

Tasty Tales: Malta

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Whatever you do in Malta, make sure you've got plenty of time for the food, says Chiara Rinaldi

HIS menu takes longer to read than most – with descriptions of all his dishes, their origins and journey to your plate.

But perhaps Claude Camilleri is simply extending the slow food movement he is pioneering in Malta one stage further to slow menus.

The Palazzo Santa Rosa in Mistral Bay is one of several restaurants trying to build up the island's reputation in an attempt to attract a different breed of traveller – the foodie.

For most of Malta's visitors, it's the old world charm, mild climate and low crime rates that draws them every year.

And, for them, a traditional rabbit stew or prickly pear jam may not feature highly, if at all, on their to-do lists.

The island's tourist industry hopes that, for future visitors, they might.

Malta's culinary traditions are the result of a history littered with conquests. All made their mark and none more than the British, who granted the colony independence in 1964. In the capital city, Valletta, there's a shot of British nostalgia at every corner. The shop fronts resemble 1970s Swansea. Red British phone boxes line piazzas and quaint English tea-rooms hide in alleyways.

The Maltese claim their cooking is the ultimate hybrid, having evolved from the north Africans, French, Italians, Spanish and Portuguese.

And Camilleri is a keen advocate. Just three years ago, he packed in his job at the City in London to pursue his dream of opening a restaurant at home.

While his slow food movement is recruiting members just as slowly – just five at present – the Palazzo has received the first and only visit from Michelin inspectors to the island.

Set close to the water's edge in an old 12-acre vineyard, his restaurant offers traditional dishes such as sheep's milk cheeselets and raw Maltese sausage next to the unusual, like spaghetti with sea urchins, hand picked off the nearby Dingli cliffs.

Fish is a staple of the Maltese diet and I arrived at the restaurant at the same time as the local fisherman.

The most evident culinary influence is from nearby Italy – the nation's favourite dishes are

spaghetti in rabbit sauce and macaroni in pastry. Like Sicilians, they make limoncello and enjoy the dessert kannoli, sweet tubes filled with ricotta, candied fruit and chocolate chips.

At the Palazzo, I started with tortelloni stuffed with veal, pork and beef, drizzled in olive oil, and the heavy combination of aromatics and spices made my mouth tingle.

It was followed with pig's cheeks stuffed with goat's cheese, pecorino, rucola and sun-dried tomatoes, cooked in a rich and fragrant north African-influenced sauce. Friends had a giant sea-bass and a rabbit stuffed with liver, dried prunes, fennel and chocolate. The lemon tart dessert was one of the best I've ever tasted and Camilleri brought out a selection of homemade chocolates to end our meal.

His food is delicious but it's extravagant and atypical of the Maltese diet, which evolved from the peasantry.

At the island's other restaurants you'll be more likely to find Aljotta, a thin fish broth boiled in a muslin bag with onions, leeks, tomatoes, olive oil and rice; Fenkata rabbit stew; or spinach and ricotta pie.

In the cafes, locals enjoy pastizzi with their coffee – boat-shaped parcels of puff pastry filled with ricotta or seasoned peas with onions.

And while tourists now travel in ever increasing numbers in search of good food, Malta has a huge challenge ahead if it's to compete with its established Mediterranean neighbours.

Luckily, it has more to offer. Action and water sport operators are setting up across Malta and its sister islands, Gozo and Camino, including windsurfing, rock-climbing, jet skiing and horse riding. There's also excellent underwater visibility for divers and snorkellers.

One macabre attraction is the The Pub in Valletta where actor Oliver Reed arm-wrestled with sailors before collapsing dead in 1999. His last round of drinks – eight lagers, 12 double rums and a half a bottle of whiskey – is displayed proudly on the wall.

Just around the corner are great views, with the upper gardens presiding over an azure sea and the canal-lined Three Cities – Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua, reached by colourful lizzijiet water taxis.

For an eerie experience visit Mdina, the island's oldest city, at night when the Unesco heritage site is free of tourists. The silent alleyways are lit by medieval lanterns and in the dark, the Carmelite Convent could be mistake for a prison. In many ways, that's not far wide of the mark. No man other than a doctor is allowed to enter without the bishop's permission, and none of the nuns are allowed out.

For history of an earlier period, head to the greener and more rural Gozo, home to the Ggantija Temples, thought to be the oldest free-standing structures in the world.

Then there's dramatic scenery at Dwerja where the rocky coastline forms a natural arch, known as the Azure window.

But whatever you decide to do, just leave plenty of time for the slow food.