



EUROPEAN REGION OF GASTRONOMY
GOZO CANDIDATE 2026

THE ISLAND OF GOZO: AN ECLECTIC JOURNEY



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Dr Samuel Azzopardi

President, Gozo Region

Gozo's gastronomy reflects the spirit of our region in more ways than one; it is highly diverse, complex, rich and accessible. Undeniably remarkable, but not explicitly so. Food pervades every aspect of Gozitan life. It embodies tradition and represents a way of life. The very small size of our territory is not indicative of the richness with which the region is endowed. Even though we, as Gozitans, are aware of what we possess, I believe that there is still a lot to be done in terms of promoting what it comprises and the benefits it holds amongst locals and visitors, as well as in terms of elevating its status. To a certain extent, we have barely scratched the surface, which makes this Bid Book even more pertinent and valuable.

The European Region of Gastronomy constitutes a salient turning point in how we perceive our gastronomy, how we communicate it and how we place it within political discourse. It is an opportunity to bring the various stakeholders together to discuss the issues, face challenges and maximise on opportunities. It is an occasion to focus on the potential of the sector as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth. It is a Platform for us to connect with international peers and promote conversation, exchange and development.

The title would, therefore, give us a tangible opportunity to put Gozitan gastronomy in the limelight and to enact our aspirations for the sector and the region. This Bid Book is being supported in full by the Gozo Regional Council and by all the collaborating stakeholders who have actively participated in this exercise to create this document which collates our current thoughts and ambitions around the subject. Most importantly for us, this constitutes a commitment to kick-start a process. Through this work, we have initiated a journey of self-discovery, learning and growth which we inevitably need to embark on to guarantee a future-proof plan for our foodscape.

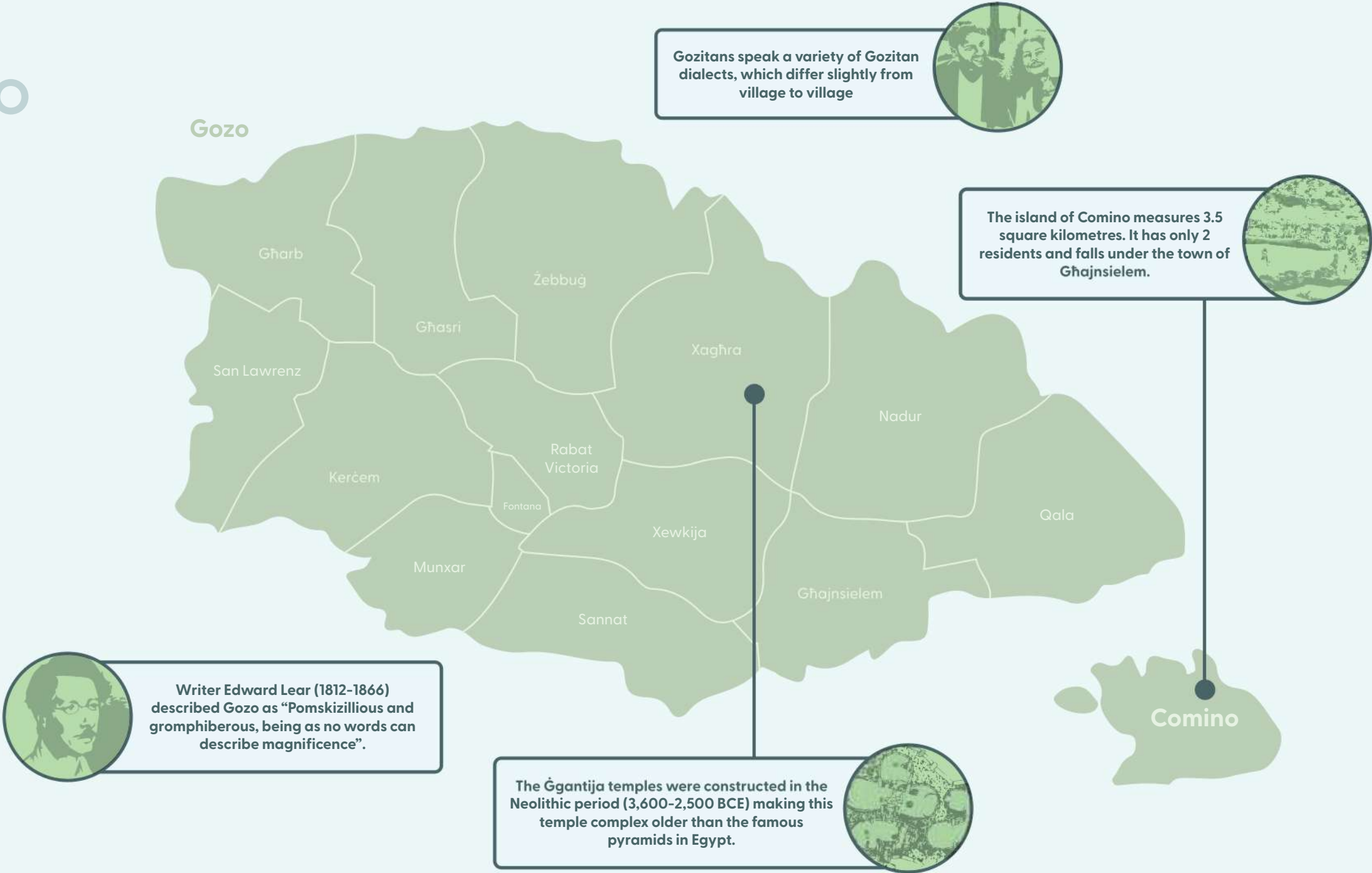
Regional Statistics: GOZO AND COMINO

Area: 67 km²
Population density: 557/km²
Coastal area: approx. 55km
Total population (Gozo & Comino): 39,287
Total population (Maltese islands): 519,562
Languages: Maltese, English

On a regional level, during 2022, the Malta region produced 93.6 % of the total quantity of marketable vegetables, while the Gozo and Comino region produced 6.4 % of the total quantity. These sales generated €19.1 million and €1.6 million respectively for the regions in Malta and the Gozo region.

The production of fruit in the Malta region in 2022 made up 87.6 % of the total quantity recorded in 2022 whereas the Gozo and Comino region produced the remaining 12.4% of the total, generating €3.5 million and €0.3 million respectively.

Total fish landings in Gozo in 2022: 248,768kg
Total land declared by Gozitan farmers in 2020: 2,617 hectares (94% used for agriculture)
Contribution of regional GVA (agriculture, forestry and fishing industries) to total economy - (Gozo and Comino): 0.07%





MANANNI

Ghad-dell tal-bugonvilla,
fil-bitħa kollha ħdura,
fejn ma tahkimx tax-xemx il-qilla,
Mananni
tghanni
u ċčekček iċ-ċombini tal-bizzilla.

Fuq wiċċ it-trajbu tagħha
toħloq il-ġmiel ta' moski, ward u slaleb,
kultant ukoll xi stilla.
U hekk it-tvalja wiesgħa
minsuġa moski u fjuri,
tiżdied u tikber dejjem
sabiex fl-aħħar tinfirex
fuq l-imwejjed tal-kawba tas-sinjuri.

U tahseb, waqt ix-xogħ'l, Mananni tahseb
fl-ikel magħżul u bnin, imħawwar sewwa,
li, ġo platti tal-fidda,
ġurnata għad jitaqiegħed
fuq wiċċ it-tvalja tagħha.
U l-ħsieb ta' l-ikel shun u ta' l-inbid
jifthilha dlonk l-aptit.

Għalhekk Mananni tidħol ġewwa
sabiex titrejjaq ftit
b'nofs hobża tal-maħlut, biż-żejt miksija,
tadam bżenguli
u ġbejna tal-bżar Għawdxija

ĠORĠ PISANI

In this poem by Gozitan poet Ġorġ Pisani, Mananni is in her garden relaxing under the bougainvillea, and, while singing Maltese traditional folksongs and creating a tablecloth made from the typical Gozitan lace, she thinks about the food to be laid on this cloth. While doing so her mouth waters. She goes inside and prepares 'hobż biż-żejt' with Gozitan cheeselets for her to savour.

Beyond the Myth

We like to think of Gozo as a well-kept secret. The island's discreet nature – originating from its very particular geographical reality – has allowed the region to keep a relatively low public profile thus far. It is, generally at least, romantically enshrouded in the realm of the unknown, triggering time-hallowed legends fuelling the collective imagination and sparking many a tale. Gozo is, case in point, traditionally thought of as 'Ogygia', the home to the mythological nymph Calypso who had kept Odysseus prisoner for seven years after his shipwreck. An association which is widely acknowledged within the island, and wisely appropriated.

Beyond this foggy surface, there are layers of features and qualities to discover. Despite being part of the Maltese archipelago, Gozo is a distinct and self-contained island covering an area of 67 km². It is home to 39,287 people – compared to a total of 480,275 who live on the main island of Malta – spread over 14 different towns/villages. Regardless of the size, each town has its own specific characteristics such as landmarks, dialect and traditions, making the island a highly diverse and dynamic place. The tiny island of Comino, which lies in between the two islands, is also considered part of Gozo from an administrative perspective.

Gozitan people, Ghawdxin in Maltese, are typically hard-working and persevering in character, with a passion for family and community, strongly rooted in the values and principles imparted by the Roman Catholic church and its teachings. This is naturally a

very generalised statement which does not do any justice to the richness and diversity with which Gozitan society is endowed. In recent years, the island's demography became characterised by an ageing population with recent figures showing a highly evident disposition towards this trend. The island has also experienced a larger influx of migrants on the island which deeply affected the island's growth and new multicultural realities. In terms of its landscape, Gozo is far more rural than Malta and is generally less developed and chaotic. It is known for its hills – earning the endearing internal title of 'the three hills island' – as well as its valleys, beaches and cliffs. One of its most remarkable natural features was lost to nature a few years ago. The prominent 'Blue Azure Window', a natural limestone arch in Dwejra Bay, collapsed in 2017 by the same natural forces that created it in the first place.

The island of Gozo is connected to Malta through a dedicated ferry service which continuously crosses the channel between the Ċirkewwa harbour in Malta and the Mġarr harbour in Gozo. There is also a fast ferry service between the Grand Harbour in Valletta and the Mġarr Harbour in Gozo. Gozo is heavily dependent on these services for the transportation of residents, visitors and goods both to and from the island. A rural airfield is also in the plans for Gozo's future. The island's economic activity relies mostly on tourism, and also features retail, manufacturing, services, construction and agriculture/fishing prominently. 16,784 Gozo and Comino residents have a full-time job, with the majority of these

working in the private sector. It is relatively common for some Gozo residents to commute to Malta for work on a daily basis. In such cases, the government assists with subsidies and measures to ease the challenges which such a situation may create. Others decide to make Malta their permanent home and to move there for work whilst still commuting back to see family members.

Gozo's cultural landscape is quite strikingly dynamic and diverse. The island proudly showcases a rich and diverse cultural scene, serving as a vital springboard for artists spanning various art forms, not only from local communities but also from around the globe.

Despite its size, Gozo has been at the forefront of cultural production and infrastructure. A fact which is further emphasised through the presence of the only two opera houses in the Maltese

islands; situated on opposite sides of the same road in Victoria. The reason for this could be, perhaps, attributed to the small size and the ensuing tight-knit communities. In fact, local communities in Gozo are the primary instigators and promoters of large-scale operas, music festivals and events, exhibitions and others. The island also demonstrates an above-average rate of cultural participation which attests the residents' interest in cultural expression, particularly in relation to live performances, visual arts and traditional cultural events. Gozo is currently in a very exciting phase as it gears up to submit its bid for the prestigious title of European Capital of Culture in 2031. The journey leading up to the European Capital of Culture is a pivotal catalyst for change and evolution in Gozo's cultural landscape, with the bid for Gozo, European Region of Gastronomy playing a crucial role in this transformative process.



Photo: Paul Eijlemans

Gozo's history is rich and endowed with an array of happenings that have shaped the island to what it is today.

Whilst sharing the majority of the main historic events with its sister island, Gozo's position led to its residents going through very specific experiences through the years. It has often served the purpose of being a place of refuge from the main events affecting mainland Malta, with the shift of a good number of Maltese residents to Gozo during the Second World War being one concrete example. Earlier in history, it was also the target for an invasion which led to Gozo becoming depopulated after the Arabs enslaved its 5,000 residents at the time.

The stories are certainly many. Numbers and descriptions start to contextualise, but fail to give the full picture and reveal the layers that lay underneath. As we go along through this Bid Book, we will delve deeper into what makes Gozo what it is and into what shapes, inspires and motivates Gozitans to continue contributing to the sustainable growth and development of this beautiful island. Gastronomy is our primary motivator and focal point for this exciting journey, which will embody the past, present and future in a quest to better understand the self, and maximise on its potential. We will reveal the reasons behind the choice of our theme and disclose our aspirations one aspect at a time, starting, for now, by looking back at our history.





Photo: Oliver Mavric

Food Through the Ages

As early as 3600 BCE, neolithic settlers became captivated by Gozo's promise of life, particularly the Xaghra promontory, a flat-topped hill towering over a fertile valley. The imposing megaliths present in the area instinctively captivate the imagination of any visitor. From folk tales of female giants straddling along carrying large slabs on their heads to academic debates on the role and purpose of the oldest free-standing man-made structure in the world, the Ġgantija temples provide endless opportunities to understand encounters of early humans with commensality and conviviality. Their material culture best represents the prehistoric culinary culture of these early settlers of the Maltese archipelago. The cooking clay pots, and liquid receptacles testify to Gozo's earliest culinary culture manifested in a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Among the treasures that stood the test of time is a charming shard, a part of a bowl incised with birds in flight.

The archaeology of the Phoenician, Punic and Roman periods continues to attest to the archipelago's rich culinary past. The final

resting place of a 7th century BCE Phoenician shipwreck is an evident testament to Gozo's economic activity and connectivity at the time. The mixed cargo of well-preserved and intact stone and ceramic objects is now part of an ongoing international research project. Xlendi's rich underwater archaeology offers insights into gastronomy during the Roman period. The remains include several receptacles intended to carry food and liquids, which are now exhibited in the Gozo Archaeology Museum. The islands then passed under Arab control in 869-70 following the sustained defensive attempts of the Byzantines. The islands' culinary culture was naturally influenced by the new rulers, and continued to enrich itself throughout this period.

Therefore, until the Norman conquest of 1091, the Maltese archipelago experienced the confluence of three Mediterranean religions and their culinary identities. Medieval Malta and Gozo are recognised for the quality of their honey and the abundance of goats and sheep. Writer Al Himyari's description of Malta also

refers to the abundance of fish. Through a separate source of writing, the Arab geographer Al Idrisi pondered on the fine quality of the fruit, including grapes, watermelons, melons, peaches, figs and citrus fruits on the islands.

Evidence of this foodscape continues well into the late medieval period. A mid-fourteenth-century description of Gozo refers to the abundance of sheep and goats and the production of milk products. The agricultural sector continued to be Malta's economic lifeline, especially since Malta was not located on the main trade routes of the Mediterranean.

Instituted by a Papal Bull in 1103, the chivalric Order of the Knights of St. John arrived in Malta in 1530. Until their forced departure in 1798, the islands of Malta and Gozo experienced unprecedented economic and cultural growth. The members of the Hospitaller Order, princes from European noble families, transformed the isolating force of the sea into a bridge connecting Malta to the European mainland. Malta's culinary experience evolved with this transformative period. While the focus of the Hospitaller government focused on Malta, Gozo continued to develop its agricultural activity. The process of double insularity propelled the Gozitans to adopt a self-sufficient approach, cultivating enough crops to feed the small population. The extent of the ability of the Gozitans to maximise their agricultural land is reflected in those situations when Gozo exported its products to support Malta in times of prosperity and, more so, in times of penury.

Although Gozo's political and economic influence could be considered peripheral to Malta, the dghajsa tal-latini commanded the narrow channel between the two sister islands. Stumpy and stubby in appearance, the high prow and the two short masts painted in their yellows, greens, reds and blues, these boats plied

between the primary harbours of the two islands. Often loaded with victuals, the persistent presence of the lateen sail only stopped being used recently. Their cargoes of grain sacks, cooking stoves (kenuri), black pigs, or milk cans reached Malta regularly well into the twentieth century.

As Malta's slow progress towards modernity became increasingly pronounced during the first seven decades of the twentieth century, Gozo continued to resist change. The dichotomy between Gozo and Malta became increasingly pronounced in the second half of the twentieth century. To any visitor, it seems like the island had just stopped in time. Agriculture continued to form the basis of Gozo's economy. While perpetuating a traditional foodscape, Gozitan produce reached Malta on a regular basis. In times of shortage, Gozo continued to fulfil the immediate role of, even if temporary, alleviating the pressure and fear of food shortages in Malta.

Gozo's past remains inseparable from its farming, agriculture and fishing industries. Here, memories of foodscapes dominate this rich past of a small community that transformed its double insularity to define very special culinary traits and traditions.

Gastronomical Legends

Marija and the Spring of Oil

In an area known as Ta' Birbuba, on the outskirts of the village of Għarb, there is a very old chapel dedicated to the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin to her cousin Saint Elizabeth. It is known throughout the island as taż-Żejt (of the oil).

Marija, a poor old woman, lived in the cluster of houses nearby. Her meagre income came from the little weaving work that her old age permitted her to carry out. Before dawn, she was usually the first at church to hear the paternoster mass at four o'clock. She then went again in the evening and used to be the last to leave. She rarely contributed anything but some flowers. However, when she earned an extra cent from her work, she immediately spent it on half-a-litre of oil to be burned in the lamp hanging in the chapel.

One day, during a calamity, all the farmers ran out of oil. Marija was, of course, the worst off. She could not bear the unlit lamp in the chapel. She prayed and prayed for the provision of some oil. One morning, she felt an urge to take an empty can with her and to look carefully in the little valley that meandered below the church parvis. To her astonishment, a hidden spring of oil was trickling just below. She filled the can and hurried to hand the precious oil to the priest as soon as he opened the church doors.

The congregation gathered for mass that morning was astonished, as the extinguished lamp was now glowing again. Marija's unwavering devotion continued to yield this miraculous oil, a beacon of hope during trying times, until the day that it became available again.



Photo: Joseph Galea



Photo: Zagarra / Wikimedia Commons

Dragut's Vineyard

Nestled between the well-known inlets of Ir-Ramla and Marsalforn, on the outskirts of the village of Ix-Xaghra, lies a tiny inlet known as Għajn Barrani, the foreigner's spring. This tranquil spot reveals a geological wonder where a massive rock that dislodged itself from the cliffs of il-Fiddien and il-Pergla now rests in the middle of a plateau. Whether it rains or shines, people often find shelter under this rock known as Il-Ġebbla ta' Dragut (the rock of Dragut.)

On a scorching hot August day, Dragut, the famous Ottoman naval commander, known as the dreaded Drawn Sword of Islam, was for the umpteenth time navigating his galley along the Gozo coastline.

The relentless summer sun shone mercilessly from the clear azure sky. As the vessel hugged the shore, he spotted a vineyard with its vines laden with bunches of grapes. The sight ignited a craving for the sweet fruit and his throat grew increasingly parched. One of his loyal slaves volunteered to climb the cliffs to quench his master's thirst. The task was very easy for the agile slave. Once in the vineyard looking for a mature bunch, he was taken aback by the sudden appearance of an armed farmer. Fearing for his safety, he hastily plucked a bunch and ran for his life.

His agility saved him, and he was soon in front of Dragut with his coveted prize. The corsair momentarily pleased by the bounty, could not contain his fury when he noticed that a vine branch had inadvertently been uprooted along with the bunch. The holy Koran upholds the vine as a holy plant and anyone who eradicates a vine faced an inevitable punishment. Dragut had no choice, he had the slave disembark onto the shore, and in a solemn and sombre ritual, the slave met a harrowing end. Beneath the colossal rock, which became Dragut's altar of sacrifice, the slave was consumed by flames, his life offered to make amends for the inadvertent desecration of the holy vine.

The Brave Bakery Girls

Marsalforn bay is the most popular haven on the island of Gozo. During the era when corsairs frequently descended upon its shores, this bay served as a favoured anchorage for their vessels.

After one such landing, a party of corsairs was dispatched in search of water and food. It was not long before they reached higher ground that they found a bakery where they surprised a group of young women busy at work. The terrified girls thought that their life was over and that they were going to be abducted and sold into slavery. The overwhelming dread, however, ignited a spirit of courage in the young women pushing them to confront the intruders.

With swift thinking and determination, they toppled a pile of firewood that was stacked in one corner of the room in the path of the corsairs, creating a temporary obstacle, so that they could flee from a door at the back and run towards the open fields.

Yet they were no match for the seasoned fighters. When they were seemingly overpowered, one of the girls, squeezed against a kneading trough, had a brilliant idea. She thrust her hands into the soft warm pastry dough within. In a bold move, she scooped a lump of the warm dough and threw it straight into the face of the corsair closest to her, blinding him for a few precious seconds. Emboldened by her quick thinking, the other girls swiftly followed suit, allowing them to break free and make their escape.

The alarm was raised that the corsairs had dared to approach the village. The militia soon rounded them up and took revenge, ensuring the safety and security of their village.

Legends courtesy of
Joseph Bezzina, *Forty legends from Gozo*, Victoria-Gozo, Gaultitana, 2001



Photos: Doreen Cassar

The Foodscape in Gozo

Undoubtedly, Malta's chequered past left an indelible mark on its gastronomy. As culinary cultures were shared and adopted, the Maltese archipelago constantly defined its culinary identity. As various culinary trends and ideas were shared, copied and adopted, the inhabitants of these islands modelled their food-related identity. This intriguing past is now increasingly considered as another important element in the making of Malta's intangible cultural heritage. Consequently, linked to the various momentous events in Malta's recent recognition of the importance of understanding a nation's culinary culture, this is an opportunity to further explore the uncharted qualities of Gozo's gastronomic experience. The foodscape is a medium that speaks of the people, the product and the place.

The term 'foodscape' is here used to highlight the human-generated relationships between food environments and the geography of food in what concerns policy, identity, location of food and the human response to associated behaviours such as food-related diseases. Foodscapes generate a discourse of policy and power relations, production and consumption issues generating social injustice, economic inequalities, discrimination, and unequal opportunities towards adequate nutritional health. The notion of foodscapes offers several advantages when seeking to understand and study cultural and societal behaviours. Therefore, foodscapes allow us to gain insight into the shifting world of modernity and identity.

Photo: Darren Cassar



Against this backdrop, Gozo is more than just part of the Maltese archipelago. Celebrating this region's culinary culture is an opportunity to provide 'front burner' status to Gozo's tangible and intangible gastronomic culinary culture. The region's foodscape is unique on many levels, and this is an opportunity to elevate food in an unprecedented manner for both locals and tourists to appreciate the uniqueness of Gozo's immersive sensory experience.

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The Maltese archipelago stands as a quintessential representation of Mediterranean culinary cultures. Strategically situated at the crossroads of the Mediterranean basin, the sea became a uniting rather than an isolating factor. The Mediterranean quality of our food is not only immediately apparent in the ingredients that characterise the food of the region, but also in the way they are cooked, presented and consumed.

Largely considered as a wholesome diet, the Mediterranean diet is typically based on vegetables, fruit and legumes and embraces natural processes. The consumption of bread, pasta, olive oil-based recipes, seafood, fish and seafood is a regular

occurrence. In line with the food philosophy and its Mediterranean counterparts, Gozo's cuisine is also very much based on these ingredients. Tomatoes, capers, olives, salt, lemons, oranges, pumpkins, marrows, prickly pears are some examples of typical produce, which also characterise Gozitan dishes. Being an island, fresh fish is always an option. Depending on the season, one can find spnotta (bass), dott (stone fish), černa (grouper), (dentiči) dentex, sargu (white bream) and trill (red mullet). Tonn (tuna) is also widely caught in our seas as well as the lampuka (dolphin fish).



Photo: Peter's Garden

A spotlight on some of the dishes characterising the Gozitan gastronomic landscape

Torta tar-Ross u l-Qargħa Ahmar, Torta tal-Lampuki, Torta tal-Ful u l-Ġbejniet

In Gozo we prepare rich savoury pies with a variety of fillings. The Rice and Pumpkin Pie is filled with diced pumpkin, rice, fresh salted tuna, olives, capers and herbs. There is also the Lampuki Pie, filled with a mixture of fresh chopped lampuki (dolphin fish) and vegetables as well as the pie filled with cheeslets and broad beans.

Torta tat-Tin

A sweet pie made of a mixture of chopped figs, dates, almonds and candied peels.

Photo: Paul James



Photo: Magro Brothers



Photo: Renata Apanaviciene/Shutterstock.com

Hobż biż-Żejt

Fresh Maltese bread garnished with kunserva, olive oil, salt, pepper, basil. This basic version is usually topped up with other ingredients such as tuna, olives, capers, onions and, at times, marinated vegetables.

Soppa tal-Armla

A traditional and staple comfort food in Gozitan cuisine is this soup made up of a mixture of different vegetables. The particular features of this soup lie with the addition of the ġbejna and a poached egg right before finishing cooking the soup.

Imqarrun/Timpana

While we regularly eat pasta in all shapes and forms, we specialise in baked pastas, particularly for Sunday lunch. 'Imqarrun il-forn' is usually baked penne or rigatoni pasta mixed with meat sauce, eggs and cheese. We also like to prepare a 'heavier' version of this baked pasta by wrapping the pasta up in shortcrust pastry, transforming the 'imqarrun' into 'timpana'.

Aljotta

A traditional Maltese fish soup prepared with a mixture of small fish, garlic (enough to end up being the dominant flavour), onion, tomatoes, herbs and white wine. The 'aljotta' is usually quite watery in terms of texture.

Stuffat tal-Fenek

Rabbit meat is a traditional delicacy in the Maltese islands usually served either fried or prepared in a stew. The stew version usually consists of local homegrown vegetables as well as all the different parts of the rabbit slowly cooked together in a rich broth.

Braġjoli

These are traditional beef olives, stuffed with minced meat, eggs and bacon cooked in a stew or baked in the oven.

Photo: AS Foodstudio/Shutterstock.com





Photo: Darren Casar



Photo: Joseph Galea



Photo: Għarb Local Council

Experiencing Gastronomy in Gozo

In Gozo, food is a way of bringing families and communities together. It is invariably present on important family occasions and gatherings that mark the most significant milestones in people's lives. It is the perfect excuse for the family to gather and meet on a Sunday; the youngsters of the family travel back to base on Sundays to eat lunch with their families, before heading back to Malta to carry on with their daily routines.

The generally good and stable weather that characterises the island is often a good motivator for groups of friends, couples and individuals to find beautiful, scenic spots or beaches and enjoy home-made meals or take-outs. One very popular food item which is often consumed outside by both locals and visitors is the 'ftira Ghawdxija', usually bought from one of the two most iconic

bakeries in Nadur 'tal-Maxokk' or 'tal-Mekren'. All throughout summer, it is quite usual that community meals are organised outdoors in the different towns and villages; either to mark the local village festa or else as fundraiser events for specific causes which are usually linked to the community life in one way or another. Seaside areas are dotted with restaurant tables serving fish and seafood, particularly in the areas of Marsalforn and Xlendi. There are also a number of gastronomic events happening all around Gozo; from wine festivals to food festivals, festivals that link gastronomy with other cultural aspects such as fireworks, and specific festivals that focus on particular products. The Fig Festival in Xaghra and the Wine, Olive Oil and Honey Festival in Ghasri are such examples.

The restaurant scene in Gozo is vibrant and diverse.

With eateries sprouting in practically every corner of the island, it is quite easy to access, taste and experience Gozitan food on the island. Most restaurants in Gozo can be defined as 'family restaurants', offering a varied menu with a generous choice of fish and seafood as well as an array of pastas, meat dishes and pizza. In recent years, the restaurant scene has started enriching itself with fusion concepts. This is also, perhaps, the result of the multiculturalism that is now fast becoming a reality on the island as well as other external influences that affect the consumers' expectations. In Gozo we also have a few iconic eateries which have been around for a number of years, and which have received titles and accolades for their performance. The restaurants 'Ta' Frenč' and 'Tmun' are such examples; both these restaurants are included in the Michelin guide and are highly sought after by locals and tourists alike.

Photo: Darren Casar





Photo: Tonia Schenker



Other Photo: Darren Casar





Photo: Darren Cassar

It would be practically impossible to attempt any understanding and appreciation of our culture, lifestyles, identities and prevalent mindset without comprehending the significant influence which religion has exerted over the communities, values and norms throughout the years. People's lives and habits in Gozo are essentially intertwined with the religious festivities that characterise the Roman Catholic calendar. From Christmas festivities in December, to Lent and Easter traditions in March/ April; from the traditional 'festas' all throughout the summer period celebrating the different patron saints in the various towns and villages around the islands, to All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day early in November; each season brings its own set of celebrations and traditions. Such traditions prominently include culinary traditions.

Each season brings its own set of celebrations and traditions.

Lent & Easter Traditions (March/April)

In the Roman Catholic tradition, Lent is a period for meditative reflection, sacrifice and redemption. It is a sombre and solemn celebration of the cathartic pain and suffering leading to absolution and remission. Therefore, the 40-day period leading up to Easter is marked by a prevailing spirit of sacrifice and abstaining from extravagance or indulgence, especially in the choice of food. This contrast is particularly evident when compared to the flamboyant Carnival celebrations that precede Lent.

Traditional foods such as 'kwarezimal' (an almond-based sweet pastry topped with almonds and honey) and 'karamelli tal-harrub' (sweets made of carob syrup) take centre stage during this period. Lent is also associated with the baking of 'Qaghqa tal-Appostli'

(Apostles' bread ring), a soft, ring-shaped bread with almonds and sesame seeds on top. Specific to Gozo, we find 'Fтира tar-Randan' ('Lenten bread'), a sweet bread traditionally given to those who participate in the feet-washing ritual during Holy Thursday mass. This tradition is distinctive to Gozo as a region.

Easter celebrations are then usually characterised by large banquets for lunch, an overload of sweets and chocolate in all shapes and forms - which include Easter eggs and the figolla (a sweet almond filling sandwiched between two biscuits and usually presented in forms relating to religious symbols linked to the time, such as the lamb).

Summer Festas

Village festas are, perhaps, the most outstanding feature of our summers; the epitome of community celebration. There are multiple festas happening in the different towns and villages every weekend during which the patron saints of the village are commemorated and celebrated. A baroque celebration through and through. It is a vibrant gathering of the home community and of the masses of visitors joining in the religious and - perhaps most remarkably in recent years - secular activities. Fireworks, brass bands in the street, processions and decoration. Food is, yet again, a central part of it all. Multiple street stalls are set up selling all sorts of food: grilled meats and fast food, pastizzi (ricotta cheese

The intrinsic link between religious festivities and gastronomy in Gozo



Photo: SZPM / Sebjo Aquilina

or pea-stuffed cakes made with puff pastry), colourful candy floss, imqaret (deep fried and date-filled pastry), and qubbajt (traditional Maltese nougat). In Xewkija, as part of the celebrations of St John the Baptist, it is customary to prepare the torta tat-tin (fig pie), featuring this exquisite and versatile summer fruit.

According to the latest census of the Maltese Islands, a total of 82.6 percent of the population identified themselves as Roman Catholic. This is then followed by Islam and the Orthodox religion. 23, 243 out of the whole population stated that they did not have any religious affiliation. Another recent study shows that religion is still an important factor in terms of decision-making for the Maltese people.

Autumn and Christmas Festivities

October is usually a period of hiatus, making way for the busier months of November and December. In November, we celebrate All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, typically marked by the availability of the sweet 'bones' made of shortcrust biscuits (shaped as a bone) and filled with an almond paste. During the same month, we celebrate the feast of Saint Martin, and typically prepare the Borża ta' San Martin (Saint Martin's bag) with seasonal fruits and nuts to share on the 11th of November. The bag usually also includes the hobża ta' San Martin, a soft sweet bun.



Photo: Darren Cassar



Photo: Darren Cassar



Photo: Ghajnsielem Local Council

The Christmas period is usually characterised by various religious activities (Church celebrations, processions), multiple events, colourful and decorated streets and multiple family gatherings. Yet again, food is central and the period is synonymous with large meals, and general food and drink excess.

Similar to other regions, there are specific foods which are prepared throughout this period, including the qagħaq tal-ghasel (honey rings) and imbuljuta (a spiced, chestnut-based warm drink). We also typically prepare mince pies, Christmas logs and fruity Christmas cakes; classic British traditions that reveal the historical link between the two countries.



Photo: Darren Cassar

Gozo's Cheese; a Geographical Matter

Gozo has a rich and enduring relationship with cheese, with one of the most prominent varieties being ġibna or ġbejna, small cheeselets made from sheep's milk. While these cheeselets are a dietary staple for the Maltese, Gozo's ġbejna, known for its superior quality, regularly finds its way to Malta. The abundance of milk and the challenges posed by inclement weather, which made it difficult to transport extra liquid to Malta by boat, played a vital role in fostering the Gozitan culture of minimal waste.

Instead of wasting surplus milk, the islanders developed various methods to preserve it through the production of diverse cheeses. Some of these traditional cheese-making processes have been lost over time, but others have been rediscovered through the collaboration and innovation of individuals who recognize the potential of Gozo's distinctive culinary culture.

Sheep's milk possesses the ideal qualities for the coagulation process. This coagulation is achieved using natural rennet, which is produced by mixing whey with the unweaned stomachs of lambs. The right amount of rennet is added to the milk to form a curd. The curd is then placed into small containers made from dried summar, a locally grown sharp rush. When producing dried cheeselets, the freshly formed ones are positioned within a wooden meshed framework crafted from reed and wood, known as 'qannċi.' This qannċi is then covered with fine netting to protect the cheeselets



Photo: Simon Culejjar



Photo: Sophie Lenoir/Shutterstock.com

The art of making cheesecakes is a wonderful experience to behold. The fine and highly expert motor skills employed in producing pastizzi are a feast for the eyes.

from insects. The wooden framework is subsequently suspended from the ceiling of a well-ventilated room.

Nowadays, there are mainly two categories of cheeselets produced: the 'fresh cheeselets', locally also referred to as tal-ilma, or the 'dried cheeselets'. Fresh cheeselets can also be salted. The dried cheeselets are sold either as plain or peppered. Once they are ready for consumption, ġbejniet are usually eaten with bread, grated over pasta, or cooked in soups such as the soppa tal-armla (Widow's soup). Cheeselets are also prepared as 'pastizzi' filling, especially on special occasions like the village festa. This is a

particular characteristic of the Gozitan pastizzi which distinguishes them from the Maltese version through the use of Gozitan cheeselets instead of the usual ricotta or pea filling. Besides mixing cheeses with eggs, the Gozitans add fresh broad beans or fresh peas. The external pastry is characterised by its notably greasy nature.

Few visitors to Malta and Gozo leave without having tasted pastizzi. Pastizzi is translated as 'cheesecakes', although this is savoury street food food and differs greatly from the traditional sweet cheesecakes. The history of this street food can be traced back several centuries. Originally, housewives prepared cheesecakes as a Christmas treat. By the first half of the twentieth century, cheesecake sellers plied the streets of several towns. Nowadays, cheesecake shops have taken every city, town and village by storm. Gone are the days when pastizzi vans used to strategically park themselves close to the church parvis on a Sunday in those villages that lacked the service of a pastizzi shop. Today, these artisans are a dying breed, and we hope that having the Gozo Region of Gastronomy title will provide incentives to preserve the art of pastizzi-making in Gozo and Malta.



Photo: Joseph Galea

Maltese Bread and the Gozitan Ftira

Photo: Oliver Sciberras



Photo: Oliver Sciberras



Photo: Darren Caesar

The hobza tal-Malti, a sourdough crusty bread typically baked in wood ovens, is still part of the staple Gozitan diet. Although wood ovens are becoming less and less common and more commercial equivalents are sprouting all over the islands, the presence of bakeries is still quite dominant particularly in Gozo.

The presence of bakeries is still quite dominant particularly in Gozo.

Some Gozitan bakeries offer the traditional ftira Ghawdxija. Recently, this product has been introduced in Malta too. Incidentally, the Maltese refer to it as ftira Ghawdxija, recognising the origins of this food. This pizza-like food is a clear testimony of the Gozitans' ability to avoid food waste. Originally, anchovies, sliced tomatoes and potatoes covered the special dough. Some preferred tuna to anchovies, adding capers and olives to the potatoes and tomatoes. Another common variety included ġibniet (Maltese cheeselets), beaten eggs, sliced potatoes and even zalzett tal-Malti (Maltese sausage). Amid the growing varieties one could find on the market today, the two types mentioned here continue to tantalise the taste buds of those visitors who seek an authentic taste of Gozo.

There was also a ftira that has since disappeared from Gozo's culinary foodscape. Only available during Lent, some village taverns and wine bars sold the ftira tar-Randan, a thin dough fried in oil. Every Sunday morning, shop owners set up their cooking equipment just outside their shops to attract potential customers. Lured by the smell of the thinly fried dough, customers could choose from three sizes and the possibilities of some toppings, such as anchovies or sardines.

Photo: Oliver Sciberras



The Women Behind the Bakeries

We are interested in cultivating our heritage to sustain what our predecessors have started.

"We have been producing the Maxokk ftira for a long time - starting from the beginning of the 20th century. My great grandmother started the business, my grandmother continued the work, then my mother and now it's me and my brother. We hope that there will be a fifth generation - our kids - following ours. We started the typical Gozitan ftira. My great grandmother used to bake bread first, and then she started creating and producing this ftira. It is now highly sought after from all. The ftira now represents our history, our identity. We are interested in cultivating our heritage to sustain what our predecessors have started. They have left us an authentic and genuine heritage and we want to sustain it for future generations."

Bernadette Gatt, Maxokk Bakery





All Photos: Darren Cassar

The Women Behind the Bakeries

This work is a vocation, it is not just a job.



"This work is a vocation, it is not just a job. The passion, the dedication that you put into it, these are the fundamental ingredients which make our products of a high quality. That, and the experience. I have been working here since forever, my kids were born and raised here. This is a family business; my great grandfather used to work here, then my grandfather followed suit, then finally my father and myself. Four generations. And now my children have also taken up this work."

Nancy Buttigieg, Mekren Bakery



The Link to Land and Sea

Agriculture in Gozo

Agricultural practice in the Maltese Islands is characterised by a number of challenges which are mostly related to the Islands' size, geographical location and various external and internal circumstances and contexts. The small size of the Islands as well as the densely populated (and ever-growing) towns and villages has profoundly impacted the balance between nature and development and damaged their relationship in somewhat irreconcilable ways. The overall lack of natural resources, especially the lack of natural water supply, and the scarcity due to size, as well as the loss of agricultural land due to over-development, has led to a dwindling sector. These issues are making it very difficult for young people to consider agriculture as their main source of livelihood. This, together with a major dependency on importation (fodder and fertilisers, as an example), as well as a clear preference by customers for imported produce has been a major contributing factor towards the perception of agriculture as an unsustainable form of income.

The sector is characterised by a significant decline in agricultural labour force (a decline of 26.7 percent in 2020 when compared to 2010) and an ageing population. The latest agricultural statistics show, in fact, that in Gozo 32% of the Agricultural Working Force is aged 65 and over, 45% is aged between 45 and 64 with the younger generations spending less time on agricultural work per year. The Maltese islands have a total of 10,281 agricultural holdings (90% of which are less than 2 hectares in size). Gozo's agricultural land has 23% of utilised agricultural land (~6% when compared to 2010 statistics), 28% of unutilised agricultural land (an increase of 14%, which is, however, lower than the increase in Malta) and 22% of other agricultural land. The contribution of the sector towards GDP in the Maltese islands is around 0.95% according to the most recent statistics, which is the latest statistic in a downward trend observed in recent years. This is not just an indicator of the downsizing of the agriculture sector, but also a clear indication that the country decided to focus its efforts on other sectors throughout the years.



Photo: Magro Brothers

Maltese agriculture has a diverse range of outputs that include potatoes, tomatoes, olives, onions, marrows and cauliflowers amongst others. In the Maltese islands, quite a significant percentage of land is used to cultivate forage; this is particularly predominant in the use of arable land. Tomatoes constitute one of the main produce for Gozo, primarily produced to be processed into other products such as tomato sauce and tomato paste (known as 'kunserva' in Maltese), as well as sundried tomatoes which are then produced on an industrial scale and sold in Malta as well as internationally. Olive groves and citrus trees are other typical features of the Gozitan agricultural landscape as well as vineyards producing the Maltese wines. In terms of livestock population, Gozo has the majority of the cattle population (37.5%) when compared to the other regions in Malta. The island – as a district compared to the other districts within Malta – tops the statistics even in terms of sheep rearing, with 286 holdings out of a total of 953 registered in all districts. The same applies for goat rearing.



Photo: Peter's Garden

Despite these challenges, the Maltese islands – and Gozo in particular – recognise the importance of agriculture for the islands as well as the opportunities which lie ahead.

A catalyst to identify and implement these opportunities has been the injection of European funds which has so far proved to be a major support for the Gozitan farmers and a significant contributor to strategise, refocus, update, and upgrade, particularly in terms of protecting the identities pertaining to the islands as well as the sustainability of the sector. A recent study, carried out by the Gozo Regional Development Authority – which is also one of our core stakeholders for the Gozo European Region of Gastronomy 2026 – analysed the regional agricultural status highlighting, amongst other things, the strengths which agriculture in Gozo currently has. In brief, this document outlines that the size of Gozo could be an advantage because it makes the 'farm to fork' strategy much easier and more achievable. It also states that there are a number of traditional and unique high-quality products linked specifically to Gozo, as well as an experimental farm with huge potential for innovation and development. The one confederation that unites the regional agricultural sector is also considered as a main advantage.

In general, the policy direction for agriculture in Gozo seems to be pointing at the need to heavily invest in this sector and to emphasise its relevance not just on an economic level, but also in terms of the opportunity to rediscover Gozo's heritage and identity, and to reaffirm itself as a source of wellbeing, recreation and



Photo: Peter's Garden

strong community foundations. Whilst considering the past and keeping an eye on the future, with potential positive changes that these might bring to agriculture's current status in Gozo, Gozitans are keen on making this sector more central to their present and future sustainable needs.

Citrus Trees

The origins of the Maltese citrus industry are estimated to date back to Arab rule between the eighth and tenth century AD. Five centuries later, under the Knights of St John, Malta was particularly renowned for the superior quality of its citrus fruit, which used to be exported to various European countries. The most common citrus varieties grown in the Maltese islands today are the ordinary round orange, the large oval orange, the Malta egg orange, the Malta

egg-blood orange, the Bahia or navel orange, and the vanilla orange, which is a sweet type of orange. With regard to lemons, the most common variety found in Malta is the perpetual lemon, which produces fruit all year round, and tangerines, such as the mandarin orange. A local variety of sweet lime (lumiċell), which is unique to the Maltese Islands, is also cultivated. Gozo also has some specific varieties, such as the tas-saliegh oranges.

Fig Trees

The fig tree originated in the Middle East. It is well adapted to Mediterranean conditions and grows well in the Maltese islands. There used to be more than 30 different varieties of fig trees cultivated in Malta. Nowadays, the varieties which are grown have

decreased. Around mid-June, the fig tree produces the bajtar ta' San Ġwann, a plump and tender fruit which is very often consumed directly as a fruit. Later in the year, the same tree produces the 'late fig' or tin in Maltese, which is widely used in the local cuisine. The honey rings, for instance, which is a typical Christmas sweet, is made up of a treacle mixture with almonds and figs. The latter are also used to create a 'fig jam', which is a spreadable paste made out of whole, ripe figs. The tin taċ-ċappa, which is usually part of the traditional San Martin bag that is prepared for the feast of Saint Martin in November, is a compressed and spiced up form of figs. In Gozo, figs are celebrated and consumed in specific ways. As outlined further above, in Xewkija the 'fig pies' are often prepared and consumed to celebrate the town's patron saint. In June, the Xaghra Local Council, supported by the Ministry for Gozo, organises the Fig Festival which is a festival that specifically focuses on the fruit and celebrates culinary richness and diversity.

Olive Groves and Olive Oil

Olive trees have been present on Maltese soil for a very long time. There are a number of different varieties present on the islands, some of which date back about 1,000 years. There are over 900 different species in the world and recent research has identified around 20 species that seem to be unique to the islands. Generally, trees produce olives (of different sizes) which are then used for the extraction of olive oil. Olives are also prepared for direct consumption. Oil producers in Gozo include Ramla Valley and Ta' Mikiel Olive Grove in Għarb.

Vineyards and Wine

Gozitan wine is the only product for the entire Maltese archipelago recognised as a regional product internationally. Gozo's quality mark requires that the grape-wine cycle is entirely carried out within the region. To obtain the DOK Gozo label, in fact, the



Photo: Darren Cassar

vineyards used for production may only be in Gozo with a smaller number of varieties allowed in order to ensure that they are more suitable. Some varieties cultivated for DOK Gozo include the Chardonnay, Merlot, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Vermentino and Cabernet Franc grapes. The quality of this terroir is another excellent reflection of Gozo's unique foodscape. The confluence between advantageous climatic conditions, the vicinity to the sea and the mostly clay or sandy soil produce fine red and white wines that are unique in quality. The size of the island, the salty spray carried in the air and the hilly topography create unique micro-climates that are different from those of any other part of the archipelago. Compared to similar varieties, Gozo's grapes mature at least a week later, possessing qualities that influence the structure and balance of the wine. The two endemic grape varieties in the Maltese islands are the Girgentina (white grape) and the Ġellewża (red variety). However in Maltese vineyards, one also finds other varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, Syrah and Chardonnay. The island of Gozo also produces a number of wines. The most prominent vineyards are the Marsovin Ramla Estate, Ta' Mena (Xagħra) and Tal-Massar (Għarb).

Honey

The beekeeping history of the Maltese islands dates back to the times of the Phoenicians in Malta, in around 750 B.C. Bees and 'Malta' are interestingly linked, as the word originates from the Greek word 'meli' meaning 'honey'. The bee indigenous to the Maltese islands is highly resilient. Through the years, it has adapted itself to its natural environment and climate. It forages in adverse weather and resists high temperatures and drought.

The Bees Health Section within the Veterinary Regulation Directorate has been created to keep the records of all the beekeepers present on the Maltese archipelago territory in order



Photo: Darren Casar



Photo: Darren Casar

to monitor, by carrying out inspections, the health status of the bees. The importation and trading of the bees is regulated through European legislation which applies for 'other' live animals. The reason for this regulation and consequent restriction is to avoid the introduction of pests which would cause damage to bee populations.

The type of honey varies throughout the year, depending on which seasonal flowers the Maltese endemic honey bee would be pollinating. It is therefore usual to find spring honey that is normally close to citrus, borage and thistle in terms of flavour. Summer honey is flavoured by wild thyme (with the season usually lasting just one week) whilst autumn honey is usually carob flavoured. Honey is often bought in jars, and consumed by mixing spoonfuls of honey with hot water (or mixed with other drinks) to create a soothing sweet drink which tastes good but also helps with sore throats, flu and sickness. Honey is also used as an ingredient in traditional sweets, such as the qagħaq tal-ġħasel (honey rings), imqaret (date-filled pastries) and the kwareżimal (Lenten biscuit).

In the Maltese islands, there are several ongoing projects and campaigns dedicated to the protection of bee populations and the promotion of biodiversity. One notable example is the 'Fields of Diversity' project, which receives funding from the Rural Development Programme and is managed by the Ministry of Gozo. This pioneering initiative aims to increase the honeybee population.

Additionally, several Local Councils have made commitments to beekeepers, ensuring that wildflowers in rural areas will not be cleared in the spring, as part of a collective effort to curb the continuous decline of pollinators. Several entities and organizations, such as the Malta Beekeepers Association and

Friends of the Earth Malta, actively contribute to the cause of bee protection.

Salt

Salt production is very typical of coastal areas and Gozo is no exception. Salt is a natural mineral used to season and flavour food and also to preserve it. Salt crystals are usually formed in salt pans and harvested after a process of natural evaporation as well as sweeping, lifting and carrying from the salt pans. In Gozo, artisanal salt-making dates back to the times of the Phoenicians and Romans. The salt pans in Gozo are found along the Xwejini (Marsalforn) bay and cover around 3km of the northern coastal area. Today, this land is divided among three salt farmers. Visitors to the area are often intrigued when they witness the salt harvesting process, which typically takes place early in the day to avoid the scorching sun. In addition to being available at local grocery stalls, salt is also sold directly from a small outlet near the salt pans, managed by one of the salt farmers. The Gozo Regional Council has joined an international network of 'saline cities' in order to focus on salt production as a catalyst for gastronomic tourism and to create opportunities for research, education, projects and dissemination of information around the subject.



Photo: Laila-Meah - Xwejini Salt





Photo: Magro Brothers

Tomatoes

One of the most prominent features of Gozo's culinary landscape is its association with tomatoes. Alongside dry onions and legumes, tomatoes rank among the top agricultural products in the Maltese islands, with the majority of them being cultivated in the Northern region and on Gozo. Gozo is also home to Malta's leading tomato processing plant, a food institution in our country. This family-run business has evolved into one of the major contributors to the preservation whilst innovating one of Gozo's and Malta's crucial cash crops.

A well-organized network of stakeholders is nowadays involved in the cultivation, processing, and distribution of various tomato products. This includes kunserva (tomato paste) and sun-dried tomatoes, which are often featured in traditional Maltese dishes, particularly in the popular *hobż biż-żejt* (bread, tomato paste, olive oil, and herbs). Additionally, sun-dried and salted tomatoes are widely produced and sold across the islands.

Capers

Caper bushes are a distinctive feature of the Mediterranean region, known for yielding edible flower buds frequently used as seasonings or garnishes. In Gozo, these capers are commonly brined with locally sourced Gozitan sea salt, resulting in a tangy and robust flavour. They are typically incorporated into various dishes to balance their naturally strong taste.

Fisheries

A strong connection with the sea and its ecosystem is an integral part of island life. As mentioned earlier, fish and seafood play a central role in the gastronomy of the Maltese islands. Since the 1970s, Malta has managed a fishing zone extending 25 nautical miles around the Maltese archipelago. This zone is utilized by Maltese fishermen as well as operators in the aquaculture sector. In Gozo and Comino, there are a total of 571 registered fishing vessels out of 2,744 in total. These vessels include various types, such as the traditional *bimbu*, *luzzu*, *kajjik*, *firilla*, and *frejgatina*, reflecting a diverse range of fishing activities on the islands. Depending on the season, Gozitan fishermen primarily catch tuna, swordfish, and *lampuka* (dolphin fish or mahi-mahi), which are either sold in the main fisheries in Gozo or transported to Malta, depending on the catch's size.

As of the latest regional statistics published in 2023, the common dolphinfish accounted for the highest total value, generating €0.5

million or 36.6% of the total fish value in the Gozo and Comino region. Gozo's primary fishing port is the Imġarr Harbour, with other fishing activities taking place in Marsalforn and Xlendi.

The fishing sector is subject to strict regulation, adhering to standard EU regulations aimed at preventing overfishing and supporting fish sustainability in the region. All vessels and fishermen must be registered with local authorities, and there are established quotas for different fish species. After each fishing trip, fishermen are required to report their catch.

Unfortunately, like agriculture, fishing is in decline in the Maltese islands. In terms of economic activity, the latest statistics for Gozo in 2021 show that most industries experienced an increase in GVA compared to the previous year, with the exception of agriculture, forestry, fishing, and a few others.



Photo: Darren Casar

A Wellness Retreat

Tourism in Gozo

As Gozitans, we take great pride in our role as hospitable hosts and in sharing our recipe for living a fulfilling life. Tourism is an important contributor to the island's economy, providing employment and income opportunities.. This is made possible by the delectable cuisine, the laid-back lifestyle, the strong sense of community, and the opportunity for visitors to immerse themselves in the island's natural beauty.

To a significant extent, we embrace the 'less is more' philosophy, striving to have minimal impact on the environment, allowing our guests to fully absorb the picturesque landscapes and savour the serenity that still characterizes most of our towns and villages. Indeed, Gozo often serves as a refuge from the daily hustle and bustle that consumes our lives.

Gozo is highly dependent on domestic tourism, particularly the recurrent visits of Maltese residents who often come to the island for short breaks, seeking relaxation and rejuvenation in self-catering rental accommodations or hotels. This trend is especially

In this sense, the island becomes a home away from home for many domestic and international visitors who return time and again to a place where wellness is not just a buzzword but a way of life.

noticeable during holidays and long weekends when there are long queues of cars waiting to board the Gozo ferry. During these periods, the ferry often doubles or even triples its trips between the islands to accommodate the increased demand.

According to the most recent national statistics for 2022, the total number of tourists who visited the Gozo and Comino region in that year amounted to 460,514, with domestic tourists constituting 72 percent of the total tourism demand in this region. It's important to note that these figures are particularly significant given the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in 2022. However, this pattern remains a fundamental aspect of Gozo's tourism landscape.

Overall, there is a growing interest in self-catering accommodations on Gozo, although hotels continue to play a prominent role. The island is dotted with rental apartments, farmhouses, and villas that can often accommodate multiple guests. These properties often feature amenities such as pools and other luxuries, making them appealing to those looking for short-term rentals.



Photo: Fokebo/Envato

Gozo is also a highly sought-after destination for nature-based activities, including swimming, hiking, and quad biking, with diving being a primary attraction. However, the main reason for tourists to visit Gozo, as indicated by a recent tourism survey carried out by the Gozo Regional Development Authority (82.5% of those interviewed), is to explore the island's unique attractions. This typically involves sightseeing visits to iconic locations such as the Ċittadella, an ancient fortified city in the heart of the island; the Ġgantija temples, a megalithic temple complex older than the Egyptian pyramids; the Xwejni salt pans; the Ta' Pinu church, a neo-Romanesque church with the status of a national shrine; as well as the numerous beaches found throughout the island.

Gastronomy and the Sustainable Future

It is particularly interesting to note, especially for our purposes, that in the same study, 9.2% of respondents expressed a preference for local food as their primary reason for visiting Gozo. This stands out when compared to other attractions, such as the Ċittadella (23.9%), beaches (16.2%), hospitality (13.2%), and scenic beauty (10.2%). The recognition of Gozitan cuisine as a key draw is not only significant but also highlights its untapped potential. We firmly believe that

Gozitan food, as a niche in tourism, holds considerable promise and warrants further attention and development.

Aligned with key policy areas and the sentiments expressed by stakeholders, gastronomy can serve as a pivotal element—a catalyst—for the ongoing growth of sustainable tourism. Through the implementation of IGCAT's Food Commitment and Sustainable Events Guidelines and through Platform support, Gozo will surely work to develop and invest in tourism niches, attracting returning visitors, and promoting eco-friendly tourism through such best practices. Embracing good, wholesome food is an integral part of this sustainability strategy. While there's a need for a more structured approach to define and establish 'Gozitan gastronomy,' we understand that it fundamentally hinges on the use of healthy and natural ingredients, characteristic of Mediterranean cuisine.

Moreover, Gozo's size and natural attributes make the farm-to-fork and sea-to-fork concept feasible and manageable. We believe this reinforces our identity as a wellness destination, equipped to provide a comprehensive quality experience to those who choose Gozo as their permanent or occasional home.

Future Food

So far, we have presented our characteristics as they have always been—a reflection of what has traditionally defined us as a ‘Mediterranean island.’ The term ‘Mediterranean’ encompasses a multitude of meanings, extending beyond our geographical location in the Mediterranean Sea. It encompasses our climate, lifestyles, produce, landscape, and way of life, and, by extension, our gastronomy.

The looming effects of climate change, including the shifting of climate belts, are increasingly becoming a reality. These changes are likely to bring about inevitable transformations in our region, which, in turn, may impact the current foodscape that defines us.

This leads us to ponder a vital question:

What happens if we can no longer wholly identify as ‘Mediterranean’?



These are the critical questions we need to address:

- How is climate change likely to affect our region’s weather, landscape and produce?
- What will happen to the ‘Mediterranean gastronomy’ in the Mediterranean region, once the climate changes in the same region? How will we identify ourselves and our cuisine at that point? How will that affect agricultural and fishing practices?
- How will we cater for potential changes in population?
- How will we cater for potential loss of agricultural land or produce?
- How will we ensure food security for our future generations particularly in relation to potential major crises (other pandemics, wars etc.)?

While providing straightforward answers to these complex questions may be challenging at this point in time, we recognize the need for open discussions and proactive efforts. To ensure continuity, we must apply the principles of ‘mitigation,’ ‘adaptability,’ and ‘resilience’ in all our endeavours and conversations.

The European Region of Gastronomy Platform offers us an invaluable opportunity to connect with other regions, fostering discussions about the challenges and opportunities we collectively face. It serves as a vital starting point for engaging politicians and stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue centred around the principles mentioned above.



The Island of Gozo: An Eclectic Journey

Our main theme focuses on Gozo as a dynamic island, characterised by a diverse, spirited and resilient character which embraces its past and enthusiastically creates its future. It hints at the multi-faceted and multilayered dynamics woven into its history, inhabitants and natural features and wonders, all of which are ultimately reflected in our gastronomy.

Our theme underlines our commitment to recognize the many facets that define our identity. It challenges the notion of time as a static factor allowing us to merge experience, strategy and foresight into one propulsive process. It signals our desire to unite in connecting the threads of Gozo's gastronomy and, once woven together, to cast a spotlight on its richness, benefits, and the untapped potential it holds.



Photo: Darren Cassar

Our goals for Gozo, European Region of Gastronomy 2026

Gozo is currently at a crossroads. There is a clear tension between the need for economic growth and the awareness of the potential damages (particularly on an environmental level) this could bring about. We are aware that growth is inevitable and needs to happen, but we are also conscious that this needs to be done sustainably. This needs to be done in order to: keep attracting tourists (both domestic and international), protect our heritage and landscape, retain our reputation for being a place of wellbeing and rest and to not repeat the same toxic patterns - leading to overdevelopment and overpopulation issues - which some parts of Malta have been affected by. Gozo, on its own merits, has a lot of untapped potential and we feel that this is the right moment to delve deeper into it and give our island the opportunity to stand out and grow.

We believe that sustainability is key. We need to make a clear decision about the attitudes we would like to adopt and how we want to forge our own future. We know that we need to be flexible and ready for the upcoming challenges. We believe that food and gastronomy can be a catalyst for discovery, rediscovery, growth and resilience.

Becoming a European Region of Gastronomy is, therefore, a fundamental need for Gozo.

It offers us an opportunity to:

- 1 Dig deep into the history, status and trends of gastronomy in Gozo. It is an exercise which - up until now - has been practised in a fragmented manner and needs to be further consolidated;
- 2 Identify the uniqueness of Gozitan gastronomy and the potential it holds vis-à-vis aspects such as sustainable growth and development, tourism, region distinctiveness, wellbeing;
- 3 Maximise on Gozo's potential: its size, its location, its resources, its history, its communities, its diversity, amongst others;
- 4 Create awareness about Gozo's gastronomic heritage and status, with the aim of increasing the public's interest in the Gozitan food and products;
- 5 Create and promote events which identify, celebrate and showcase Gozitan products and gastronomy. It is also an opportunity to create platforms to discuss issues identified in the Gozitan gastronomical scene and address them where relevant;
- 6 Encourage more people - especially young people - to engage directly with the gastronomical and agricultural scene in Gozo;
- 7 Create a quality mark which motivates (i) the primary stakeholders to keep their standards high and (ii) the consumers to buy local and to know their food better;
- 8 Focus on food as a catalyst for sustainable development and wellbeing;
- 9 Think about potential future scenarios - possibly impacted by climate change, increase in population and other factors - to be better placed to think ahead, plan and work around the changes. This exercise will help us understand our distinctiveness as a small island in the Mediterranean, and to cater for what may challenge as well as affect these distinctive characteristics.



Photo: San Blas Groves



Photo: Steve Allen/Envato

Focus Areas and Gozo’s Goals

Gozo’s vision for hosting the European Region of Gastronomy 2026 seamlessly incorporates IGCAT’s Focus Areas, encapsulated within what we term “Gozo’s Goals.” These include Educating for Our Future, Wellbeing and Healthier Living, Innovation, Creativity, and Job Opportunities, Feeding our Planet, and Balanced and Sustainable Tourism. Given the unique context of Gozo – characterized by its smaller size and diverse landscape in contrast to larger regions – the integration of Urban with Rural will be redefined as Linking and Connecting. This strategic adjustment acknowledges the distinctive regional dynamics, emphasizing a comprehensive approach to address the intricate relationship between urban and rural elements and ensuring a tailored strategy for Gozo’s successful participation in the European Region of Gastronomy initiative in 2026.

Aligned with the priority areas of the European Region of Gastronomy, Gozo has identified the following overarching goals for the region:

- **Authenticity:** Emphasizing the preservation and celebration of Gozo’s unique cultural and culinary heritage.
- **Awareness and Education:** Focusing on initiatives that raise awareness about gastronomic traditions, local produce, and culinary expertise, coupled with educational programmes for both residents and visitors.
- **Linking and Connecting:** Recognizing the importance of fostering connections, particularly in a region with diverse characteristics, emphasizing collaboration and integration between various elements.
- **Planning and Innovating:** Committing to strategic planning and innovation to enhance the gastronomic landscape, ensuring it remains dynamic and responsive to evolving trends.
- **Sustaining:** Prioritizing sustainability across all aspects, from environmental practices to community well-being, to ensure a resilient and enduring gastronomic identity.
- **Nourishing:** Promoting the concept of nourishment beyond the plate, encompassing the holistic well-being of individuals, communities, and the environment.

These goals collectively form a comprehensive framework that reflects Gozo’s commitment to becoming a vibrant and sustainable European Region of Gastronomy.

Authenticity

As an island within an archipelago of islands, Gozo has the tendency to be secluded even further and to become absorbed into descriptions, policies and approaches that are not specific to the region. This is, therefore, our opportunity to delve deeper into who we are, the reasons behind our actions and the next steps for our island. We want to be true to our identities that define us. We want to discover the characteristics that make us stand out and also those that unite us with other territories. We want to safeguard our landscape and to discover its attributes and needs, in line with sustainability principles. We want to instil a sense of pride in Gozitans with respect to their food and its attributes. The focus will be on discovering, offering and sharing authentic experiences that reflect the various aspects of Gozo.

Educating for our future/Linking urban and rural

We commit to:

- 1

Empower research processes and projects which look into the history of Gozitan’s agriculture and fisheries as well as gastronomy in general.
- 2

Initiate conversations between various stakeholders, in particular, historians, farmers, fishermen and scientists to better understand the current state of gastronomy in Gozo vis-a-vis its resources and investigate the potential which lies there.
- 3

Facilitate links and discussions with international peers in order to establish the commonalities and the particular features of the region.
- 4

Endorse the launch of the Gozo Quality Mark, which acknowledges and warrants quality and authenticity of Gozitan products.
- 5

Engage in conversation with communities and keep record of the various memories, traditions and practices which could, by time, be lost.
- 6

Support the dissemination of research outcomes undertaken by partners and stakeholders within the region.
- 7

Support the dissemination of research findings amongst operators who work directly with international/local visitors in Gozo.
- 8

Organise authentic food experiences, including tastings and food passport experiences, hands-on farming experiences, fishing trips and festivals among others to allow for more direct interaction with authentic Gozitan food.

Awareness and Education

As we look inwards at those practices, features and characteristics that make us who we are, we also intend to share these insights and to create an awareness about Gozo as a region as well as Gozitan gastronomy. This will be our opportunity to define Gozitan cuisine; to understand its eclectic nature and influences and appreciate its specificities. To discover and/or rediscover practices which are specific and particular to Gozo as a region. We will embark on projects, initiatives and campaigns that will enable us to spread the word about local produce and products as well as traditions that make up the Gozitan gastronomic scene. We will be proposing a variety of activities which will actively engage Gozitans, Maltese, international residents and visitors to better understand Gozo as a region on its own and within its various contexts together. The focus will particularly be on young people as active contributors in this field, as well as consumers and visitors. The European Young Chef Award which aims to raise awareness amongst the future chefs about the importance of protecting and promoting local food, in particular will be a vital launchpad for young aspiring chefs.

Educating for Our Future/Wellbeing and Healthier Living/Innovation, Creativity and Job Opportunities

We commit to:

1 Launch workshops, addressing the general public, to inform about Gozitan gastronomy, the project and the benefits of buying/eating local;

2 Celebrate the diversity of food in Gozo by acknowledging the multitude of influences as well as the multiculturalism characterising our island. This will be done by means of events, publications and similar initiatives within the Gozitan community;

3 Facilitate the creation of specific education courses to address the needs within the catering, hospitality and gastronomy industries;

4 Facilitate and promote postgraduate research into Gozitan gastronomy;

5 Facilitate and promote a closer link between education and industry to empower the creation of more agribusiness ventures;

6 Continue offering and promoting continuous professional development aimed at reinforcing skill sets, reskilling and upskilling within the gastronomy industry;

7 Organise hands-on experiences - particularly targeting young people - to experience work in the rural environment;

8 Look at the potential to host the European Young Chef Award in Gozo and commit to participating by sending young aspiring chefs.

- 9** Embark on an information campaign focusing on Gozo European Region of Gastronomy and highlighting aspects addressed. This would involve:
- Developing a brand identity and activation toolkit representing the region's brand vision, mission, & values through standardised messaging and content, offering standardised support to partners and stakeholders;
 - Creating, digitally producing, and printing merchandise and brand awareness materials;
 - Establishing a website to centralise and support all communications and marketing activities;
 - Using brand elements to generate content across multiple channels (including social media) in diverse formats;
 - Collaborating with other entities to maximise the dissemination of existing audiovisual material within the region's framework;
 - Producing an information campaign focused on raising awareness of local produce and the 'farm to fork' concept;
 - Producing an information campaign to empower the accessibility of local children and young people to the field of gastronomy; Managing and activating paid media channels for promotional and advertising purposes, employing strategies to enhance visibility and engage target audiences;
 - Developing a reputation management plan to address unforeseen PR challenges;
 - Executing press initiatives including press trips, and invitations to foreign journalists and foodie bloggers.



Linking and Connecting

Another important area which we will be addressing is taken from different perspectives and on a number of different levels, in order to join forces and cooperate. The European Region of Gastronomy Platform will be crucial for Gozo in that it is an established network of coordinators, stakeholders and experts from the awarded and candidate World Regions of Gastronomy that aim to support one another through knowledge exchange and building projects that add additional international visibility to the respective regions. Gozo will take part in the Platform and also invite the Platform to Gozo to learn from our uniqueness in 2026 if we are awarded. Over the years the Platform has developed many joint projects mentioned throughout the bid book and we hope to enrich our community by connecting them to these international projects that will shine a light on our food and cultural uniqueness. The Platform will also support Gozo in addressing the challenges that are deemed as pressing in Gozo's gastronomic scene. Most importantly, this will be an opportunity for us to establish Gozo as a gastronomic island on the international scene through active networking, media presence and active engagement in various projects. The focus will be on establishing rooted and trustworthy relationships with all the local stakeholders and with the international network allowing exchanges to happen.

Linking and Connecting

We commit to:

- 1

Associate the region with Platforms, projects, and community events received through the public call and integrated into the year's Programme of Events;
- 2

Create possibilities for regular and open conversations between the different stakeholders;
- 3

We will launch and manage a local stakeholders' network, setting a structure which allows the core local stakeholders – as well as other interested parties- to join the initiative and own the process through a regular and structured process.
- 4

Promote the region's participation in international collaboration projects;
- 5

Actively seek and facilitate collaborations between stakeholders, government, international organisations and cultural entities to promote local products through a diverse range of activities;
- 6

Launch and promote the Gozo Quality Mark and the Gozo Food Trail at the local level and through collaboration with existing international counterparts;
- 7

Promote the region's involvement in IGCAT activities and the European Region of Gastronomy Platform, that includes the World Food Gift Challenge, Food Film Menu, European Young Chef Award, Golden Bee Award, and Top Websites for Foodies Travelers.

Planning and Innovating

This will serve as our inaugural gastronomy strategy for Gozo, with a central focus on sustainability, innovation, and growth. Our objective is to cast a spotlight on Gozo's gastronomy, not only examining it in isolation but also from broader perspectives, including its role in relation to tourism, health, and overall well-being.

Collaborating closely with key stakeholders, we intend to delve into the current state of affairs, establish clear objectives, and formulate plans to achieve our envisioned targets. Equally crucial will be our consideration of future scenarios and the myriad factors that influence these scenarios, enabling us to proactively prepare for potential changes.

Our primary aim is to challenge the status quo description of Gozo as 'a Mediterranean island,' particularly in light of the looming effects of climate change. We will explore related concepts, such as the possible loss of current crops and products and the resulting impacts on food supply and gastronomic identity. This exploration will lead us into vital discussions regarding the role of innovation and digitalization, with the ultimate goal of reinventing and repositioning ourselves to meet the needs of the future. Becoming a European Region of Gastronomy marks our first step in establishing Gozo as a gastronomic island of the future.

Innovation, Creativity and Job Opportunities

We commit to:

- 1

Acknowledge Gozitan gastronomy as a significant part of the region's identity by creating a dedicated strategy which focuses exclusively on gastronomy as an instigator and motivator in every aspect of our lives and activity;
- 2

Pursue discussions between the relevant stakeholders to continue the development of the Food Lab in Gozo. The project will have science and innovation at its core;
- 3

Focus on innovation as the primary instigator for growth in agriculture, fisheries and gastronomy in general;
- 4

Discuss future issues and considerations in collaboration with local and international stakeholders. This effort should be part of the strategy but should also be a long-term conversation;
- 5

Engage in creative projects which discuss and consider future scenarios as potential realities. Through these projects, creative solutions are sought;
- 6

Work in direct collaboration with educational institutions in order to promote research into the role of innovation and digitising in gastronomy.



Photo: Joseph Galea

Sustaining

In this context, our focus will be on researching and implementing sustainable practices to advance responsibly. The emphasis on gastronomy itself is a pivotal step in our journey, allowing us to prioritize niche sectors, particularly tourism. This prioritization enables us to gain a deeper understanding and respect for the sources of our food. It aligns with our overarching goal of fostering resilient food systems that can withstand the test of time and adapt to constant changes.

Conversations will revolve around agricultural practices, produce, and fishing methods, with a view to harmonizing these practices with our natural environment and resources. The European Region of Gastronomy Platform serves as the catalyst for these vital discussions and the development of subsequent steps.

On a more practical level, the Platform empowers us to introduce small yet effective changes in our approach by promoting and applying sustainability principles. These principles span environmental, social, and economic aspects and will be integrated into all projects and plans proposed and implemented in connection with this title.

We will also raise awareness and implement the IGCAT Food Commitment in willing restaurants and hotels that will commit to increase year on year their use and promotion of local products as well as introduce more sustainable practices. Another initiative will be to raise awareness about IGCAT's Sustainable Event Policies that will support the improvement of environmental protection and sustainability.

Feeding our planet/Balanced and Sustainable Tourism/Linking and Connecting

We commit to:

- 1 Associate the region with the Platform through local projects and community events received through a public call and integrated into the year's Programme of Events;
- 2 Bring together the various operators in the tourism industry to discuss sustainable practices and solutions for the sector;
- 3 Encourage a more streamlined implementation of the farm-to-fork strategy, including clear directions for how locals and visitors may find local products and how to purchase them. This would also entail collaboration with restaurants, chefs and hotels;
- 4 Join national and international conversations around water efficiency and discuss solutions with businesses and stakeholders in the tourism industry;
- 5 Offer practical hands-on and authentic experiences for children, young people and visitors to engage in farming/fishing activities;
- 6 Promote the region's involvement in IGCAT activities and the European Region of Gastronomy Platform, that includes the World Food Gift Challenge, European Young Chef Award, Golden Bee Award, and Top Websites for Foodies Travelers. The Directorate for Tourism and Economic Development within the Ministry for Gozo has already committed to managing Gozo's participation in the Food Film Menu project;
- 7 Disseminate information about local and sustainable products, especially in retail outlets, restaurants and hotels;
- 8 Create and disseminate Food Sustainability Guidelines for adoption by partners and stakeholders at all events within the region's framework;
- 9 Discuss and disseminate information about how to avoid food waste and how to ensure food security;
- 10 Discuss and promote sustainability in schools;
- 11 Promote sustainability in business management, hospitality and food preparation industry in general;
- 12 Rediscover practices and methods which are more environmentally friendly such as, for instance, packaging of food and agricultural practices;
- 13 Discuss ways of making sustainable practices - in gastronomy, tourism, agriculture, fisheries - commercially viable;
- 14 Raise awareness about IGCAT's Sustainable Event Policies;
- 15 Raise awareness and implement the IGCAT Food Commitment in willing restaurants and hotels.

Nourishing

Our focus will also extend to the relationship between gastronomy and wellbeing. We are committed to preserving Gozo’s reputation as a place for peaceful and purposeful living, where serenity and relaxation are paramount. Within this narrative, we will place a strong emphasis on the role of gastronomy.

The concept of “slow” principles is important with this “Nourishing” context. “Slow” has already been introduced to Gozo through the MEDSNAIL project and the subsequent inclusion in the Terra Madre network. The objectives of the MEDSNAIL project are to foster socially and environmentally sustainable development of agro-food SMEs by valorising traditional Euro-Mediterranean products according to a “slow” approach and short-chain principles. We now aim to encourage “slow” principles and looking towards encouragement of Slow Food on the island both in restaurants and local producers. We will underline the benefits of consuming healthy foods and beverages in our daily lives and highlight the significance of engaging in cultural and sports activities for overall wellbeing.

Wellbeing and Healthier Living

We commit to:

- 1

Focus on making local and healthy produce and products more accessible to everyone by creating related incentives and increasing visibility;
- 2

Work with hotels and restaurants to increase healthy options on their menus;
- 3

Introduce the concept of healthy food stalls in established and regular events happening in the region;
- 4

Continue to work and strive on making Gozo a wellness destination by creating the right environment and conditions and addressing issues;
- 5

Incentivise the consumption of good and wholesome food, especially in schools and government residences;
- 6

Support research into nutrition and the link to wellbeing and healthier living;
- 7

Embark on an information campaign to emphasise the importance of wellbeing and good nutrition;
- 8

Encourage “slow” principles and looking towards encouragement of Slow Food on the island both in restaurants and local producers.



Photo: Sean Mallia

Flagship Initiatives

In order to further support the implementation of the focus areas and the commitments explained above, we will:

Create the Gozo, The Local Stakeholders network: This network will be made up of the core stakeholders for the ‘Gozo, European Region of Gastronomy 2026’ as well as other interested NGOs and groups and, for at least the initial three years, this will be managed by the Executive Manager for the Platform in the region. Its main aim will be to oversee the implementation of the European Region of Gastronomy Bid Book and plan, including the projects and initiatives outlined. The reason behind this action is to empower the main stakeholders in the field and to offer them the opportunity to be on the frontline of this initiative which is the first of its kind in the region. This will also be the opportunity to maximise on the momentum generated by the Platform to define the eclectic Gozitan gastronomy whilst putting a spotlight on it as a policy area with the aim of creating the first ever gastronomy strategy for the region. The latter will also be our commitment to creating a legacy after the title as well as sustainability of the good practices implemented.

Photo: Darren Cassar

Carry out research and invest in documentation: The research and documentation will be carried out in various ways. The research aspect will focus on identifying the Gozo cuisine as such, with particular attention given to the produce, products and dishes that are particular to our region. In terms of documentation, apart from the more traditional processes of recording and disseminating the events and initiatives happening in the run up to Gozo becoming European Region of Gastronomy, we also plan to engage in different projects which discover, analyse and classify both readily-available information about gastronomy as well as experiences and sentiments around the same topic.

Embark on an information campaign: Throughout the years leading up to the year of the title, the region will be embarking on a campaign to educate and create awareness around gastronomy, most notably around the benefits of local foods and produce. The focus will be on the ‘farm to fork’ concept, with an emphasis on the economic, social, environmental and personal benefits that this has. This is in line with the general recommendations received throughout the Bid Book consultation process as well as the recommendations in the Gozo Regional Development Strategy document. Another important aspect of this campaign will be education about our products with the aim of instilling further awareness and pride. This part will be supported by the creation of related visual material disseminated on social media and local media, the production of workshops (to further educate and promote this aspect, especially with young people), the creation of a Gozo quality label (which marks territorial provenance and quality). Our focus will also be on food as a catalyst for wellbeing; what we consume and how. Efforts and campaigns will highlight the benefits of good and healthy food which directly contribute to a longer and happier life. Another aspect of the campaign will particularly focus on children and young people, with the

aim of attracting more people towards the sector and to clearly demonstrate the prospect of working in the gastronomy field and empower accessibility.

The focus will be on the ‘Farm to Fork’ concept, with an emphasis on the economic, social, environmental and personal benefits that this has.

Launch the Gozo Quality Mark: 2024 will see the introduction of a new label which aims to promote excellence in the local craft products and services. The Gozo Quality Mark, created and managed by the Gozo Artisan Network, is a quality label that was created to safeguard and promote the uniqueness, quality and great variety of artisan products, arts and crafts made in Gozo. Its aim is to safeguard the livelihoods of artisans and preserve the Gozitan heritage. The project has been in motion for a number of years through a thorough research process which focused on the analysis of all opportunities and challenges that such a label presents. The label aims to be publicly announced in 2024 with the first onboarding processes to follow.



Photo: Gharb Local Council



Photo: Anthony Cassar

Discuss and develop further the Food Lab project: This will be an important part of the implementation plan, which will feature the Food Lab project as a space for science-based and evidence-based approaches to food and environmental management. The remit of the Food Lab project throughout the next years leading to 2026, may be that of creating conversations, debates and think-tanks around the subjects of sustainable farming and fishing, to discuss innovation as a catalyst for development as well as the future of food in Gozo. The Food Lab project may also be the backbone for the Gozo Quality Mark, in terms of acting as the primary research resource. The Xewkija Farm could be a 'natural home' for this project. At this point, our proposal is to kick off the process for it to become a fully fledged food lab.

The Food Sustainability Guidelines: The Gozo Regional Council, in direct collaboration with the other stakeholders will be creating

'Food Sustainability Guidelines' which will essentially consist of a set of principles, tips and practical suggestions to be applied to all the events happening in Gozo. This document will serve as a group of recommendations for producers/organisers to achieve a more sustainable approach to gastronomic events or events that involve food in general. It will include suggestions about avoiding food waste, using more environmentally friendly packaging, promoting local products and healthy eating amongst others. This project will be part of a larger local initiative, spearheaded by Arts Council Malta, to promote sustainable approaches to events in general.

Create a programme of events: The plan will include a variety of activities and initiatives which aim to celebrate Gozitan food and bring it closer to both locals and visitors. Through this programme primary stakeholders, educators, creatives, local communities, international residents and visitors will have the opportunity to

The plan will include a variety of activities and initiatives which aim to celebrate Gozitan food and bring it closer to both locals and visitors.

come together to discover, honour and celebrate gastronomy as a catalyst for sustainable development, wellbeing and positive change. This is, perhaps, one of the most tangible aspects of the Bid Book. All events and initiatives will help us to show in practice how we are effectively implementing the theme, goals and aspirations outlined in this Bid Book. In all the events endorsed by the Local Stakeholders network, we will be applying sustainability principles, based on The Food Sustainability Guidelines that will be shared with all the stakeholders.

The Gozo Food Trail: The creation of a food trail will help us to support the process of branding Gozo as a 'Food Destination'. The trail, which is to be created and presented in both physical and digital formats, will help locals and visitors to identify the outlets/spaces/areas where the authentic Gozitan cuisine may be experienced or purchased, depending on the context and the situation. It will also help us to connect with other international existing trails to further support and promote active exchange.

Il-Forn Antik ta' Kemmuna (The Historic Comino Bakery): The restoration of the Historic Comino Bakery, being managed by the environmental NGO Friends of the Earth Malta (FoEM), aims to be a leading example to demonstrate ecological technologies and sustainable lifestyles with a sensitivity to the building's unique importance in the context of Gozitan food history. Once complete,

the building will restore the historic oven to its full functionality, it will open spaces for educational workshops and house a permanent exhibition about Comino's importance as Natura 2000 site and its cultural heritage. The project itself, is also an extension of FoEM's, Food, Agriculture and Biodiversity campaign which aims to provide educational tools, resources and organise activities which promote sustainable food practices.



Photo: Darren Cassar

Gozo European Region of Gastronomy Ambassadors



■ Amand P. Veranneman Van Hoeck

Amand is a gastronome and restaurateur. After graduating from the International School for Catering and Tourism COOVI in Brussels, he worked and trained in several High-Class Horeca establishments in Belgium. After moving to the Maltese islands, he opened the restaurant La Vallette in Valletta in 1982. He then launched the known restaurant Ta' Frenċ in Gozo and was also its co-owner. He was also the owner of Auberge Napoleon in Victoria and Gharb, as well as the restaurant Chez Amand. He is also the founder member of The Chaîne des Rotisseurs Bailliage of Malta. Amand retired from catering at age 65.



■ Anna Marie Galea

Anna Marie Galea has been writing about food, fashion, culture, and everything in between for the Times of Malta, Sunday Circle, Pink, and Foodist magazine for over a decade. She is a weekly columnist for the Sunday Times of Malta and enjoys reading, cooking, and trying out the latest restaurants to determine whether the positive reviews are justified or not. She is a vocal supporter of investing in local talent and local produce and has written extensively about both.



■ George Borg

George Borg is a renowned chef, TV personality and recipe book author in the Maltese islands. His culinary experience started at a very young age in his family business. After completing his studies, he had different experiences working abroad in several countries. His passion for local, seasonal ingredients is often highlighted in his dishes and in his books The Gozo Table 1 & 2, Ta' Gigi Home Cooking and Tastes like Gozo. George is the host chef of one of the most popular, cultural television programmes on the Maltese islands, 'Malta u lil Hinn Minnha'.

Calendar of Events

Despite its size, there are a number of different cultural projects happening in Gozo all year round. Some of the events are directly produced by the Ministry for Gozo targeting domestic and international tourism as well as community engagement. However, there is a significant number of events that are spearheaded by local councils and private initiatives (often NGOs or businesses). The events usually promote specific products. A few of the following examples focus, in fact, on specific seasonal produce and take place within the localities that have some form of relationship with that specific item. Wine events also feature prominently and are organised throughout the year. Other events, although not necessarily focusing exclusively on gastronomy, promote local food by including food stalls or food experiences within their programmes.

Here we are listing some existing examples of ongoing/yearly events featuring local gastronomy:

JANUARY
UARY
NADUR CARNIVAL NADUR
MARCH
APRIL
EASTER IN GOZO AN ARRAY OF EVENTS HAPPENING IN THE DIFFERENT LOCALITIES AROUND GOZO INCLUDING EXHIBITIONS, PROCESSIONS, PAGEANTS
TA' SANNAT WINE FESTIVAL TA' SANNAT
GHADIRA FUN FAIR TA' KERĊEM
FIREWORKS AND GASTRONOMY FESTIVAL MUNXAR
MAY
LEJL IMKEBBES ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS VICTORIA
FIERA TAD-DWEJRA SAN LAWRENZ

JUNE
BIS-SAHHA WINE FESTIVAL SANTA LUĊIJA
XAGHRA FIG FESTIVAL XAGHRA
WIRJA AGRARJA (L-IMNARJA) NADUR
JULY
EVVIVA: WINE AND DINE FESTIVAL XEWKIJA
FLAMES ACROSS THE MEADOWS TA' KERĊEM
LEJLA GHAWDXIJA QALA
AUGUST
SANNAT BEER FESTIVAL SANNAT
THE GOZO TRADITIONAL, AGRICULTURAL AND INDUSTRIAL EXHIBITION/ WIRJA TAL-BIEDJA U SNAJJA' VICTORIA
IKLA TRADIZZJONALI ZEBBUG

GHAJNSIELEM FEST GHAJNSIELEM
FIORI D'ARGENTA: FESTIVAL TRADIZZJONALI GHALL-FAMILJA KOLLHA XEWKIJA
MALTA INTERNATIONAL FOOD FESTIVAL - GOZO EDITION XEWKIJA
ANTONIN UNDER THE STARS WINE FESTIVAL – MARSOVIN RAMLA
MILL-GHALQA NHAWRU L-BORMA TA' KERĊEM
DAWRA DURELLA LURA FIŻ-ŻMIEN, LOGHOB, GASTRONOMIJA U TRADIZZJONIJIET TA' KERĊEM
SEPTEMBER
FONTANA WINE FESTIVAL FONTANA
GHASRI - TRADITIONS: WINE, OLIVE OIL AND HONEY GHASRI
QALA INTERNATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL QALA
DELICATA CLASSIC WINE FESTIVAL NADUR

OCTOBER
GHARB KITE AND WIND FESTIVAL GHARB
NOVEMBER
THE SWEETH TOOTH FESTIVAL VICTORIA
DECEMBER
CHRISTMAS IN GOZO AN ARRAY OF EVENTS HAPPENING DURING CHRISTMAS TIME IN GOZO, INCLUDING CHRISTMAS MARKETS IN VICTORIA, KERĊEM, SAN LAWRENZ, NADUR AMONGST OTHERS, LIFE-SIZE CRIBS IN GHAJNSIELEM AND NADUR, PROCESSIONS

Gozo European Region of Gastronomy Projects 2026

In response to a public call for ideas, we have received a range of different projects to be developed and implemented between 2024 and 2026. From artistic-led research projects to community gastronomic events, from workshops and lectures to publications; the gastronomic, artistic and academic came forward with engaging proposals which will help us fulfil our aims and intentions for Gozo European of Gastronomy 2026.



Photo: Molinia/Envato

Ongoing Platforms

MEET THE MAKERS - Gozo Artisan Network

An ongoing platform which aims at promoting the local craft producers and to make their work more accessible by locals and visitors alike.

THE SEED LIBRARY - Gozo Central Public Library

The Gozo Central Public Library will become the SEED LIBRARY from where people can 'borrow' seeds. Our main aim will be to create a space where kids and adults may find the right information about seeds and share knowledge with other patrons. Through this process, co-lead by patrons and experts, we will learn about the importance of native plants whilst advocating for sustainable landscaping with native plants.

Culinary STEM: Nurturing Sustainable Gastronomy Education - SED Hub (A project of ESINED Group of Ventures)

The project titled "Culinary STEM: Nurturing Sustainable Gastronomy Education," aims to incorporate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) principles into culinary practices. This innovative approach will not only celebrate Gozo's gastronomic heritage but also foster sustainability and resilience in the local culinary and food industry. The project will propose a series of workshops, interactive learning experiences, and educational programs that integrate STEM concepts into culinary arts. By doing so, the project aims to educate the younger generation about sustainable food systems, nutrition, responsible food production, and the significance of preserving cultural culinary traditions. The details of this project are still being discussed with the relevant potential collaborators and its outcome will be determined in the coming months.

Research Projects

FUTURING ISLANDS | GOZO 2026 - Unfinished Foundation

Island thinking in the age of climate change and digitalisation. A hybrid cultural programme (online and in person in Gozo), presenting workshops, debates, screenings and artistic performances.

Farfara2031, referring to an island that appeared sporadically on maps of Malta of the 17th century, is an ongoing project by a collective of 4 cultural practitioners, that serves as an artistic experimental platform to push boundaries in thinking, practising and experiencing what a European Capital of Culture may be in

the future through the artistic explorations of concepts ranging on virtuality as a new form of cultural 'physicality' to issues such as climate change. 2031 is Malta's next opportunity to host the European Capital of Culture; Farfara2031 takes the model of ECoC as a working template for investigating innovative structures and improved relations of creative and systemic thinking.

Futuring Islands | Gozo 2026 will be a week-long hybrid cultural event, presenting workshops, debates, screenings and artistic works curated by the collective, and available to the Gozitan public, as well as to a wider online community. Futuring Islands will instigate creative and hybrid conversations on island-thinking in the age of climate change and the role of agriculture, gastronomy and food culture in a world where food production is no longer a known quantity. As the effects of climate change, and our responsibilities towards ourselves and the rest of the planet become more and more pronounced, Futuring Islands will investigate the future of food cultures, asking how we can continue to enjoy the foods that we identify as 'Gozitan' if their key ingredients are under threat or damaging to the planet.

At the first edition of Futuring Islands in Vienna, Austrian chef Bela Eckermann researched and developed a 'futured' aljotta made without fish, in order to experiment with the realities around the planet's fragilities and over-exploitation. We now propose to take this model further in collaboration with researchers, artists and food experts, to offer the public a contemporary and innovative outlook on Gozitan food culture through the presentation of an artistic programme asking the question; "How can traditional, indigenous food be conceptualised in a world where key ingredients are threatened by climate-change, and are no longer easily available?"

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SALT-MAKING -

Elyse Tonna, Samuel Ciantar, Sephora Schembri, Mattea Ciantar (no.site.studio)

The Architecture of Salt-Making (working title) is a research-based interdisciplinary project which focuses on salt-making as the primary departure point. It unearths and rediscovers traditional knowledge and practices directly linked to the various processes involved in salt production, with the aim of cultivating its value in contemporary society. Within this context, the term architecture takes on multiple meanings: it is the embodiment of its social, cultural, environmental and anthropological frameworks. The aim of The Architecture of Salt-Making is to re-ignite awareness on the various structures related to salt-making through research, artistic intervention/s and socially-engaged processes. Additionally, it aims to project salt as a valuable resource for coexistence, speculating upon its potential value in contemporary society.

IL-QAMAR, IL-KEWKBA, WIN-NEWBA - Gabriel Caruana Foundation

The project will involve Raffaella Zammit, Elyse Tonna and Martina Camilleri from the Gabriel Caruana Foundation who will be collaborating with three diverse communities on the island—the community of Qala, migrant workers based in Gozo, and local farmers— creating a collective narrative that embodies the island's culinary traditions, past, present, and future. The focus goes beyond mere recipes; the aim is to capture how food connects people to communities, to the land and its resources, the contributions of community leaders who leave an impact, the natural and cultural rhythms and cycles passed on from one generation to the next, all elements that form the fabric of Gozo's unique gastronomical and cultural ecology.

The focus goes beyond mere recipes; the aim is to capture how food connects people to communities.

Through a series of participatory workshops, artistic documentation, and cultural exchanges, the project aims to unearth unsung heroes and untold stories such dedicated volunteers who prepare delicacies for fundraising initiatives, farmers growing agricultural produce, migrants working towards community initiatives, past stories such as the fisherman who trekked from Mgarr Harbour (Ix-Xatt) to Qala with their wicker baskets, selling their daily catch during the post-war years. It will revisit cherished family recipes like Hobż biż-żejt u bit-tadam (bread with olive oil and tomatoes) prepared lovingly by grandmothers after a refreshing swim. It will look for long lost recipes such as patata l-forn bil-meraq tar-rummien (roasted potatoes in pomegranate juice). It will follow the trail of particular crops, such as tomatoes, pomegranate, and summer fruits such as għajnbaqar (plums), from farm to table and in between. In collaboration with the communities, the project leaders will explore the people and structures that have contributed to Gozo's food culture, from community leaders who volunteer their time to produce seasonal sweet treats, farmers, to fields of broad beans, corner shops and local ice cream makers in the island's culinary narrative. Together with communities, the project will explore the significance of seasonality, water resources and energy flows in the midst of a global climate crisis and means of adaptation and mitigation. It will question how we can live symbiotically with our land and sea.

HISTORIC COMINO BAKERY - Friends of the Earth

Friends of the Earth Malta will be running a programme of events for the duration of 2026 which educates the general public about Gozo's rich food history, sharing sustainable food and farming practices from the past, exploring Gozo's connection to bread history and beekeeping together with honey production. Between 2024 and 2026, the organisation intends on researching the history of the building itself, its links with the farming community who used to work in Comino and discover the relationship between etymology of the island's name and its connection to the cultivation of cumin through scientific research of soil samples. The link currently relies solely on anecdotal evidence. The project activities proposed cover a wide range of topics related to gastronomy including promoting sustainable food and farming practices, researching the history of the bakery, implementing foraging walks, organising cooking workshops and conducting beekeeping workshops.

Campaigns

BOXXLA* - Ghawdix

For the European Region of Gastronomy 2026, Ghawdix will embark on a mission to act as a link between the older and younger generations that call Gozo their home. Through a series of interviews and eventual workshops, that can take shape in various creative forms, we will help in the transition of knowledge when it comes to food, sustainability and the environment of the Gozitan landscape. We believe that our older generations are key in providing the experience that our younger generations crave

to create a better and more sustainable future. Together we can create a Gozo which we are all proud of: from the oldest member of our community to the youngest member that is still to be born.

**a word with different levels of meaning. In standard Maltese it means compass highlighting the direction where we're headed but in Gozitan it also means antiporta highlighting a metaphorical doorway that Ghawdix will open between generations for the transfer of knowledge.*

Publications

MELTING POT (THE COOKBOOK) - The JAM project

The project will be focusing on creating a cookbook which will bring together recipes from the different international residents living in Gozo. The conclusion of this project will be a Food Festival which will celebrate and promote in Gozo.

GHADU HAWN - MICAELA BOGEN

'Għadu Hawn' IS a photojournalism project seeking to protect and celebrate the authentic stories and practices of our local farmers. The project's title, meaning 'Still Here,' pays homage to the dedication of our farmers who continue to work the land and produce food using traditional methods. The project will include local artists, farmers, Gozitan cuisine and storytellers to curate a comprehensive photojournalism book.

Community Events

GOZO HERBS FESTIVAL - Għarb Local Council

A festival focusing on herbs, with particular attention to their uses in gastronomy, medicine and beauty. The festival will involve an array of activities including tastings, workshops, demonstrations, lectures, walks and tours, performances, yoga and meditation sessions, and a marketplace. It aims to involve audiences directly and allowing for hands-on engagement with the activities proposed.

ALJOTTA - Bettina Hutschek

The proposal titled ALJOTTA consists of an outdoor film installation. The film ALJOTTA by Bettina Hutschek (2018, 20 min long, HD, 2 channel) with video and sculptural installation will be screened in a chosen public space of Gozo. Visitors are invited for free to view the film. Before the screening, the audience will be invited to eat a plate of Aljotta (fish soup) provided by a local caterer.

Synopsis of the film: The film - in the form of a poetic science-fiction narrative, the film presents events on a fictitious island, famous for its fish soup 'Aljotta': Recently, when the island's inhabitants eat their 'Aljotta', they start having hallucinations and become witnesses of a surreal process of memory transfer. Scientists explain this phenomenon in a biochemical way: they discover the "HFH-effect" (Human-Fish-Human-effect). Fragments of other human's memories infiltrate the gestures, actions and expressions of the inhabitants. The script is based on excerpts of Shakespeare's "The Tempest", on a recipe for 'Aljotta', on Dr. James V. McConnell's theory of memory



transfer, and on long-term observations of Maltese society. The video-installation is an artistic reflection on the impact of strangers onto the collective memory of an island society. ALJOTTA is an Essay-Film Written and directed by Bettina Hutschek. The filmed was produced by Bettina Hutschek, Arts Council Malta and Valletta 2018 Foundation

LOCAL SHEEP CHEESE - AN ATTEMPT AT BREAKING THE RECORD FOR THE LARGEST LOCAL SHEEP PRODUCED - Għarb Local Council

The aim of this event is to put a spotlight on the local sheep cheese making and to celebrate this local tradition through culinary workshops for participants to learn new cooking techniques, demonstrations on food plating, presentation and educational sessions on sustainable practices in the food industry and innovative gastronomic trends. The event will also feature food stalls, entertainment as well as an exhibition and interactive displays focusing on food.

ARTICHOKES AND LARGE PAN COOKING FESTIVAL - Għarb Local Council

The artichoke festival will focus on this specific ingredient, with particular attention given to the health benefits of artichokes. The festival will feature a large pan-cooking competition featuring artichoke-based dishes, cooking demonstrations by renowned chefs showcasing unique artichoke recipes and artichoke tasting stations offering a variety of preparations and culinary styles. This will be complemented by educational workshops about the ingredient as well as an exhibition. In an effort to attract more attention and visibility, during the festival the organisers will also attempt to break the record for the largest artichoke-based dish cooked in a single pan.

**LOCAL GASTRONOMIC EVENT IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE –
San Lawrenz Local Council**

An event aiming to showcase local gastronomy with a focus on our rich cultural heritage. This project proposes a range of different activities including food stalls, culinary workshops, live demonstrations, performances, local artisans’ market and tasting passports to encourage both locals and visitors to taste the different foods available.

BENNA QALB IN-NATURA – Għaqda Għajn Tuta

An event, spread over a number of days, which will include workshops about beekeeping and honeymaking, olive oil, a specific wheat which used to grow on the island called Tumminia, machinery used in agriculture and cooking classes. The event will also include a food section focusing on local gastronomy as well as a class about planting and growing your own food. One of the days will be entirely dedicated to children.

**MUNXAR FIREWORKS AND GASTRONOMY FESTIVAL –
Munxar Local Council**

A festival that encourages and promotes local artists and chefs to exhibit their talents to the public. Its primary aim is to showcase local talent and support traditions.

**TASTE OF GOZO: CELEBRATING GOZITAN GASTRONOMY
AND CULTURE – Sannat Local Council**

The event will consist of several different features and ideas. The main event will present a food festival promoting the local cuisine and, more importantly, the locally sourced ingredients and products. Local chefs will be invited for the event to set up food stalls made up of different local dishes. Throughout the event they will also have the opportunity to share their knowledge with the public.

VILLAGĠ WIKKIEL – Żebbuġ Local Council

Villagġ Wikkiel aims at showcasing Żebbuġ as the village that is “voracious” for culture in its widest sense. In an orchestrated intention to exhibit the village’s hidden gems, artistic and curatorial talent as well as the unknown and undocumented gastronomical tradition, the proposal aims at regenerating culture. This will be achieved through a programme of events consisting of an educational programme, lectures, art exhibitions as well as culinary events where gastronomy will meet contemporary visual art, music and literature.

Photo: Paul Eijlemans



International Collaborations

One of our main aims for joining the platform and being part of this project is the potential that this holds in terms of the opportunities to engage in international exchange. We feel that these connections and exchanges are vital for any region, but especially for a small island where insularity could – at times – be a threatening factor to growth and prosperity. International connections through the membership of the European Region of Gastronomy Platform, will extend to diverse collaborations across various sectors, as elaborated in the preceding sections of the Bid Book. As we establish and integrate the local stakeholders network, planning to evolve through 2026 and beyond, we aim to foster active participation from Gozo's stakeholders. This involvement will extend to joint initiatives led by IGCAT, encompassing the World Food Gift Challenge, Food Film Menu, European Young Chef Award, European Young Maitre d' Award, Golden Bee Award, and Top Websites for Foodies Travelers.

Through these endeavors, we envision a rich tapestry of engagement and contribution, enhancing our regional gastronomic presence.



Photo: San Blas Groves

We intend to do this by:

- 1 Participating in the activities of the Platform organised by IGCAT. We are discussing the possibilities with our stakeholders and partners to create a sound plan for participation in the existing awards and Platform;
- 2 Creating direct contacts and links with the other regions of gastronomy (past, current and nominated regions). Since joining the platform early in 2023, we have started participating in the Platform Field Visits, which so far proved to be highly fruitful. It is an excellent opportunity for us to meet up but also to exchange practices, thoughts, concerns and solutions. This is particularly relevant when discussing future issues and challenges related to sustainability (environmental, social and economic), climate change and food security and how to tackle these in a good way. We intend to keep participating in these meetings and to maximise on the potential that the platform offers in this sense.
- 3 Maximising on the international partnerships which we already have – through the village twinning programmes from a local councils' perspectives, partnerships on a political level, on an academic level as well as on a regional and national level – with a view to promoting Gozitan gastronomy and exchanging ideas and practices with respect to how gastronomy can be a catalyst for sustainable development.
- 4 Engaging in international projects with other European regions of gastronomy and/or projects (potentially EU funded projects) focusing on gastronomy.
- 5 Increasing Gozo's international visibility in the gastronomic field.
- 6 Maximising on the potential of having a highly diverse community in Gozo presenting an eclectic mix of nationalities and communities within our own communities. This is an effort to embrace the differences, to welcome the fact that ours is an international community and to be able to connect further through food.
- 7 Enhancing the visitors' experience. This exercise will be crucial for us to identify ways to engage with visitors in a more meaningful way. We have amply explained why we think this is important in this Bid Book. The European Region of Gastronomy is an opportunity for us to put Gozo, as a region, on the map as a gastronomic and wellness destination.
- 8 We will create a public website that gathers all information and pinpoints where to book foodie experiences.

Marketing Plan

The marketing, communications, and promotion plan for Gozo European Region of Gastronomy 2026 will underpin and reinforce the vision for Gozo as presented in this Bid Book.

Strategy

We will engage a marketing agency to craft and execute a comprehensive strategy that aligns with this initial plan. The strategy will encompass several key elements: a brand identity and activation toolkit, marketing content, key region events, public relations, and paid media for Gozo European Region of Gastronomy 2026. The agency will also be responsible for monitoring the visibility and overall success of the Region.

Effective communication among stakeholders will be pivotal for the plan's success. Our engagement through the Bid Book process has enabled us to cultivate relationships with core stakeholders, their affiliated groups, and other stakeholders such as local action groups, NGOs, and private organisations within the region. Furthermore, we will appoint a Manager to ensure seamless communication between the Gozo Regional Council (as the coordinator) and the marketing agency.

In addition, we will allocate additional funds towards distinct messaging and strategic channel selection to effectively reach the intended audiences of the region's flagship initiatives outlined in this Bid Book, including but not limited to the Gozo Quality Mark and the Gozo Food Trail.

Objectives

Aligned with our overarching vision for Gozo, this plan will aim towards consistent and evidence-based messaging, actively engage with stakeholders at local and international levels to raise awareness and reach target groups, promote the long-term value and tangible impact of research outcomes, and implement communications strategies that endorse the application of sustainability principles.

Our activities will be guided by these principles:

Consolidation

Maximising synergies by combining independent activities into a unified promotional strategy;

Accessibility

Customising tools, channels, content, messaging, and activities to suit target groups;

Longevity

Documenting and creating content and materials with relevance beyond the region year's duration;

Engagement

Fostering active participation and enthusiastic involvement of different target groups;

Ownership

Providing resources that empower stakeholders to actively ensure the region's sustained success.

Target Groups

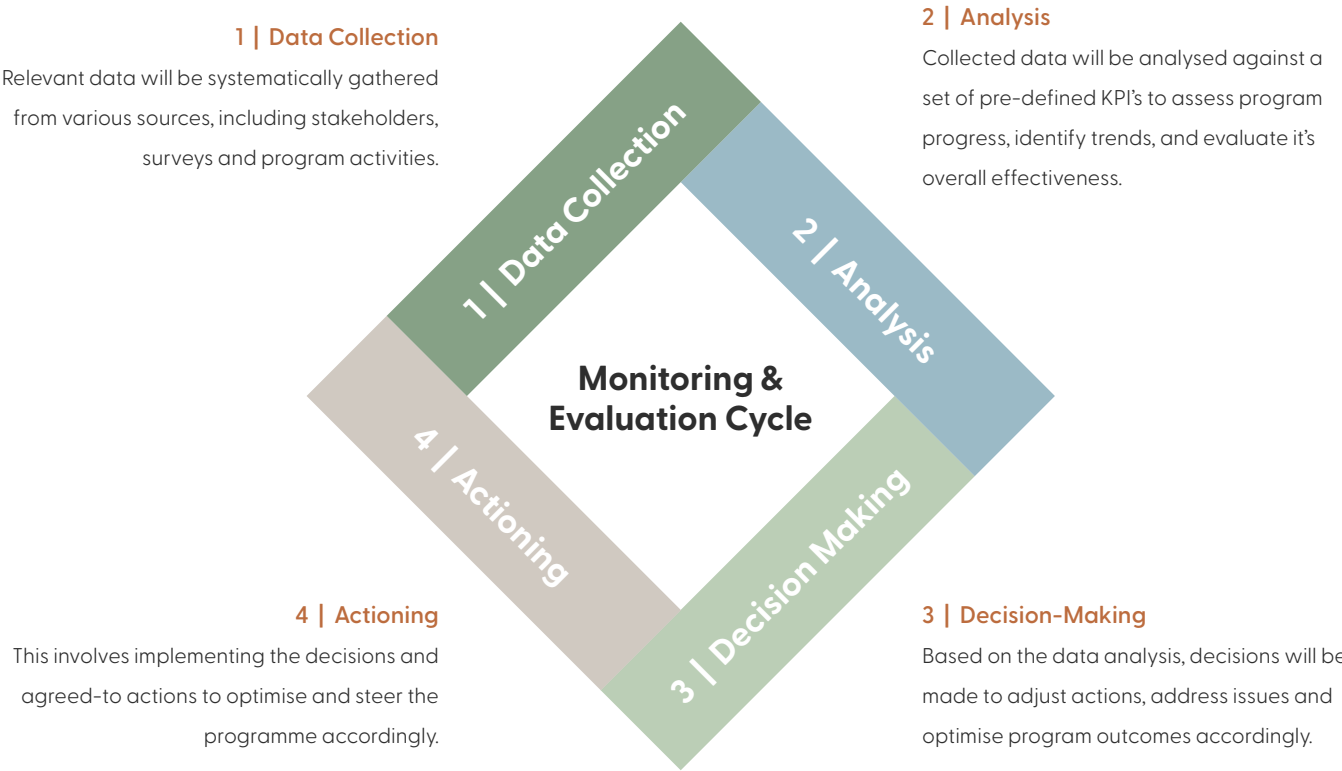
We identify these groups as key players for Gozo European Region of Gastronomy 2026. Actively engaging and communicating with them will enable us to achieve our vision for Gozo as outlined in this Bid Book:

- Local gastronomy stakeholders, including producers;
- The Gozitan public, including locals and expatriate communities;
- Local young people;
- Domestic and international visitors;
- International gastronomy network.



Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

Monitoring and evaluation activities play a pivotal role in the proposed programme, serving as the cornerstone for assessing its impact and ensuring its successful execution. To achieve this, we are committed to implementing a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation Framework encompassing a multi-stage process of data collection, analysis, decision-making, and actioning. This system will provide a structured approach to continuously gauge the progress, effectiveness, and efficiency of the programme. The monitoring and evaluation methodology adopted is diagrammatically illustrated below.



At the heart of this monitoring and evaluation system lies a robust Key Performance Indicator (KPI) system. These KPIs will serve as the pulse of the programme, allowing us to assess and validate its health throughout its lifecycle and after its implementation. These will play a vital role in evaluating the programme's performance during its implementation phase by providing timely insights into the programme's progress, allowing for adjustments and improvements. By design, the KPIs shall be linked to the key focus areas described earlier to elevate the coherency and consistency of the programme.

Underpinning the KPIs will be a set of data collection methods and techniques. These data collection methods may include stakeholder workshops, feedback surveys, and other appropriate techniques, and will serve to systematically gather relevant information, ensuring accurate and comprehensive assessment of the programme's performance and impact. This integrated approach to monitoring and evaluation, supported by a robust KPI framework, ensures that our programme remains on track, adaptable, and continually delivers on its objectives, both in the short and long term.

Prior to the finalisation of the proposed Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, the proposed network of stakeholders shall also be responsible for:

- 1 Identifying targets (critical success factors) for each of the KPIs, serving as a benchmark against which success may be measured;
- 2 Establishing long-term KPIs as part of a benefits realisation management approach to elevate sustainability. These higher level KPIs will aim to assess the intended outcomes of the programme following its completion and are intended to gauge the enduring and long-term impact of the programme on the region, ensuring lasting success;
- 3 The development of a comprehensive data collection plan to ensure that all relevant information and data is collected through the appropriate channels, to a sufficient level of quality, and in a timely manner;
- 4 Opening the framework to stakeholder feedback ahead of its finalisation to promote ownership and achieve buy-in;
- 5 Launching a pilot testing phase of the framework before its launch, allowing identification of any practical challenges and making the necessary adjustments before full deployment; and
- 6 Identifying and assigning resources, including budget, personnel, and technology, which will be allocated to support the implementation of the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. Adequate resourcing is essential for the success of these activities.



Photo: Wirestock

Hereunder, for each of the Focus Areas, we identify a first set of KPIs and data collection methods which are grouped into various monitoring areas. The Monitoring and Evaluation Plan will be carried out with a research institution together with the Gozo, European Region of Gastronomy project team.

Focus Area	Monitoring Areas	KPI's	Data Collection
Authenticity	Quality	Number of Gozo Quality Mark awards	Data readily available and provided by the Gozo Artisan Network
	Stakeholder engagement	Number of local stakeholders engaged on safeguarding authenticity	Data maintained by network of stakeholders
	Supporting Research	Number of research papers published on authentic Gozitan gastronomy	Data provided by academic institutions
		Number of views and citations on published research	Data readily available from online research platforms
	Experiences	Number of authentic food experiences organised	Data maintained by network of stakeholders
		Attendance in authentic food events	Number of registrations for events recorded by event organisers
		Satisfaction with authentic food events	Feedback forms delivered to attendees following event

Focus Area	Monitoring Areas	KPI's	Data Collection
Awareness and Education	Awareness	Number of awareness raising events organised	Data maintained by network of stakeholders
		Engagement in awareness-raising events	Number of attendees in awareness raising events
			Engagement with audio-visual material (e.g. social media posts)
		Effectiveness of awareness-raising activities	Surveys with general public to gauge awareness around Gozitan gastronomy
	Education	Number of specific educational initiatives organised	Data provided by respective academic institutions
		Uptake of educational initiatives	
		Number of research papers published on Gozitan gastronomy	
	Business Creation	Number of new agribusiness ventures in Gozo	Data provided by the National Statistics Office
Linking and Connecting	Participation & Collaboration	Number of international collaboration projects	Data maintained by network of stakeholders
		Number of IGCAT activities and platforms in which the region participates	
		Number of collaborations between stakeholders	
	Stakeholder engagement	Number of structured stakeholder engagement activities carried out	
		Number of stakeholders engaged	
	Innovation	Adoption of innovative practices in the industry	Interviews or surveys with agribusinesses
		Number of research projects in collaboration with educational institutions	Data obtained from respective educational institutions
	Planning	Number of actions successfully implemented as part of the proposed strategy	Data reported at a Ministerial level
Sustaining	Sustainable Practices	Number of sustainable solutions for the gastronomic field discussed and implemented with key actors	Interviews or surveys with agribusinesses and other stakeholders
		Number of events adopting the Food Sustainability Guidelines	Conversations and follow-up surveys with event organisers
		Number of gastronomical tourism sustainable initiatives identified and launched	Data maintained by network of stakeholders
		Number of awareness and educational initiatives on sustainability	
		Number of collaborations with economic operators (e.g. restaurants and hotels) on initiatives which align with the Farm to Fork Strategy and "slow" presence	
Nourishing	Healthier living	Volume of local and healthy produce and products sold	Surveys with wholesalers
		Number of options on restaurant menus	Surveys with restaurant owners
		Number of healthy food stalls at major events	Surveys with event organisers

Financial Framework

The total projected budget at this stage which will be dedicated towards this initiative is estimated at a total of €1,777,805.80.

This amount is made up of a mix of recurrent administrative and organisational costs, planned costs related to the participation in the international Platform meetings (based on current rates), projected totals for the implementation of projects proposed based on the current programme for 2026 (project concepts submitted through the open call as well as other planned projects supporting the goals and priorities set for this year) and projected promotional costs which can also be partially covered through existing budgets and current efforts. To reach this projected amount, we will also be needing and requesting outside funding. At this point, we reserve the right to add some further elements to the programme throughout the next years, with the possibility of amending the budget if relevant and necessary. In case some projects do not materialise, we will redistribute our projected budget accordingly.

Administration and Operations

Includes personnel, recurrent operational expenses, membership fees, the evaluation and monitoring exercise, participation in network meetings and competitions. This accounts for 19% of the total budget.

Project Implementation

Includes projects/initiatives which will be led by the core stakeholders as well as the implementation of projects that were received through the open call for proposals. Together with the owners of the projects, we will be approaching other entities, local and European funding programmes and tapping into our own funding and resources to raise the necessary funds for these projects. This accounts for 67% of the total budget.

Promotional Costs

Includes any costs relating to creating a brand identity for the year, generating marketing content and paid mediamanagement. This accounts for 14% of the total budget. The total amount excludes any budget related to current existing events - featuring gastronomy - that happen on a regular basis.



Photo: MaltaDoors, Lisa Gwenn



Towards Gozo: European Region of Gastronomy 2026

This exercise was particularly helpful with identifying the goals and priority areas for the year and to better understand the context as well as the sentiment around the subject.

We estimate that around 100 people were directly involved in the initial conversations around the Bid Book for the European Region of Gastronomy title. This number involves the core stakeholders and the respective teams, workshop participants, the general public as well as collaborators who have approached us with initiatives and projects to be included in the Bid Book.

We have initiated the process by organising a public workshop which helped us to highlight the primary strengths and opportunities which this Platform can help us develop further as well as the threats and weaknesses in the gastronomic sector in Gozo (and in general) that need to be addressed.

This workshop was followed by an in-depth analysis of the outcomes as well as some further conversations with the core stakeholders, with other stakeholders as well as potential collaborators. This, in turn, led to the consolidation of the goals and the creation of an open call for proposals, which encouraged individuals, organisations and entities to submit ideas for projects to be included in the Bid Book. We received a total of 23 different project proposals, ranging from artist-led research projects to publications to workshops and events. Towards the end of the process, we had another structured conversation with the core stakeholders to shape the priorities as well as the actual commitments, helping us shape a more concrete and tangible bid which aligns with the needs outlined as well as the priorities of the European Region of Gastronomy Platform.

Governance

Core stakeholders

Gozo Regional Council

The Gozo Regional Council is a Local Government set-up representing the 14 Local Councils in Gozo. In line with its remit to provide the Local Councils with assistance within the social, cultural, touristic and environmental spheres. The Gozo Regional Council has embarked on the European Region of Gastronomy project to promote Gozo's gastronomy as an asset and a catalyst for sustainable development in the region. Through a coordinated approach which will promote coordination and collaboration as the main driving forces, the Gozo Regional Council will be spearheading this international initiative which will, for the first time ever in local history, focus exclusively on gastronomy. The actions proposed within this Bid Book will be put into practice in tandem with the implementation of the Regional Cultural Strategy launched in 2022, and aiming to empower cultural development within the Region.

Institute of Tourism, Gozo

Established in 1987, the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) is Malta's main educational institution for hospitality and tourism. Offering a wide range of study programmes from Foundation to Master's Degree level, ITS provides students with both theoretical and practical education in specialised labs and kitchens. ITS also provides opportunities for students to pursue further training and specialisations, equipping them with a competitive edge in the industry. The Institute of Tourism currently has two campuses; one in Luqa (Malta) and another one in Qala (Gozo).

Gozo Regional Development Authority

The Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) was officially launched on the 14th of September 2020. The Authority has a regulatory and consultative role and addresses an important gap in the socio-economic development of Gozo by developing and streamlining regional policies and by overseeing their implementation through the adoption of modern project management tools.

Gozo Business Chamber

The Gozo Business Chamber was founded by a public deed on the 20th December 1999, to promote the common interests of business operators in Gozo. The Gozo Business Chamber safeguards and promotes the common interests of its members, addresses challenges and issues, acts as a mediator between members and authorities, represents members, promotes commercial opportunities and fosters cooperation between members.

Gozo Tourism Association

An association which unites, promotes and safeguards individuals, companies, partnerships and associations that operate in the tourism industry in Gozo. The GTA acts as a contact point for all the stakeholders in the field and promotes Gozo as a tourism destination. The association organises the yearly Gozo Tourism awards.

Gozo NGOs Association

The Gozo NGOs Association is an umbrella organisation set up in 2003 with the aim of encouraging cooperation between NGOs in Gozo and to act as a partner with the Ministry of Gozo in process required to prepare the Gozo to meet the challenges that the Gozo based voluntary sector would have to face on Malta's accession to the EU.



We are aiming for this structure to allow for multiple voices to be heard and to ensure that we reach a wide range of audiences.

Gozo College

The Gozo College is essentially a group of 11 Primary Schools, 1 Middle School and 1 Secondary School in Gozo. The College manages and administers these different schools, with the aim of providing a sound and solid base for a holistic education for school children in Gozo.

The Core Stakeholders have all agreed to form part of the Local Stakeholders' network. We consider the 'network' as a preferable option because this suggests an open approach which will allow for a certain level of dynamism and flexibility within the group. This is particularly relevant in our case to respect the individuality of each stakeholder and to allow for more collaborators to join the group in the run up to Gozo becoming a European Region of Gastronomy. We have listed the creation of this network as one of our initiatives because collaboration and coordination between the different stakeholders is one of the challenging areas we need to address (through this network). Governance will therefore be constituted as a priority. This 'flexibility' will also allow for a

diverse group of contributors to be directly involved in the process. Apart from the core stakeholders and the Ambassadors, we have already had interest from academics, the general public and creatives to be involved.

We are aiming for this structure to allow for multiple voices to be heard and to ensure that we reach a wide range of audiences hailing from the political, academic and the communities' sphere whilst encouraging knowledge-sharing, open collaboration as well as science-based and expert input to support all the initiatives taken. The Cultural Manager within the Gozo Regional Council will act as the coordinator, working in close collaboration with all the core stakeholders, external partners and collaborators to ensure that everything runs smoothly and according to plans. The Manager will also be ensuring that there is active involvement by the general public in all events and conversations, in direct collaboration with the Marketing Manager overseeing campaigns and communications.

Other Entities Involved



Graphic: Vipa_s/Shutterstock.com

These other entities of relevance to our project have shown interest in being collaborators and active members of the local network.

The Gozo Action Group Foundation

The Gozo Action Group Foundation (GAGF) is a foundation composed of a group of local councils and private entities operating within the Island of Gozo in Malta. The Foundation is responsible for implementing the LEADER Programme under the Rural Development Programme for Malta (2014-2020) within its territory, amongst others. The Foundation's overarching objective is to develop the rural localities in its territory so as to improve the quality of life and make this territory more economically prosperous. The foundation is made up of the 14 Gozitan Local Councils that are represented on the Decision Committee by three mayors, the general business sector represented by the Gozo Business Chamber, the Gozo Tourism Association, the Maltese Islands Agri Federation (MIAF) and the Gozo NGO Association. The GAGF, with the same partners, has been operating successfully since 2008. The Previous programming period was the first experience of the Foundation in the implementation of the LEADER programme. The GAGF successfully set up a fully functioning office and has gained experience in the evaluation of projects, communication of the LEADER initiative to the region as well as promoting LEADER.

The Government Experimental Farm

In 2008 the Maltese Government presented a new concept for the island called Eco-Gozo, a vision which aims to transform Gozo and Gozitan society into a sustainable reality, not only environmentally, but also socially and economically. Clearly the agricultural sector will play a significant role in bringing about this transformation. The Ministry for Gozo recognised that the scarcity of available background data and the general lack of research facilities required to fulfill the quest for all-round sustainability needed to be remedied. As a result of the most important proposals of the Eco-Gozo programme is the establishment of a state-of the art centre for research, development and innovation in ecology and agriculture. The Government Experimental Farm (GEF) at Xewkija was chosen as the base for the development of this centre. This farm, which was set up in 1958, intended to improve agricultural productivity of the island both qualitatively and quantitatively. The farm has a total area of about 9 hectares, of which 7.2 hectares is arable land. Activities over the years included trials concerning new growing and rearing techniques, demonstration of new technologies, educational courses for farmers, trials of new seed varieties, trials of local vegetables among other things. Currently

works are underway to transform the Government Experimental Farm in a Centre for Innovation, Rural Sciences and Environmental Management (CIRSEM). The main mission of the centre will be research, education and dissemination of knowledge and technological advancement in Mediterranean agriculture, food production and environmental management.

Gozo confederation of agriculture and fisheries

The Gozo Confederation of Agriculture and Fisheries is the organization representating and protecting the interests of Gozo's agricultural and fisheries sectors. It recognises farmers and fishermen as entrepreneur; the protagonists who pursue economic development within the primary sector and the technological and social importance of their enterprises. The Confederation also takes care of the problems of young farmers, women entrepreneurs in agriculture and fishermen. It represents the vast majority of farmers and fishermen in Gozo, thus becoming the interlocutor with the Government for this important sector in Gozo. The presence of the Confederation in Gozo is embodied in a widespread manner. The headquarters is in Xewkija, Gozo in the historic Gozitano Agricultural Village – a monument to Gozo's agricultural history. Through its members, it is also present in Brussels, at CEJA.

Gozo Artisan Network

The aim of the Gozo Artisan Network is to unite and bring together all persons, companies, partnerships or associations operating in the artisan and craftmaking sector in Gozo in order to safeguard the interests of local artisans and craftspeople and promote excellence in the local craft product/service both nationally and internationally.

Tal-Fuklar Folk Group

Tal-Fuklar Folk Group is a folk group from the island of Gozo. Its main aim is to increase the awareness of traditional Maltese culture with a special attention to crafts, costumes, music, għanġiet and makkjetti (traditional songs and lullabies), amongst the local and foreign communities, especially amongst the younger generations.

Merill

Merill is a de facto social enterprise that brings together a number of farmers, breeders and artisans operating in the Maltese Islands. They aim at empowering their members to diversify their income and offers thanks to rural tourism, until envisioning a circular economy where tourism supports agriculture and crafts and vice versa.

Over the last decade, they have worked closely with the main actors – namely small-scale farmers and artisans. They grew a solid network based on mutual trust which carries out different actions to:

- Increase awareness about local agriculture
- Add value to the farmers and artisans' venues and products
- Bridge the gap between producers and consumers
- Revive traditions and keeping them alive

The goals and actions they undertake are inherently intertwined, all contributing to the overarching mission of bolstering Malta's rural community.

Policy References

National Food Policy

The National Food Policy, launched in 2023, aims to align mindsets and behaviours amongst the various stakeholders across the food ecosystem including government, producers, consumers and business in a common direction, in alignment with national priorities set out in various sectoral and thematic strategies, Malta's National Post-Pandemic Strategy and the EU's Green Deal, Farm to Fork Strategy and National Action Plan for Organic Food, amongst others.

Malta's National Food Policy is built on three pillars:

- Pillar 1. Igniting Pride in Local Food and Nurturing a Knowledge-Driven Food Culture
- Pillar 2. Securing the Viability of Local Production: Empowering Economic Activity for the Present and Beyond
- Pillar 3. Future-Proofing Food: Strengthening Resilience and Security

National Tourism Strategy 2021 - 2030

The current tourism strategy is entitled 'Recover. Rethink. Revitalise' and covers three-staged premise:

- A recovery effort from the chaos wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on protecting and preserving the vital components of Malta's Visitor Economy in the background of the challenges posed by the pandemic;
- A longer-term re-evaluation and repositioning to reflect evolutionary forces as well as new post pandemic and Climate Change realities – both negative and positive;
- A detailed and committed programme of deliverables covering the various strategic challenges addressed by the strategy with a view to being able to deliver a stronger, more sustainable and competitive tourism industry by 2030.

This strategy was launched by the Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection. One of its important objectives in relation to Gozo, is the identification of the region as a distinct Tourism destination. It acknowledges 'gastronomy' as being one of the main pillars on which this updated positioning relies together with nature, wellness and wellbeing, outdoor activities and underwater activities.

<https://tourism.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/National-Tourism-Strategy-2021-2030.pdf>

The Gozo Regional Development Strategy

The Gozo Regional Development Strategy was launched in 2023 after a thorough consultation process. It aims to be a central tool in the development of Gozo, expressing a clear, coherent vision and serving as a roadmap for the next ten years. The theme of the strategy 'Gozo, An Island of Villages' aims to outline the need for Gozo to safeguard its heritage and distinctive features. The main thematic areas are: Promoting sensible use of land and the environment, re-aligning economic growth with wellbeing and revaluating Gozo's identity. This strategy acknowledges the bid for Gozo to become a European Region of Gastronomy in 2026 and places an emphasis on the importance of recognising Gozitan food as one of the central factors in recognising and reinforcing the Gozitan identities.

https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GRDA_RDS-Document_A4_VH_2023_Web-1.pdf

The Regional Cultural Strategy

The cultural strategy for the Gozo Region outlines the overarching cultural themes and priorities for the region from 2022 onwards. This strategy, a first for the region, was developed with the Regional Council, Local Councils, non-governmental cultural organisations, Public Cultural Organisations, creative practitioners and residents of the localities. The region-specific themes for Gozo are (i) Enhancing cultural connectivity and dialogue (ii) Culture for internationalisation (iii) : Innovation in cultural tourism and the overall 'cultural offer', (iv) Improving regional cultural governance, (v) Engaging more citizens in culture and arts. It is within this strategy that there is a first reference to the European Region of Gastronomy as an important Platform for Gozo to address theme number ii, i.e. culture for internationalisation. The strategy specifically states that 'gastronomy as a unique selling point for internationalisation' is a priority 'to celebrate a distinctive Gozo heritage in cuisine, farming, seafood and the rituals associated with gastronomy. This might include a bid for the European Region of Gastronomy title.' This was what spurred the Gozo Regional Council to go ahead with applying to become a European Region of Gastronomy.

<https://artscouncilmalta.gov.mt/files/uploads/misc/Arts%20Council%20Malta%20Regional%20Cultural%20Strategy%20Booklet%20Gozo%20EN.pdf>

National Agricultural Policy for the Maltese islands 2018 - 2028

The Agricultural Policy for the Maltese Islands 2018-2028 is intended to provide a clear direction to all relevant stakeholders ranging from public entities involved with certification, permitting and decision making to private entities directly involved in the agricultural scenario who intend to invest or diversify their business. As the overarching objective for this Agricultural Policy, a 'vision' for the Maltese agriculture sector was identified and agreed between government entities, representatives of the private sector and the farming community.

This vision entailed the development of a policy that targets the following critical targets:

- Increasing the competitiveness of active farmers and livestock breeders by focusing on quality and embracing diversification;
- Facilitating the entry of young farmers by creating a cost-effective agri-business sector;
- Fostering sustainability of farming activities by adapting to the local geo-climatic conditions;
- Ensuring that farmland is managed by genuine farmers for agricultural purposes and related activities.

https://agricultureservices.gov.mt/en/agricultural_directorate/Documents/nationalAgriculturalPolicy/napFinal.pdf

A note on Agriculture in Gozo, published by the GRDA

This document outlines a region specific outlook in relation to the latest developments, trends and opportunities in agriculture in Gozo. In its concluding remarks it highlights the need for fiscal policies which address the challenges faced by this sector. This to address the current rise in prices and to encourage more young people to look for employment in agriculture.

<https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Agriculture-in-Gozo-Final-14.06.22.pdf>

CAP Strategic Plan for Malta

The Maltese CAP Plan targets the needs of the agricultural sector with the specific aim of providing adequate resources to meet future demands. These include environmental and climate objectives, fair income for farmers and workers, improving rural conditions and infrastructure, new technologies and digitalisation, as well as farm resilience.

https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/cap-my-country/cap-strategic-plans/malta_en#goal-and-strategy

The National Action Plan for Organic Food

The National Action Plan for Organic Food is based on a vision created to offer consumers high quality, local organic food from farming and aquaculture, whilst driving sustainable income for Maltese and Gozitan producers.

This will result in the diversification of local organic production, more access to organic produce in retail stores and markets to meet rising domestic demand and strengthen ecosystem around the organic food sector in Malta. Malta's National Action Plan for Organic Food also focuses on promoting organic food production for public health, climate change mitigation and biodiversity protection aims.

In line with the European Commission's 'Farm to Fork' Strategy, the EU has set a target of 25% of its agricultural land being organic by 2030 and while also substantially increasing organic aquaculture by the same year. Malta's share of organic production should reach 5% of total cultivated area by 2030, up from its current 0.6%. This target is also in cohesion with the national food policy that is currently being developed for Malta and other national strategies that support organic production and consumption.

<https://agriculture.gov.mt/publications/national-action-plan-for-organic-food/>

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The Gozitan Legends were originally taken from the following publication:

Bezzina J., 2001, *Forty Legends from Gozo – Stories of Bygone Times 9, Third Edition, Gaulitana, Gozo.*

The legends were revised for this Bid Book by the author.

The poem Mananni by Ġorġ Pisani was taken from the following publication:

Cassola A., Degabriele G., Mifsud M., Pace P., Sammut A., 1993, *Qawsalla, University of Malta, Malta*



Photo: Visit Gozo.com



Photo: REMAX Malta

