

Quality course

HAVE YOU EVER felt like playing tourist? You know, getting in your car and head off in any direction to see what is going on beyond the usual circle of friends and places.

Last week we did just that. We headed south towards the Three Cities. This is not an area I know very well or visit frequently, but I like the feel of the place. The proximity to the water and the historical aspect of the area plus all the grandiose architecture makes the place very special. Cospicua has a buzzing atmosphere and the Vittoriosa waterfront looks like it will eventually be very chic and expensive.

Kalkara creek has got to be one of the most serene and beautiful spots in the whole of Malta and once Vittoriosa is up and running I am sure that Kalkara will be a favourite spot with quality visitors. It is just a shame that there is nowhere to eat here.

The creek is the ideal place where no chi-chi regional restaurants should spring up. We had been in the area for about two hours and it suddenly dawned on me that, apart from the enormous number of take-aways, we had not come across a single restaurant.

It is a known fact that when it comes to finding good food, quality visitors search for places where the locals eat. Whether the locals would frequent good restaurants, should they open up in Kalkara, I don't know, but burgers, hot dogs and deep-fried, water-injected, tasteless chickens are not my idea of fun; so we headed towards Marsaxlokk.

We strolled along the waterfront examining the many restaurants available. Most of them were busy with Maltese people, which if I were encouraging, *Lampuki*, chips and salad - Lm2.95, seemed to be the tourist menu in most of the restaurants.

Worth a try, I thought; after all how can you go wrong with a bit of *lampuka* in Malta's main fishing village. We walked in, sat down, and were shown the menu.

I said that we would like the *lampuka*. The waiter looked at me strangely and asked me if I would like some wine to drink. I thought rosé. The choice was 'Maltese', made from "a specific blend of quality varietals" or Portuguese. For various reasons, I opted for 'Maltese'.

Now I am the first one to say that everyone has an opinion and a budget to respect, and that the world of wine would not be as exciting if medals or critics were to be taken too seriously, but honestly, how can anyone describe this 'Maltese' wine as wine, is beyond me!

It has the most unnatural colour, reminding me of those watery cordials, essence ice lollies that we used to buy for one cent each. A strange taste of sweetness that is obviously not coming from the part fermentation of natural sugars and a not typical of this kind of wine alcohol presence, which at 12 per cent is completely unbalanced with the also weird, exotic and sour-tasting acid.

I don't know how popular this wine is, but maybe it explains why I meet so many people who tell me that they don't like rosé wine, which is a real shame, especially when one considers the versatility of this kind of wine and our climate!

Needless to say, the *lampuka* was reheated until not a drop of flavour was left in it, and the Mediterranean salad included tinned mushrooms. I'd rather not tell you about the dessert!

What I found very strange is that after a quick look around the restaurant most people there seemed to be very happy. One was having what was being described on the menu as a seafood platter. Frozen mussels, clams and prawns. Now clearly, this was not a question of money as this

by Michael Tabone

platter was around Lm9, but what is sad is to know that this particular customer probably thinks that that's what real mussels and clams taste like.

The restaurateur might argue that his customers are happy and that he is always full of people who keep coming back. And I suppose that he is quite correct. However, that argument is very short-sighted and stagnant. A modern, creative society must consistently question its standards, especially since our culture constantly crosses that of others and a good way of examining the state of the nation's well-being is on the table.

At this year's Safi feast the organisers held a *Lejla Maltija*. Safi is a wonderful small village, and the women of the club prepared some *bigilla*, snails and *hobz biz-zejt*. They were all very good and at very cheap prices. They also set up a burger and chips stand, supposedly for the children. In reality no one was eating the real food, except me and a few others while the children's stand had a continuous queue all through the evening.

While giving a wine lecture to the staff of one of our top restaurants, I asked them their opinion on wine in general. Most admitted that they do not like wine and that most of their clients are crazy for spending so much money for a bottle of wine.

Now, I ask you, what's the point of teaching these people how to serve wine and how to look after the restaurant's guests if every time a client orders a bottle of wine that costs more than Lm12, they think he is crazy?

For many years critics have criticised hotels, catering companies, general state of our hospitality industry, but I think that I for one was half-

wrong. The truth is that the standard and quality offered is the standard that most people want and are happy with.

We are a nation of corned beef eaters. We drink bad 'wine' and criticise good wine for being light. We call margarine, butter and blue cheese, parsley cheese. We don't entertain at home, just in case we damage the plastic covers on our sofas. We think that grilling was invented by the Australians and good, healthy food by Nancy. We are prepared to pay bourgeois prices for peasant food.

A lot of us accept and applaud bad service because we shy away from complaining. Our politicians allow and sometimes protect inferior products to be marketed as quality products. They call sparkling wine, made in Malta, Champagne and protect the idea that wine is made from sugar. Let's face it, most of us would not know quality if it hits us in the face.

Any decent restaurant will confirm how difficult it is to find good, knowledgeable staff. And they don't mean people who know the difference between Chateaufort du Pape and Chateaubriand. Simple things that should have been taught to our children from an early age. Like for example how to welcome guests or how to lay a table.

Simple tasks that distinguishes good hosts from bad plate carriers; good living from existing.

Clearly, we have to learn how to recognise and appreciate quality. We have to start teaching our youngsters to demand and expect quality.

Our primary schools should include the art of gastronomy and living in their curriculum: organise visits to good quality producers, importers, restaurants and hotels to

Clearly, we need to learn how to eat before we learn how to cook!



PAULO BONNICI flanked by David Maxwell Scott, former Justerini & Brooks Ltd. managing director (left) and Patrick Millet, Scotch Heritage director (right)

Forty years of J&B in Malta

PAOLO BONNICI LTD. recently welcomed guests to an entertaining at the SAS Radisson Baypoint Ballroom in St George's Bay to celebrate 40 years of J&B Rare Scotch Whisky in Malta.

Guests were piped into the ballroom by the Jackson Pipe Band in true Scottish style. Giant J&B decorations covered the ballroom while eye-catching J&B human "statues" posed and hostesses in J&B bikinis mingled with the crowd. Even the

Paul Giordmaina band got into the spirit of the evening wearing J&B waistcoats.

The guests enjoyed music and a foot tapping show by the YADA Dancers taking the guests through the years with familiar tunes.

Speeches were delivered by Stefano Novarese from UDV Italia, responsible for J&B in Malta, David Maxwell Scott, former Justerini & Brooks Ltd managing director, Patrick Millet, Scotch Whisky heritage director, who all flew in specially for the occasion, and Paolo Bonnici representing Paolo Bonnici Ltd.

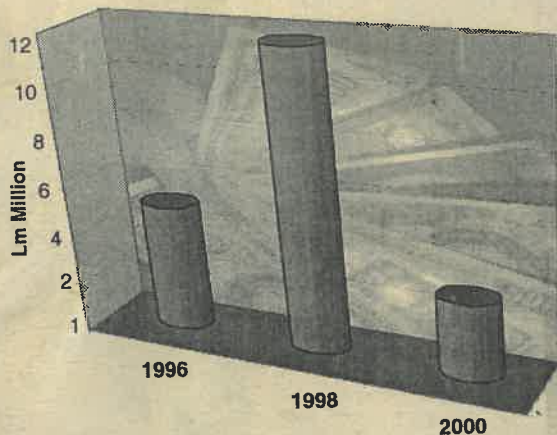
Mr Bonnici thanked the guests for making J&B such a success over the years and urged the guests to enjoy the rest of the evening as fireworks were let off in the J&B colours and Sergio Carbonaro got on the DJ stand. The YADA Dancers and J&B hostesses made sure everyone found a partner and the real partying began.



ministry for the environment

2000-2001 highlights

Change in Government expenditure in debt servicing (1996-2000)



- Works on the Manoel Island and Tigné Project as well as the Cottonera Project started during the past year. The Valletta Cruise Liner Passenger Terminal has been approved. The total investment in these projects is of Lm170 million.
- We are committed to conserve our historical and cultural heritage. In the last three years, over Lm3.2 million have been invested in restoration works. 20 restoration projects have already been completed, works are currently in hand on a further 30 projects, whilst 45 other projects are currently at the planning stage. The projects include the Auberge d'Italia, the Auberge de Baviere and the church of Santa Caterina d'Italia.
- Embellishment and rehabilitation projects continue to be high on our agenda. The Sliema promenade and the first phase of the St Julian's promenade projects have been completed. Over Lm3 million have been invested in these and other similar projects since 1999.
- We are now importing diesel with 60% less sulphur content and petrol with 62% less lead content.
- The Integrated Solid Waste Management Strategy has been approved and is being implemented. This is Malta's largest ever environmental project.

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GOVERNMENT 1998-2003: The Third Year