

Pizza people - Eating out the Maltese way

If there were any truth to the old maxim that 'you are what you eat', the typical Maltese person would definitely be a pizza. **JAMES DEBONO** on our national eating habits

Places frequented more than six times a year (NSO Lifestyle Survey 2007)

Restaurants	43.2
Bars	20.6
Discos/Night clubs	12.7
Clubs	10.8
Sports Events	6.5
Live Performances	4
Cinemas	5.5
Casinos	1.7

Different types of restaurants frequented at least once in past month

	Yes	No
Chinese	12.9	87.1
Indian	2.8	97.2
Japanese	2.1	97.9
Maltese	22.9	77.1
Pizzeria	45	55
Hotel Buffet	13.7	86.3

Places frequented once in past year (NSO Lifestyle Survey 2007)

Restaurants	79.1
Bars	42.5
Cinemas	41.2
Live Performances	33.3
Discos/Night Clubs	26.4
Clubs	25
Sports events	21.4
Casinos	9.8



How many times a month do you have a meal in a restaurant?

More than once a week	9.9
Once a week	15.5
Between once a week and once every fortnight	11.3
Between once every fortnight and once a month	11.6
Less than once a month	25
Never	26.7

(MaltaToday survey June 2009)

Frequency of restaurant visits by social class:

	AB	CI	C2	DE	PE	SE
More than once a week	15.1	18.6	8.3	2.4	5.2	13.6
Once a week	30.3	11.6	12.5	26.8	6.1	9.1
Between once a week and once every fortnight	18.2	14	20.8	12.2	5.2	13.6
Between once every fortnight and once a month	21.2	18.6	4.2	4.9	7	13.6
Less than once a month	9.1	16.3	29.2	39	25	31.8
Never	6.1	23.2	27	14.7	51.5	18.3

Legend:
AB-professional and managerial
CI-clerical, vocational, technical
C2-Skilled workers
DE-unskilled workers/unemployed
PE-pensioners
SE-self employed

(MaltaToday survey June 2009)

Different types of restaurants frequented by AB category

	Yes	No
Chinese	24.2	75.8
Indian	9.1	90.9
Japanese	6.1	93.9
Maltese	21.2	78.8
Pizzeria	63.6	36.4
Hotel Buffet	21.2	78.8



WHILE one tenth of the population eats out in a restaurant more than once a week, one fourth does so less than once a month, and another fourth again never eats out at all.

However, almost three quarters of the Maltese eat out in a restaurant at least once a year: a figure confirmed by surveys conducted by both MaltaToday and the National Office of Statistics.

While the MaltaToday survey estimates the number of those frequenting restaurants at least once a year at 73.3%, the NSO life style survey puts the figure at 71%.

Moreover, nearly half the Maltese go to eat in a pizzeria at least once a month – making pizzerias one of the most popular leisure places on the island.

But the MaltaToday survey also indicates that higher income groups visit restaurants more frequently than working class respondents: confirming the widespread notion that different social classes live very different lifestyles.

While 85% of professionals and managers eat out more than once a month, only 46.3% of unskilled workers do the same. The self-employed are also hard pressed, with 49% claiming that they eat out less than once a month.

Significantly, 15% of ABs and 19% of C1s eat out more than once a week: which indicates that for a vast sector of society, restaurants are not a luxury but provide a much needed service for people who lack the time to cook in their homes every day.

This could be especially true among single people and families in which both spouses work. For this reason, prices in restaurants do not only have a bearing on tourism but also on the cost of living in Malta itself.

A survey held in 1996 by the Planning Authority also shows that locals outspend tourists, and



are thus indispensable to this thriving trade.

But despite these sociological realities, most Maltese restaurants remain oriented towards tourists, and apart from cheap snack bars offering high calorie fare for male manual workers, few restaurants offer cheap food which is also appealing to a middle class crowd.

Not surprisingly, professionals and managers are also more likely to frequent a greater variety of international cuisines and types of restaurants.

A quarter of ABs has been to a Chinese restaurant during the past month, while one fifth has indulged in a buffet

in a hotel.

Chinese restaurants emerge as the most popular international cuisine.

Restaurants serving Maltese food are more popular overall than restaurants serving Chinese fare. But this is not the case among ABs, who are more likely to frequent Chinese restaurants than restaurants serving local fare.

This category is also three times as likely to eat in an Indian restaurant than the general population.

While one tenth of the general population have attended a hotel buffet in the previous month, one fifth of ABs have done likewise.

Overall the most popular type of restaurant remains the pizzeria. While only 2.1% have eaten sushi in a Japanese restaurant, 45% visit a pizzeria at least once a month.

The NSO survey showed that restaurants are the most frequented places by the adult population, while casinos are the least.

Moreover, attendance to restaurants was found to be very similar for males and females.

Price matters

The Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices issued by the NSO in May showed that the hotel industry had increased its prices by 11.7 points. Sta-

tistics collected by the Ministry of Finance in July have also revealed that increases in prices by hotels and restaurants during June have impacted the general rate of inflation by 18.64%.

The report – prepared by Permanent Secretary Alfred Camilleri – was presented to all MCESD partners recently, and also to the PL national conference on inflation.

The registered 18.64% increase in prices by hotels and restaurants, has impacted the general rate of 4.7%, making Malta the highest amongst the Eurozone countries, the government claims.

But the Malta Hotels and

Restaurants' Association has disputed these statistics, claiming that restaurant prices have actually remained stable for the past six months.

Figures on price level indices published by Eurostat, the EU's statistical arm, in April showed Maltese consumers pay less than fellow Europeans when eating at a restaurant. Restaurant and hotel prices were given an index of 84 against an EU average of 100.

For restaurants and hotels, price variations were more significant, with price levels ranging from 40% of the average in Bulgaria, to 151% of the average in Denmark.

Is 'in' the new 'out'?

With restaurant prices on the increase, and home entertainment enjoying a new lease of life, more people are turning to home caterers instead of eating out

RESTAURANTS may not be booming at present, but it's not because the general public has lost its appetite. If the experience of Hungry Caterers is anything to go by, people are actually eating more, not less. It's just they're choosing different ways of enjoying the experience of "eating in": namely, "eating in".

Nick Camilleri-Preziosi – one half of the Hungry duo, alongside Alex Mattei – cites numerous possible reasons to account for this sudden interest for home catering. Not least, the global economic recession.

"With less disposable income, people still want to be entertained, but are more wary about how they spend their money. There are other factors, too: the smoking ban is one; another is convenience. Hiring caterers for a private dinner party can offer better value for money in a much more casual and familiar atmosphere... with all that you would expect from a top restaurant: excellent service, delicious food, etc.

"We primarily cater for a niche market of clients who want original food using the best quality ingredients available on the local market," he adds - placing enormous extra emphasis on the word "quality".

Judging by the public response to Hungry Caterer's services to date, it seems there is no shortage of demand.



Nick Camilleri-Preziosi (L) and Alex Mattei

"From our experience, people can't get enough of it. They love the fact that the whole evening is hassle-free, and a guaranteed way to impress guests."

In keeping with a growing trend among the more conscientious, quality-oriented restaurants – and also food connoisseurs – Hungry Caterers insist as far as possible on using local ingredients.

"It would be nice if more caterers and restaurants supported local ingredients and producers more, rather than falling back on cheaper, imported goods," Alex maintains.

"The mentality is still to offer large portions of inferior, cheaper produce... and this unfortunately still seems to please the masses. Malta and the Mediterranean diet has so much to offer, but people seem to be more impressed with what they consider to be

more exotic or fancy. But really, what's better than Maltese tomatoes, basil, fresh gbejniet and good quality olive oil?"

However, for all the attraction of exotic alternatives, the typical Maltese diner appears to have retained a cautious scepticism regarding anything new or outlandish. And in spite of a recent surge in appreciation for Japanese cuisine such as sushi and sashimi – something of a Hungry Caterers' speciality – Nick explains that the idea of eating raw fish is still off-putting to some clients.

"Sometimes we find ourselves adapting Japanese dishes to Western styles: using smoked fish or cooked prawns instead of raw ingredients in sushi. Having said that, there is also a growing niche of niche of clients who appreciate authenticity, and for these we provide the real thing."