

## Cheeselets in Maltese Food Culture

Direct references to the production and or consumption of *gbejniet* are not available until the Middle Ages. There are however indications that milk, cheese and honey were produced in large quantities and consumed locally in medieval Malta.

Nutritional information for medieval times does not exist but it is inferred from sporadic references to the state of the economy of Malta and to the great importance attached to pasturage and the presence of large herds of goats and sheep at the time. The information may indicate, and possibly suggest, that milk and its derivatives, notably cheese, were an important source of food in medieval Malta

The earliest reliable source is Al Idrisi, the Arab geographer of the Norman King Roger II, who gives some reliable facts about the economy of Malta in the twelfth century. Admittedly the conditions relate to Norman times, but the details seem to refer to a process which dates back to the Islamic period in Maltese history. Al Idrisi explains how one can reach Malta by sea:

*... From there going eastwards one finds the island of Malta. It is large and has a sheltered port on the east side. Malta has a town and abounds in pasture, sheep, fruit and honey.<sup>1</sup>*

It would seem therefore that animal husbandry - supplemented mainly by horticulture and bee-keeping - were key features of agriculture in medieval Malta. But Al Idrisi does not provide information on food items consumed by artisans and peasants in medieval times. This type of information can be gleaned in the reply which Emperor Frederick II made in response to the report of GiliBERTUS Abate, his administrator in Malta, around 1241.<sup>2</sup>

The report indicates an economy based on the royal estates, cereal producing *latifundia* worked by *villani* [serf/labourers]. It states that there were 359 employees at the Castle by the Sea (present day Fort St Angelo) and each of these received a ration of food that included wheat, meat, butter and around

<sup>1</sup> Godfrey Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta', p.97.

<sup>2</sup> E. Winkelmann, *Acta Imperii inedita saeculi XIII et XIV*, vol. i, pp.713-715; Illuminato Peri, *Uomini, Città e Campagna in Sicilia dall'XI al XIII secolo*, pp.154-155; Anthony Luttrell, 'Approaches to Medieval Malta', pp.36-40; C. Dessoulayy, 'Malta in the Middle Ages', pp.537-544.

two kilos of cheese each.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore there were eighty-four *servi* from Djerba working in the *massarie*; sixty *servi* and *ancille* [male and female slaves] in the service of the curia [local government]; fifty five cowherds; ten shepherds; and others who consumed barley bread.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly the report contains comments on the presence of cowherds and shepherds indicating the presence of milk production and its derivative - cheese.

The next reference to pasturage is given by a German bishop - Ludolph von Suchen - who passed through Malta on his trip to the Levant between 1336 and 1341. Von Suchen described Malta as an island that abounded in sheep and other dairy-producing animals.<sup>5</sup> The abundance of milk may have induced Maltese shepherds to produce cheese from their sheep and goats' milk. But there are no direct references to the production of cheese, far less any details on how it was produced.

By the late fifteenth century there were strict regulations which prohibited the exportation of farm animals - equines, bovines, and sheep - from Malta. There may have been similar legislations in earlier times but the fact that such rules were registered in the fifteenth century, suggests that these animals were protected and highly valued.<sup>6</sup> A glimpse at the economic value given to herds of sheep and goats can be obtained from a notarial deed of 1487 by notary Giacomo Zabbara. The deed relates that the Augustinian friar, Johannes Zurki, leased a flock of sheep - seventy in all - thirty goats, three rams and two billy goats for four years to Gullielmus Agius. Fra Zurki stipulated that the rentier had to pay in kind. Agius was furthermore, expected to hand over all the wool shorn from the sheep, one-and-a-half cantara of cheese, kids and lambs' meat, ten hubara of butter (*mantecca* Spanish for butter or *butiro*) and one hubara of ricotta (*burru de ricocta*).<sup>7</sup>

Int  
goats &  
sheep = 100

The descriptions of Malta, by sixteenth century visitors, seem to attach great importance to the large presence of sheep and pasture. This view emerges from the impressions penned, in the 1530s, by Jean Quintin d'Autun - only a

<sup>3</sup> Peri. *Comini, città e campagne*, p.223; J.L.A., Huillard-Bréholles, *Historia Diplomatica Federici Secundi*, vol.x, pp.509-510.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Bresc, "The 'Secrezia' and the Royal Patrimony", p.131.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Keller, *St Paul's Grotto and Its Visitors*, p.242.

<sup>6</sup> NLM Univ. II fol.506v dated: Friday, 14 September, 1481. Godfrey Wettinger (ed), *Acta Iuratorum et consilii civitatis et insulae Maltae*, n.858, p.823.

<sup>7</sup> The *hubara* (*ghabara* in Maltese) was a liquid capacity measure equivalent to 50 quartucci or ten mondelli (42.9825 litres). A cantaro was equivalent to 100 rotoli (79.342 kilos). Stanley Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History. Part I: Notarial Documents. No.1 Notary Giacomo Zabbara R494 11j: 1486-1488*, p.249, doc. 245: 17 August, 1487.

See Zabbar<sup>2</sup>

3 cantara refer to  
MT cantara  
Mondelli

few years after the Order of St John established itself in Malta. Jean Quintin d'Autun explains that the locals - 'conscious of their country's sterility' - lived a frugal life but he could not help noticing that there was 'the plenty of pasture for sheep'.<sup>8</sup>

Even the mid-seventeenth century Maltese historian Gian Francesco Abela, writing in 1647, comments on areas meant for pasturage scattered all over Malta and in particular on the troglodytic community of *Grotta Grande* [Ghar il-Kbir] that depended largely on pasturage."

In the early seventeenth century, documents refer to the selling of milk by quartuccio.<sup>10</sup> In 1628 the Università, as the local municipal council was called, distinguished between the price of sheep's milk and goats' milk. Sheep's milk was pegged at nine grani per quartuccio, while goats' milk cost 8 grani per quartuccio.<sup>11</sup> This is the time when direct references to the production of cheeselets begins to emerge.

When different writers, living in different times, concur on the importance of pasturage in medieval and early modern Malta, one can appreciate that sheep and possibly goats' cheese was bound to become a key element in the Maltese cuisine. The cheeselet or *gbejna* [plural *gbejniet*], the main produce of grazing herds of sheep and goats, must have been the obvious product for a relatively arid terrain. In both Malta, and the neighbouring island of Gozo, sheep's milk has remained a popular Maltese food product even to this day - especially those produced by family-owned cottage industries where methods of production have become part of the popular lore and where techniques have passed from one generation to the next, over the centuries.

The cheeselets made in the Maltese Islands consist of sheep's milk, salt and rennet and are prepared and served in a variety of forms: as a plain, fresh cheeselet, dried, and semi-dried. The semi-dried were sometimes pickled, or salted, and more recently peppered. However the peppered cheeselet appears to be a much more recent introduction and seems to date back to the British colonial period.

<sup>8</sup> Quintin d'Autun, *Insulae Melita Descriptio*, p.39.

<sup>9</sup> "...quasi tutti pastori, o pecorari", Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>10</sup> The quartuccio (*cartuccio*) was equivalent to 0.86 of a litre, Francesco Luigi Oddo, *Dizionario di antiche istituzioni siciliane*, p.112.

<sup>11</sup> NLM Univ. 18, fol.57: 29 January, 1628.

The Università did its utmost to control the prices of essential commodities like grain, oil, wine and cheese.<sup>12</sup> Price lists, dating back to the fifteenth century, contained a section on the official prices of *lactacini* or *lactumi*. These were usually issued early in September by the Town Council and gave details of prices for various types of cheese including fresh cheese [*furmayu friscu*], curdled cheese [*furmayu muxu*], grating cheese [*furmayu di gractari*], butter [*burru or burru homi*], rancid butter [*burru tristu*], ricotta [*burru di la ricrocta*], milk [*lacti*] and eggs.<sup>13</sup>

An analysis of the price-lists for the first century of the Order's rule in Malta (1534-1630) shows prices for cheese and other milk derivatives did not differ much.<sup>14</sup>

The required weight and price of dry and soft cheeselets are singled out in a proclamation [*bando*] made by the Università dated April 1627. Soft cheeselets - six ounces in weight - were to sell at two grani and 2 piccoli, while those that weighed less were to be sold at two grani.<sup>15</sup> In September of that year it was stipulated that dry cheeselets were to be sold at fourteen piccoli each.<sup>16</sup> A similar decree published in February 1628 stipulated that the semi-dried cheeselets were to be sold at sixteen piccoli each.<sup>17</sup> Another *bando* of 1628 specifies that fresh Maltese cheeselets should, from then onwards, weigh seven ounces, the soft semi-dried (*musci*) five ounces, and the dry ones should weigh four ounces. Contraveners were fined fifteen tari.<sup>18</sup>

But it would be wrong to assume that the Maltese ate only local cheeselets. The archival sources provide useful information on the types of cheeses brought over to Malta from the late sixteenth century onwards. In the few weeks between 21 November and 14 December 1588 four cheese merchants arrived from Sicily with cheese consignments at the harbour of Malta. It seems that Sicilian cheese was much appreciated, at least in the harbour towns, at the time.<sup>19</sup> In a single year between 15 September 1627 and 30 August 1628 one comes across no less than 37 applications for permission to

<sup>12</sup> Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, p.54.

<sup>13</sup> Wettinger, *Ieta Juratorum*. See for example: the list of 1453 pp.77-78; the list of 1461 pp.182-183; the list of 1467 pp.287-288; the list of 1469, pp.361-362; the list of 1472 pp.454-455; the list for 1473 p.510; the list of 1481 pp.821-822; .

<sup>14</sup> Vassallo, 'Prices of Commodities in Malta', pp.248-258.

<sup>15</sup> NLM Univ. 18, fol.72v, 73v; April, 1627.

<sup>16</sup> NLM Univ. 18, fol.10; 15 September, 1627.

<sup>17</sup> NLM Univ. 18, fol.60v; 8 February, 1628.

<sup>18</sup> NLM Univ. 18, fol.57; 26 January, 1628.

sell cheese. The list of cheese vendors indicates that four vendors hailed from the *contado*. Technically the term *contado* refers to the farmsteads from the district around Mdina.

In the centuries that followed, it became normal for the shops [*botteghe*], set up in Valletta, to be well-furnished with various kinds of cheese. During an interrogation at the Law Courts of the Castellania (Grand Master's law courts) in 1702, Orazio Frenco hailing from Valletta, explained that one particular woman, Maria - whose husband had left for Spain - was managing a shop which was well stocked in many different types of cheese.<sup>20</sup> However it does not seem that Frenco made any reference to *gbejniet* - that were, at the time, sold daily at the city market and brought to Valletta regularly by Maltese peasants.

The scanty details that exist for the early modern period, often refer to frugal meals heavily based on bread, cheese, oil and vegetables. In theory, dairy produce could only be consumed on meat-eating days. Consequently their consumption was forbidden during Lent, on Fridays or Saturdays. Being difficult to preserve, milk was consumed principally as cheese or 'butter'. The Roman Inquisition records for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provide revealing information on the culinary preparation of food. This can be gleaned from the food prohibitions recorded during Lent time and other Catholic festivities.

At one point we come across a time when the witch Margarita Bertone taught Maria Gagliarda a spell which, Margarita stated, would help Maria bring her lover back to her. Maria was advised to throw three pieces of bread and three pieces of cheese out of the window into the street and recite the spell:

*As people cannot live without eating bread and cheese so the lover will not survive without returning to the one that loves him.*<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> On 21 November Alexandro Mamo arrived on a Gjozo boat and Francisco Caruni with pardon Vincentio Rispulo. On the following day Vincentio Emulo arrived with a consignment of Sicilian cheese, and on 14 December 1588 Hieronimo from Terranova (Gela) arrived from Licata. These cheese consignments from Sicily were very frequent. On 12 May 1589 Matteo Vella brought some cheese from Sicily which he intended to sell in Malla. On 18 June 1589 Antonio Barberi of Scicli brought another consignment of cheese from Sicily. NAM MCC Reg. Revel. Mancip, vol. unico 1588-1617 not paginated.

<sup>20</sup> *...ben fornita con quantità di cascio, cascioecavallo et altre cose attinenti a detto mestiere...* ANM MCC AO vol.623, fol.168: 8 October, 1702.

<sup>21</sup> *...Cosi come la gente non possono stare senza mangiare pane et formaggio cosi l'amico non possa star, senza venire dalla tale che l'ama...* AMM Crim., vol.40A fol.160 : 4 August 1617.

Canon Agius De Soldanis, a Gozitan, who lived in Valletta and whose work dates back to around 1750 explains:

In Malta there is fresh cheese of various forms, but the best is that found in Gozo both for its large size and appearance. The more aged it gets the better is its smell and taste. I have seen Maltese cheeselets in many parts of Italy where it is called Maltese Cheese and is highly rated. It has been shown convincingly that, if wrapped in the leaves of a climber plant, called *haxix ir-rif*, [while] white wine is sprinkled over [it], [and then] closed in a container, kept in a partial humidity, and every now and then sprinkled with the same wine, within a period of fifteen to twenty days it changes colour and taste and will not be distinguished from the best French cheese.<sup>22</sup>

Agius de Soldanis then lists the various forms and types of cheese available in his times.

a. *Gobon frisk*: fresh cheeselets made from baqta or curds.<sup>23</sup>

b. *Gobon tal-Garra*: very small dried cheeselets which were kept in pottery vases and were sold at three grani each.<sup>24</sup>

c. *Gobon l'Għawdex*: (Gozo Cheese) which is large in size and cooked on a fire.<sup>25</sup>

d. *Gobon moxx*: cheese that is partly dry and partly fresh.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> What follows is a description of the forms and types of cheeselets available in Malta in the mid-eighteenth century. The details were written by Canonico Agius De Soldanis (1712-1770) National Library of Malta (Valletta), Library Ms. 143, entitled: "Damma tal Klieh Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Għawdin".

*In Malta awt del cacio fresco di varie forme, ma nel Gozo si forma il perfetto di più grande: e forme; quanto più antico, tanto più si rende squisito il suo odore e sapore. Io ne ho veduto di questo in più luoghi d'Italia chiamato Formaggio Maltese, che passa per ottima qualità. S'è provato con felicità ed involto nell'erba parietaria chiamata da noi haxix ir-rif, e spruzzato sopra vino bianco, indi chiuso in qualche cosa, e posto in parte umido, e di tanto in tanto aspergergli dello stesso vino, a capo di 15 o 20 giorni si muta nel colore e sapore, dove non si distingue dal miglior cacio francese.*

<sup>23</sup> *Gobon frisk*, che altro non è che latte quagliato (v. *baqta*).

<sup>24</sup> *Gobon tal-Garra*, sono piccolissime forme del cacio fresco disseccato. Conservato in qualche vaso di creta diviene perfettissimo. Si vende per ordinario a grani tre l'una.

<sup>25</sup> *Gobon l'Għawdex* (Gozo Cheese) cacio del Gozo. Viene inteso quello fatto a fuoco, e grande.

<sup>26</sup> *Gobon moxx*: cacio non affatto disseccato, *mezzo fresco e mezzo secco*.

e. *Gobon niexef*: dried cheese in all forms.<sup>27</sup>

f. *Gobon tas-salib*: cheeselets signed with a cross. In Gozo it has the eight-pointed cross on top to distinguish it from the cheese that is not put under fire. The cross distinguishes this type of cheeselets from the others.<sup>28</sup>

Cheese, in various forms, was greatly appreciated among the inmates of religious communities. At the start of the seventeenth century the Dominican friars at Rabat – as the suburb of Mdina is known – ate cheese in various forms. Cheese was eaten as *gġbeniet* [cheeselets of Malta], or fresh *gbejniet* accompanying macaroni, in *qassatat*, or fresh cheeselet pies, and even as a separate and distinct dish.<sup>29</sup>

But things did not change much for the common folk over the centuries. In 1839 George Percy Badger observed that goats' milk was drunk in great quantities:

*The milk of the sheep is used particularly for making curd; and in Gozo, a very pleasant kind of fresh cheese, with which it supplies our island, is produced from the same.*<sup>30</sup>

However, it seems that Badger erroneously associated the production of cheeselets solely with Gozo. But this does not seem to be the case. For it is wrong to associate *gbejniet* solely with Gozo. In 1915 John Borg, the superintendent of Public Gardens and Plantations, claimed that,

*Our sheep are not remarkable for the fineness of their fleece, but are more generally reared as milking animals. In Gozo, and to some extent also in Malta, cheese is made from the milk of sheep, and besides supplying the large local demand is exported in considerable quantities.*<sup>31</sup>

Thus although the production of cheeselets in Gozo was noteworthy, it seems wrong to assume that it was solely produced in Gozo. Maltese cheeselets were sold at the Valletta market and were also exported. This

<sup>27</sup> *Gobon niexef*: *cacio secco di ogni forma*.

<sup>28</sup> *Gobon tas-salib*: *cacio della croce*. Nel Gozo si ha la forma del *cacio* colla croce ottagonale sopra per distinguerlo da quello fatto senza fuoco. Dalla detta croce prese il nome proprio.

<sup>29</sup> Fsadni, *Id-Dummkani fir-Rabat u l-Birgu*, p.270.

<sup>30</sup> Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, p.58.

<sup>31</sup> John Borg, [Sheep] in 'Agriculture and Horticulture in Malta', p.239.

proves that they were appreciated beyond the local village level - despite the fact that they remained the most common type of cheese consumed by the Maltese peasant population until the Second World War.

In 1913 Giovan Battista Mamo from Luqa described the trip which he had undertaken - from Luqa to Mellieha in the north of Malta - in order to attend the feast of Our Lady of Mellieha. His uncle came to pick him up, on a mule-drawn cart, well before dawn and the food which they took with them included maslin bread, home-made wine, turnips, dried figs, and as good country folk normally did, they also took some cheeselets.<sup>32</sup>

Over the centuries bread, accompanied by cheese, came to constitute the basic elements of the Maltese peasant's diet. This explains why Maltese idioms and expressions associated with the eating of bread with cheese - abound in the Maltese language. Thus by way of example when an apprentice is learning a craft, the trainee - who is expected to make a serious effort over a long span of time before being able to master it - is said to have the need to consume a large quantity of bread and cheese before he can possibly be considered to have reached a respectable level of mastery. Thus the expression - *ghad irid jiekol hobż u ġobon biex jitgħallem is-sengħa sewwa!*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> G.B. Mamo, (ta' Hal Luqa). *Il-Għannej Kormi u il-Għannej Zeituni. Meta Morna tal-Mellieha*, p.11.

<sup>33</sup> 'He needs to eat a lot of bread and cheese to learn the craft well'. Joseph Aquilina. *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol.i, p.470.



# Cheese-making

## an ancient traditional cottage industry in Gozo

*Gozo is rich in its flocks and merry with its vineyards* — wrote the Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martialis (c. AD 40-102). This praise was showered on the produce of the flocks and vines of Gozo in the first century of the present era, but cheese must have certainly been produced on the island since prehistoric times. It is an important item in the diet of almost all people, because it is relatively easy to make and can be preserved for fairly long periods of time.

### The first flocks

Goats must have been first bred in Gozo by the early settlers that some seven thousand years ago crossed the eighty-kilometre stretch of sea from Sicily to Gozo. During a long spell of good weather and using some pretty reliable rafts, they brought seeds and domestic animals to settle the island for good. Goats were to remain the most numerous ruminants until the mid-1950s. They did not cost much to keep as for the greater part of the year they wandered about on waste lands and were able to find enough food to keep them going. However, since very early times, there were also some sheep and cows and nowadays these have completely replaced goats on many farms. They give more milk and the cheese produced is of a higher quality but they are more expensive to keep.

### Dairywork

Dairywork is possibly the most important chore of the farmer's wife in Gozo. Very few farmers could afford to build a dairy proper, and thus, in the majority of cases, dairywork was done in a corner of the kitchen. Some however did have a dairy at the back of the garden, a small room under two metres square with stone shelves projecting from the walls.

Marija Cini from Wied il-Ghasri, a hamlet of Gozo, is an expert cheese-maker and until lately she was completely occupied with this work. She learned the craft from her mother Tonina Attard, who in turn had learnt it from her mother Guzeppa, Tonina's grandmother. The craft of cheese-making has in fact been passed from one generation to another since time immemorial.

### Milking

Before the actual dairywork could commence the milking had to be done, and again in most cases this was the woman's work. During most of the year, the milking was done in the fields, but in wintertime the animals were housed in a shed and were milked there. During the milking, goats and sheep were sometimes positioned on special wooden milking-stands and given food to keep them occupied for the duration.

Milking vessels varied from simple wooden pails, *brajma* in Maltese, to special metal milking-cans. The tinsmith-made *timmy* was also used though it was originally a water-carrier. Pails were carried more easily with the aid of a shoulder-yoke or *menza* made from branches of the plum tree and carved in a such a way as to fit comfortably on the shoulders and balance the burden of the weight above the carrier's arms.

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### Cheese-making

Inside the dairy, or in the kitchen corner-turned-dairy, the milk is filtrated through a strainer with very fine meshes to purify it from any hairs and poured into an earthenware vat. If it has cooled off, it is warmed up by wrapping a heated piece of cotton or wool around the vat. Then it is slowly stirred and, as the temperature rises to around 26°C, rennet is added.

Rennet, called simply *qtar*, drops, in Maltese, is procured from a foul-smelling reddish-brown liquid found in the gastric juices of young milk-drinking mammals. When lambs were slaughtered, the lining of their stomach, known locally as *tâmes*, was preserved in salt for some days until it hardened. It was then retrieved, tied by a string, and lowered into whey, locally called as *xorrox*, for three or four days after which time the whey turns into a yellowish liquid known as rennet. It was the whey after the second settling of the curd that was good for making rennet as the whey after the first settling was too diluted.

The stomach's lining was then dried in the sun and buried again in salt for it could be employed several times. The salt was many times placed in an earthenware recipient so that the stomach remained humid. Rennet extract is now available at the chemist and it is commercially prepared from the inner lining of the fourth stomach of calves. All ruminants have a stomach with four complete cavities.

Rennet contains a milk-coagulating enzyme called rennin which as soon as it is added to the milk is stimulated by the acid in the milk coagulating it. The cheese-maker pours about three spoonfuls of rennet with about a gallon or under five litres of milk, but it all depends, it was explained to me, on the stomach used in its preparation. Besides, the more it is used, the less the rennet is effective. The milk is then stirred and left in a warm place. After some time it becomes junket, *baqta* in Maltese, and following a rest of thirty minutes or so it becomes thick enough to slice with a knife.

Of course, it is not sliced but placed by one spoonful after another into a cup-like recipient called *qâleb*. These cheese-form recipients, some 8 cm high with a base diameter of 5 cm rising to 7 cm, were locally made of rushes. Nowadays they are of plastic. The curd was left to settle for some time and then jerked and turned over. Salt was sometimes added at this point. *Qâleb*, the Maltese word for the recipient, is in fact derived from this turning over after the first settling. The thick curd continues to settle for some time and the whey drains itself through the mesh between the rushes. This whey is collected if the cheese-maker is going to make rennet.

After the second settling, the thick curd takes about half a day to be ready; if prepared in the evening the cheeselets can be consumed in the morning. If they are not going to be consumed fresh, they are turned over a third time and left to settle for about twenty four hours.

### The best cheese

It is locally believed that the best cheese was prepared from the milk of sheep born in autumn, *il-bikrin*, and not from those in spring, *l-imwahhrin*. The fact is that during a rainy season when the sheep can have as much grass as they desire the milk is more plentiful. The more grass and fodder they get, the cheese-makers assured me, the better the milk and the better the cheese produced.