

TRADITIONAL  
MALTESE ĠBEJNA





# ĠBEJNA THE WORD

The earliest record of the word 'ġbejna' is in the Lexicon<sup>i</sup> of M.A. Vassalli in 1796 who defined it as the diminutive of 'ġobna'. The word is not just Maltese. It is also a modern Arabic word, and just like in Maltese, the word; *ڤني بچ* (ġbejna) still means 'small cheese' or 'cheeslet'. The Maltese words *ġobna* (singular), *ġobon* (plural), *ġbejna*, *ġbejniet* are all derived from Siculo-Arabic which was introduced into Malta in the high Middle Ages before it evolved into modern Maltese. The word *ġbejna* used on its own only conveyed the idea of a small cheese. Other descriptive terms had to be added to convey any understanding of what the product was specifically, such as *tan-nagħaġ*, *tal-baqra*, *tal-mogħoż*, *tal-ġarra*, *friska*, *nixfa*, *moxxa*, *t'Għawdex*, *tal-bżar* and so on.

The renowned Gozitan ethnographer Agius de Soldanis, in his *Damma*<sup>ii</sup> (c. 1750) listed several Maltese cheeses including *ġobon frisk*, *ġobon tal-ġarra*, *ġobon ta' Għawdex*, *ġobon moxx*, *ġobon niexef* and *ġobon tas-salib*. He did not define a 'ġbejna' or 'ġbejniet'. Instead, under *ġobon tal-ġarra* he included the following description: "sono piccolissime forme del cacio fresco disseccato conservato in qualche vase di creta diviene perfettissimo. Si vende per ordinario a grani tre l'una." This is the same definition that is used today for *ġbejniet niexfa* (small forms of fresh curd that are dried and preserved, closed in container, then ripen perfectly). Makers of such cheese in Gozo still regularly use the collective plural *ġobon* rather than *ġbejniet*.



Bust of Giovanni  
Pietro Francesco  
Agius de Soldanis

# ĠBEJNA THE HISTORY

The earliest evidence of cheese making in Malta is pottery which appears to have been a cheese basket (*qaleb*) that was found in Baħrija. It was dated to a thousand years BC and shown to still have traces of cow milk protein<sup>iii</sup>. Records in medieval notarial deeds<sup>iv</sup> referred to the transfer of goats, sheep and the more prized cattle. Although goats tended to be used primarily for drinking milk and cattle as draft animals, nothing was wasted, and any milk from all species was used to make cheese. A legend<sup>v</sup> dating to a siege of Mdina in 1427 even records how human milk was mixed in with that of other species to make cheeselets so as to deceive the Ottoman forces.

Maltese folklore books written by the renowned folklorists Anton F. Attard<sup>vi</sup> and Guido Lanfranco<sup>vii</sup> both describe the manufacture of traditional *ġbejniet* in the twentieth century made from milk from sheep, cows, goats or mixed. Attard also described the colour and size differences between those made in Malta and Gozo, and the ways of manufacture. The herders in Malta who had more goats in the early twentieth century tended to make *ġbejniet* from goat's milk, which was whiter. This explains why many English speakers translated *ġbejna* as 'goat cheese'. According to Attard *ġbejniet* in Gozo were primarily made from sheep milk, and were smaller with a yellow tint. He also added that milk from sheep and cows was superior for making *ġbejniet* than goat's milk.



Anton F. Attard



Guido Lanfranco

# ĠBEJNA RECIPES

Even within the confines of the Maltese islands various regional varieties of *ġbejniet* existed, according to the species and breed of milking animal, the feed of the animal, the type of rennet, the time of drying, the ripening process, the use of vinegar, oil, wine and/or seasoning. Even today the *ġbejniet* made from one seller are rarely the same in flavour and texture as another.



There are however common factors to all forms of *ġbejniet*. Their small size and ribbing create a relatively higher surface area to volume ratio compared to typical large cheese wheels. This allows all forms of '*ġbejna*' production to have faster drying times and no need for pressing. The small size means that it has little if any rind formation. Any flavouring, seasoning or acidification using vinegar, pepper or other herbs is done after the rapid primary drying and ripening, through the ribbed surface of the cheese blocks, as the high Surface Area to Volume ratio allows a complete coverage. When they are dry enough they are sealed and allowed to ripen or sold and eaten fresh.



# ĠBEJNA TODAY

Maltese dairy farmers can trace their family's history back by many generations of livestock owners. In 1958 many of these milk producers joined into a single cooperative and in 1986 they bought the government's dairy processing facilities to process their local produce with the brand name **Benna**. They took steps to continue the traditional cheese making process, but first pasteurised their milk to meet growing safety concerns and used modern equipment to ensure hygiene during production. However, local cheese makers and a local recipe for ġbejna production were employed from Gozo to ensure that the method of making *ġbejniet* had roots in tradition. By 1990 a Benna *Ġbejna* made from pasteurised cow's milk in sealed vacuum packaging was out on the market. It was an instant hit with local consumers looking for a good quality and zero-risk product. It has since been used with peace of mind and a guarantee of quality in many traditional dishes such as *Soppa tal-Armla* and Maltese Platters.

In the meantime many other sheep and goat herders kept producing cheese as cottage industries. Even they had to adopt to modern methods. Rennet (*Tames*) could no longer be made in the traditional manner and some herders also pasteurised their milk to reduce the risk of bacteria associated with raw milk. The diversity of cheese production in Malta evolved. Today, it is the consumers' tastes for the different types of Maltese *ġbejniet* that ensure that they all remain popular.



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<sup>i</sup> Vassalli M.A. 1796 Ktyb il Klym Malti

<sup>ii</sup> Agius de Soldanis G.P.F c.1750 Damma tal-Kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fomm tal Maltin u Ghaucin

<sup>iii</sup> Tanasi D. et al. 2021 Paleoproteomic profiling of organic residues on prehistoric pottery from Malta, in *Amino Acids*

<sup>iv</sup> Wettinger 1982 Agriculture in Malta in the Middle Ages, *Proceedings of history week* and Fiorini S. 2014 The Notary in Maltese Late Medieval society.

<sup>v</sup> Cassar Pullicino J. 2000 'The Historical Legends: The Stratagem of the Besieged in Imdina' in *Folktales of Malta and Gozo*'.

<sup>vi</sup> Attard A.F. 1991 "L- Industria Tal- Gbejniet" from the book "Mill Hajja tal Imoddi".

<sup>vii</sup> Lanfranco G. 1994 "2Halib, Ġbejniet u Rkotta" in *Imnara* (journal of the Malta Folklore society)