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Identity and Gozitan Culinary Tourism: Two Case Studies

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Abstract

This examination of two sites of culinary tourism on the Mediterranean island of Gozo explores the ways in which each defines “authentic” Gozitan identity through the selection and intensification of specific food ingredients, recipes, production processes, and educational activities. Fieldwork revealed how each site variably stresses these food production aspects to manufacture a version of Gozitan identity and uses the rhetoric of authenticity to assign value to a romantic representation of Gozitan culinary heritage. Beyond providing education about local ingredients, traditional agricultural methods, and the food preparation processes according to recipes handed down through generations, each site offers visitors tangible representations of Gozitan identity that they may take home and continue to interact with: material objects that have also been carefully selected, presented, and commodified for the tourist gaze.

Key Words: Malta, Gozo, culinary tourism, identity

The densely populated Maltese archipelago of three inhabited islands—Malta, Gozo, and Comino—sits in the midst of the Mediterranean Sea between Italy and Libya. Years of invasion and foreign occupation have left a distinct mark on the physical and cultural landscape and have combined to create a history and lifestyle of which the Maltese people are extremely proud. Today, Malta is host to over one million annual visitors (Malta Tourism Authority) who come to experience the Mediterranean climate, the stunning landscape, and the rich cultural heritage. One piece of Malta’s complex cultural identity can be found in its foodways. Through the lenses of folklore studies, cultural studies, and food studies, this paper examines two sites of culinary tourism on the island of Gozo that attempt to define “authentic” Gozitan identity through food.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

This paper compares and contrasts the ways in which aspects of local foodways are selected and focused upon at these sites in order to create a version of Gozitan identity. Through local ingredients, recipes, food production processes, and educational activities featured at each site, visitors learn what to expect of “authentic” Gozitan foodways. Guides and workers at each site stress its respective origins—whether physically close or from within the family—using site features and the rhetoric of authenticity to assign value to a romantic representation of Gozitan culinary heritage.

After centuries of invasions and outside rule, Malta gained independence in 1964, became a republic in 1974, and entered into the European Union in 2004. Tourism, mostly made up of Western Europeans, provided the majority of Malta’s income at the time of this research (Malta Tourism Authority). Gozo, the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago, with an area of roughly 40 square miles, is located 3 ³/₄ miles off the northern coast of the main island of Malta. With a population of about 31,000, Gozo is more rural and agricultural than its larger sister island. In a 1969 study, Ian Masser reported that 50% of the population of Gozo was part of the traditional farming community and that the island’s industry was largely connected to the “processing of agricultural produce” (240-241). In 1999 Thelma Barer-Stein confirmed that this had not changed much—at least in perception. She stated that local customs were quite distinguishable and the Gozitans were seen as “the Scotsmen of our islands” by their Maltese counterparts (305), painting the smaller island’s inhabitants as wild and rugged compared to those of the more “civilized” Main Island. The perceived concept of rural otherness plays a large role in the manufactured sense of authenticity expressed in the following examples of Gozitan foodways. It was on this smaller island that my fieldwork took place.

In August of 2014, I spent three weeks living in the coastal Gozitan village of Xlendi with a dozen students of anthropology and a handful of instructors from the University of Leuven in Belgium.¹ Armed with a proposal inspired by undergraduate coursework in folklore, I was ready to jump into one of my first post-collegiate experiences with fieldwork. With an interest in cultural commodification, I searched for presentations of the “authentic” and “traditional” offered for visitors on the small island. Online investigation had led me to the Magro Food Village and Savina Creativity Center, which advertised an interactive experience for tourists that focused on “traditional” Gozitan foods and crafts. After my arrival, I saw sign boards for Ta’ Mena, an agro-tourism estate that offered tours followed by a tasting of



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

traditional Gozitan specialties, the majority of which were produced on site. Ultimately my fieldwork study focused centrally on comparing and contrasting these two Gozitan sites.

My fieldwork on the island included participant observation based on multiple tours of the Magro factory and a tour and tasting at the Ta' Mena Estate. I took photographs of the built and natural environments and material culture, and held informal in-person and email interviews with staff, tour guides, and executive personnel including Joanna Magro—a member of the founding family of the Food Village—and Joseph Spiteri, director of Ta' Mena Estates.

My observations in the field were structured around foodways: the “network of behaviors, traditions, and beliefs concerning food” which includes the activities from procurement to “preparation, presentation, and performance” (Long 2004: 8). Lucy Long defines culinary tourism as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an ‘other’” (2004: 21). While some scholars discuss culinary tourism that results simply from the need for subsistence while in a new place (Mak, Lumbers, Eves, and Chang 2012; Long 2004), my fieldwork in Gozo specifically considers two sites visited by tourists who make an effort to travel to a specific location and participate in a set of activities through which they can experience the foodways of the “other”—spending time and in some cases, money, to do so.

The Magro Food Village, located in the city center of Xewkija, Gozo, offers a variety of experiences ranging from a seasonally available tour of the tomato processing factory—around which the Food Village experience was built—to cooking classes featuring traditional Gozitan foodstuffs led by master chefs (Savina: Visitor's Information). The website states that the Food Village offers a “unique experience in local food-making and crafts all under one roof,” and that it is “a one-stop shop for all travelling taste buds!” (Magro Group: Factory Tours). Whether visitors are simply part of a hop-on, hop-off bus tour of the island (Photo 1)—who stop for ten minutes to browse the gift shop filled with “traditional and authentic” souvenirs that can be taken home—or they pre-book a tour and explore the factory with a guide for over an hour, the Magro Food Village and Magro Group are proud of the organization's role in “keeping Gozitan culinary traditions alive” (Magro Group: visitor video).



Photo 1. Hop-on hop-off tour bus parked outside of the Magro Food Village. Xewkija, Gozo, July 2014. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.

In 1916, the original Magro brothers joined their father in his business as a merchant in Pjazza Savina in Gozo's capitol, Victoria. In 1934, the brothers entered the business of canning and processing fresh tomatoes grown on Gozo along with "the importation into Malta of livestock, fodder and foodstuffs and exports of local agricultural produce" (Magro Group: "Our History"). Through the following generations, the business continued to expand and in 1995 the company moved into a new factory that is now a "centre of excellence for food processing in the Mediterranean" that exports its products to over 20 countries (Magro Group: "Our History"). The company is currently in the hands of the fourth generation of the Magro family. Not only does the company offer tourists the chance to learn about the history of the company and purchase food and souvenirs, but, depending on the interest of the visitor, a variety of activities is also available. These include a free tour of the Savina Creativity Center, a free (but pre-booked) tour of the Magro Food Village, including the tomato processing plant and the dairy center, and a pre-booked session in the Magro Village Kitchen, including lectures, group activities, and cooking classes for a fee.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Compared to the Magro factory and Food Village, Ta' Mena Estates offered quite a different experience, though the central themes remained the same. Ta' Mena is a family owned estate in Xaghra, Gozo that offers “Maltese Wine, Agritourism Activities and Traditional Foods” (Ta' Mena Enterprises). Through the generosity of Ta' Mena's director Joseph Spiteri, I was invited to tour the estate and participate in the food and wine tasting that followed. Located in the rural countryside, the gated entrance to the estate opened into a tented outdoor seating area and a small roadside shop. In 1936, Joseph Spiteri's grandfather owned two hectares of land in Xhagra on which he cultivated grapes for wine making. In the 1960s his mother Carmela—known as Mena—purchased 23 more hectares of land and cultivated it. She offered the opportunity for people to come pick their own vegetables and shop the produce from her land until her death in 1986. In 2002, Joseph, his four siblings, and their father decided to pursue Mena's dream of “integrating agriculture with tourism so that one sector sustains the other” (Ta' Mena Enterprises). (Photo 2) The land that was once a fruit and vegetable garden now includes an orange grove, fruit trees, 1,500 olive trees, and over 10 hectares of vineyards. Their food production includes a mix of traditional methods and modern equipment, including a windmill from the 1930s, a winery, and a cold press for olive oil (Joseph Spiteri, personal communication; Ta' Mena Enterprises: About Us).



Photo 2. Roadside sign for Ta' Mena in Xaghra. Gozo, July 2014. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Ta' Mena's website states that its goal is to offer "more of what is unique to Gozo with its history, folklore and culture" (Ta' Mena Enterprises: About Us). This includes "hands on agricultural experiences" during the harvest season, in which visitors can pick their own produce, take guided tours of the estate (free of charge), participate in tours followed by wine and olive oil tasting (pre-booking required), or experience private tours, lunches, and dinners that feature traditional and seasonal Gozitan specialties (with a minimum fee of €200). Ta' Mena's website also advertises cooking classes and the opportunity to observe wine making and the production of olive oil (Ta' Mena Enterprises). Accommodations in self-catering apartments and rustic farmhouses are also available.

In his publication on staged authenticity in tourism, Dean MacCannell states that the desire of the tourist is to "share in the real life of the places visited, or at least to see that life as it is really lived" (1973: 594). The online *English Oxford Living Dictionary* gives several definitions for "authentic" including "of undisputed origin and not a copy; genuine," and "made or done in the traditional or original way" (Oxford University Press 2018), in other words, how close something is to how it "ought to be" (Appadurai 1986: 25). Bendix states that "[once] a cultural good has been declared authentic, the demand for it rises, and it acquires a market value (2004: 8). Tourists often look for authentic experiences, or at least experiences that are perceived to be authentic, and therefore, successful companies will cater to this need. Several scholars have since critiqued MacCannell's work by stressing that authenticity is a construct and therefore subjective rather than being objective reality (Bendix 1997; Scarpato and Daniele 2003; Germann Moltz 2004). According to Jeannie Germann Moltz, there are several ways in which tourist experiences can project authenticity, from the ingredients used to the décor to those responsible for conveying the information (in Long 2004: 57). In their 2003 article "Staged Authenticity and Heritage Tourism," Deepak Chhabra, Robert Healy, and Erin Sills mention that built environments are "perhaps the most obvious manifestations of heritage and the most popular destinations of heritage tourism" (704). Both the Magro Food Village and Ta' Mena Estates operate from specific built environments to which tourists are invited in order to experience staged encounters with Gozitan heritage. Once within the purposefully constructed sites, visitors are not only presented with a version of Gozitan authenticity that is carefully crafted, but they are also shown the different components of this authentic food that imply value.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Three main components emerged that can be thought of according to their relationship to the food at both sites: where the food came from (ingredients), how the food is made (recipes and processes), and what the visitor can do to experience the food (activities)—both at the sites and after visitors leave. While the sites are quite different in size, scope, and content, both focus on the same components (and larger ideologies) to create a sense of local and authentic Gozitan identity through food that is created close to its origin and is therefore more valuable as both a process and a product.

The first component that plays a role at the Food Village and Ta'Mena is the origin of the sites' ingredients, and consequently, the agricultural methods used to produce them. Both sites stress that their ingredients are local—whether they employ local farmers, like the Magro tomato processing factory, or grow the majority of the ingredients on site, in the case of Ta'Mena. However, this is more than just a statement shared by those in charge of the guided tours. In both cases, visitors are taken to see the produce that is either recently harvested or still on the vine.

The Magro Food Village's main focus is the tomato, as that is the chief product of the larger processing factory around which the Food Village is centered. (Photo 3) Seasonal tours of the factory include a visit to the loading docks where countless tomatoes are awaiting processing less than 24 hours after being harvested. This statistic is due to the minimal distance that the produce must travel—either from elsewhere on the island of Gozo or from Malta—to reach the factory. True to the company's desire to stimulate the senses, a visitor is drenched in the thick smell of ripe tomatoes warming in the Mediterranean sun as the produce arrives at the factory. Not only are all visitors told that the tomatoes are fresh and brought to the factory on a daily basis, which is a point of company pride, but they are not expected simply to believe the guides; rather, visitors are invited to see for themselves. According to Regina Bendix, the “scarcity value [of authentic items] is evaporating” because of the mass application of the term “authentic” to a variety of products (1997: 7). Perhaps it is for this reason that the Magro tours include a trip outside of the carefully constructed Savina Creativity Center and into the depths of a massive factory—the act of calling something authentic is no longer convincing; rather, the Magro Food Village presents solid evidence in the form of mountains built from crates of tomatoes.



Photo 3. Sliced tomatoes drying in a display outside the Magro Food Village. July 2014. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.

One must question, then, how the Magro Food Village communicates this idea of authentic products to those visitors who do not tour the factory and encounter the tomatoes, as this is another option for tourists as well as a seasonal necessity. I suggest that the stress applied to the seasonal production of the factory is implicitly responsible for this task. Just as tours of the factory are seasonal, so is the variety of products being produced by individuals behind glass walls in the Savina Creativity Center. By producing seasonal products, the company is implying that they are following the natural growing seasons and using fresh produce from the island's traditional agricultural cycle. While this relationship is largely implied by the Magro Food Village, those at Ta' Mena explicitly show their dedication to the use of fresh and local (and therefore more authentic) ingredients.

Visitors to Ta' Mena are able to experience a more diverse selection of produce as they tour the Spiteri Estate, following paths through olive groves and looking out on acres of carob trees, fruit trees, and vineyards while a guide discusses the traditional methods of agriculture used on the family's land (Photos 4 and 5). These include hand-picked produce and irrigation



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

powered by an 80-year-old windmill. Visitors are literally led through the land on which the ingredients grow and in some cases are able to harvest the produce themselves (Ta' Mena). Bendix connects the original form of a thing to the most authentic form of that thing (1997: 49), and whether discussing the original windmill or the locality of the produce, visitors at Ta' Mena are asked and/or expected to recognize this connection between originality and authenticity, and therefore, value, prescribed by those in search of authenticity.

Not only are the contemporary origins of the ingredients important, but the stability of each company's history is emphasized. In both cases, a connection is drawn between the origins of each site and their present operations: the original Magro brothers exported local goods and Mena grew produce for locals to harvest. This portrayal fits with the rural and idealized view of Gozo that was related earlier about the conception of Gozitan identity. In fulfilling this notion, the Magro Food Village and Ta' Mena are propagating the idea of a rural Gozo as the most authentic version that a tourist can experience, starting with local ingredients.



Photo 4. View of Ta' Mena Estates, including historic windmill used for irrigation. July 2014. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.



Photo 5. Walking tour of Ta' Mena passing through olive grove. July 2014.
Photo: Kylie Schroeder.

The second component is that of recipes and the production processes—how are the ingredients transformed into food products? The focus shifts from where in a physical sense to who—where is the origin located within the families that are responsible for presenting the food and the larger experience to visitors. Patterns reflect a romanticized vision of authenticity that generally falls to the responsibility of the women, and in the case of the Magro Food Village, women from some unidentified point in the past.

Both of the companies stress the role of recipes that have purportedly been handed down through the generations from the families' respective forefathers. The companies both explicitly state and implicitly project this idea: Ta' Mena's website states that "[they] are using traditional recipes which were used by [their] fore-fathers who did not have refrigerators and freezers but still had to provide for the winter season" ("Our Products"), while the Magro Food Village reflects a more community-based locality which, in the case of cheeselets production, is "the same way [it] has been done for generations in small local farms" (Magro Group).



While the language that is used to communicate this close connection to the recipes is generally masculine or non-gendered, the majority of representation takes a female form, reflecting a case of essentialism which, according to Susan Gelman is “the view that categories [such as “girl” or “boy”] have an underlying reality or true nature that . . . gives an object its identity” (2003: 3). In the case of Ta’ Mena and the Magro Food Village, the connection between women and the creation of food is emphasized. Bendix identifies two types of authority that can be recognized when it comes to authenticity: the credibility of the anonymous folk or the credibility of a specific individual (46-47). The Magro Food Village and Ta’ Mena provide both. While the generally anonymous forefathers are mentioned, each site represents their food through at least one named female.

Ta’ Mena’s source of feminine authority is Mena herself, matriarch of the Spiteri family and in whose honor the estate was reopened. Though a majority of the workers, guides, owners, and farmers are male, the brand bears Mena’s name and carries her legacy. Photographs of Mena can be found on the estate’s website, but the image that is most firmly connected to her name is a stylized feminine head that serves as a logo for the brand (Photo 6).



Photo 6. Wine bottle from Ta’ Mena, featuring stylized woman’s head. September 2016. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

One of the central figures for the Magro Food Village and Savina Creativity Center is Sor Serafina, an aunt of the Magro family and a Franciscan nun (Photo 7). Her image is featured on a line of sweet treats and accompanied by the story of her recipes—lost and found again, and used to recreate her desserts, such as jam tarts, fruitcakes, and Maltese pastini, for visitors to the Magro Food Village. The following narrative is included on the packing of the entire line:

Amongst my grandmother's papers, several years ago, I found a collection of recipes, handwritten by a relative of my grandmother, Sor Serafina. Born in 1892, Sor Serafina was a loving aunt of my family. She joined at a Franciscan nunnery at a very young age and became a regular provider of sweet delights for Christmas, Easter and our summer feast of Santa Marija. She passed away at the venerable age of 92. These gourmet desserts are recreated in her honor and we are proud to share the recipes of Sor Serafina with you and your loved ones. (John Magro; box of Savina Creations product)



Photo 7. Sketch of Sor Serafina included on the packaging of a sweets line sold at the gift shop located in the Magro Food Village. July 2014. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.



Photo 8. Kitchen statue of unidentified woman carrying goods from Magro brands. Magro Food Village, July 2014. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.

In a rhetorical move that is not new, but nevertheless effective, the companies have located a sense of their products' authenticity in a feminine representation. However, one notable feature at Magro is the presence of multiple statues of anonymous women at the Magro Food Village in old-fashioned clothing and with bare feet (Photo 8)—the industrious “peasant woman” responsible for the creation of the food, if not now then at least at some point in the past. While this image contrasts with the workers behind glass windows in sterile uniforms, producing foods and wares for the gift shop in stainless steel kitchens, the anonymous women remind visitors whom the employees are emulating. One must then ask why this image is represented at the Magro Food Village and seemingly absent at Ta' Mena.

I suggest that the anonymous female statues in traditional garb are an active opposition to the Magro Food Village's location within a large factory that sits in the middle of Xewkija, which is far less rural than Xhagra. Ta' Mena, surrounded by the Gozitan countryside and situated among the produce that is transformed into the goods that can be bought at the end of the drive, does not need to evoke a romanticized version of a rural past because it is



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

not so hard to imagine the history that the Spiteri family uses to legitimize their brand. On the other hand, the Magro Food Village actively works to offset the inherent modernity associated with sterile mechanized food production. By aligning their products with those people who are connected to the romanticized version of Gozitan authenticity, both sites make use of a rhetorical strategy that is not new, but nevertheless effective: locating their authority as purveyors of Gozitan food in the authority of both individual women and the “folk” at large through the depiction of Mena, Sor Serafina, and the anonymous women in historic garb.

Finally, both the Magro Food Village and Ta’ Mena offer a variety of activities that introduce visitors to their produced idea of Gozitan culture and food. A very basic visit to either site contains activities that are largely non-interactive. At the Magro Food Village, one can watch a video that depicts the history of the Magro family, watch workers infuse olive oils behind glass walls, and wander through the gift shop with strategically placed “photo points” before leaving the premises (Photo 9). Visitors to the roadside stand at Ta’ Mena, or those who participate in the free walking tour are led through the estate to look at the variety of plants and animals that contribute to the goods in the gift shop. However, both sites also offer more interactive experiences for those who are interested.



Photo 9. “Photo Point” bobbin lace-making diorama located inside the Magro Food Village gift shop. The figure is slightly larger than life and seated above eye level to provide picture-taking opportunities. July 2014. Photo: Kylie Schroeder.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Additional activities at the Food Village include a tour of the Magro canning factory and an interactive presentation in the Magro Village Kitchen—in which tourists are encouraged to look for familiar products (ketchups, sauces, etc.) produced by the company—simulated milking competitions with cut out cows, and tomato bulls-eye throwing competitions. At Ta’ Mena, guests are welcome to pre-book a food and wine tasting and can even participate in harvesting ingredients and watching the production of olive oil or wine. Both offer cooking classes that teach the visitor to create typical Gozitan cuisine and are available for a price.

Regardless of the depth of interactivity by the visitor, trips to both sites end with a tasting of different food items and a trip to the gift shop. Not only can a visitor enact a version of Gozitan identity while at the site, but through the gift shop a visitor can leave with products that have been imbued—by experience and branding—with a sense of authenticity.

Obviously, the representations of Gozitan culinary and cultural authenticity depicted at Ta’ Mena and the Magro Food Village are not fully representative of the diversity of the island. However, these are two of the most visible representations for visitors to Gozo. Through presenting a similar focus at each site, though accomplished in different ways, these sites undoubtedly affect the representation—which is selected by proprietors at the sites—and the perceptions, consumed by visitors, of what makes Gozitan food special.

Not only are visitors to the Magro Food Village and Ta’ Mena Estate able to bring home foods, drinks, and other goods, but they also leave with a sense of what is “authentic” according to those with the power to select and present a specific view of what it means to be Gozitan and Maltese. Therefore, being closer to origin—either in location or in familial connection—means being closer to the original and more valuable. After learning about and interacting with the local ingredients and traditional agricultural methods, and food processed and prepared according to recipes handed down through generations, a visitor to either site is able to take home and continue to interact with a tangible representation of Gozitan identity that has been carefully selected, presented, and commodified for the tourist gaze.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Notes

1. Off the Beaten Track Field School, Expeditions.

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Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

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