

“We create dishes that remind our guests of their childhood”

Malta has long been popular for its enduring summers, bath-warm seas and striking architecture – but not necessarily its cuisine. In 2026, that is changing thanks to the creativity of these newcomer chefs



Words by Ally Wybrew



Eighteen-year-old Jake Caruana is on a mission to catapult Malta's cuisine into the 21st century. "Ten to 20 years ago, the food scene here was very different and very limited," says the private chef and sous chef at his mother's restaurant, 59 Republic, in Valletta. "Growing up, food in Malta was much more simple."

These 'simple' dishes were primarily soups and stews, food designed to quell hunger rather than invigorate the palate.

"The mentality was, 'let's not be hungry'. It was about big bowls of food, big plates, big portions," expands George Attard, head chef at Level Nine at The Grand and winner of Michelin's Malta Young Chef of the Year. "It wasn't about the experience."

While many countries' national dishes reflect their history, Malta's cuisine is truly shaped by it. Centuries of influence from France, Türkiye, Britain and the Arab world have created distinct culinary offerings now synonymous with the islands. *Bragioli* (stuffed beef strips) were inspired by Greek dolmades; Gozo's famous cheeselets – *ġbejna* – were influenced by the Arabic rule of the 9th-11th centuries; and Malta's national dish, fenkata rabbit stew, likely evolved as a rebellious act against rabbit hunting restrictions put in

Clockwise from above
The Golden Fork; Valletta has become a foodie hotspot; the kitchen at Level Nine at The Grand; a dish at Level Nine; rising culinary star Jake Caruana

place by the Knights of St. John. Today, investment from the Maltese government has significantly expanded the country's gastronomic scene, helping it transition from zero Michelin stars in 2019, to seven in 2026. Such accolades have put

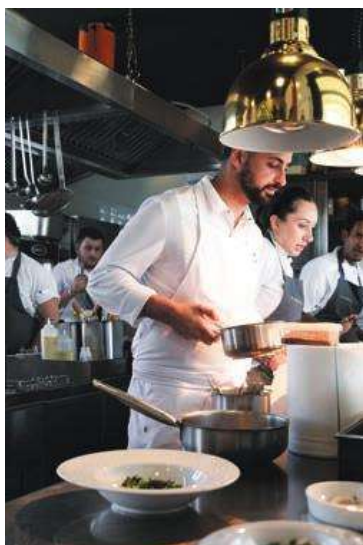
Malta firmly on the foodie map, drawing attention and talent from abroad (Simon Rogan's ION Harbour is the only two Michelin-star restaurant in the country) while fuelling a new generation of domestic talent, too.

Letizia Vella, head chef at The Golden Fork in Rabat and judge on Masterchef Malta, says locals are behind the sudden awarding of stars. "I really believe we have good chefs here. When Michelin came, a lot of chefs pushed more, invested more – they saw a bigger opportunity for them."

For Letizia, modern-day Maltese cuisine is all about tapping into the country's gastronomic roots and repackaging them to meet modern tastes. It means re-creating dishes her mum made growing up, and adding new elements. Prawn cocktail is a favourite.

"She always used to make it for Christmas or New Year, so I wanted to do something with that dish," Letizia says. "Today, we use all the ingredients of a traditional prawn cocktail, but instead of the Marie Rose sauce, we make a





PHOTOS: ALBERT CAMILLERI, ADOBE STOCK, IZABELLA KOVESDI

marinade that has lemongrass and ginger – things my mother wouldn't normally use – and combine them together. People really love it."

Jake feels similarly. "[Maltese food] comes from a poor history. It's very basic," he says. "A chef needs to create it their way, to elevate it. They need to get the concept of Maltese cuisine – the basics, like a local fried rabbit – and turn it into something innovative."

The country's relatively remote location means it's become self-sufficient in many ingredients, such as fruits, vegetables and of course, fresh fish and seafood. Letizia's restaurant sources 80% of its produce domestically, much from the 'breadbasket of Malta', its sister island, Gozo.



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"I love Gozo produce," George enthuses from the large sun terrace of his top-floor restaurant in the four-star hotel in Mġarr, a plush space full of dusky blue booths and embroidered seats. "Spring is my favourite time. The asparagus, broad beans, broccoli – all the green vegetables."

Hailing from Victoria, Gozo, the 31-year-old enrolled in ITS (Institute of Tourism Studies) when he was 18 to develop his culinary skills, then worked as sous chef at two Michelin-star restaurants, in Malta (Bahia and Fernandõ Gastrotheque) and Scotland (The Kitchen in Edinburgh and Cail Bruich in Glasgow).

Back in Gozo, his first head chef appointment finally allows him an autonomy he's been craving, and today his menu features pork belly with endive, broad beans and nduja, catch of the day with Gozo asparagus and capers, and burrata with tamarind and smoked eel. His menu changes seasonally, prioritising Malta's produce and bolstered by any necessary imports.

In 2026, Malta's dining offerings are an attraction in their own right. Visitors not only have seven Michelin-starred restaurants to choose from (three in Valletta, two in Sliema, one in St. Julian's and one in Mdina), but also a growing array of lunch, brunch and dinner spots serving up inventive dishes in vibey settings – like Elephant Shoe's green and pink, pop-focused restaurant in Valletta. In the 21st century, external influences on Malta's culinary scene are more holistic than

Clockwise from above
The green hills of Gozo;
Level Nine cuisine;
toasting The Golden Fork



in previous times, revealing a pleasing synergy between foreign talent and local chefs.

"I've talked to a lot of foreign chefs," says Letizia, "and it's inspiring that they're trying to use as many local ingredients as possible. It's good for the economy of Malta." But do local chefs have an edge when it comes to developing dishes? "I think because we're from here, we know more about our cuisine, so that's beneficial for us," the Best Chef Award winner says. "We can create dishes that remind our guests of their childhood."

✈ **Wizz Air flies to Malta**



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