

Maltese Bread: a changing symbol of the island's identity

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ABSTRACT

Food and culture – it is nearly impossible to separate these two aspects of the way humans live. The way we prepare, consume, and talk about food says a lot about who we are, and distinguishes us from any other species on earth. Perhaps this is why, on the island of Gozo in Malta, the production of *hobz tal-Malti*, or Maltese bread, has become a symbol not only of sustenance, but identity.

In times past, people came together in bakeries to make their bread, and in doing so obtained news and strengthened community ties. Now people have their own ovens at home. They either make bread themselves, or buy it from the store. Bakers that still make bread in traditional bakeries see themselves as protectors of a heritage that is being lost as the old ways of production fade. While this change is due to a variety of factors like tourism and globalization, it is apparent that breadmaking is being modified, some believe, to the detriment of Maltese cuisine and, some believe, culture. For this reason, cultural tourism projects in Malta are seeking to preserve the tradition of making Maltese bread, as well as the way of life with which this tradition is associated.

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Introduction

There are several aspects of culture that set us as humans apart from the rest of the living world. As an anthropologist it is these things – things like instrumental music, conversational language, cooking and art – that I find most intriguing to study. This summer, as the recipient of a scholarship from my university, I was able to take part in the Expeditions Summer Field School in Malta through the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. I used this opportunity to study the social nature of food, and bread in particular. I am intrigued by humans' tendency to go beyond the act of sustenance to find ways of enjoying food, and connecting through preparing and sharing it. I was fortunate to learn about all these things by studying the history of Maltese bread. Discovering how such a simple staple of the local diet also functions as a focal point for social activity and identity was an intriguing window into the long and dynamic relationship between people and the food they eat.

Methodology

My fieldwork in Gozo was conducted over a period of three weeks from July 28 to August 17, 2008. Gozo is the smaller, rural counterpart to the larger island of Malta. The two islands, along with tiny Comino, comprise the southern Mediterranean nation of Malta, a member of the European Union since 2004. With a population of 403,532 and size slightly less than twice that of Washington, D.C. (12), this nation possesses a vibrant cultural history.

My goal, in the beginning, was to explore the food culture of Gozo and to see what impact, if any, tourism had on the production of Gozitan cuisine over the past few decades. In narrowing my focus to Maltese bread and the changing role of the bakery in the community, I learned a great deal about how closely food and culture are tied to the history, geography, language and lifestyle of a particular place. These factors also contribute to a sense of Gozitan identity that bakers see themselves as helping to preserve through maintaining traditional means of production. I also learned that while tourism affects many aspects of life in a place where it becomes central to the economy, it is one of many factors that change culture over time.

“Tell me what you eat and how you eat, and I’ll tell you who you are.”

(German saying)

“You take on the food of another country at your peril. Do it, and you inevitably loosen your own cultural moorings, and destabilize your fundamental sense of identity. It’s a risky business.”

(Fuchsia Dunlop)

I began by taking trips to several libraries to research the history of Maltese bread; I also met with a Gozitan anthropologist who gave me some suggestions about where to start my research. While there are 14 bakeries on the island of Gozo, there are just a handful that still pride themselves in producing bread in the traditional manner: hand-kneaded sourdough loaves baked in wood-fired ovens. (4) I visited three of these and asked the owners what a day’s work is like, and how being a baker has changed over the years.

I also spoke with those involved in tourism projects that protect this traditional way of life. Since tourism is an inescapable industry in Gozo, I wanted to know how breadmaking

and this traditional way of life are portrayed through educational displays. These authorities stressed how important it is that such lifeways be supported and preserved, and made apparent both to tourists and Gozitans themselves. Both of these authorities stressed the importance of not letting the larger industry of tourism wipe out the ways of life that have made Gozo a place people flock to in order to experience an unrushed country lifestyle.

Finally, I observed how bread is marketed in local supermarkets and how bakeries are located spatially in communities. In addition, I listened to the narratives of local people about how they remember making or eating bread, providing me with a larger picture of how one food item is closely linked with identity and culture in Gozo.

Due to the short amount of time in which I was able to conduct fieldwork in Gozo, I would like to caution the reader that there are many other stories, factors and implications tied to the changing of traditional breadmaking that would likely become more apparent given more time to study this intriguing topic. The observations which I present here are merely one narrative about how change has come to this particular niche industry on the island of Gozo.

Research

Bread throughout Malta’s history

Bread and its production have always been central to the culture of food in the Mediterranean, and Malta is no exception. Malta’s culture, in particular, has been influenced by a variety of cultures. Due to its strategic position between Europe and Africa, it has served as a naval station for several groups including the French and British. Malta has also come under Arab rule for portions of its past, and most recently has been ever since the Knights of St. John controlled the island in the mid 17th century, bread has made up 75% of the local diet. In fact, most other food-stuffs served at meals were referred to as ‘companaticum’ or ‘bread accompaniments.’ (15)

There are many types of bread produced in Malta such as various forms of “fancy” or “French” bread found in restaurants and hotels to the ftira, a local specialty consisting of a ring of bread stuffed with olives, tomatoes, and anchovies. (1) However, the bread with which I am concerned in this paper is the staple wheat loaf known as hobz tal-Malti or simply hobz (bread.) This sourdough bread is made by incorporating a lump of dough from the previous day’s batch into the new dough, which produces a slightly sour taste.

The loaves themselves come in two sizes. Smaller loaves generally begin with 650g of dough; larger loaves weigh one kilogram. This is measured by cutting pieces from the kneaded dough and weighing them on a scale balanced with weights of the proper size. Once these pieces are measured, they are rolled in flour and shaped into loaves that are set aside and allowed to rise for approximately 20 minutes. They are then placed on trays and baked in ovens heated either by burning wood or gas at a temperature of about 500 degrees Fahrenheit. (5) This produces a round loaf about the size of a dinner plate, which is generally sliced in half, and the halves are sliced lengthwise into pieces.

The outside of the loaf is crusty, while the inside remains very soft. The smaller loaf, referred to as *nofs artal ratal* can be purchased in most supermarkets for around €0.34 while the larger size, or *tar-ratal* loaf sells for around €0.54. (17) This bread is also served regularly as a complimentary appetizer in many of Gozo's restaurants, whether they cater to Western or local tastes.

This type of bread has been both a staple of the Maltese diet as well as a factor in the country's interaction with others through trade and wartime strategy. Malta has never been able to produce enough grain to feed all its inhabitants, since the soil is too rocky and the climate too dry to support this scale of agriculture. Wheat has been imported from Sicily to make up for this deficit. Under the control of the British, who annexed Malta as a part of their empire in 1800, Malta became a strategic military stopover in the Mediterranean. The British and the Maltese did not always get along smoothly, due in part to some violations by the British of their original agreement with Malta about occupation of the island. In 1837, despite knowledge that doing so would raise the price of wheat, the British colonial government liberalized the import of grain. The Maltese people were no longer able to afford the wheat they had previously bought, and starvation became a problem on the island. This led to the revolt of 1919 in which the Maltese rose up against the British government. Though relations between the British and the Maltese people remained shaky for the next decade, this revolt led to the allowance of a new constitution in 1921 in which the Maltese elected their first prime minister, Joseph Howard. (18)

In 1942 as World War II raged, the Axis powers attacked Malta, bombing it repeatedly along with its Allied partners. During this time, it was nearly impossible to import food from Sicily, and starvation once again became a problem on the island. The British government proposed a system of distribution of locally grown wheat that would keep the

Maltese supported until the raids subsided. The Maltese people were reluctant to sell their grain to the government, but the British knew that appealing to the church would be a wise move, as much of Maltese life revolved around the doings of the Catholic Church. With the help of the influence of the powerful Bishop of Gozo, the Maltese people sold their wheat and were able to hold out until Operation Pedestal Convoy came to their aid on August 13, 1942, and the bombings ended. (18)

In addition to the import of grain and importance of wheat and bread in the Maltese diet, bread has had an impact on various other aspects of Maltese life throughout the years. Bakeries themselves used to be a far more central part of communities in Malta and Gozo than they are today. The bakery was less a place of production and more a center where people came together to bake their own bread. The baker was responsible only for operating the ovens; people brought their own ingredients to the bakery and mixed the bread themselves. (4,6) Some bakeries, like Doleana Bertoli in Xaghra, have stone counters containing sink-like depressions where people would mix and knead the dough. While waiting for the bread to rise and bake, people would talk amongst themselves and learn the latest news from the village. People could gather information and strengthen community ties as well as procure their sustenance. Even today, though most bakers mix their own dough, people bring uncooked vegetable dishes and meat pies from home and leave them in the bakery's oven, then come back to collect them when they have baked.

Bread as Identity

Bread in Malta today has lost none of its clout as a symbol of local tradition and identity. Guidebooks and cookbooks alike proclaim that Maltese bread, or *hobz tal-Malti*, as it is locally known, is the best in the world. (16) Bread is incorporated in many aspects of Maltese language and geography as well. Many villages have a Bakery Street where bakeries were located in years past. Other villages, such as Marsalforn, have bakery connotations in their name (*marsal* = harbor, *for* = bakery.) In fact, Marsalforn has a place in Gozitan folklore as a town where the girls who worked in the bakery helped fend off a pirate attack with their surprisingly staunch resistance. (7)

There are a variety of expressions in which bread is shown to be a symbol of sustenance, character and life in Malti, the official language of the island. The obvious connection between bread (*hobz*) and sustenance is apparent in such expressions as *jeh tiegu bhall-hobz li jiekol* (he needs it like

his daily bread), *haga li fiha bicca hobz gmielha* (something which provides a loadsome of bread; something profitable) and *ma fihix hobz* (it procures no bread; it is profitless.) This metaphor can be carried a bit further to symbolize jobs or ways of living in the phrases *tilef hobzu* (he lost his job) and *hobzu mahbuz* (his bread is baked; he is provided for.) Bread is also used as a stand-in for character in the phrase *x'hobz jiekol dan* (what kind of bread does he consume? Lit: what is his character like?) (3) In a more literal sense, there are also single words that exemplify the centrality of bread in the Maltese diet. For example, the verb *xappap* means 'to dip bread in oil.' (8)

Apart from language and geography, bread remains a visible symbol of identity in Gozo today and the culture that Gozitans project through invitations to share in Gozitan cuisine and purchase local products. During my fieldwork, I was surprised at the readiness of almost everyone I spoke with to share anecdotes about bread, whether it was the bread they remembered from their childhood, the way bread used to be made, or the way in which bread production and the price of bread has changed in recent times. Not only were people involved in the bread and tourism industries ready with these anecdotes, but everyone I talked to had a story to tell, including elderly citizens at a coffee shop and tourists visiting Gozo from Malta proper. It did not strike me as surprising, then, that the image chosen to promote the 'Taste a Shared Culture' project at a local food store was a loaf of Maltese bread. The program, implemented in the mall's food store in Victoria, Gozo, is geared towards educating people about where their food comes from and how it is intertwined with culture and globalization.

Bread as a Lifestyle

While Gozitan bakeries of today are not the social centers they once were, they are still a very active part of the community and being a baker is seen as a profitable profession. Bread is just as integral a part of the Maltese diet as it has been in years past, and many homes have a fresh loaf delivered from the local bakery daily, including Sundays. (14) Consequently, being a baker requires many hours of dedication and many bakers rise in the early hours of the morning to begin baking so that these deliveries will be fresh. Among other things, bakeries may sell bread to local restaurants and produce stands, provide their ovens for local use as described above, and often have a shop in the front of the bakery where customers can purchase various types of bread as well as drinks, snacks and other types of refreshment.

To gain a firsthand sense of how bread is made and how it affects the people who make it, I spoke with several bakers about their individual bakeries. While in Gozo, I visited three different bakeries: Cini's Bakery in Fontana, Doleana Bertoli Bakery and Restaurant in Xaghra, and Ta' Saminu bakery in Xewkija. Each bakery had some subtle differences in its means of producing bread and services. However, at each place, the business had been in the family for generations and the current owners were happy to show me the equipment used to produce bread and to share with me the history of the place. At each bakery the owners projected an air of pride in producing bread that symbolized Gozo's heritage, and were passionate about the job of keeping that tradition alive and providing their fellow citizens with bread baked in the traditional way.

Cini's Bakery in Fontana was the only bakery I visited that still delivers bread to local homes on a daily basis. Located off one of the main roads leading into Fontana in Gozo, you might miss the shop if it weren't for the hanging wooden sign in front proclaiming the bakery's name. In the front of the store there are a few shelves for bread that customers come in to buy; there are also snacks and juice for sale. The small storefront belies the cavernous baking area in the back of the shop, and the already humid air is hot and dense with the smell of baking bread, even after the baking is finished for the day. Evana, the woman I talked to, and her daughter Marija, niece Francesca, and two of her other children chased each other around the bakery as some of the employees swept up the remains of crust and flour from the floor. It was just after noon and baking was over for the day, but tidying up and preparing for the next day's baking occupied the few employees.

Cini's recipe for bread has been the same through all 5 generations that the business has been in the current owner's family. Because they want to deliver fresh bread, baking begins around midnight here, and the two men who drive the Cini's delivery van leave the bakery with the fresh loaves around 5:45 a.m. Evana has five children to care for so she slices the bread and drives deliveries of loaves to local produce stands while her brother and sister's husband do the actual baking. This bakery allows locals to bring in dishes to bake in the oven, though they've had to limit this to two days a week to allow plenty of time and room for their own bread in the ovens. The ovens are still heated by burning wood, though the dough is no longer kneaded by hand since there are large quantities that must be mixed to produce enough loaves to keep the business afloat. The traditional *hobz* loaf is Cini's most popular product.

The Ta' Saminu bakery in Xewkija is run by two brothers, Pawlu and Indrija, who are the only people that work there. The brothers' father founded the bakery, and they have been working there since 1960. They keep a pleasant shop, well-organized but cheerfully cluttered. There are pictures of bread everywhere, and even a bread calendar on the mint-green wall. In the back, sacks of flour are stacked against the wall halfway to the ceiling. The first time I entered the shop it was midmorning, and I had lost my way twice in the narrow streets nearby, asked directions, and finally followed my nose to the nondescript curtained entrance that I wasn't even sure was the bakery at first. The place was hopping with customers coming in to buy loaves of bread.

The brothers are very friendly and seem intent on maintaining connections with those who come in. The cash register is framed with pictures and letters from people who have visited the bakery throughout the years.

The brothers do not deliver bread to locals or to restaurants, so they get up around 4 a.m. to begin the first bake of the day which will go into the ovens around 7 a.m. This bread is baked and sold in the shop which is incorporated in the bakery itself. After serving customers all morning, the brothers prepare a second bake of bread, which they put in the oven in the early afternoon. The rest of the afternoon is spent cleaning the bakery and preparing for the next day's production. Pawlu and Indrija produce around 300 loaves of hobz a day, in addition to other types of bread such as sweet rings containing vanilla and sesame seeds. After pulling a tray of these rings from the oven on a long-handled wooden paddle, they urge me to try one, which almost melts in my mouth in a combination of sweet and savory. Ta' Saminu also opens its ovens to public use, and many people come in and out each morning, exchanging stories as they deposit and collect their dishes – roasted eggplant, onions and potatoes and trays of sizzling chicken that falls from the bones in a drizzle of their own oil.

Xaghra's Doleana Bertoli Bakery and Restaurant is a good example of what a traditional bakery used to be like. It has garnered much attention from TV stations and magazines as a bakery doing its best to keep the traditional way of producing bread alive. It contains a large wood-burning oven where the bread is baked, and the sink-like depressions mentioned in the introduction where locals used to mix bread dough themselves before turning it over to the baker to be fired in the oven. The bakery was opened in 1932, but in 2005 was converted into a restaurant as well. While traditional hobz is made here, it is now only about 30

loaves per day as opposed to the larger bakes that used to supply grocery stores with bread. The restaurant is famed for its stuffed ftira loaves and is popular with both locals and tourists, though more tourists eat there now. Rosemary, the woman I spoke with was the owner's daughter. She told me that it had been her father's dream to open a restaurant. While they still produce bread, her father shares his knowledge of Maltese cuisine with locals and tourists alike through the traditional dishes he prepares in the restaurant.

Bread as a Changing Symbol

Each of these locations represents a small business that is being affected by changes in the production of bread in Malta. Though small bakeries like these continue to produce bread in a traditional manner, for people who enjoy the taste of authentic hobz, there are those who are changing the recipe of the bread, or the type of bread they produce altogether. This is largely to cut the costs of producing bread, and to be able to produce bread more quickly. For example, some types of "fancy" or "French" bread do not require time to rise before being baked, so bakers can turn out a larger number of loaves in a day as they do not have to wait for the bread to rise. Also, some bakers are turning to more refined flour that produces a less dense, whiter bread. While some people think this may be in order to reduce costs, others complain that this is done to cater to the tastes of Western tourists, and that such influences are becoming detrimental to traditional Maltese cuisine. The introduction to one Maltese cookbook explains:

"It is an unfortunate paradox that despite our slow but steady economic development over the last 30 years, in the great part due to the hundreds of thousands of tourists that invade our shores, the quality and characteristics of our food have been practically obliterated." (15)

While this may be exaggerating the actual damage that has been done to Maltese traditional cuisine, the influence of outside cultures is undeniable on the island of Gozo. Nearly 1.25 million tourists visit Malta yearly, mostly from The U.S., U.K. and western European countries (13). Some of these are countries that have had a hand in controlling the country in the past, so why blame tourists for detrimental change? In the past, other countries have allowed the Maltese to maintain some hand in their government and situation. However, while the Maltese are fully in charge of their own government today, the increasing profitability of tourism makes it harder to resist the demands brought by visitors to the country. As far as tradition goes, in many

cases it seems that the Maltese people have been able to resist change and maintain their own culture. Author Bill Bramwell points out that they have “neither simply absorbed the behavior and consumption patterns of their guests, nor have they taken to ‘mirroring’ what is expected of them.” He maintains that the Maltese “feel, and indeed seem to be, well-equipped to negotiate their relationship with foreigners and to exercise some choice and control as to where the lines of influence become drawn.” (2)

Nonetheless, as it becomes more and more profitable to encourage tourism, the Maltese grow more likely to cater to outsiders’ tastes in order to keep them coming. This dependence on visitors for income follows a trend to which many countries where tourism is a main industry can relate. The scale begins with euphoria that there is an ability to share culture and gain revenue in the process. After awhile the newness of the industry wears off and locals become apathetic. However, as time goes by and tourists begin to arrive in larger numbers, locals begin to become annoyed with the behavior of outsiders and the demands they place on locals. Eventually this annoyance becomes antagonism, but tourism is already so closely linked to the island’s economy that it is no longer practical or profitable to eliminate it. (2)

Tourists continue to flock to Malta and bring with them their (largely Western) tastes. There are nearly as many places to procure pizza or fish and chips on the island as there are to seek out local dishes like *fenek* (stewed rabbit) or *Gbejniet* (Gozo cheese.) Nevertheless, there are those who claim that the bread just doesn’t taste the same anymore, and that many foods today are going downhill simply because people are trying to make things “too healthy” and are skimping on taste in the process. This response came up surprisingly often among the elder Gozitans I talked to. Some of them said that “food tastes better when you’re younger,” and admitted that their age might have something to do with their ability to taste the bread the way they remembered it from their childhood. But they also mentioned that children today are turning to other snacks and treats rather than the slices of fresh bread they remember eating as children.

“We would get a loaf of brown bread, and you get a big loaf every week so by the end of the week it’s dry,” said Stephen Cini, a Heritage Malta representative I talked to at the Archaeology Museum in Victoria. “We would dip this in coffee, or put it with milk and sugar and make a kind of pudding. We would eat that when it rained,” he remembered. “We make it for my kids sometimes now, but they don’t eat it so much,” he said with a smile.

Mario Gauci, who works as a docent in de Redin’s tower at Dwerja, remembered eating bread as a child as well. He also agreed that bread tasted better to him as a child, and recalls visiting a bakery in Valetta where a tall thin woman who never smiled when she sold his family bread. “She must be so old now,” he said. “I remember her as an old woman even then. I was afraid of her,” he remembers, though he and his friends nicknamed her Smiley. “Her husband was a very nice man, though, always joking. He gave us pieces of bread when she wasn’t looking.”

Mario used to make bread at home, but now says he buys it at the supermarket. This seemed to be a common theme among the people I talked to about making bread. I wondered if this was because of the lack of recipes for *hobz* in Maltese cookbooks, which brought up an issue that had puzzled me. For as many guidebooks and cookbooks that I paged through that touted Maltese bread as the best in the world, I found very few recipes for the bread itself. When I asked Mario why this might be, he answered with a laugh: “I think people (today) are just more lazy.” He talked about the time-consuming process that goes into making a loaf of bread; it seems that most people, though they have their own ovens now, want to leave this up to the bakers. Sometimes these are the traditional bakers; sometimes they are the commercial bakers selling bread made with processed flour and less of the traditional sourdough taste. In either case, people are looking for ways to save both time and money, and being able to purchase cheaply produced bread at a store (as opposed to a bakery) accomplishes both. What is lost, then, is the traditional knowledge passed on in instructing others to make homemade (or traditional bakery) bread. The complexity of this process may indeed be another reason it does not often appear in cookbooks; there are many techniques and approximations involved in baking bread that are difficult to consolidate in a single recipe. As people turn to supermarkets for their bread, old-style bakeries become less the social centers they once were, and Gozitans are buying “tourist” bread and trading lower costs for lower quality. As this trend towards cheaper, tourist-friendly food continues, traditional bakeries lose their status as providers of sustenance and local identity.

This issue begs the question of whether it is worth relying so heavily on the tourist industry to bring revenue to Gozo at the expense of losing traditional dishes and ways of producing these dishes. At first thought, the loss of a few recipes may not seem like something to question an industry over. However, as has been illustrated by the history and anecdotes provided here, it becomes apparent that there is more involved with the production of a single dish than simple

procurement and arrangement of ingredients. It is for this reason that several groups involved with the preservation of Malta's heritage have taken action to protect these local dishes and the traditions surrounding their production.

The effort most directly concerning the preservation of breadmaking in Malta is the TriMed project, funded jointly by the European Union and Heritage Malta, Malta's national agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage.

The project's goal, according to its informational display at the Windmill Museum in Xaghra is focused on several "trilogies" according to its informational brochure. It aims to "safeguard, inherit and promote a common heritage through research, restoration and circulation through a period of three years." (18) The project's display at the Ta' Kola windmill museum in Xaghra gives a concise history of bread throughout Malta's past and showcases a variety of milling equipment. It also provides visitors a chance to examine a defunct windmill where people used to mill flour for producing bread.

Another organization, the Ager Foundation, takes a hands-on approach to showing Gozitans and tourists alike what rural lifestyles are like, and taking them to Ta' Saminu bakery to see where locals go to buy bread and cook vegetable dishes. This model of "responsible" rather than "quality" tourism can be invaluable in showing people how they get the foods they eat and how the staple of Maltese bread is part of their cultural heritage. People are able to participate in programs that allow them to engage in lifestyles that used to provide the main source of revenue in Gozo rather than tourism, as it is today. Tourists (and also Gozitans interested in learning about what life used to be like on their island) can participate in these programs and experience activities like herding sheep, milking the sheep and making Gbejniet or Gozo cheese from this milk. These programs can teach tourists and locals alike about the heritage that draws people to visit and experience Gozo life for themselves. In this way, people can learn about Gozo's culture and still support tourism on the island without exploiting the island's resources and services. (10)

Conclusions

There are many differences between the image of Gozo that these groups want to promote and the reality that exists. The question remains, whether tourism is trying to promote the Gozitan culture that existed previously, or creating a culture of its own. All cultures change over time;

perhaps the transition from producing bread communally in a bakery to buying it at the store is one such change in the lifeways of Gozo. However, breadmaking and tourism have both left their marks throughout Gozo's history and have impacted the island's culture. The issues involved with the clash between tourist and local taste, the rising cost of food, and the changing role of the bakery can be emphasized through such responsible tourism. Bringing the traditions enmeshed with the production of *hobz tal-Malti* to the attention of tourists and Gozitans alike highlights how the production of this food has helped shape Gozo into the island it is today.

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