the passing of more contented days yield to an inevitably changing and uncertain future.

Il-Ghid taz-Zghozija

*Let's all drink lost
In a dream of enjoyment
Before the loss forever
Of the spark of youth*

*Wine is inviting us
To joy and revelry
In its contentment we forget
Sorrow and all worry*

(Gorg Pisani)

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