

Lifestyle & Culture



maie & Diary



An Accademia Italiana della Cucina event

Together with the Istituto Italiano di Cultura the Accademia organized this interesting event about Italian and Maltese food. Massimiliana Tomaselli is a ball of energy. Even her emails seem to arrive in my in-box with smoke coming out of them. She is full of plans, ideas and is seemingly thinking up an endless stream of events. She books me weeks ahead: "Save the date... I will give you details later on," she tells me mysteriously. This time round it was three short talks to discuss the Cucina Maltese e italiana a confronto, tra commissioni e contaminazioni," and was taking place at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, in Valletta.

My heart almost misses a beat when something is on in Valletta. The complications of parking immediately come to mind. But thanks to Massimiliana I escaped the traumatic parking and enjoyed the evening. As the Delegate for Malta of the *Accademia Italiana della cucina* she spoke of the art of gastronomy which is a mirror of society – this being a concept of particular interest to the Accademia. She explained that there is a relationship between the art of the table and the other arts such as the architecture of dining rooms, the accompanying music, banquets, decorations on the walls, fine ceramics, silver and sculptures fashioned by goldsmiths for use on the table.

She then gave the audience a brief history of Italian cuisine from the Roman period up to present times: from Apicus in the first century A.D., Bartolomeo Scappi in the 16th century, to Pellegrino Artusi at the end of the 19th century, always focusing on the cultural aspects, especially the meaning of food in the different periods and for the different classes.

Signora Tomaselli went into some detail over bread, which she said was "a social indicator: white, soft bread made with wheat for the rich; bread made with poorer cereals for the poor." Meat and game were just for the aristocracy while a vegetarian diet was for the general population. Exhibitions of food were brought around the villages from time to time. The culture of power, she explained, coincides with the culture of food.

She then spoke of the characteristics of the Italian cuisine which is Regional. "All regions have their own products... it is simple, using few ingredients and focuses mainly on the quality of the ingredients rather



The President of the Accademia, Signora Massimiliana Tomaselli



Mr Liam Gauci, Curator, Maritime Museum



Mrs Matty Cremona, food lover and author (right) and Mrs Sue Mizzi

than on the complexity of preparation. It finds its roots in the Italian family's style of life: they know how to mix the ingredients and for how long they need to cook a particular dish, she told us.

The next speaker was Matty Cremona who has always been interested in food and has written at least three books, the latest, which I bought on that occasion is *The Way We Ate* with a wealth of recipes, reminiscences and information. That evening she spoke about *The Italian Influences in Maltese Cuisine*. Mrs Cremona explained why we eat what we eat and said that geographical position and cultural background have a great deal to do with these influences. She quoted Jean Quintin D'Autun's *Earliest description of Malta*, published in 1536: "Malta is very fortunate for this one reason, namely, that Sicily, very fertile in all kinds of grains, lies nearby and is for the inhabitants as good as a granary, where otherwise they would die of hunger." Malta, she said, rarely, if ever, produced enough wheat to be self sufficient. "Large shipments of wheat and other cereals and pulses were imported annually free from Sicilian import duties." In her well documented and illustrated talk Mrs Cremona explained that Malta had a serious problem - wood supply. Again

quoting D'Autun: "The inhabitants make use of certain kinds of thistles instead of wood, which together with dried cows' dung, is used for the bakers' ovens." This, she maintained went on for hundreds of years. In rural areas bread was often made at home and taken to the bakery to bake. "Payment for this was in the form of thistles gathered as fuel for the oven. This was a lengthy process which is perhaps why it took place once a week, but the bread was much better quality and kept well." In the past, she explained, bread was the main feature of most meals. "People ate bread with a few dried tomatoes, olives, onions, cheese or anchovies with a drizzle of oil at lunchtime, and with a bowl of *minestra* in the evening. She went on to speak about the popularity of broad/Fava beans and *bigilla*, made with dried broad beans, "very similar in principle to the patés in the south of Italy."

Mrs Cremona then spoke of the artichoke, the forerunner of which was a wild thistle and eaten by the Ancient Romans. She quoted Pliny the Elder who had commented that 'even the monstrosities of the earth are turned to purposes of gluttony.' Again she quoted D'Autun who recorded that there were two sorts of thistles the Maltese ate, a sour sort, as well as the ones the Italians now eat 'with so much relish' and which were to

be found growing in Malta in great abundance.

The Maltese word *qaqocc* is derived from the Sicilian dialect, she told the audience. Then she tackled ricotta and its origins and remarked that Maltese ricotta uses sea water as a curdling agent, just as they still do in Pantelleria.

And so onto tomatoes and *kun-serva* "the more traditional version of which is exactly like Sicilian *strattu*." Mrs Cremona said that it was not until 1790 when Neapolitan chef Francesco Leonardi wrote *L'Apicio Moderno* that tomato sauce was paired with pasta.

Feasting and Fasting next: from zeppoli or sfing ta' San Guzepp "which are similar to those found all over Italy especially those around Palermo and Naples. Many of our sweets have been influenced by Italy: Cannoli, *pastini tal-lewz* or *pasti di Mandorle* and *qubbajt*; the much loved Ottijiet 'very similar to Sicilian Biscotti Regina,' " Matty told us. I carry kilos of *ottijiet* to the States, as my daughter there loves them.

Another favourite is Timpana, similar to the Sicilian *timballo* "except that the Maltese version is not quite as rich," the speaker said. She then spoke of the similarity between *pastizzi* and *sfogliatelle napoletane*.

mbeoit@independent.com.mt



Trezza where Mifsud bought some fresh ricotta for himself and wine for the sailors of the speronara



The belfry of Sorrento whose bells sounded like those of the Zejtun Parish Church

The last speaker was Liam Gauci, Curator, Malta Maritime Museum who based his talk on Ignazio Saverio Mifsud and his travels in a *speronara*. A Maltese intellectual of the 18th century, Mifsud left behind priceless documentation of life in Malta during his lifetime. The speaker said that one of his earliest written texts is a day to day diary of a journey he made aboard a Maltese *speronara* travelling to Rome. "His minute details bring to life the perilous crossing of the Malta Sicily channel, the refreshing taste of Italian lemon sorbet, the smells of a roasted capon and the soothing effects of Neapolitan hot chocolate." Mifsud's insights especially about sea going food of the period is extremely interesting and to a certain extent unique in a Maltese historical context, Mr Gauci believes. "Such food related insights are also enhanced with information about the skill and perseverance of Maltese sailors in the face of perils at sea and all the tribulations aboard a lice riddled *speronara*," said Mr Gauci. The *speronara*, he explained, was a sailing boat which originated in Malta and evolved over a period of almost four centuries. "It derives its name from the spur or beak which it carried on its bows. It was built in great numbers during the 18th century and was operated by private *padroni*, as well as by the Order. The boat was a double ended carvel-built open boat, which utilized lateen sails and oars. This Latin rigged boat, sailed to all parts of the Mediterranean. The *speronara* was quick and was quite often utilized as a passenger boat.

And so to some questions.

After so much talk of food most of us were feeling more than merely peckish and fortunately dinner had been organised at Michael's just a few steps away from the *Istituto*. It turned out to be a treat.