

## Searching for a National Cuisine

*Elise Billiard*

Université de Provence,  
University of Malta.

### **Abstract**

*As the marketing of national cuisines is spreading at an epidemic rate all around the world and as we witness countless aberrations it is necessary to shed light on the gastronomic search for identity. In this article I will be looking at some common postulates on national food. The discussion will tackle four main issues: are we really what we eat? What makes a cuisine unique? What is the place of tradition in national cuisine and how can food heritage be used to define group identity? Taking Maltese national cuisine as an example, I hope to start an indispensable debate. This article does not intend to define what is national cuisine but exposes the pitfalls and contradictions that are endemic to such definitions.*

### **1. You are what you wish to eat**

Nowadays any article or book relating to food issues begins with this popular statement in its regional variations : “you are what you eat” ; “tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you who you are”, “*ghidli x’hobz tiekol u nighdlek min int*”, “*Dimmi cosa mangi e ti dirò chi sei*”, “*Parla come mangi*” etc. Unfortunately the aphorism has seldom been applied to the study of modern nationalism<sup>1</sup>. However this cliché might be the key to a richer understanding of national food.

The longevity of such a proverb lies certainly in its malleability. Just as nutritionists can make use of it to encourage people to eat more healthily, so can geographers and historians use this proverb to divide humanity into groups of staple-food based civilizations. Sociologists have also tackled the issue by showing how social groups are commonly distinguished by their food preferences. Numerous popular sayings corroborate this food division<sup>2</sup>.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu gives us a basic insight to grasp the implication of this social/food division. In his famous book “*Distinction, A Social Critique of the*

---

<sup>1</sup> An exception is the very interesting work from the historian J.M. Piltcher on Mexican national food: *!Que vivan los tamales ! Food and the making of Mexican National Identity*, University New Mexico Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> For example the etymology of “companion” which defines two persons sharing their bread. For more bread related proverbs see the thesis of Rachel Radmilli “*Hobzna ta’ kuljum: Qormi bakeries and the role of bread in society.*” Unpublished thesis, University of Malta, 1999.

Judgement of Taste”<sup>3</sup>, the anthropologist argues that not only are we categorizing people according to their food habits (as much as their clothing for instance), but we are also judged by our own choices. As Bourdieu put it so eloquently: “Taste classifies and classifies the classifier”. Consequently an individual who is aware of such distinctions based on his own choices can correct his food behaviour in order to be categorized as he wishes to be. For instance, a young man willing to be perceived as an educated citizen will invite his colleagues for a glass of wine and not for tea or beer. Whereas this often happens at an individual level, we can also see it happening at a national level at a time when a “traditional” cuisine is promoted in order to be seen as an educated or authentic nation.

When displaying a particular cuisine, one must be aware of one’s choice: is it intended to show the “real” food habits of one’s nation, or does it just give “a good image” of his nation? Even if the two orientations are often entangled some extreme examples are misleading such as the recent trend for olive oil in Malta, which is not founded on any sociological evidence. Although olive oil was produced in significant quantities during the Roman time the cultivation of olive trees had for centuries been reduced to a virtual standstill<sup>4</sup>. Since then the Maltese government, the European Union and some Maltese food lovers have united their efforts to plant more than 100 000 olive trees but this momentum (often spurred by lucrative economic realities) does not make olive oil a national product, or at least not yet. Olive oil production is without doubt suitable to the Maltese soil and climate, however olive oil is nowhere to be found in the core of popular food in Malta. The desire to cultivate this fruit does not originate from local heritage but from an imported vision of who we are meant to be. The production of a Maltese olive oil responds to the Western trend for Mediterranean stereotypes of sun kissed rurality. In order to understand the principle underlying the movement to promote Mediterranean characteristics we must return to Bourdieu’s argument on distinction and identity.

Unlike what we would like to believe, our preference for food, colour or smell is strongly determined by our social origin. This is in fact the very reason why we tend to classify people according to their “good” or “bad” taste. In the words of Bourdieu, the classifier makes his judgements according to his *habitus*, or in layman’s terms, according to his personal embodied representation of the world. As a first example we can say that it is clear how for the young man, education is linked with wine and the whole knowledge associated with it. Other people who share the same representation of the world, will perceive him as educated. However for those who belong to another group, the fact that he drinks wine will have no incidence or might even provoke certain prejudices. Looking further at this same example the young man’s choice of a particular bottle of wine may reveal his ignorance about the quality of wine and the people he wants to impress might see right through it. Bourdieu makes three points about this. Firstly our actions are always intended for someone<sup>5</sup>, and consequently human actions are always communicative signs. Secondly the interpretation of our acts depends on the receiver and the social group he belongs to.

---

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> J. Borg, *Cultivation and Diseases of Fruit Trees in the Maltese Islands*, Government Printing Office, Malta, 1922.

<sup>5</sup> They can be attended to ourselves or to the image of ourselves from outside.

Thirdly our tastes show that we belong to a group and that we want to belong to a group, which might change at different points in a person's life.

When a nation declares "this is what we eat", it is saying "this is who we want to be". In the case of Malta, the contemporary context can be summed up as a will to prove that Maltese food is not the burger and chips served at the beach resorts as the sisters Caruana Galizia wrote<sup>6</sup> and therefore, that Maltese are not "British clones" having "lost their identity". On the contrary, there has been an effort to promote a Maltese cuisine with strong Mediterranean flavours. Far from being a whimsical reverie of a few food lovers, the search for national food has strong political consequences. To understand the reasons for this Mediterranean trend it is therefore essential to take a broader view and look at what "Mediterranean" really means in today's globalized world.

The Mediterranean world experienced a surge of exoticism in the 19th century. It is of no surprise that the birth of tourism is associated with the portrayal of the Mediterranean in literature and in social sciences as a region of backward culture as well as the depository of an "authenticity" that the industrialised Western nations seemed to be rapidly losing. Both these ideals were born during the industrial revolution at a time when affluent Westerners (led predominantly by British Lords) were looking with nostalgia for a peaceful society that would bring back the true values of family, art de vivre and folklore.

This "Mediterraneanism", as Michael Herzfeld calls it<sup>7</sup>, might have been a construction of nostalgic post-industrial societies but nowadays it is taken for granted by the Mediterranean people themselves. The Maltese have also integrated into their own self-image the cuisine which carries strong romantic ideas of the mother's home-made food. In Greece, Morocco, Spain and Slovenia to mention just a few, the same process is at work: The cultural characteristics that fit the Mediterranean stereotypes are being enhanced, or put to the forefront of marketing campaigns. For the ex-colonial countries their past culinary heritage, be it British, Russian or French influenced, are undervalued and seen as foreign and deliberately neglected.

The decision to promote a Mediterranean image of Maltese food culture follows the individual choice of our example of the man choosing to drink wine. The choice of selecting recipes for their Mediterranean flair draws on an image that is understood by tourists. Here the marketing of an idealized national food is an act of communication. However complying with what tourists want to see is also a submission to a pre-determined order dictated by colonial hegemony<sup>8</sup>. Like any post-colonial country, Maltese people share a common vision of the world with their previous colonizers where the centre is still located in the old colonial centres<sup>9</sup>. Therefore far from promoting the independence of Maltese culture, the choice of

---

<sup>6</sup> Anne Caruana Galizia & Helen Caruana Galizia, *The Food and Cookery Book*, PaxBook (first edition 1977), Malta, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Herzfeld, 'The Horns of the Mediterranean Dilemma', in *American Ethnologist*, n°11, 1984, 439-454.

<sup>8</sup> Argyrou Vassos, 'Tradition, Modernity and European Hegemony in the Mediterranean', in *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, n°12, vol.1, 2002, 23-42.

<sup>9</sup> On this point it can be argued that strong countries like Brazil, China or India are building their own centrality and might soon become the new cultural hegemony? However I would argue that this is still not the case.

being Mediterranean reinforces the peripheral location of Malta as it is dictated by a larger Western ideal. This is clearly visible when looking at which recipes are put up as national emblems.

### 2. What makes a cuisine unique?

The selection of recipes that will flavour the national identity is crucial. I shall argue now that the principles underlying this selection are unclear if only for the fact that they tend to reinforce a picturesque image of society which is not supported by historical, geographical and social facts.

In Malta, several dishes are commonly recognized as part of the national cuisine: *Fenkata*, *pastizzi*, *timpana*, *soppa tal-armla*, *qassatat*, *imqaret*, *sfineg*, *hobz malti*, to mention a few. They appear on the menu of so-called “Maltese restaurants” (as if the others were not Maltese) and in cookery books. One argument made to justify the choice of these recipes is that they are typically Maltese. However none of them are exclusive to Malta. Although the *soppa tal-armla* carries this name only in Malta this poor-man’s soup has doubtlessly been prepared all over the Mediterranean. In this case we can hardly state that Maltese food (as it is formally defined) is unique. My fieldwork in domestic kitchens has shown me that there are many ways to cook *timpana* or *minestra*, and that it is the Maltese women’s creativity that through generations has given these dishes a distinctive Maltese taste. The singularity of any popular food lies in its long history of blending. The most globally known cuisines (Chinese, Italian and French cuisine) have built their reputation through their ability to create new dishes from imported ingredients and recipes. The art of blending is the chef’s greatest skill<sup>10</sup>. Nowadays with the huge amount of imports and food exchanges all over the world, the professional cooks are no longer the only innovators although it would be a mistake to think of food imports as a recent phenomenon. One could go as far as saying there was never a unique food system since the exchange of seeds started with the earliest agriculture during the Neolithic period using grain brought to Europe from the Middle East. Historical research shows how much the so-called Mediterranean cuisine is indebted to Asia and the Americas for their richness and variety of ingredients. It is enough here to remember that tomatoes originated from the Americas.

Since imported food has been so common and present in Maltese cuisine we must rethink the definition of “unique”. Malta stands as a perfect example to tackle the construction of modern national food as a cuisine that is not fixed and closed but on the contrary a cuisine that is constantly evolving. Unlike societies historically based on farming, Maltese society has always relied heavily on imports for the majority of its food. During the time of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem the two

---

<sup>10</sup> See Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982; Jean-François Revel, *Un festin de paroles, Histoire littéraire de la sensualité gastronomique de l’antiquité à nos jours*, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris, 1979; Michael Freeman, “Sung”, in K.C. Chang (ed.), *Food in Chinese culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977.

third of the wheat consumption was imported from Sicily and France<sup>11</sup>. Even when the population was small and land was still fairly fertile, harvests were exchanged for other foods. For instance, during the Roman period olive oil was exported to Rome. This was the fate of many Mediterranean islands that exported their monoculture of olives, vines, cotton or mastic tree<sup>12</sup>. The strength of the Maltese economy was for a long time focused on the port and the majority of food provisions had to be purchased from overseas. In this aspect, Maltese food culture is a precursor of today's global world. In Malta the identity of a dish does not lie in the local origin of its ingredients but in the local combination of such ingredients and the way they are consumed. In a nutshell the specificity of Maltese food culture lies in its people and their practices.

A look at some historical facts will help understand the specificity of Maltese cuisine. Food is first of all, as Claude Levi-Strauss famously said: "*bon à penser*" (good to think with) which reminds us of its symbolic nature. When eating pork, for instance, we swallow all the semantic associations of what a pig represents. For vegetarians killing animals for nutrition is similar to murder and in this perspective only plants can enter their mouth. This is similar to Mary Douglas' famous explanation of Jewish food taboos, where some foods are considered to be imperfect or impure, and therefore inedible<sup>13</sup>. In this respect Christians who are only surpassed by the Chinese for their appetite for almost anything, are great conquerors since they can survive amongst any religious group. However to emphasise their own religious beliefs they might be prone to eat more of the food banned by the other<sup>14</sup>. After all identity is always built by distinguishing oneself from the other<sup>15</sup>. As a Christian fortress Malta has for centuries used pork in its popular cuisine. Even today Maltese sausages, the Christmas roast stuffed pork, *kawalata* and ham are still very present in vernacular cuisine.

The previous foreign rulers have inevitably left an imprint on Maltese culture and the islands' cuisine was not spared this influence.. The Knights of Saint John, for instance left their imprint on Maltese food heritage by reinforcing Christianity and therefore the consumption of pork. British colonisation introduced other habits and ingredients. At the turn of the 20th century beer started to be locally brewed as a result of strong British demand and today the Farsons brewing company exports with pride its Maltese beers with a branding campaign "Our Heritage, our Beers". The ongoing history of medical research also plays its part. When, as a consequence of the discovery of the brucellosis or "Maltese fever", the staple goat milk was replaced by

---

<sup>11</sup> Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, tome I, Armand Colin, Paris, 1966.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Braudel notes the islands of Djerba, Corfu, Chio among others.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge & Kegan Paul PLC, London, 1966.

<sup>14</sup> Sauner-Leroy notes also the opposite phenomenon, when Christian minorities living amongst Muslims, like Copts or Armenians, tend to eat little pork having slowly integrated the disgust this animal represents for their neighbors (Sauner-Leroy Marie-Hélène, 'Les Traditions Culinaires', in Albera Dionigi, Blok Anton, Bromberger Christian (eds.), *L'anthropologie de la Méditerranée*, Maisonneuve et Larose, Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme, 2001, 121-130.

<sup>15</sup> Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Boktrykkeri, Johansen & Nielsen, Oslo (first edition, 1969), 1970.

evaporated tinned milk and later fresh cow's milk<sup>16</sup>. Today the government's campaigns are pushing food industries to produce more low fat products : skimmed milk, margarine and diet coke. Information is given about the ill effects of sugar, an ingredient that Mediterranean people have known and enjoyed even before Europeans and that it is at the core of Maltese festive food culture.

Together with historical events the geographical aspects of the Maltese Islands have an important influence on Maltese flavours. Being a sun drenched arid land Mediterranean herbs have flavoured many dishes such as the *patata fil-forn* which is cooked with rosemary. The result can be seen as a successful hybrid of British import and local habits. All these food products are Maltese and as such they should appear together with the more "typical" Mediterranean food.

If historical and geographical aspects are frequently quoted, social structure is often neglected when defining a national food, however food culture is primarily shaped by the society that produces it. In Malta, cooking is a family business and it is the duty of each mother and spouse to nourish their family. The maternal status is justified in the catholic dogma in a nation that is strongly attached to its religious values. Cooking therefore is more than producing edible products, it is for women a way of displaying their femininity even though nowadays men are taking an active part in the evolution of food habits by introducing new techniques and reinterpreting old ones. Barbecues for instance, which are so popular in the summer months, are modern versions of the fried *fenkata* as it was once prepared by men during the feast of the *Imnarja*. More broadly cooking techniques also seem to follow a gender division where stews and boiling are associated with femininity whereas the dry cooking techniques such as grills and frying are more suitable for men. The choice of ingredients also has gender distinctions as men tend to cook and eat rare meat much more than women.

Social life also plays a part in the constitution of national food habits. The strong division between domestic food and street food is still very clear in Malta and it classifies dishes and habits. Street food is loved for its richness, for its strong flavours and for its novelty. Women are always concerned with health issues, paying attention to feed their family in a healthy way, but the Maltese do not restrain themselves once they are eating out (therefore outside the domestic/maternal safe haven). For this reason there is no apparent contradiction between cooking home-made ravioli made with semi-skimmed ricotta and later eating a hot-dog or a kebab during a village feast on the same day. For the anthropologist, a food culture is made of all these social characteristics and cannot be summed up in a selection of recipes. However national food tends to be seen as the projection of an idealized identity which inevitably leads to an incomplete and often inaccurate collection of recipes. Often undervalued the social rules that classify food production and consumption are more permanent and deep rooted than superficial trends. For the anthropologist they are at the core of a national food identity.

### 3. Is traditional always national ?

Here we begin to see that the definition of national food might not be so self-evident. Not only is the image projected by cookery books and tourist brochures

---

<sup>16</sup> H. Vivian Wyatt, 'Brucellosis and Maltese goats in the Mediterranean', in *Journal of Maltese History* Vol.1 No. 2, 2009, 4-19.



biased towards a romanticised image of the Mediterranean but further more the prodigious imports of ingredients and cookery techniques and the impact of health and beauty concerns are increasingly blurring the boundaries. However there is a term that everyone seems to agree upon when discussing national food: Tradition.

A nation is defined as a group of people sharing a common history and other heritage such as a common language or a common ethnicity. To prove the continuity of its culture, nations have used traditions. Nation-States promote old traditions that objectify their uniqueness for their own people and for those considered outsiders. In spite of their apparent longevity, historians such as Eric Hobsbawn have shown that so-called ancestral traditions are often invented or at least re-constructed<sup>17</sup>. The example of the Scottish kilt is often used as the paradigm of a recent dress-code promoting ancestral tradition in order to justify the singularity of the Scottish nation. They are used by the state to rewrite a history that is in fact less continuous than the nationalists would be willing to admit. Official history is by definition political. In Malta the question of how much the Arab period influenced Maltese society epitomises the impossibility to keep an objective eye on the past.

A “national” discourse of food must prove the ancestral origin of its recipes. In Malta, the lack of archives on popular eating habits makes this research difficult. Most past observers note that the Maltese were living on a monotonous diet based on bread and onions, flavoured with goat cheese and anchovies<sup>18</sup>. Historians are definitely needed to unearth the many missing parts and some have thankfully started this long research<sup>19</sup>. Anthropologists and biologists could also work together to collect popular knowledge that is still adamantly undocumented. Unfortunately this absence of popular history encourages many aberrations and due to the lack of documented proof virtually any recipe can be claimed to be traditional.

Nations are not only seeking continuity, they are also in need of homogeneity. All nation-states need a common system of measures, an official language (or two at most), and obviously a common civil code and law. They tend to create other common languages such as a culinary language. In India recently urban women have gathered their regional home recipes to create a national food<sup>20</sup>. In Greece in the 1980’s, rural women migrating to the cities where they learnt urban cuisine brought back to their village this new knowledge thus reducing the discrepancies between rural and urban food<sup>21</sup>. This process of exchange simplifies the regional or familial culinary traditions into mere stereotypes in order to be understood by all. Inevitably in this homogenization process many traditions are left aside and quickly forgotten. In this sense nations-states use and create on the first place traditions only to destroy them.

---

<sup>17</sup> Eric Hobsbawn & Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

<sup>18</sup> See among others Louis De Boisgelin, *Malte ancienne et moderne*, Paris, 1805.

<sup>19</sup> See the works of Carmel Cassar, Simon Mercieca, Noel Buttigieg and Kenneth Gambin.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Appadurai, ‘Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia’, in *American Ethnologist*, Vol.8, n°3, 1981, 494-511.

<sup>21</sup> Marie-Hélène Sauner-Leroy, ‘Les Traditions Culinaires’, in Albera Dionigi, Blok Anton, Bromberger Christian (eds.), *L’anthropologie de la Méditerranée*, Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l’Homme. 2001, 121-130.

There is nonetheless a point that unites nations and traditions. The romantic nationalist of the 19th century believed that the true identity of a nation lay in its common people and not in its cosmopolitan elite. They were, and still are, the traditions of the common people that were flaunted as national emblems. In Europe rural traditions were collected and compiled in books by folklorists, poets and writers who were emphasizing the innocence and the courage of their people. In Malta Oliver Friggieri has shown this process in Maltese literature and pointed out that the idea of a Maltese nation was inspired by Italian refugees and was deliberately aimed at those that struggled against the British governance of the time<sup>22</sup>. This historical perspective can be traced in the contemporary idea of national Maltese food.

National food discourse invariably recalls popular home-made food and therefore it is inevitable that new cookery books stress the rural traditions and not the urban ones. The idea that rural people are the “authentic” nationals has negatively influenced authors who have forgotten large parts of Maltese cookery habits. Around the port, in the city, and in the noble homes, cooking was different. European influences were strong and the cosmopolitanism *de rigueur*. The urban eating habits are part of the Maltese national heritage.

The problem of using the term “tradition” lies in its vague definition and its powerful semantic projection that evokes all sorts of sepia hued images. A traditional dish smells good, it is done with love by an old grandma, the ingredients are fresh and natural. Tradition rhymes with authenticity and *art de vivre*. It conjures up memories of the good old days when women had time to cook and when everything was done from scratch. For these reasons tradition is deeply associated with an idealization of the past. In a nutshell, traditional is nostalgic.

In the process of crystallization of the “good old days” many popular practices are left aside. During the fieldwork and research I conducted for my PhD, I noticed that many familial old home-cooked dishes, like the trifle or the shepherd’s pie (both well integrated in the Maltese domestic repertoire since each family had its own twist to the method or ingredients) were not represented in the common national cuisine. If tradition is about the past, then it is not about the whole past. Changes do not always come about where one initially thinks they do. We know for instance that the integration of macaroni in the Maltese habits dates approximately from the turn of the 20th century, a period when corned beef was already sold in the archipelago. However corned beef is not seen as traditional. In Malta, it seems that British food is associated with industrial low-quality food and the decadence of modern food habits. This explains why many dishes influenced by the British culture (such as the Trifle and Shepherd’s Pie) are discarded in the national food discourse. This is a cultural bias that stops us from looking at food heritage with impartiality.

The question “When does a habit become a tradition?” brings me to a last indispensable point. I shall here take the liberty to recall the short story of a man who wanted to understand why in his family there was the tradition of cutting sausages in two before cooking them. He first asked his wife, who didn’t know so he asked her mother, who also didn’t know so he went and asked her ageing mother who nonchalantly replied that she cut her sausages in two because her pan was too small. Habits performed out of necessity became traditions once they lose their original purpose. In this perspective culinary techniques, like the slow-cooking process,

---

<sup>22</sup> Oliver Friggieri, ‘In Search of a National Identity: a Survey of Maltese Literature’, in *Durham University Journal*, Vol. LXXVIII (New Series Vol. XLVII n°1), December 1985-86, 121-136.



became national emblems when they lost their original purpose . Today, cooking slowly does not mean the same as it did 50 years ago when the housewife only had a *spiritiera* to prepare the everyday *minestra* and therefore had no choice but to cook slowly. Slow cooking is a choice (or luxury) which is grounded in the idea that fast cooking is unhealthy and tasteless<sup>23</sup>. It takes its meaning from the nostalgic idea of the good old days.

To conclude, it must be stressed that traditions are not fixed. I would even say that once a tradition is fixed then it is dead. Traditions are characterized by a transmission through practice and imitation, and not by the linearity of writing. This means that they are constantly evolving. In fact the putting in writing of know-how, which was previously transmitted through practice<sup>24</sup> or learning by doing, reduces the body knowledge to a mere set of rules. If tradition is commonly associated with the family or domestic space then it has to adapt to the evolving taste of the participants. Consequently a tradition cannot be fixed but must be kept alive through its transmission from hand to mouth.

#### 4. Performing national identity through food festivals.

Meals have been the occasion for social bonding and showing one's group identity since time immemorial. Collective celebrations always revolve around an abundant table. This is the case when Christians commemorate the birth or death of Christ or when Muslims celebrate the *Aid el-kebir* with the killing and eating of a lamb. In the same way, Maltese assert their national identity by sharing a *fenkata* at home or in specialized restaurants. Nowadays some food events are becoming what Pierre Nora called *lieux de mémoires*<sup>25</sup>. By artificially recreating some historical event such as the banquets of the Order of Saint John, the audience has the possibility to "live history". The sensuality of food (unlike inanimate monuments) helps to "feel" the past. If Samuel has shown that the spread of "living history" happened mostly in the 60's, he also acknowledged the fact that its origins are to be found in any procession or ritual that aimed to incarnate a legendary character or a key moment in history<sup>26</sup>. Re-enactments make a collective past tangible and the participants become actors of their collective history.

---

<sup>23</sup> Some Mediterranean grand-mothers might not have spent more time cooking than their grand-daughters (Padilla Martine, Oberti Beatrice, Aubaile-Sallenave Françoise, 'Comportements alimentaires et pratiques culinaires', in *Alimentation méditerranéenne et santé – Actualités et perspectives*, Editions John Libbey Eurotext, 2000, 119-136.

<sup>24</sup> see Giard Luce, "Faire-la-cuisine", *L'invention du quotidien, tome II Habiter et cuisiner*, in Michael De Certeau, Gallimard, Paris, 1994; see also David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts : an Anthropology of Food and Memory*, Berg, Oxford 2001; D. Sutton, 'Cooking Still, the Senses, and Memory : the Fate of Practical Knowledge', in Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Philip (eds.), *Sensible Objects. Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, Berg, Oxford, 2006, 87-120.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Nora 'Between Memory and History : Les Lieux de Mémoire', in *Representations*, n°26, Special Issue, *Memory and Counter-Memory*, 7-24.

<sup>26</sup> Raphael Samuels, *Theatre of Memory*, London, Verso, 1994.

In Malta the village feasts that reunite villagers around the patron Saint of the parish are a typical display of collective identity. Aside of these “*festi*”, some villages have recently organised annual food festivals with the support of the ministry of agriculture and the fish industry. During these events themed around one ingredient (tuna, olive oil, chocolate, strawberry, bread...etc) local and foreign visitors are welcomed to taste the local food production and to attend to numerous activities such as folk dances, musical concerts and exhibitions of old agricultural tools. The food festivals are doing more than just marketing the local food produce, which in the case of chocolate festival for instance is not really linked to the history of the village anyway, they are a time when common people can recreate their collective history. Here past and present blend in a joyful atmosphere. With little attention to historical research they recreate their idealized past and perform their identity based on a collective image of themselves.

Malta has a long history of beautiful religious processions that have doubtlessly served as models for the recent folkloristic re-enactments. In recent years the evolution of the Good Friday procession towards a very realistic re-enactment of the way of the cross (complete with a bleeding Christ and weeping Madonna) gives an idea of the movement towards national tradition of living history in one’s own flesh<sup>27</sup>. The reconstructions of the last supper are also done with the same blend of common sense *bricolage* and true attention to historical details. Not only statues being modelled in life size but the food is also real, with burned hard boiled eggs, apple purée and leaves of spinach in earthen pots. The artists are proud of their exhibition and always glad to give to the curious tourist some explanation about the symbolism of the dishes. Recreating a Jewish pass-over supper and adding the Jewish funeral smell of hot wine and spices to recall Christ’ death, the artists display their ability and knowledge as well as their collective past and identity. At a general level they are here also asserting that the Maltese nation is highly centred around Christianity.

As we can see, several forces are at work in the construction of a collective Maltese cuisine. Some food lovers, highly influenced by the European perspective are defending a Mediterraneanist view. Supported by the state and the European union they efficiently promoted olive oil and quality wine. Other- groups like the farmers of Mgarr, that might not appreciate learning that their heritage is similar to that of the Arab world, have successfully produced strawberries and organized a strawberry village feast. Defending with pride their rurality that they wish to be seen as modern, they do not mind performing an American style cow-boy show at the end of their festival. A less obvious influential group is formed by the enthusiasts that each year build replicas of the last supper (*cenaklu*) for Easter week. They are displaying their attachment to Christianity through the re-enactment of a highly symbolic meal. Each one of these groups has its own idea of what is the core of Maltese food culture being Mediterranean, open to modernity or Christian.

### Conclusion

The nation is an imaginary community as Benedict Anderson famously stated. This definition includes two majors postulates : 1. nationals think of themselves as belonging to the same group, being symbolically brothers even if nobody knows every co-citizen. Therefore 2. to exist a nation must be justified by the sharing of a collective heritage.

---

<sup>27</sup> The Bible being often been popularly considered a “historical book” in the islands

However as we have seen this heritage is largely constructed according to present interests. This is why as Eric Hobsbawn wrote: “*forgetting history or even getting a history wrong are an essential factor in the formation of a nation*”<sup>28</sup>. The national discourse is not based on real facts but on a mystification, it does not reflect the complex social reality but shows what its nationals wish it to be. The question then is two-fold: why do the nationals wish to be so and which part of the population wishes to be so? Finally a national food, which we understand now as a collective desire to be seen in a specific way, may become a reality only if all the different sub-groups of a population agree on a common dream.

In this perspective we might want to take the example of a multi ethnic nation: Trinidad. Viranjini Munasinghe <sup>29</sup> explains that on these islands the *callaloo* (a stew made from dasheen) is the dish commonly referred to as a metaphor for the Trinidadian nation:

*because the ingredients making up the “callaloo” are boiled down to an indistinguishable mush, and consequently the original ingredients lose their respective individual identities and blend into one homogeneous taste. This rather negative view has provoked some Trinidadians to disapprove of the dish and to replace it by the metaphor of the “tossed salad”—an image which also signified diversity but one where, unlike the callaloo, each diverse ingredient maintained its originally distinct and unique identity. Thus the food metaphors of the callaloo and the tossed salad for the nation of Trinidad and Tobago convey very different ideas of mixture — callaloo depicting a process of mixture that produces homogeneity and tossed salad signifying the co-existence of diverse elements in pluralism.*<sup>30</sup>

In Malta, a much more homogeneous nation, the *fenkata* appears as a fair national emblem since it reunites Italian pasta, British fries and it tells the story of the struggle of the Maltese for their hunting rights<sup>31</sup>. The preparation that is for some gastronomes based on frying and for others based on stew, brings together different points of view. And finally because the *fenkata* allows various additions such as peas, olive oil, house-wine and industrial *kunserva* (a tomato concentrate) or even Bovril, it can be appreciated by the whole spectrum of tastes that characterises the Maltese population. Like the Trinidadian tossed salad, it is a metaphor for the complex historical Maltese heritage and by keeping the fries and pasta separated, it keeps the pluralism that any nation, even a united nation, needs to thrive. Through the preparation and the consumption of the festive *fenkata*, the Maltese gather around a common dream.

---

<sup>28</sup> Hobsbawn, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Viranjini Munasinghe, *Callaloo or Tossed Salad : East Indians and the Cultural Politics of Identity in Trinidad*, University Press, Cornell, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> The extract comes from the blog Zero anthropology, <http://zeroanthropology.net/2008/07/10/video-notes-from-the-indian-diaspora-part-1-responding-to-modernity-and-the-tyranny-of-tradition/>. and was written by Maximilian Forte.

<sup>31</sup> The *fenkata*, which has been promoted as ‘national dish’, tells the story of ‘the courageous Maltese’ disobeying the Order of St John’s ban on rabbit hunting (Carmel Cassar, *Fenkata: An Emblem of Maltese Peasant Resistance?*, Malta, 1994.)