

Words by

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Ally is a travel writer who's been living in Gozo for two years. When not exploring the depths of its coastline in her newfound passion for scuba diving, you'll find her seeking out rock-climbing locations or unknown corners of the island's beautiful landscape.

A foodie destination

Malta is proving that great food isn't just about heritage – it's also about evolution. The island is carving out its own identity as a serious gastronomic destination and one where a passion for local ingredients is driving a new chapter in its culinary story.

"It's like being in San Sebastián; you can go to every little shop, café, or bakery and everything is delicious and made by someone who's been doing it for 30 years."

This is Oli Marlow, executive chef at the two-Michelin-starred ION Harbour by Simon Rogan, rapturously comparing Malta to one of Europe's most prestigious foodie destinations. "The ingredients (here) are very, very special..."

Oli isn't the only one to have been enchanted by Maltese cuisine. In recent years, chefs from all over have been flooding to its mid-Mediterranean shores. Since 2020, the number of Michelin-starred restaurants has grown from three to seven, with Parisian-inspired Le GV in Sliema the latest to receive the accolade in 2025, just six months after opening. This puts the archipelago fourth on the global list of Michelin-starred restaurants per capita, surpassing the likes of Italy, France and Spain.

While this is partly down to its modest 316sq km landmass, that's not to say it's not worthy.

Malta's culinary landscape has long possessed a unique quality, its isolated position lending it

fresh, succulent seafood, while Italian and Arabic flavours have helped influence Maltese staples such as the morish, bean-based dip *bigilla* and a profusion of tomatoes and olive oil encouraged by neighbouring Sicily.

Whereas other remote islands rely on imported goods, Malta has maintained a relatively high level of agricultural self-sufficiency, something started as far back as 5900 BC.

Tourists who come to marvel at historic cities, luxuriate in five-star hotels and snap shots of picturesque waterfront towns likely miss the wealth of hidden agriculture – particularly in the dry summer months. Come winter and spring, the islands' limestone lands transform into verdant valleys, producing all manner of produce from lettuce, broccoli, leeks and tomatoes to olive oil, grapes, oranges and honey.

At the Michelin-starred de Mondion in Mdina, Melleħa-born executive chef Clint Grech has always prided himself on promoting Maltese food, sourced as much as possible from the islands.

"I believe that if we don't support the local farmers, local fishermen and local produce, we're going to lose what Malta is all about," he explains. "It's this little, tiny island in the middle of the Mediterranean; we have very good fish, very good seafood, and very good vegetables, so we chefs need to support as much as possible when it comes to these food items and traditions."

Oli Marlow (left), executive chef at ION Harbour by Simon Rogan.



Clint explains how the standard of local produce has increased in line with the country's rising culinary reputation. Up to six years ago, before Michelin came to Malta, local cheese, for example, was not up to standard. Now, he is sourcing high-quality ricotta from Ta Zeppi Farm in Siggiewi.

Clint also has an ace up his sleeve: The Xara Gardens, a 1.5-acre farming plot established during the pandemic. This patch of rich production soil is mere metres from the restaurant, and he finds himself there most mornings perusing possible produce.

"I think around 70 to 80 per cent comes from our own garden," he says. "We have the advantage of picking the crops two, three, or four hours before [dinner]. Menus are printed every day, so if today the beetroot or zucchini flowers are nice, we adjust the menu accordingly."

The proteins – in Clint's case his famous suckling pig – largely remain the same, but the supporting tastes and textures fluctuate according to season and supply.

For many high-end restaurants, some produce is still sourced abroad to ensure it meets the quality they require, but in these instances, the footprint of the produce is a consideration.

Andrew Borg, executive chef of Le GV, estimates 95 per cent of his restaurant's fruit and vegetables come from the islands, while only 50 per cent of meat originates here. Fish is a different matter.



All his seafood is sourced from Maltese waters, while in ION Harbour, Oli enlists the help of a local forager and producer to provide only line-caught fish for their guests.

At de Mondion, one of their most popular dishes, the octopus, is subject to demand. To meet the restaurant's sustainable criteria, Clint only buys octopus weighing at least 1.5kg, meaning he has to purchase them over month-long periods and freeze them until he has enough to put on the menu. At the time we spoke in March, he guessed this likely wouldn't be until August.

This kind of adaptability is something Michelin-level chefs are used to, and something they've had to become increasingly good at since the rise in dietary requirements and allergies.

Chef Oli again: "Receiving vegetarians or vegans is really not an issue. I've always been a believer that if someone doesn't want to eat a particular thing, it's your job to give them just as good a time. I think you can still bring so much joy and excitement to any ingredient and it's part of our job to put a smile on your face. It's a challenge sometimes, but it's a good challenge." ▼



Clint Grech, executive chef at de Mondion with his octopus dish.



they're not always the main event when it comes to local dishes – despite what Michelin chefs might say.

A case in point: Gabriel's family had difficulty adjusting to his new diet. "Everyone eats fish here, so my family didn't really accept it. They'd say 'we cooked some meat for you' – because that's what they're cooking today, so that's all you have to eat. They were confused."

The VeganFest team hoped to attract 800 people to the Ta' Qali National Park across two days but actually saw 2,000 visitors turn out. Eight food vendors sold vegan Italian, Chinese and Maltese treats, while 15 others were spread around the leafy venue, which also had a yoga space. Vegan pet food supplier Green Paws sold two weeks' worth of food in two days and vegan donut supplier Tad-Doughnuts sold out and had to keep shuttling back to their shop in Fgura to restock.

"It was a huge surprise," Gabriel said. "We weren't expecting that many people and it turned out amazingly." This year, the festival, which is being held on 3rd and 4th May, looks to expand its offerings. It is aiming to almost double its space in the park and include a dedicated pet area, featuring vegan and sustainable pet food and accessories, as well as a new layout.

Pastizzi and pintxos might be worlds apart, but Malta is proving that great food isn't just about heritage – it's about evolution. Like San Sebastián, the island is carving out its own identity as a serious gastronomic destination and one where a passion for local ingredients is driving a new chapter in its culinary story. ◀



Andrew Borg, executive chef of Le CV.

In more mainstream restaurants, menus' dietary offerings are dictated by demand. Across Malta and Gozo, tourist hubs have seen an increase in plant-based offerings, for example. In Malta's old capital, Mdina, Coogi's Restaurant, based in an old Arab townhouse, serves traditional Maltese delicacies – rabbit liver, *bragioli* (beef olives) – alongside vegan alternatives such as Beyond Meat chicken tenders, chickpea curry and chilli 'sin' carne.

In Gozo's popular seaside town of Marsalforn, Alive Bistro features a near completely vegan menu – spinach lasagne, goulash and beetroot empanadas, alongside Insta-worthy vegan cakes. At least one plant-based option can be found at most other eateries along the promenade. KM Malta Airlines' fliers are also catered for: a piping hot vegan lasagne costs just €8.50 on board.

This expansion in offerings mirrors a more gradual change in attitude across the islands, exemplified by the launch of the country's first vegan festival last year. VeganFest organiser Gabriel Mallia admits producing it was a gamble, and despite having opted for a plant-based diet five years earlier, he wasn't certain there was the audience for it.

"It was a risk. I wasn't sleeping because I thought people weren't going to come," he said. It's unsurprising: Maltese cuisine prides itself on fresh seafood, *bragioli* and *gbejna*-stuffed delights. Though the islands produce a lot of fruit and vegetables,



The Xara Gardens.



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