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On Viticulture and Vintners: The Future of Vine Growing and Wine Making in Malta

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Abstract. *Viticulture was first introduced in Malta by the Phoenicians. After thriving under the knights of St. John, vine growing was substituted by other crops in the eighteenth century. In the 1990s the Maltese wine industry has to confront itself with the incidence of vine diseases, increased grape imports and a contraction in the land under cultivation. There is no collective vine growing policy. Future prospects are nevertheless positive particularly in the case of enterprises which are cognizant of changing consumers' preferences and which invest heavily in modern technology and human resources.*

Titre. La viticulture et les négociants : l'avenir des productions viticole et vinicole à Malte.

Résumé. La viticulture fut introduite à Malte par les Phéniciens. Après la période prospérité des chevaliers de St. Jean, elle est remplacée au XVIII^{ème} siècle par d'autres cultures. Dans les années 1990, en raison de maladies de la vigne, la viticulture maltaise doit faire face à l'augmentation des importations de raisin de table et la diminution des surfaces des vignobles. Il n'y a pas de politique viticole collective. Les perspectives sont néanmoins positives, en particulier pour les entreprises attentives aux préférences changeantes du consommateur et investissant massivement dans les technologies modernes et les ressources humaines.

Keywords. Wine production – Table wines – Quality – Land management – Consumers demand – Importation – Investment.

I. – Introduction of Vine Species and Viticulture in Malta

Vitis Vinifera is the latin name for the vine species. It has been cultivated in the Mediterranean regions from immemorial times both for use as fresh fruit and for the production of wine.

The English name, vine, is often used generically for perennial climbers and the Maltese name *dielja*, literally shade maker or trailer, the vine being *par excellence*, the classic plant for pergolas, and to this day the vine-covered pergola is the favourite contrivance to shade off the sun in the yards and gardens.

The vine grows wild and half-wild in our fields, valleys and rocky places and agrees well with our soil and climate. Research shows that the first Phoenician settlers introduced its cultivation in these Islands. Along with the improved forms of the vine they introduced their methods of cultivation which along the course of the ages have had slight variations and even today shows signs of its Phoenician origin.

Although it is assumed that vines were planted on Malta from the time it was properly settled, the foundations of today's wine industry were laid by the Knights of St. John when they were ceded Malta by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V of Spain in 1530. The Knights brought with them vine-cuttings from Europe to revitalize whatever vineyards remained after two centuries of Arab domination.

In the middle ages owing to the recurrent invasions by the Arabs of Barbary, the spread of malaria, the epidemics of fevers and plague, and the emigration to Sicily and Italy, the population became greatly reduced in numbers, and the cultivation of lands in outlying districts was neglected or abandoned.

But during the rule of the Order of St. John with the return of comparative security after the defeat of the Turkish invasion in 1565, viticulture once more thrived, and the Island began to produce its own wine, and even exported some to other countries.

However, the increased demand for cotton in the eighteenth century, caused a wholesale destruction of our vineyards as well as of our olive-groves to make room for its cultivation, and a further reduction of our vineyards took place during the American War of Secession, when the incredible prices of cotton induced our farmers to take up its cultivation to a hitherto unequalled extent.

Consequently, the production of grapes became limited to their use as fresh fruit for the table, and the manufacture of wine ceased altogether, the Island becoming entirely dependent on imports of produce from Sicily and Greece.

Towards 1870 the cultivation of vines was resumed in both Islands, and twenty years later there were considerable vineyards at Xaghra, Nadur, Qala, Zebbug and other places in Gozo, as well as in the districts of Notabile, Dingli, Fiddien, Ghemieri, Gnejna, Bahrija, Mellieha, etc., and our viticulture entered into a new period of prosperity.

The regulations prohibiting or restricting the importation of vines, grapes and living parts of the vine have long saved our vineyards from an invasion of Phylloxera.

In 1919 and in 1920, the Vine-Phylloxera was finally detected over considerable areas in Gozo as well as in Malta, but immediate steps have been taken to establish vine-nurseries, and the reconstitution of vineyards on suitable stock progressed satisfactorily.

In general the vines adapted to the lack of rain in Malta, the poor soils and the limited depth their roots could penetrate, and more or less hybridized themselves. There are reckoned to be about 120 varieties cultivated in these Islands, of which only about twenty are cultivated on a large scale, the others being grown sporadically or as table grapes.

About 38 are local varieties but the great majority are identical with other types cultivated along the Mediterranean region or are mere local variations due to the influence of soil and climate.

Two varieties of grapes dominate local wine production. They both come from Sicily. They are the white *Insolia*, an important variety in Sicily, but known in Malta as *Ghirgentina*, and the black grape, *Mammolo*, now only found in small quantities in Tuscany and called *Gellewza* in Malta.

The cultivation of the vine in these Islands, like that of most fruit trees, has had its periods of prosperity and depression. In ancient days Qormi was the land of vineyards, and extensive vineyards must have existed also at Zabbar and in the hilly western districts as shown by the characteristic long troughs excavated in the rock for the reception of the vine, and met with everywhere it was planted.

II. – Local Grape Production and Consumption

At present, our vineyards cover an extent of approximately 732 hectares, and consist exclusively of European vines propagated directly by cuttings and sometimes by layers, and in a few instances by grafting on the local wild or half-wild forms of the European vine.

Good table wines as well as dessert wines of excellent quality are being made out of local grapes which compare favourably with the imported article, and although the consumption of wine by the present increasing population is rather large, we are quite capable of doing without the imported produce altogether. The larger wineries have adequate capital and equipment to serve local demand in all segments of the wine industry, *i.e.*, table wines, classics and varietals.

Even the local production of so called 'artificial' wine by minor wine manufacturers seems condemned to extinction as the Maltese consumer becomes more appreciative of quality. A hobby which seems to be dying out is DIY (do-it-yourself) wine making. In 1986, a survey was carried out and it was established that 10% of all wine drinkers have tried their hand at fermenting wine. With the introduction of convenience packaging (1 litre Tetra Pak) this practice has, however, diminished.

The Maltese consumer definitely enjoys his wine even though we may not be at the level of our Mediterranean counterparts. Using a base of 260,000¹ indigenous potential consumers and 40,000 equivalent tourists, this gives an average annual consumption of 20 litres per capita (France 72 lit./cap., Italy 63 lit./cap., Benelux 21 lit./cap.).

However, the bulk of local produce is still of inferior quality owing to the wrong importance given to vine-growing by farmers, and subsequently there is an absolute absence of uniformity of type offered to vintners. There has been a lack of expert advice over the last few years despite the invitation of the vintners to assist the farmers in this regard.

The wine mildew is kept thoroughly in check by the use of sulphur, and vine blight is only troublesome in exceptionally moist springs, so that with the protection afforded by the import duties on wines and spirits, originally meant solely for the purposes of revenue, there is every reason to expect that viticulture can prosper locally.

III. – Wine Advisory Council

The growing of vines in Malta is controlled by a Wine Advisory Council which is appointed by Government. Its main functions are to set a market price for the sales of grapes for table consumption and for wine production.

This market price is dependent on two main factors:

- a) climatic conditions experienced during the year,
- b) yield expectations.

The price fixed can always be supplemented by variation orders to adjust for shortages or abundance which are outside the expectations prepared before the harvest. The date of the harvest of grapes for wine production is also set by the Council for all farmers in Malta and Gozo.

The vine growing areas are concentrated in the main agricultural areas of the Islands which support all other main crops grown. These centre around Mgarr, Rabat and Burmarrad. The extent of land dedicated to vine-growing is affected by three main factors:

- a) loss of agricultural land to building,
- b) demand for the growing of other crops,
- c) incidence of vine diseases.

a) Loss of land to encroachment by buildings has been a rising phenomenon in Malta and Gozo due to the demand for dwellings and improvements to the infrastructure of a growing economy. In addition, a

certain amount of loss of labour from agriculture to industry has also been a spur to the abandonment of fields to other uses and a consequent drop in the acreage under cultivation.

b) The demand for other crops has a direct effect on vine-growing as a farmer will look to increased earnings from other items such as tomatoes. This factor is further compounded if an alternative crop will require less attention and treatment, resulting in lower costs. Vines, in particular, do not allow other crops to be grown in the same season and this can be an incentive to change to crops which will allow more than one crop.

Due to the warm climate in Malta, vines need not be raised high from the field to be exposed to sunlight and are thus closer to the ground. This increases the risk of botrytis which ensues from the rotting of the grapes in contact with moisture.

Another economic factor which influences vines is the length of time before a new vine will bear fruit, around the fifth year. In addition, the vine will tire out the soil within 7-10 years with the quality increasing on the one hand but the yield decreasing on the other.

c) Diseases are a feature of any crop but recent information indicates that it is a growing concern within vine circles that new strains of disease are appearing on the Island which have not been identified promptly and have affected a number of vines.

This factor is compounded by a lack of an effective centralized function to analyse, detect and inform farmers of potential problems and to suggest actions and provide information which could make a substantial difference to the eradication of vine disease.

The above factors have contributed to a decline in the yield of grapes which has been supplied to the markets. Graph 1 shows an index of recent yields (see also Appendix) which is quite clear in its indications, the most significant of which, are the two poor harvests within the space of four years in 1988 and 1990.

This is not keeping with the rest of the agricultural crops. The most worrying fact, however, related to the 1991 crop which has been described as a bumper crop. In relation to previous indices, this could be taken to mean that the total potential crop has been severely reduced.

IV. – On Vintners and Wine Producers

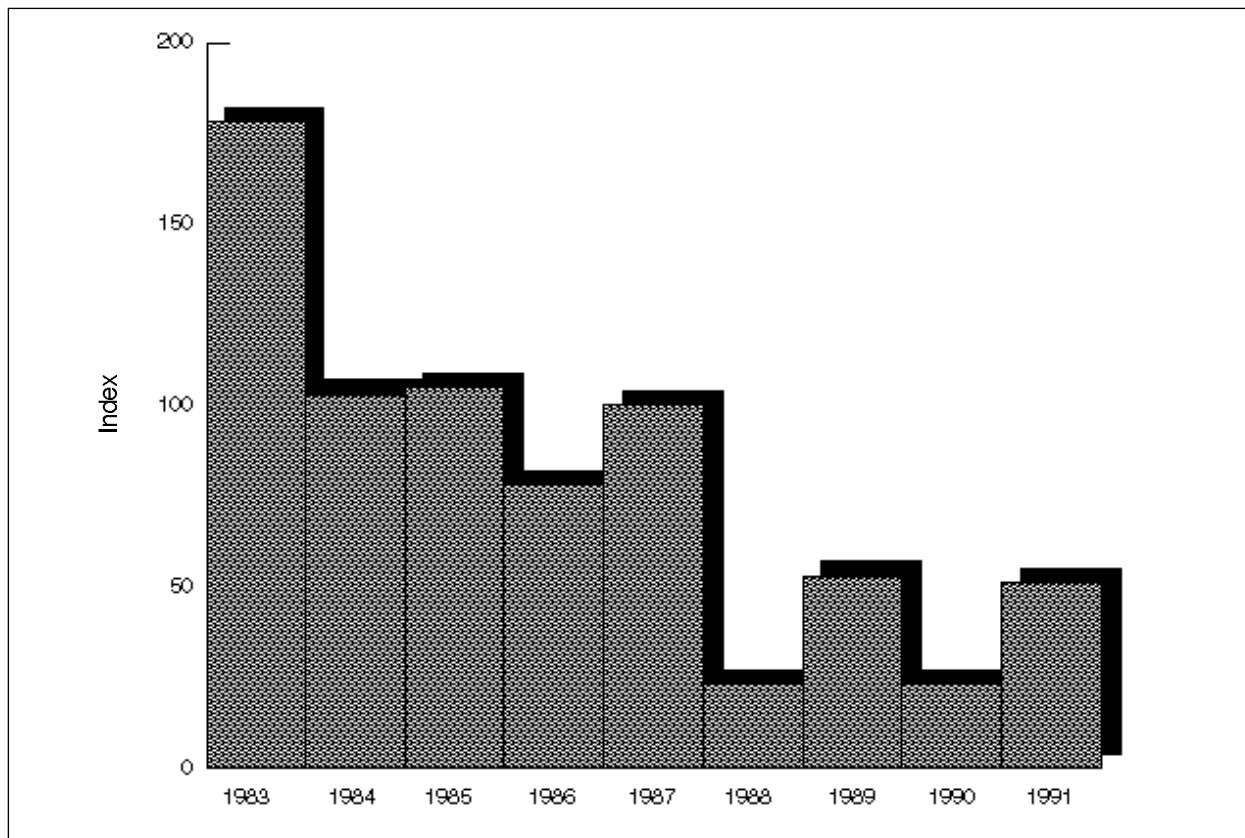
There are a number of wine producers in Malta but only two companies actually compete on a large scale.

– **Marsovin** was founded in 1919 by Chev. Anthony Cassar and has since grown to be the largest wine maker on the Islands. The majority of grapes are imported from all over Europe and they are delivered to the winery in Marsa. As the grapes can vary from area to area, and gain in ripeness during the three to four week harvest, the *Vendemia*, only the best grapes are vinified.

Marsovin ferment their wines in glass lined 380 hl steel tanks, temperature controlled, and then cold stabilize the wines.

The Company is the only producer to offer locally-produced varietal wines: *Chardonnay*, *Cabernet Sauvignon*, *Pinot Grigio* and *Merlot Noir*. In addition high quality wines are offered such as *Palazzo Verdala* (White and Rose) and *La Valette* (Red) as well as a variety of "Specials" and "Table wines".

Graph 1: Index of Maltese Harvests (1987 = 100)



– **E. Delicata and Co.** is the second largest wine manufacturer and also produces high quality wine in *Gellewza* (Red) and *Green Label* (White) competing in the table wines sector with their brand *Lachryma Vitis*. They were established in 1947.

– **Coleiro Wine Company** was established in 1922 when they bought their own sailing vessels and started importing grape juice from Alicante, Sicily, Crete and Cyprus to produce blended wines. **Coleiro** markets a range of table wines mainly *Chevalier*.

– The only other companies worth mentioning are **Farmer's Co-op**, **Caprat** and **Dacoutros** which all produce table wines.

V. – Land Management

The acreage under vine cultivation is cultivated by a large number of small farmers. The main wineries deal directly with brokers who handle the sales of grapes of individual farmers. There is virtually no collective growing policy which stems from the fragmented ownership and management of the parcels of land.

This has wide-ranging implications on the types of vines grown, their upkeep and maintenance and the final results in terms of the quality of grapes and wine. There is no conscious leaning towards consumer demands for specific varieties and quality to be produced, and farmers either continue utilizing existing strains or experiment on an individual basis.

The wineries' role in this area has been to indicate that certain varieties are preferable to others but, having no executive powers, their role is only consultative. It has been effective in the offering of advice on the prevention of diseases.

The recent poor harvests have instigated the Government to allow the importation of grapes to supplement the shortfall in local production. This move has allowed a winery such as **Marsovin** to compete favourably with imported wines in terms of quality and in meeting consumer demands.

The importation of wines has an important proviso which binds Maltese wineries to purchase all the local production of grapes, so long as the health of the grapes is of acceptable standards. This is a very positive policy and it is hoped that the added security derived from this agreement and the current experience of consumer tastes and demands will instigate farmers to take heed of this and provide local grapes of a more consistent quality.

VI. – Future Developments

Despite the static picture that may emerge from a description of the situation, there has been a flurry of activity on the commercial front. Companies such as **Marsovin** have invested heavily in equipment, training, R & D, and extensive market research in order to forge a way through the difficulties experienced.

In this process, two important results were sought:

- a) consumer preferences
- b) technological investment

In both cases the critical objective was to produce wines of quality equal or superior to wines produced in the locality from where the varieties are produced.

Both factors have taken time to be defined, but it has been a boost to realize in practice that consumers will recognise a superior product. This experience should be a spur to the agricultural sector which, with adequate investment and trained staff, would be able to improve the current situation and compete at every level with produce from other countries.

Other areas which have to be considered in depth are developments in the EEC with regards to presentation of wines and grape musts (EEC Reg. 3201/90) and wine labelling (EEC Reg. 3897/91). These have major implications on our export policies and unless Maltese vintners are given special exemption then the development and marketing of high quality wines can suffer unfairly.

Notes

1. This is estimated on the basis that potential wine consumers are only those in the age bracket 15 +.

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Appendix

Imports of Grapes

Year	Metric tonnes
1986	59
1987	187
1988	1 194
1989	783
1990	1 705
1991	1 639*

* of which Italy 94% of total imports.

Source: *Trade Statistics* (various), Central Office of Statistics.

Malta Wine Harvests – Index of Yield

Year	Index
1983	177.0
1984	101.3
1985	104.5
1986	76.2
1987	100.0
1988	22.1
1989	52.5
1990	21.9
1991	51.8
1992	n.a.

Source: Marsovin Ltd.

