



Claire Bonello

# Our national Chihuahua complex

When the American pop star Kelis, visiting Malta for the MTV concert, posted a remark about the country on her Facebook page, she sparked a storm of comments by aggrieved locals. The singer's remark was innocuous and quite complimentary.

She wrote: "Malta is beautiful! Food so far is not amazing but it's so glorious here I will just drink good wine and eat bread." These were the first impressions – and overall positive ones – of a first-time visitor to the country.

There is no evidence of any intended slight, cultural superiority or dismissal of a nation's gastronomic heritage. Kelis' comment was simply an observation about her experience so far.

As such, I would have expected it to pass unmarked and unmentioned as do so many similar utterances by pop singers and other minor celebrities (Jessica Simpson about the wonders of cupping or Jennifer Aniston about her baby food diet).

However, the good denizens of Malta did not take this affront to our glorious culinary heritage lying down. Armed to the teeth with their artillery of clichés, absurd non-sequiturs and woe-filled spelling abilities, they took to the keyboards to disabuse Kelis of any notion that she may have had about Maltese food not

being uniformly excellent and delicious.

First bat went to two men who both said that Kelis should go back to her diet of burgers and chips and junk food. There they were happy with their alarmingly outdated stereotypes, letting the world observe their utter ignorance. Do they imagine that it's only Americans who over-indulge in junk food? Don't they know that Maltese children top the obesity stakes? That doesn't come from grazing on broccoli and snacking on strawberries.

More to the point, do they think that American cuisine is solely made up of burgers, chips and the occasional hot dog? Of course it's not. The 50 states all have different immigrant influences which make for a wonderfully varied cuisine which does not consist solely of gristle and fat.

The 'Americans are brought up on burgers, hot dogs and fries' refrain was taken up by a woman who peppered her comment with exclamation marks (a sure sign of poor writing style) and lamented the fact that Kelis could not partake of good Maltese home cooking which was the best in the world.

That may be the case, but short-term visitors and tourists may not have the opportunity to sit down for a family meal, so there's a lot to be said for having

restaurants and bars which serve decent food.

Another eloquent person simply told Kelis to leave if she didn't like it. And someone else tried his hand at sarcasm, wondering if Kelis' taste in food had been influenced by the chef at the Waldorf Astoria or by the junk food which she could grab while on tour. He also exhorted the singer to stuff it and just go up there and do her thing as that is what she had been invited for and not for her culinary expertise.

That last statement reveals breathtaking levels of ignorance and arrogance. First, there's the totally unsubstantiated assumption that pop singers have never experienced the fine dining experience and cannot recognise good food when they taste it. Then there's the way that the commenter dismisses Kelis' comment because she's a singer, and singers should stick to singing and nothing else.

Well, I've got news for Mr Stuff It. Every visitor to Malta, every diner who goes to a restaurant on the island, has a profession or a job other than that of expert gourmand. That is no bar to their voicing their opinion and criticising the mediocre meals, the indifferent service, and the exorbitant prices that they may come across from time to time.

If the people in the restaurant and hospitality industry were serious about improving their

product and service, they would be taking note of the criticism coming their way and strive to change things. Instead of that, we get the "shoot the messenger" reaction with angry and incoherent ravings directed at the person making the criticism.

I have noticed this kind of aggressive reaction mostly in cases where we perceive that the national honour is being affronted or anything Maltese is being criticised by a foreigner.

That's when we whip ourselves into a misguided faux patriotic fervour and snap and bitch at the offender. I think it's a case of national Chihuahua syndrome or Napoleon complex, which is the term used to describe a personality complex which consists of aggression and false machismo to compensate for short height and feelings of inferiority.

The people who yap and snap so loudly when confronted by criticism of anything Maltese feel they have to respond in this over-the-top manner to make up for the country's insignificance on the world stage.

They cannot come to terms with the fact that others may not regard Malta as the epitome of excellence in all fields and yelp away loudly.

In so doing they only reveal how ridiculous they are, which has always been the fate of Chihuahuas they so resemble.

cl.bon@nextgen.net.mt

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Mark-Anthony Falzon

# Borg Olivier under the hammer?

Which is the better job, being King of England or auctioneer? Well, it depends. The year 1649, for example, turned out tragic for the sceptre and magical for the London hammers. On January 30, Charles I quite literally lost his head to Cromwell's republican Commonwealth outside the Banqueting House in Whitehall.

Eager to make a point, the new Parliament took no time to draw up an 'Act for the Sale of the Late King's Goods'. Which proved especially lucky for the salesmen, since Charles happened to own one of the best art collections anywhere in Europe at the time.

Jerry Brotton's delightful *The Sale of the Late King's Goods* (Macmillan, 2006) shows how, over the few years following the king's execution, Londoners high and low fell over each other to buy objects from the royal collection.

Most didn't get to enjoy their purchases very long. By 1660 Charles II was very much on the restored throne and busy getting back together – by means fair or foul – his late father's collection. The move went well beyond a love for paintings. It was, as Brotton puts it, "a remarkable process of cultural and political restitution".

For many, what happened in Sliema last weekend was the exact opposite. When the auction house dubbed the auction "very important" and lauded the quality of the "Borg Olivier collection", it got more than it bid for. A number of people seemed upset by the sale of the late Prime

Minister's goods, for various reasons.

Some accused the heirs of greed and lack of finesse. Were they so cash-strapped that they had to sell their late parents' possessions? And how dare they be so hard-nosed, so unsentimental?

I've no time for this nonsense, which stinks of politics of envy. One's financial and sentimental accounts are hard enough to balance without having to factor in other people's transactions. To each their own – the Borg Olivier family's finances and feelings are nobody's business but theirs.

Then again, it could be argued that they were partly to blame for the limelight. They could easily have sold off their inheritance through general auctions and/or private dealers. Instead they chose the family name, with all the implications.

For ethical and probably also legal reasons, I won't go into the dynamics of this particular auction. Let's just say that provenance is everything in the art and antiques trade. Buyers are usually willing to pay well beyond average market prices for objects that come with a clear history. In this case it was also a prestigious history, and one can't really fault the sellers for peddling it.

Apart from all that, the Borg Olivier sale did raise some intriguing questions. It was argued, for example, that privately-owned goods that are of 'national importance' should be bought by the state, not by private buyers. Trouble is, it's actually very hard to define what is and what isn't of national importance.

A good number of works in our national collection have nothing to do with Malta as such, subject- or provenance-wise. But because

they're excellent works, we think they enhance the collection and are therefore of 'national importance'.

On this count there was nothing other-worldly about the Borg Olivier auction. Some lots were indeed of high quality, but so are the scores of objects that come up for auction at other times in Malta. So, if quality alone is hardly a sufficient criterion, what, if anything, made the Sliema auction special?

Perhaps it was the narrative. Since this was billed as the 'Borg Olivier auction', many must have imagined that it was crawling with lots that brought name and nation together.

Not really. The couple of portraits of the man that were there were eventually withdrawn. The family photographs were not for sale. Papers and personal effects were nowhere to be seen. There was a piece of 'heat shield' from a spacecraft, a gift by the city of Rome, and one or two other vaguely 'personalised' things, but that was all. Again, on this second count, Sunday's auction was hardly special.

Which leaves us with what may be the strongest argument, that from heritage and continuity. It was suggested that, rather than individual objects, it was the house and contents as a complete package that was of national importance. Prof. Henry Frendo even suggested the whole thing should have been turned into a museum of political history.

There have been one or two past attempts at setting up such a museum. One goes back to the late 1980s, when the Labour government of the time had a shot at the Auberge de France in Vittoriosa (location matters).

It never really worked. For different reasons, I doubt the Borg Olivier

place would have done the job. The name and place (again, location) are too closely linked with the Nationalist Party for the idea to work on a national level. I can imagine some would have protested that the PN was seeking to appropriate national political history.

So, is there no sense in preserving the legacy of such an important protagonist of our recent history? Was not the Borg Olivier auction special in at least that respect?

Yes and no. I don't think anyone would argue that we should forget Borg Olivier and fritter away his legacy. (A certain Labour MP certainly wouldn't, having spent 25 grand on an old desk at the auction.) I would, however, question why people so objected to the dismantling and dispersal of the house contents? Surely that doesn't mean Borg Olivier will be forgotten?

The answer must partly lie in 'culture', for want of a better word. In European culture, memory and patrimony and such are closely linked to location. It's not really our thing to cremate the dead and scatter their ashes to the four winds, for example. (A few eccentrics do choose to be disposed of that way, but that's the point.) We prefer tombs, places we can visit that is, preferably in specially consecrated locations. And that's just one instance.

Seen in this light, I can begin to understand why people thought there was something special about the Borg Olivier sale. For many it seems, it was a shrine in the unmaking, a sacred location made profane, a link between location and memory broken forever.

malfalzon@hotmail.com

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