

The WHITE OLIVES of Malta

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM VERDE



Greeting me at the gate of his farm in the hilltop village of Wardija, Sam Cremona ushered me to the porticoed dining and kitchen area where he holds olive oil tastings. Opening a cupboard, he showed me several dozen jars of his rare *bajda*, or white olives, blushed by brine to a pale ivory-pink. “I wish I could give you some, but the Maltese government has asked me to save all I have to give as a gift to the president of the EU,” he said with an apologetic shrug.

Since 1999 Sam Cremona has led the revival of the olive industry in Malta. As one of the island nation's few operators of an olive press, he processes both his own harvests and, *right*, others from nearby farms. *Opposite*: Though the varieties of the European olive, *Olea europaea*, number in the hundreds, the *bajda*, or var. *Leucocarpa*, is uniquely pearl-white.

That the government should turn to Cremona—informally known as Malta's godfather of olive oil—for the rare white olive is not surprising. Since 1999, when he began processing oil from trees planted on his farm eight years earlier (using an imported Sicilian olive press, as there were none left on Malta at the time), the 66-year-old Malta native and retired gemologist has dedicated himself to reviving what had been a moribund industry. Prior to his efforts, Maltese olive varieties like the *bajda* and the more common, more conventionally colored *bidni* had all but disappeared after thriving for several thousand years on this rocky, sun-drenched nation of islands that poke out of the central Mediterranean between Sicily and North Africa.

Nor is a European aristocratic appetite for Maltese white olives anything new. Back in the days of the Knights of the Order of Saint John—known also as the Knights of Malta, a multinational order of Crusaders that held the island from 1530 to 1798—these plump, bone-white olives were known across Europe as *perlina Maltese*—Maltese pearls. *Bajda* trees adorned the gardens of wealthy knights, and their fruit featured in recipes for one of the country's signature dishes—rabbit stew.

According to documents unearthed by Cremona, one of the knights, a French doctor, wrote about the grafting and propagation of white olives, and more generally, olives appear frequently in reports on Malta's agronomy. "This island is irrigated with springs, and it has plantations of ... olives and vines ... and fig trees, besides every other kind of fruit," wrote clergyman Johannes Quintinus in his 1536 *Insulae Melitae descriptio*. (*Melita* was the classical name for Malta, possibly from the Greek word *meli*, meaning "honey," for which the island was also known.)

The white olive is just one of hundreds of varieties of the European olive (*Olea europaea*) found from Portugal east across the Mediterranean all the way to the Arabian Peninsula.



la. One of its botanical subclassifications is *Leucocarpa*, from the Greek *leukos* (white) and *karpos* (flesh or pulp). White olives also grow in Italy, Morocco, Libya, Greece and Portugal, where they often go by local names, including *bianca* (in Italian "white"), *biancolilla* or *cannellina* (after their resemblance to white cannellini beans). Researchers who have studied the white olive's genetics say that its unique color, or lack thereof, is simply a quirk of nature.

"White olives originate from mutations affecting the production of anthocyanins, those pigments typical of what you see in conventional ripened olives, so that at the full ripening stage they do not become black," explained Antonella

Pasqualone, professor of food science and technology at the University of Bari in southern Italy. The white olives, she added, "are not very diffused and are normally rare."

This is why they are seldom commercially available today and, historically, why they have been valued ornamentally and even religiously, she continued. In the southern Italian region of Calabria, for example, white

olive trees in the gardens of churches and monasteries provided sacramental oil used to anoint high-ranking church officials and Byzantine emperors. In the Qur'an, although white olives are not mentioned specifically, several verses refer to olives and olive oil as gifts from God. (See sidebar, p. 25.)

Oil from white olives resembles that from black and green olives, yet it has a much shorter shelf life, owing to compara-

“ ”

“White olives originate from mutations affecting the production of anthocyanins, those pigments typical of what you see in conventional ripened olives, so that at the full ripening stage they do not become black.”

Senior Agricultural Officer Carmelo Briffa inspects a white olive tree cultivated in a government nursery of some 20 indigenous varieties. Of the island nation's 12,000 olive trees today, only 70 are white olive trees.



tively low levels of bitter-tasting antioxidants that also make for a natural preservative. “A table olive of fairly good quality, but does not keep well,” observed the late, pioneering Maltese botanist John Borg in his 1922 study, *Cultivation and Diseases of Fruit Trees in the Maltese Islands*. Thus, white olive oil tastes sweeter than many common olive oils, with which it is sometimes commercially blended.

Perhaps tempted by the delicate flavor of their oil, or charmed by their ornamental appeal, it was likely Italian knights who, probably sometime during the Renaissance, introduced white olives to Malta, Cremona said. Research by Frederick Lia, an ethnobotanist and biotechnologist at the University of Malta, has focused on the health benefits of Maltese olive oil, and he supports Cremona's assertion. “My personal opinion is that the bajda is in fact an Italian cultivar brought from southern and central Italy as an ornamental plant,” Lia explained. “Evidence of this is the lack of wild white olive trees in Malta and the restricted number of old, individual trees.”

That number of old trees was down to precisely three when Cremona first set eyes on one in 2010. “It was in a nunnery, in a garden that once belonged to the knights,” said Cremona. At first, he thought the startlingly white olives might be diseased, or albino aberrations. However, after taking some to an olive conference in Spain, he learned that Malta possessed a rare treasure.

“They told me, ‘Ah, we know about these white olives. We used to have them, but we don't have them anymore,’ because they were a variety that had disappeared in Spain, where they were known as ‘Maltese olives,’” Cremona stated. His trip to Spain was part of wider initiative he had helped launch in 2006 called the Project for Revival of the Indigenous Maltese Olive (PRIMO), in cooperation with Malta's Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment and with funding from the local Bank of Valetta.

Dismayed that Maltese olive oil was no longer being produced on the islands, Cremona hoped to revive interest. *Olea europaea* olives in Malta date back some 5,000 years or more, to the late Copper Age, according to carbonized remains of cultivated olive trees excavated at the temple complexes at Skorba. Such evidence indicates that olives were planted there around the same time they began spreading west from the Levant across the Mediterranean.

Phoenicians settled in Malta around 800 BCE, and they, too, cultivated olives. Under the Romans, from the third century BCE to the fourth century CE, olive production on the islands reached its height, as olives and olive oil were prized commodities in the imperial economy.

“This whole valley was covered with olive trees,” said Cremona, as he toured me around the grounds of his one-hectare plantation, once part of a larger Roman

villa. Just down the terraced hillside, at the ruins of San Pawl Milqi, another villa, massive stone olive presses and oil storage cisterns hint at the magnitude of Malta's former olive oil industry.

Equally if not more impressive is the nearby site of Iż-Żebbuġ tal-Bidnija. This grove of 20 bidni olive trees, like a den of dozing grandfathers, is believed to be the oldest olive grove in the country, dating to Roman times and perhaps earlier. The gnarled and twisted trees, averaging some five to eight meters in height, still bear fruit, though the olives are too small



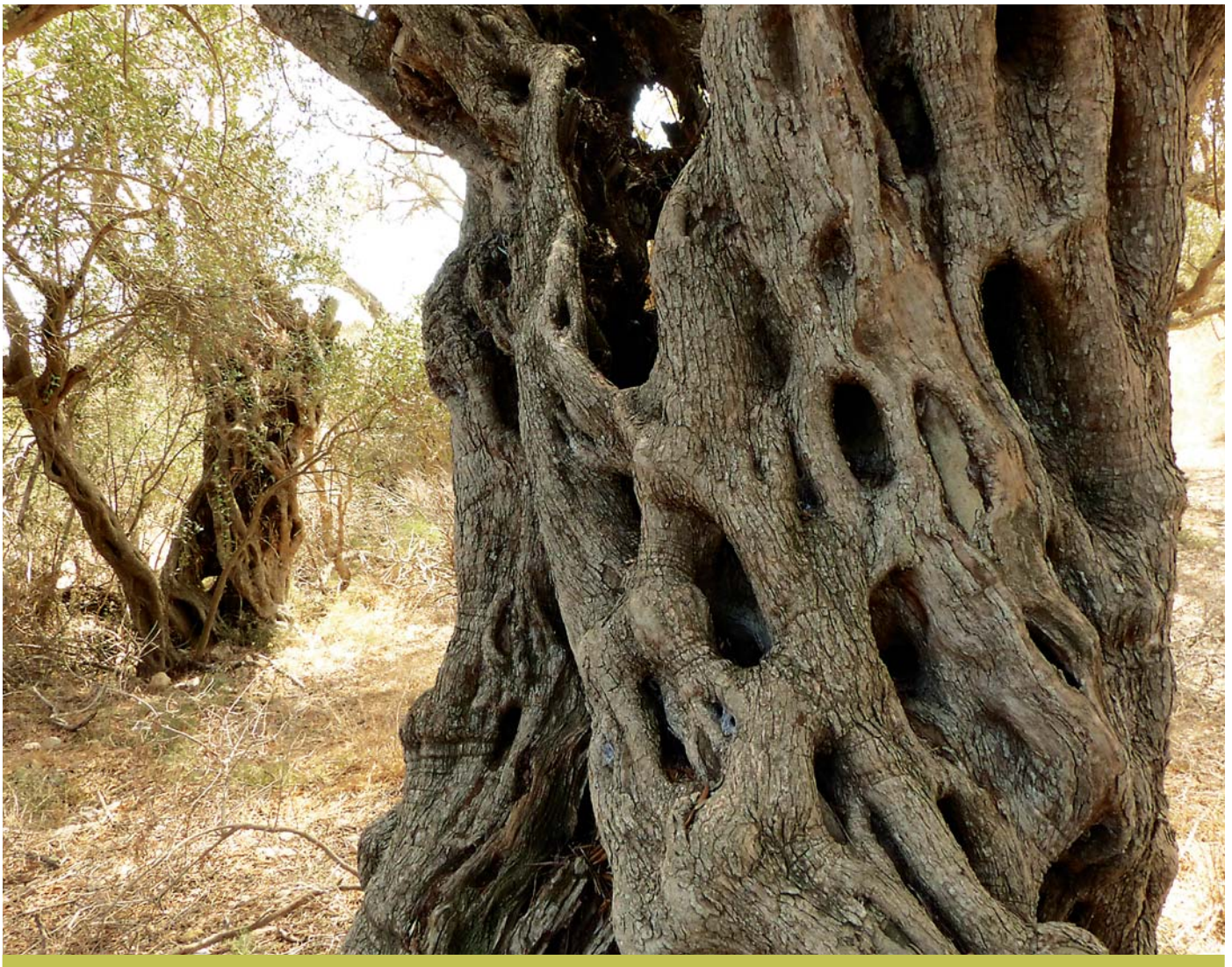
for harvesting. The Maltese government designated them as national monuments, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) named them groves of “Antiquarian Importance.”

Under the Byzantines, Malta continued to thrive as a trading center and source of olive oil. Towns and villages with names referencing olives and olive oil production include Ghasri, which takes its name from *ghasar*, “to squeeze” (as in olive pressing). Żebbuġ is Maltese for “wild olives,” and Birżebbuġa translates as “olive well.” The city of Iż-Żejtun, site of an annual olive festival, derives its name directly from *zaytun*, the Arabic word for olive.

Though olives and olive oil figure prominently in the traditional Arab Mediterranean diet, Malta’s Arab colonizers were more partial to growing almonds, blood oranges (which they brought from Sicily) and cotton, for which Malta was known in antiquity and which continued to be an important crop up to early modern times. Popular legends say the Arabs actually cut down olive trees to use the wood for ships and clear the land for cotton, but

Believed to be the oldest in Malta, these bidni olive trees stand among some 20 that have been here since at least Roman times. The Maltese government has designated them as national monuments.

In Islam the Qur’an references both the olive tree and olive oil, as do several hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). “He causes to grow for you the crops, the olives, the date-palms, the grapes, and every kind of fruit,” reads Sura 16:11. In Sura 24:35, the plant is praised as the “blessed olive tree.” “Eat olive oil with your bread,” Ibn Majah recorded the Prophet advising his followers, while Tirmidhi wrote, “The Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him) said: ‘Eat olive oil and use it on your hair and skin, for it is from a blessed tree.’”



modern historians mostly regard such accounts as exaggerated. Another legend, also likely apocryphal, holds that the Arabs attached special value to Malta's indigenous bidni olives because their slightly curved shape bore resemblance to a crescent moon.

Following the Arabs came the Crusader knights; after them came the French; and then the British, who ruled the island from 1813 until independence in 1964. The English preference for butter and lard over olive oil relegated olives to the diet of the common people, who were content with "a clove of garlic, or an onion, anchovies dipped in oil, and salted fish," as French knight Louis de Boisgelin observed in his 1804 history, *Ancient and Modern Malta*.

Settling back for an evening of traditional food and folkloric

songs and dances, I headed to Malta's northern town of Mosta and Ta' Marija Restaurant, which offers a top-notch version of the classic sampler, Mizet Malta, or Maltese Mezze. In between performances by young women wearing the distinctively Maltese black, hooped headscarves called *ghonnella*, owner Marija Muscat informed me that, despite its vicissitudes over the centuries, olives and olive oil remain



essential in Maltese cuisine and culture.

"They are used widely on our island, in food and for medicinal purposes. You will find a jar with olives and olive oil in every household in Malta," she said.

Yet for much of modern history, most olive oil on Malta has been imported, from Italy and elsewhere, even though the archipelago's subtropical, Mediterranean climate and rich, alkaline soil make it ideal for olive cultivation. Now, by encouraging landowners to grow native olive species, Cremona and the PRIMO initiative, which ran through 2012, have helped bring back Malta's unique olives—including both the

bajda and the bidni.

"Thanks to this project, the population of olive trees in Malta is now growing," Senior Agricultural Officer Carmelo Briffa acknowledged as he walked me through the government's leafy nursery of fruit trees in Gham-

“ ”

Despite its vicissitudes over the centuries, olives and olive oil remain essential in Maltese cuisine.

mieri, in central Malta. It's home to 20 varieties of indigenous olives, including white olives. Now, at least 12,000 olive trees, including 70 white olive trees, are productive on dozens of farms throughout the Maltese Islands. The number of commercial presses has gone from the single one Cremona imported in 1996 to at least nine. Smaller, artisanal farms, such as Djar il-Bniet (House of the Sisters) in Dinghli, near Malta's western shore, where I wandered through groves of 800-year-old olive trees, bottle single-varietal batches of olive oil that are sought after in the culinary world. During a 2013 visit to Cremona's farm, British celebrity chef and cookbook author Jamie Oliver gave Maltese olive oil high marks for "freshness" while marveling that "the white olive tree [had] fruit of such pearlescent beauty that it would have seemed a crime to pick them." At last year's Olio Officina Festival in Milan, Maltese white olives were commended for taste, quality and appearance.

Science, too, has weighed in. Borg long ago observed that the bidni tree and its fruit "are very resistant to disease" as well as the dreaded olive fruit fly, *Dacus oleae*. Modern analysis has confirmed that this is because the bidni is high in oleuropein, a natural antibiotic that also makes the oil an exceptionally healthy choice for human consumption. Most recently, University of Malta researcher Oriana Mazzitelli in a 2014 study compared the DNA of three Maltese cultivars—bidni, bajda and another common variety called a *Malti*—with an Italian and a Tunisian variety.

The results, she said, surprised her. "The genetic differences were greater than I expected, which suggests that Maltese olives diverged at some early point and became extremely different than the rest of Mediterranean olives," she said.

Cremona pours freshly pressed olive oil. A recent genetic study suggests that due to Malta's isolation, at least three Maltese cultivars, including the white olive, may have developed characteristics more distinctly local than researchers previously believed.



Olives, and olive oil, are best preserved when shielded from light. Soon after this photograph was made, Cremona returned this jar packed with white olives to a dark storage cabinet.

Mazzitelli's findings also reinforce Lia's claim, first proposed by Borg nearly a century earlier, that the white olive may be a variant that had been introduced at some point later than the other varieties.

Back at Cremona's farm, I joined him to take pity on a writer who had traveled 7,200 kilometers to investigate his singular, ivory-colored olives. In the kitchen, he fetched a jar from the darkness of another wooden cupboard. As if this crypt wasn't deep enough to shield his olive pearls from the flavor-sapping light of day, he peeled back layers of aluminum foil that encased the jar before opening its lid and plucking from the jar's mouth a pair of oil-soaked bay leaves. He dotted a plate with a half-dozen or so pale, dimpled olives, swimming in golden oil. Then he showed me how to enjoy them like a native.

"Here, you go like this," he demonstrated, proffering a hunk of crusty bread. "Dip the bread in the oil first, and suck on it. Don't chew the bread."

I followed his instructions. The flavor was rich and peppery, yet at the same time mild and sweet. After observing protocol, I gobbled down the bread and headed for the prize:

my first white olive. The flavor was ... delicious—bitter top, citrusy middle, briny finish. Reaching for another, I thought to myself, "If I could actually eat a pearl, this is just about how I'd expect it to taste." 🌿



Tom Verde (tomverde.pressfolios.com) is a regular contributor to *AramcoWorld*. His "Malika" series, on historical Muslim queens, won "Best Series" awards from both the National Federation of Press Women and the Connecticut Press Club in 2017.



Related articles at www.aramcoworld.com

Malta: N/D 04



VIDEO:
aramcoworld.com

