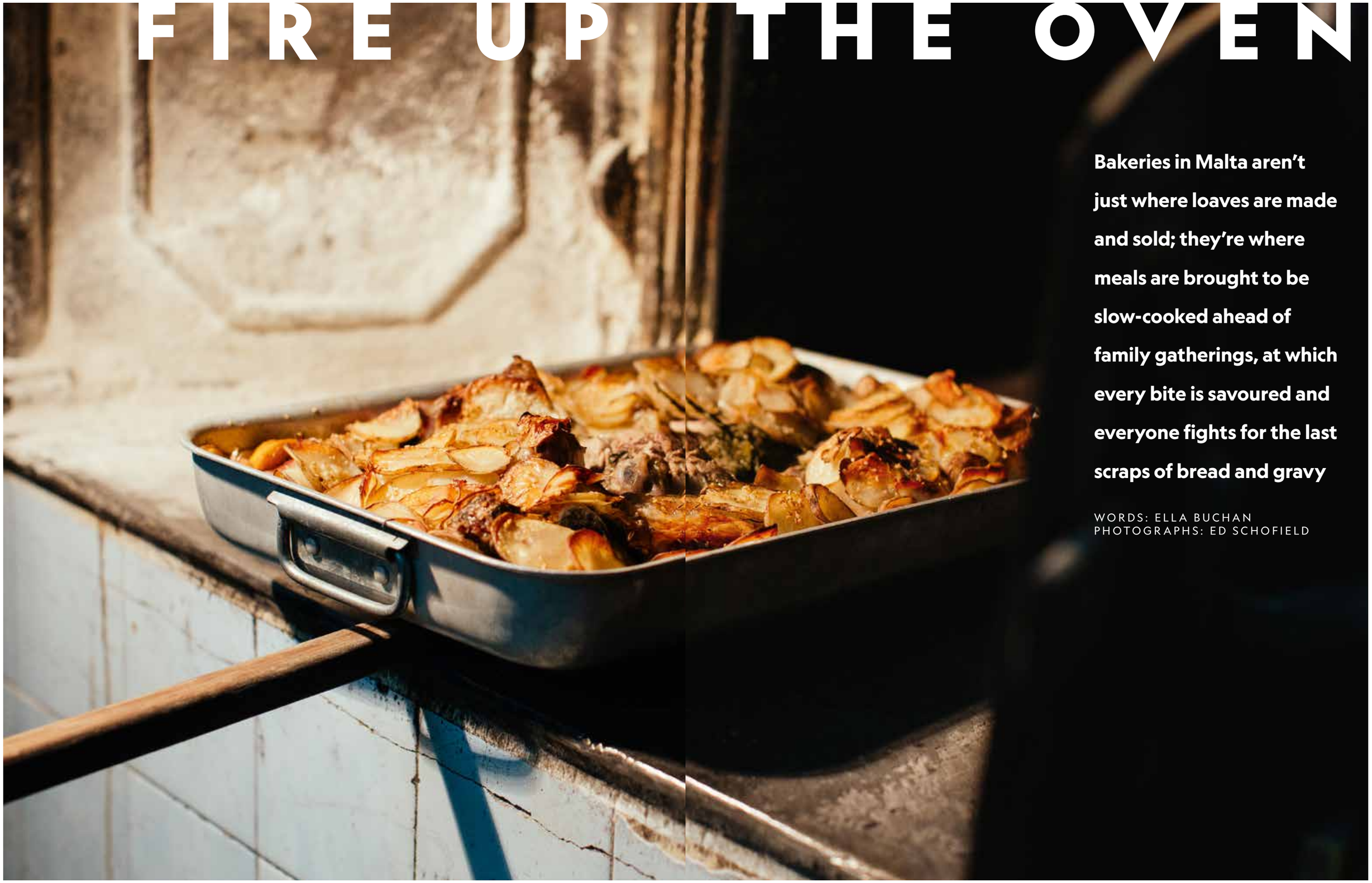
FIRE UP THE OVEN



Bakeries in Malta aren't just where loaves are made and sold; they're where meals are brought to be slow-cooked ahead of family gatherings, at which every bite is savoured and everyone fights for the last scraps of bread and gravy

WORDS: ELLA BUCHAN
PHOTOGRAPHS: ED SCHOFIELD

I'M STANDING IN ONE OF THE MOST REVERED ROOMS IN MALTA. JESUS AND THE VIRGIN MARY GAZE DOWN FROM FRAMED PAINTINGS ON THE WALL.

Soft lights flicker against the smooth concrete floor and powder-blue wall tiles. The air is scented with citrus peel, burnt sugar and flour.

It's chilly outside and the sky is thick with cloud. But here in Maria Stephanie Bakery, in the Maltese town of Żebbuġ, it's positively toasty, thanks to the huge bread oven glowing at the far end and the racks of still-warm rolls, loaves and pastries.

"Bread in Malta is sacred," Julian Sammut, my host for the day, tells me through a mouthful of ftira, a flat, ring-shaped loaf traditionally eaten at the end of Ramadan (the country is predominantly Catholic, but experienced 220 years of Arab rule, which ended in the 11th century). "If you find a piece of bread on the floor, you pick it up and place it on a window ledge or wall," Julian says. "You show respect."

We're gathering ingredients for an evening feast at Julian's house. This, of course, involves a morning trip to the bakery. "No one bakes at home," Julian explains, as customer after customer trickles in to fill their bags with fresh loaves. "You can't match this."

Biting into a qaghaq tal-ħmira, a soft, brioche-like bun topped with sesame seeds, I see his point. It's delicate in texture, with warm whispers of cinnamon and cloves. The aromas are so thick and palpable, I'm tempted to bite the air. Luckily, Margaret Aquilina, who runs the bakery with her husband, Ivan, keeps me well fed with a steady stream of samples. She hands me a piece of classic tal-Malti ('of the Maltese'), similar to sourdough but with a crunchier crust and a softer inside. The fermented starter, used as a raising agent, goes back "forever and ever," says Margaret. "Generations."

Next up is a saffron-yellow pastry, its dark filling bursting through the scores on the surface. "Qagħaq tal-għasel," Margaret tells me. "Treacle ring." It has the texture of a fig roll, the crunchy pastry giving way to a thick molasses that's brightened by orange peel, mixed spices and a touch of aniseed.

The flavours speak of Malta's history and geography; the archipelago, comprising Malta and the smaller islands of Gozo and Camino, sits in the Mediterranean between Sicily and North Africa. Sophisticated baking techniques were brought over by the Romans, while the Arab influence, so prevalent within the Maltese language, also lives on in the recipes that make use of spices, nuts and dried fruit.

Maltese bakeries have extra significance on Sundays, when locals bring their meals to be cooked in the huge, industrial-size ovens — a tradition stemming from the days when few people could afford their own oven. They'd prepare a stew or a joint of meat at home, then take it to the nearest bakery and collect it once cooked. Many still bring along their 'pasta, pork, whatever' on a Sunday, says Margaret;

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: qagħaq tal-għasel, Maltese fig and honey pastries; Julian stocks up on bread for the family meal; the streets of the capital, Valletta; two generations of Maria Stephanie Bakery owners

Previous page: the family's lamb dish is cooked in the bakery oven

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Rafel and Toni carrying veg back from the field; ġbejniet, or cheeselets; St Paul's Street, Valletta; Julian prepares artichokes hearts

the Sammuts will be doing just this with our main course later.

Laden with bags of bread and boxes of pastries, I settle into the backseat of the car driven by Julian's youngest son, Rafel, who's in his late 20s and shares his father's warmth, easy grin and boundless passion for food. We set off around the main square, passing buttery limestone buildings fitted with pea-green shutters. Every July, Julian tells me, the area is a riot of firework displays in celebration of the Feast of Saint Joseph.

On the outskirts of town, fields flash by our windows; some with neat rows of potato crops, others are scattered with wild marigolds, shaded by olive trees and prickly pear cacti. The plots are separated by low dry-stone walls, the limestone sourced from local quarries.

It takes Rafel two attempts to manoeuvre around a sharp, steep bend. A silver-haired figure, squinting and smiling beneath a baseball cap and black-rimmed glasses, appears at the top of the lane and gestures for us to follow him.

"Hello, Toni!" bellows Julian, stepping out to embrace his friend. Toni Farrugia is a retired chef and part-time farmer, the crops grown on his 10.5 acres are primarily given away to friends and family or preserved by being frozen, fermented or dried in the sun. We wander between rows of swiss chard, fennel, broccoli and curly endive. Raised beds are overgrown with yellow, trumpet-shaped flowers. "We used to eat these like sweets," says Julian, his eyes crinkling at the memory. He bends to pluck one, his polka-dot scarf breaking loose from his navy jacket, and hands it to me. It's sharp, citrussy and tastes a bit like sherbet.

Rafel peers at our crate of vegetables, already overflowing with waxy potatoes, onions and pods of peas and broad beans.

"You need garlic, hey?" asks Toni, ducking into a small stone shed and emerging with a pitchfork and knife. He digs out strands of green garlic, the bulbs not yet formed into cloves, then turns to a patch of baby carrots, tugging a few from the soil and adding them to our haul.

I get the impression he doesn't want us to leave — and the feeling is mutual. It's beautiful here, with the hillside fields dissected by those higgledy-piggledy walls, and the carob trees heavy with long, leathery seed pods. But it's nearly lunchtime, so we bid Toni farewell and head back to the car, Rafel hefting the mountain of veg.

HOME COOKING

We make our way to Ta' Salvu u Marie, a sheep farm surrounded by steeply terraced farmland. The owner, Salvu, shows us the vats of sheep's milk used to make traditional ġbejniet, or 'cheeselets'. The small rounds, a sort of cross between ricotta and mozzarella, are prepared and served in a variety of ways, including fresh, salted or cured in vinegar. Salvu also makes pecorino studded with peppercorns.

As Julian buys a selection of cheeses, Salvu gestures for us to follow him towards a barn populated with lean, long-legged sheep. "You'll never see them like these in England," he chuckles. "In England, they are short and fat, no?"

He insists on pouring each of us a measure of whisky before we leave. It's barely 2pm, but this is all part of Maltese hospitality. "You can't go into someone's home without having something to eat or drink," shrugs Julian, raising his glass.

Our next stop is Ta' Kerubin, where we're picking up lamb for the evening meal. Butcher Conrad Schembri doles out more whisky while we sample zalzett tal-Malti — garlicky sausages, which are suprisingly delicious, given that they're served raw, sandwiched in small buns with tomato paste.

From here, it's just a short drive to the Sammut residence, a converted farmhouse in the old part of Żebbuġ. By now, the sun is low and the stone facade is tinged with orange. Juggling the bags of cheese, meat and vegetables, Julian pushes open the wooden door and leads the way into an old cart room filled with potted plants. We head through to the drawing room,decked out with thick rugs, a plush sofa and Julian's pride and joy: an old wooden trough that's been converted to a bar, stocked with an enviable selection of whiskies.

This is a home for entertaining — and the kitchen is clearly the heart of the show. Shelves are loaded with spices, honey and olive oil; above them hangs a display of plates collected on family holidays, each one decorated with food motifs. A prismatic light fitted above the oak-topped dining table emits a warm glow. Even Poopa, the Sammuts' elderly and partially deaf kelb tal-fenek (Pharaoh Hound, a Maltese breed of dog), knows this is the place to be. She stretches out lazily on a sofa by the back door, occasionally sniffing the air as it fills with cooking aromas.

Julian's kusksu bil-ful

This is usually eaten in spring, when ful (broad beans) are in season. If kusksu (pasta beads) proves tricky to find, use giant couscous instead.

SERVES: 4
TAKES: 1 HR 30 MINS-2 HRS

INGREDIENTS

2 litres vegetable or chicken stock
2 tbsp olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
20 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
800g podded broad beans
1 tbsp tomato purée
2 bay leaves
200g kusksu (or giant couscous)
ricotta, to serve (optional)

METHOD

1. Pour the stock into a large casserole pot and bring to the boil, then reduce the heat to low and keep at a simmer.
2. Pour the oil into a large saucepan and set over a low heat. Sauté the garlic for 3 mins until golden. Add the beans and cook, stirring, for 5 mins, then stir through the tomato purée.
3. Turn the heat to medium-high and pour in the stock, one ladleful at a time. Add the bay leaves and a generous amount of salt and pepper, then reduce the heat to very low, cover and leave to simmer for 45 mins.
4. Add the kusksu, turn the heat to medium and cook for 10-12 mins until al dente. Remove from the heat and leave to sit, covered, for 5 mins.
5. Divide the kusksu bil-ful between four bowls, drizzle with olive oil and top with a dollop of ricotta, if you like.

The Sammut family sit down for their evening meal

Rafel makes quick work of the lamb, dividing the meat between two deep trays, throwing in chopped garlic and squeezing lemon juice over the meat before adding a drizzle of olive oil and finishing off with a lid of sliced potatoes. He hops back in the car and whisks the dishes off to Maria Stephanie Bakery, to be cooked in the depths of the still-glowing oven.

Julian, meanwhile, makes a start on the side dish, quartering artichoke hearts and tossing them into a heavy-bottomed skillet with shelled peas, lemon juice and olive oil.

"Food has always been about bringing family together and friends together," he says, giving the pan a shimmy. This love of food has spilled over into his career; he owns several restaurants in Malta. A framed photo of Julian's mother surveys the action from the sideboard. Lola passed away in 2013, but her presence in the kitchen is palpable. Julian, the youngest of three boys, used to hover at her elbow, watching intently as she salted aubergines for caponata (a traditional Sicilian eggplant dish) or piped sweetened mascarpone into crisp pastry shells for cannoli.

"I would ask her sometimes, 'How do you do this?' or 'What are you putting in there?'" he says, throwing a handful of chopped green garlic into a heavy saucepan for the starter, kusksu bil-ful (a thick soup of broad beans and tiny pasta beads). "Watching her cook and tasting her food is how I learnt about Maltese cooking, of herbs and spices, fresh ingredients and traditional festive food. Things were cooked very slowly. Life was slower then."

Julian's wife Karen swooshes in, elegantly dressed in black, with a pair of glasses pushing her hair off her face. "Poops!" she coos, making a beeline for the dog. "I plan my day around her," she adds, before checking if I need anything: tea, water, whisky?

She asks about our day as she moves about the kitchen, sorting out cutlery and napkins and peeking into the pot of soup. The steam, pungent with green garlic, thickens the air. The kitchen grows loud with chatter and laughter. Rafel returns with the cooked lamb dishes, which he sets on the sideboard to rest. His brothers, Nikol and Andrea, arrive, followed by their sister, Marija, who breezes in with her two kids, unleashing a flurry of kisses and hellos. She isn't staying for supper, but few days go by when the family don't all see each other.

While Julian puts the finishing touches on the meal, Rafel offers to show me his drying room, in which he cures meats for his Valletta restaurant, The Pulled Meat Company. We walk through the garden, skirting past the pool and up a flight of stone steps. Inside, dried hams and peppered guanciale (cured pork jowl) hang from ceiling hooks. Local pork is under threat from cheap imports, Rafel tells me. But Maltese farmers are fighting back by raising the quality of their meat even further.

MALTESE FAVOURITES

Pastizzi

This savoury snack is made with golden layers of crisp, flaky filo pastry. The fold usually signifies the filling: the pastry around a ricotta centre is typically gathered in the middle, while a pastizz folded to one side will contain spiced mushy peas, often mixed with boiled ham.

Ħobż biż-żejt

Crusty, chewy bread is topped with citrussy olive oil and plump, juicy tomatoes in this simple dish, which celebrates the best of the Maltese archipelago. Purists eat it just as it is, while others add a mix of tuna, capers, onion and garlic.

Stuffat tal-fenek

Rabbits were introduced to Malta by the Phoenicians, who settled there around 700BC; the animals thrived and became a popular meat source. Today, fenkata (rabbit) nights see families and neighbours gather together to dine on spaghetti with rabbit ragu, followed by stuffat tal-fenek (rabbit meat stewed in wine and garlic, served with fried potatoes).

Lampuki

From mid-August to December, this meaty fish (also known as mahi-mahi) is available pretty much everywhere in Malta. Try it in a number of ways: in a rich tomato sauce; simmered with white wine, garlic and herbs; or packed in salt and baked.

From top: Julian chops fresh ingredients for dinner; setting the table; Rafel inspects the potatoes

BREAD & GRAVY

Back in the kitchen, Julian ladles the starter into shallow bowls and tops each portion with a fresh cheeselet. The soup is golden, rich and nutty, the zingy garlic mellowed by slow cooking. “My favourite,” says Karen. “I could eat this every day.”

A basket of bread is quickly demolished, although Andrea can only look on longingly. He has a gluten intolerance, which must feel particularly unfair in a country so famed for its baked goods. “Dad used to send me to school with proper bread, tomatoes and olive oil,” he says, thick eyebrows raised wistfully. “I always remember, when we were children, the last piece of bread was the best. We would always fight about who would have it to dip in what was left of the gravy.”

Nikol mops up the last drops of soup with a scrap of sourdough. “For us, it was always about eating,” he says.

Rafel brings the lamb to the table, peeling back the foil to release aromas of warm orange and gamey meat. The crinkled, golden potatoes have been transferred into a separate bowl, and a jug of toffee-coloured gravy, made from the meat juices, is passed around the table.

The lamb, brightened by citrus and herbs, is perfect and easily falls away from the bone. But Julian is worried about the potatoes. “Maybe they’re overcooked,” he says with a frown. This, the family agrees, is typical. “If dad overcooked the meat, he would spend the whole meal upset,” says Nikol. “As though the cat had died or something.”

He tops up our wine glasses as Julian brings over a plate of zeppoli: golden rounds of deep-fried choux pastry filled with honey-, orange- and vanilla-flavoured ricotta. A comfortable silence falls over the table. Our mouths — and bellies — are too full for conversation. Poopa slumps by her bowl, defeated, too, by the scraps of leftover lamb she’s been given.

The night is inky and silent as I finally, and more than a little reluctantly, bid farewell. But my taxi is waiting outside, everyone has work in the morning and I can’t eat another bite. As the car pulls away, I find myself wondering: who did get to mop up that last ladleful of gravy? ●

HOW TO DO IT EasyJet flights from Gatwick, Southend, Newcastle or Manchester start at around £25 one way. Rooms at 66 Saint Paul’s hotel in Valletta start at €185 (£159) on a B&B basis.
easyjet.com 66saintpaulsmalta.com
visitmalta.com