

# The Usage of herbs in the Maltese cuisine

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## **DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY**

I, the undersigned, \_\_\_\_\_, declare that this dissertation is my original work, gathered and utilized especially to fulfil the purposes and objectives of this study, and has not been previously submitted to any other university for a higher degree. I also declare that the publications cited in this work have been personally consulted. \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

This research is set out to help understand more about herbs, the usage of herbs in Malta, what the Maltese do think about herbs in Malta, how they use them and the Maltese cuisine itself because you do not find that much information about this kind of research and it is an interesting topic to do the research about. The author seeks to do this title long essay by first find what the author like and to know about more, which in this case it is herbs and the Maltese cuisine, and a bit of Maltese history. These suggest to others to do more research about it because for a student who is learning to become a chef need to have some knowledge about herbs since they are an important matter in the kitchen.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my family and friends who has helped and supported me the author with the long essay, especially my tutor Mr.S.Borg who helped guiding me in my long essay.

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## **1. Introduction**

As part of the Higher National Diploma program, the author is required to do a long essay. The long essay that the author decided to do is going to be about the usage of herbs in the Maltese cuisine. The purpose of this study will be to further increase the knowledge about herbs, to find out if Maltese people know about these herbs and how they like to use them, if they use them in their everyday cooking, how much and what herbs they like use. The author is going to write about this subjects because the author always found herbs interesting and wanted to know more knowledge about herbs, especially how they were used and introduced in Malta, how they are being used now and what the Maltese know about herbs since Malta is surrounded with wild herbs that are good to be used. It is also an interesting topic to do the research and to do the long assignment. As a chef the author thinks that it is important for chefs to have some knowledge about herbs so they can be more creative, find it is easier when cooking and try to create new dishes.

The author is going to mention a brief history how the herbs where introduced in Malta , how and what was the purpose of herbs back in the days, the difference between fresh and dry herbs, analysis of popular recipes in Malta that contain different types of herbs and analyze the answers of the questionnaires that she did.

## **2. Literature review**

As part of the Higher National Diploma the author is required to do a long essay which in her case the title that she chose is going to be about the usage of herbs in the Maltese Cuisine. The structure for this assignment includes an Introduction, this chapter which is the literature review, Research methodology, analysis of result, conclusion and reference. In the introduction section the author introduced what the long essay is going to consist of briefly. In the analysis of result the author has added her research a bit more in detail about how herbs got introduced in Malta and in this sectioned I have mentioned how herbs use to be used, what was its purpose in those days, the difference between fresh and dry herbs in this section the author has mentioned how dry and fresh herbs should be used, different methods how dried herbs can be dried and more, she have analyzed three popular and traditional Maltese recipes how the herb was used in it and the results from the questionnaires that where filled by mothers who like to cook, her colleagues which are chefs, students from ITS who are still studying to become a chef and lectures from ITS. In the questionnaire the author has ask questions how they like to use herbs with for example rabbit when fried or stewed , what is there favorite herb, if they grow there own herb, what is their opinion when using herbs in desserts such as for example mint chocolate ice cream and a yogurt cake with berries, thyme and lemon zest, their opinion on if us the Maltese do use a lot of herbs in our cooking and so much more.

### **3. Analysis of research**

#### **3.1. History of herbs in the Maltese Cuisine**

Herbs wasn't always common for the Maltese to use at first because they didn't use to have herbs. The Maltese started to use herbs in the medieval times. Herbs use to be used for meat preservation so they will hide the "bad taste" because they use to travel for a long period of time and sometimes, they even added some spices with the preservation mix as well and to enhance its flavor as well. In Malta herb was more common with people of a higher class because herb where more expensive because of its rarely found in that period.

Europe use to depend more on the American continent and the conquest of the southern Asia for herbs especially for the pepper. In the northern Europe the consumption of herbs and spices was raising till the seventeenth century especially when Vasco da Gama who was the first Portuguese explorer to reach India by sea, and he explored more herbs and spices as well. After a while meat consumption began to increase so this mean that less herbs where being used. In fact, after a while the strong flavor that the Medieval use to use from both herbs and spices they didn't use them anymore so herbs where being used less. When they started to use less herbs I their recipes they started to replace the herbs with orange blossom water and sugar. They still use to use herbs but in a minimum amount and mostly during that period they use to use spices more such as nutmeg, pepper and cloves.

Herbs and spices where to be more affordable especially when there was a competition between the English and the Dutch and people from the lower class started to use them more because herbs and spices where more affordable. People from the higher class didn't use more herbs because of this purpose. The usage of herbs started growing again in the French cooking and it started to spread in the seventeenth century around Europe, for the Italians it took longer to start using herbs. When the French use to cook the use to keep their cooking more delicate, simple and natural. Even nowadays they still do.

### **3.2. Fresh and Dry herbs**

There are many ways how herbs can be preserved or used around the world. The two most popular are Fresh herbs and Dry herbs. Some of the herbs have strong flavor, a mild flavor or a strong flavor. This can vary a lot on the taste because some herbs when dried they might have a stronger flavor for example the bay leaf and oregano , other herbs might have a weaker flavor or a flavor that is totally different from when the herbs was fresh like dried parsley and basil. When using these kinds of herbs, you need to be more careful because it might change your recipe flavors either better or worse.

#### **3.2.1. Dried herbs**

The process of dried herbs is when the water of the herb leave evaporates, and the oils of the herbs increases and that is why dried herbs tend to have stronger flavors. As already mentioned, you need to be more careful when using dried herbs because it may affect the taste. To be more careful when using these kind of herbs you will probably need to use less cause of its strong taste but again it depends on what herbs you are using because if it has a weaker taste you will be needing to add more and keep in mind that it is actually a different ingredient from that which was the fresh one and with what food you are going to use dried herbs and its purpose. When you cannot smell the herb after you rub them in your hands this means that the herbs have gone bad and when using them, they will not have that much of a flavor so there will be no purpose of using dried herbs that has gone bad. There are many ways how you can dry herbs. Some of the techniques of drying herbs are sun drying and air drying. When sun drying the herbs, you are removing the flavor from the herbs faster due to the temperature of the sun and you cannot control the suns temperature and the ultraviolet light drying.

#### **3.2.2. Fresh Herbs**

When fresh herbs are harvested, they need to be harvested from mature plants and their flowers start to bloom it is usually the used for essential oils. When cooking with fresh herbs it is important to know when to add the because it might affect the herbs taste and color. This depends when you are using fresh hard herbs or fresh soft herbs. Hard Herbs have tougher, wood

like stems and are not typically served raw because they are tough to eat and have a strong flavor. When using hard herbs, it is better to add them in the beginning of the cooking because the flavor will infuse better and they need a bit longer for the taste to come out good. Examples of hard herbs are rosemary, thyme, oregano, bay leaf and sage. Soft herbs are softer and has more of a grass like stems and leaf. Soft herbs can be eaten raw as well in fact a lot of people like to add it to salads to the salads won't be bland especially during the Summer days. When using soft fresh herbs, you need to add them in the end of cooking because as a herb they are more delicate and if you add them in the beginning of cooking you will either not taste it at all or only a bit. When you add them at the end of cooking it will also give the dish a nice bright color of the herb. Examples of soft herbs are basil, flat parsley, mint, sorrel and chervil.

### **3.3. Herbs Seasons**

Just like any other food every herb had its own season.

#### **3.3.1. Spring**

Spring is the season that most of the soft herbs grow and is one of the busiest seasons for herbs. Some of the herbs that grow in Spring are basil, chives, fennel, lemon verbena, lovage and mint. For the Greeks basil is the king of herbs. In France it is commonly use with tomatoes and mozzarella and in Italy it is commonly used to make Genovese pesto. There are many types of basil such as the green basil that we mostly use, there's also a purple basil and many other different types of basil. Lemon verbena is a herb that is mostly used for desserts because of its citrusy flavor and it is used for herbal teas as well. Lovage is another soft herb which is Mediterranean and as a herb it has a specific spicy and celery flavor. Some like to use this herb to cook it in soups for the warm feeling.

#### **3.3.2. Summer**

The herbs that grow during the season of Summer have a stronger flavor and aroma. Some of the herbs that grow during Summer are dill, hyssop is a herb from the mint family, lavender, mint, savory and thyme. Dill goes very well with cured salmon. Lavender is a herb that grows with flower. It is commonly used with desserts, essential oils, herbal teas and meat like lamb. Mint is one of the most commonly used herbs during this season. It is commonly added with water so it will leave a fresh and minty taste after drinking it, it is also commonly used with dessert as well such as sorbets, ice creams, and with savory items such as fish which for the Maltese it is one of the main ingredients when cooking fish, lamb and for sauces and so much more

#### **3.3.3. Autumn**

In Autumn a lot of different herbs grow both soft herbs and hard herbs. In the beginning of autumn usually the herb flower blooms and it is mostly used for essential oils and herbal teas as well. Some of the herbs that grow during this season

are parsley, sage, dill and sorrel. Parsley is one of the most commonly used herbs worldwide especially in the Mediterranean area. It can be used to make sauce verte, in Malta the Maltese like to add it with the chicken broth and for herb oil parsley is the best herb to use if you need a herb oil that has a brighter green color. Sage is domestic from the Mediterranean area; it also is one of the hard herbs and it is commonly used with pork especially roasted pork. Sorrel is commonly used on top of meat terrines to garnish, to add in soups, tarts and so much more.

#### **3.3.4. Winter**

The herbs that grow during the winter season have more of a hearty flavor because they keep you warm, have strong flavors and aroma. Some herbs that grow in the winter are parsley, chervil, bay leaf, coriander, sweet cicely and rosemary.

Rosemary is a Mediterranean herb and it is commonly used for roasting and goes well with all kind of meat. Cilantro also known as coriander has a robust flavor and is mostly used in the curries. Sweet cicely comes from central Europe. The sweet cicely herb has an anise seed aroma. It is commonly used for desserts.

### **3.4. Analysis of Traditional Maltese Recipes from seventies.**

The Maltese people like to cook quite a lot, especially traditional recipes such as roasted potato with fennel seeds, chicken broth, rabbit or beef olive stew, stuffed marrows and so much more. Almost all the traditional Maltese recipes contain herbs. The only course that does not contain herbs in the Maltese cooking is the dessert. Most of the dessert usually contains either lemon, orange or tangerine zest, almond or almond essence, fruit such as dates and spices. The four recipes that the researcher is going to analyses are from a book back from the nineteen seventies. The recipes that the researcher is going to use are chicken broth, rabbit stew and Aljotta which is a fish soup.

#### **3.4.1. Chicken Broth**

The ingredients and the cooking method for chicken broth are simple. The ingredients are chicken, carrots, celery, onion, parsley and water. The usage of herbs in this recipe are celery and parsley. These herbs are herbs that doesn't have a strong flavor and when cooking the chicken broth, it need to simmer till the chicken is cook as is says from the recipe. The recipe itself is that heavy when eating it as well if the herbs that it was used in it are herbs that as the researcher has already mentioned don't have a strong flavor.

#### **3.4.2. Rabbit Stew**

Rabbit stew is one of the most traditional dish in Malta. The ingredients needed for this recipe are rabbit meat, onion, tomato, bay leaf, red wine and potatoes. The herb that is used in this recipe is bay leaf which is a herb that had a strong flavor. The method for this recipe is stewing which meant you need to leave it cook on a low heat and when it cooks slowly for a long time it is releasing the flavor of the ingredients especially the meat and herb slower but it will have a better taste if the herb and the meat will be so tender.

### **3.4.3. Fish soup (Aljotta)**

Aljotta has a very flavorful taste because of the different ingredients used. This recipe consists of fish, onion, garlic, oil, salt, pepper, bay leaf, mint and tomato. The herbs that are used in this recipe has a strong and aromatic taste even the garlic. This soup is perfect for the summertime because it is not that heavy, and the mint makes the soup more refreshing.

## 4. Questionnaire results

### 4.1. Questions

#### 4.1.1. Question 1: What are your favorite herbs?

As seen from Figure 1 the most favorite herb was basil, second place mint, third thyme, fourth rosemary, fifth oregano, parsley and on the sixth-place dill, fennel, peppermint and marjoram.

The author thinks that basil is the most favorite herb because it is one of the easiest to grow in your home.

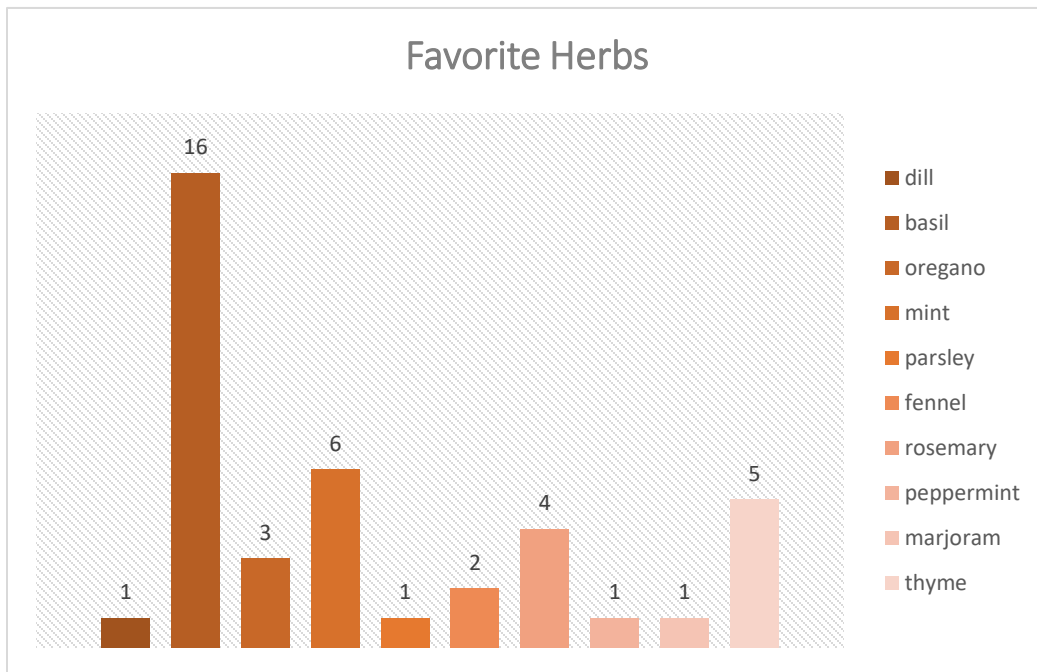


Figure 1

#### 4.1.2. Question 2: Do you use herbs in your cooking?

As seen on Figure 2 forty-two of the people who answered the questionnaire answered that they like using herb in their cooking and the others, only one that said that he or she does not or use that much of herbs in their cooking.

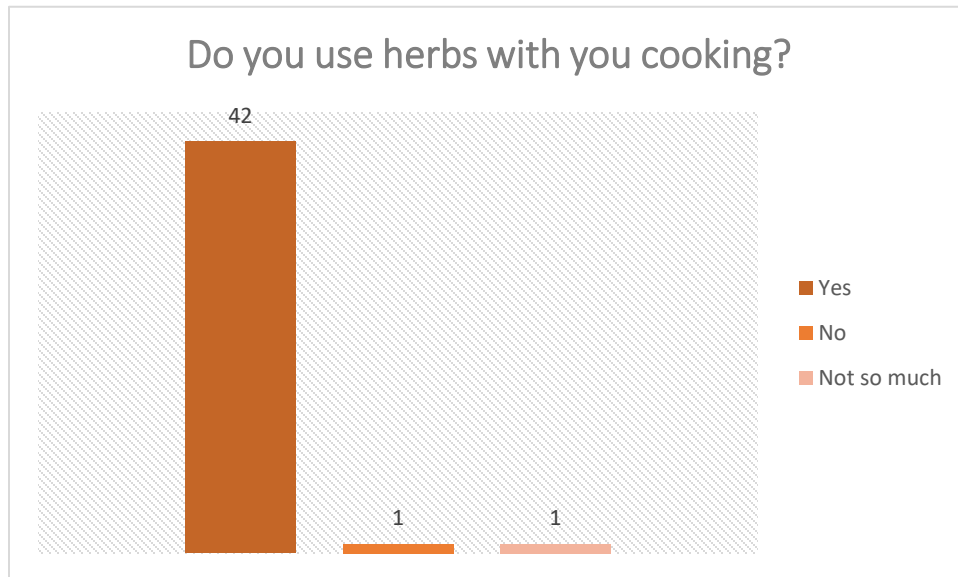


Figure 2

#### 4.1.3. Question 3. Do you use fresh, or dry herbs, and is there a reason why?

As seen on Figure 3 most of the people which in this case was twenty-two like to use fresh herbs, nineteen said they like to use dry herbs and four of them said they like to use both.

The reasons for these answers where the one that like fresh herbs said they like using fresh herbs because of the they prefer fresh, has more flavor and aroma and because of what they use it for example one motioned that he or she uses fresh herbs to do essential oils.

The reasons for using both or dry herbs where because of availability, bigger variety of herbs, more convenient and if the herbs season due to you always find dry.

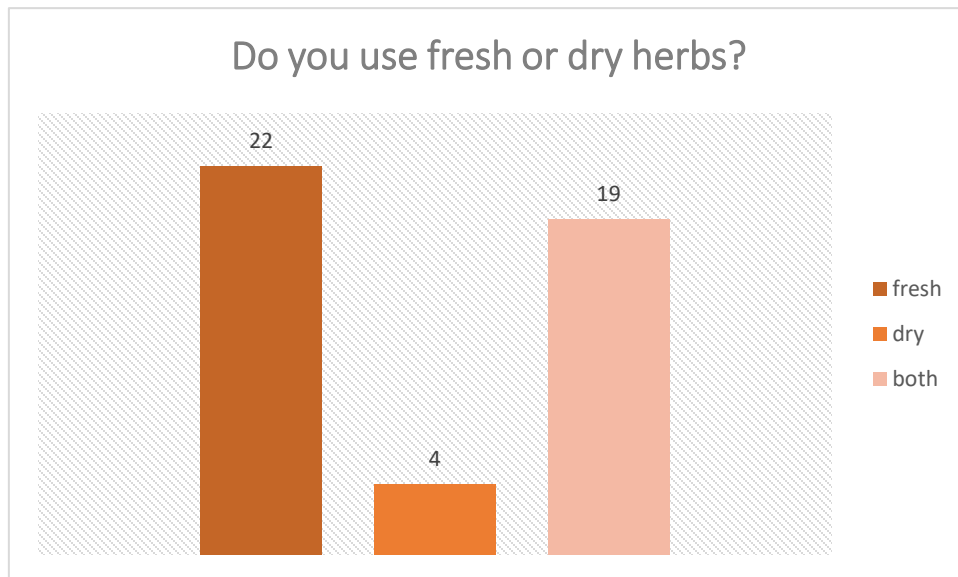


Figure 3

#### 4.1.4. Question.4. Do you grow your own herbs? If so, which herbs do normally you grow?

As seen on Figure 4 most of the people which in this case are fifteen grow their own herbs and the other eleven do not.

The reason for this was that because some prefer growing and using their own herbs because they find it cheaper instead of buying every time they need and find it more convenient for the so instead of going to shop for herbs every time, they grow they own. Some of the others said that they do not grow their own herbs because they do not have that much space where to grow them or do not know how to take care of them.

As seen on Figure 5 the most popular herb that they grow is basil, second place goes to parsley and rosemary, third place to thyme and fourth mint, dill, sage, peppermint, oregano and marjoram.

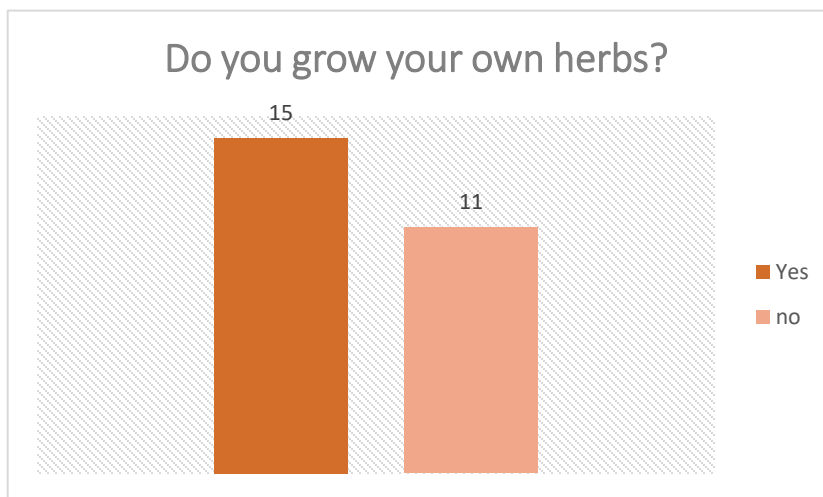


Figure 4

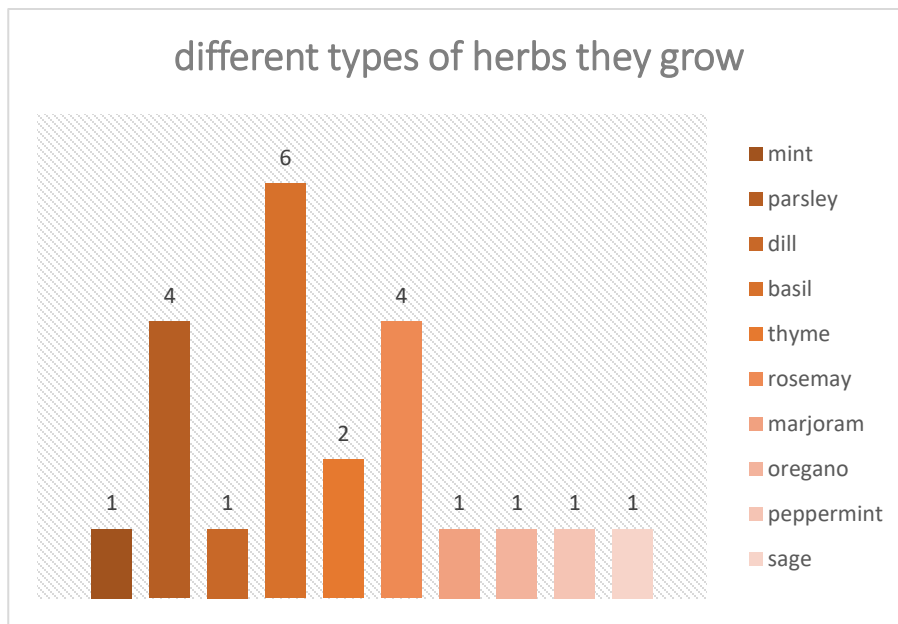


Figure 5

**4.1.5. Question.5. What herbs do you like to use with: Chicken (roasted chicken, chicken broth), Pork (roasted pork, pork stew), Fish (lempira, Aljotta), Rabbit (rabbit stew, fried rabbit), Beef (beef olives, roasted beef)**

**4.1.5.1. Chicken (roasted chicken, chicken broth)**

As seen on Figure 6 The herb that they use the most with chicken is rosemary, for the second-place thyme, third celery, fourth parsley and fifth popular where the oregano, dill, tarragon, coriander and bay leaf.

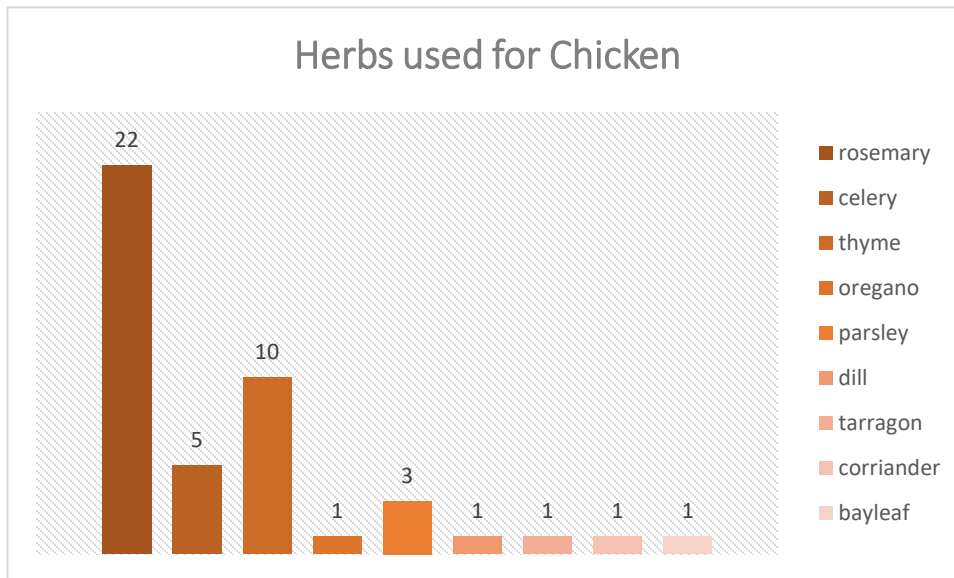


Figure 6

#### 4.1.5.2. Pork (roasted pork, pork stew)

As seen on Figure 7 the most popular herb used with por is thyme, the second rosemary, third sage, fourth bay leaf and fifth used are the celery, fennel, mint, parsley, coriander or noting.

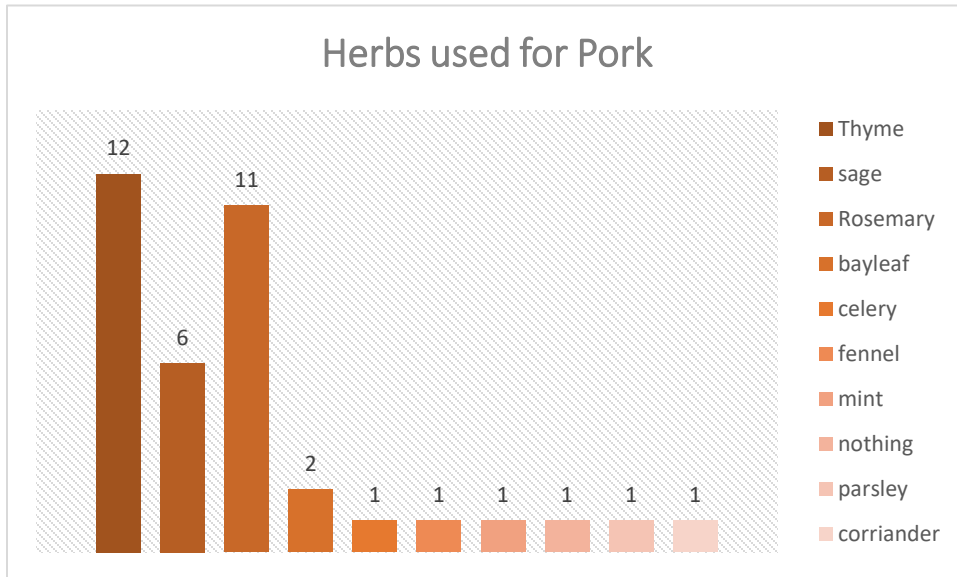


Figure 7

#### 4.1.5.3. Fish (lampuka, Aljotta)

As seen on Figure 8 the most popular herb used with Fish is mint, second basil third marjoram, fourth parsley, fifth dill, thyme and oregano, sixth peppermint, fennel and tarragon.

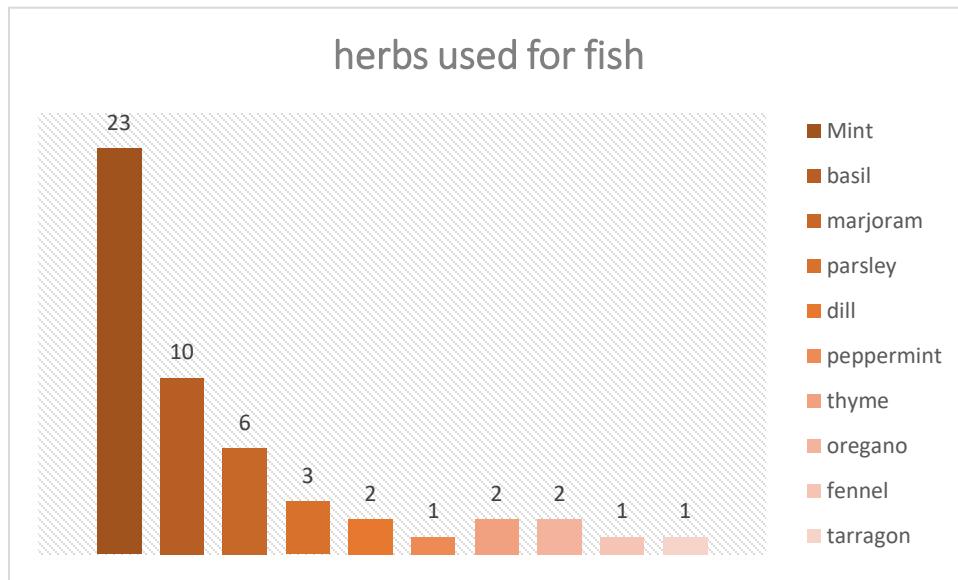


Figure 8

#### 4.1.5.4. Rabbit (rabbit stew, fried rabbit)

As seen on Figure 9 the most herb used with rabbit is the bay leaf, in the second place there is the thyme, third rosemary, fourth sage and oregano, parsley and fifth nothing.

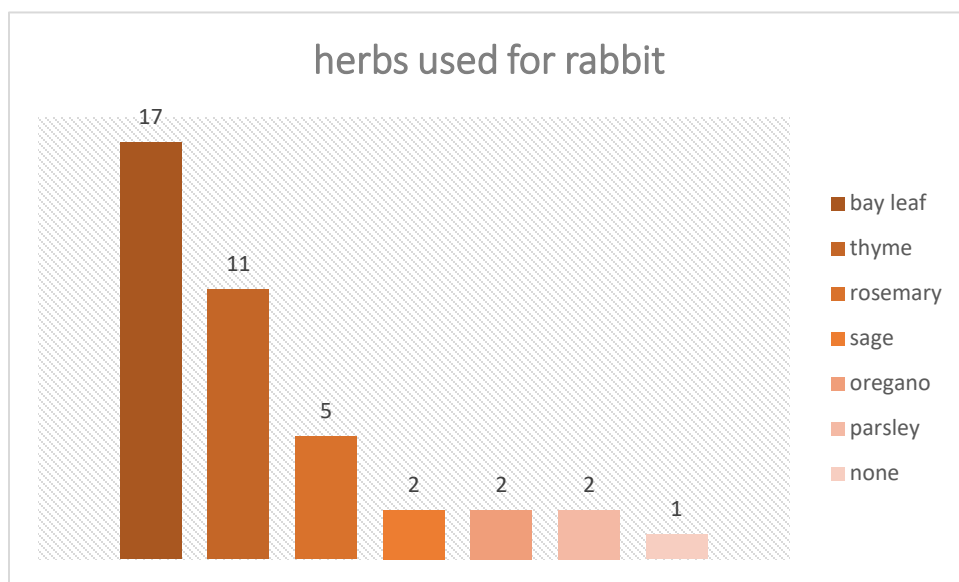


Figure 9

#### 4.1.5.5. Beef (beef olives, roasted beef)

As seen on Figure 10 the most popular herb used with beef is thyme, in the second-place rosemary, third bay leaf, fourth oregano, fifth parsley, sixth basil, seventh sage, mixed dried herbs, fennel and mint.

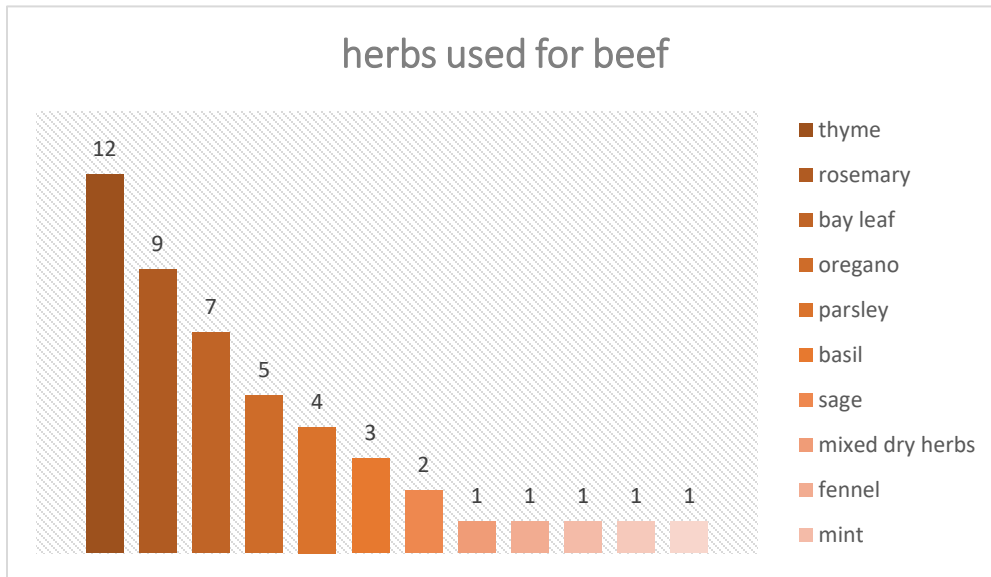


Figure 10

**4.1.6. Question.6 Do you think that in the Maltese Cuisine a lot of herbs are used?  
Is there a reason to your answer?**

As seen on Figure 11 thirty seven of those who did the questionnaire say that herbs are used a lot in the Maltese, six says no that we do not use a lot of herbs in the Maltese cuisine and two say that non that much herbs are being used in the Maltese cuisine.

The reasons for this question where that we use a lot of herbs due t we are surrounded by herbs, that we are Mediterranean, some of the dishes need a lot of herbs to taste good and that the Maltese like it. The reason for those who said no and does not use that much was that they said that most household tend to shy away from using them and some are fussy cause of their taste.

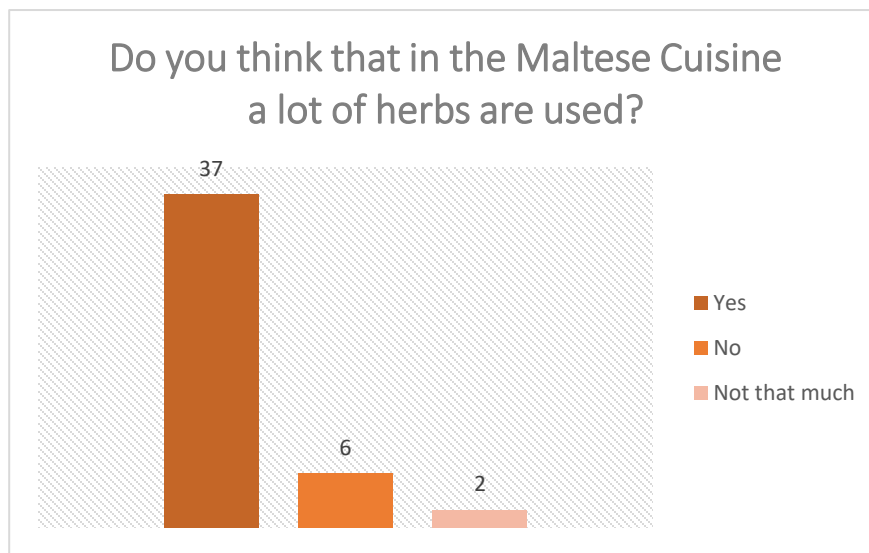


Figure 11

**4.1.7. Question.7. List these herbs from most popular to lest popular that you think are being used by the Maltese.**

The percipients ranked them as first parsley, second fennel, third rosemary, fourth mint, fifth thyme, sixth bay leaf, seventh sage and eight coriander. Which the author think is quite accurate.

**4.1.8. Question.8. What herbs do you usually use during the season of Winter, Summer, Spring and Autumn?**

The responses from the participants was herbs that grow during the season of winter are thyme, rosemary, parsley, bay leaf, celery, sage, dill, mint and oregano.

The herbs that grow in the Summer are soft herbs such as parsley, mint, basil, fennel. Marjoram, peppermint and dill. They even mentioned some hard herbs such as oregano, rosemary and thyme. For the season of Sprig most of the participants mentioned soft herbs such as celery, sage, basil, mint parsley, dill, marjoram, coriander, chives and they even mentioned two hard herb which was rosemary and thyme. The herbs that the participants think that grow during the season of autumn are strong herbs which they mentioned thyme, oregano, bay leaf, rosemary. Some mentioned soft herbs as well which they mentioned celery, parsley, coriander, mint, sage, fennel, marjoram and basil.

**4.1.9. Question.9. Do you think that herbs prices both dry and fresh herbs are affordable or overprices?**

As seen on Figure 12 thirty of the participated agreed that herbs are affordable but six thinks that herbs are overpriced. One of the participants said that if you buy a plant and grow it will be cheaper than buying herbs every time that you need to use herbs.

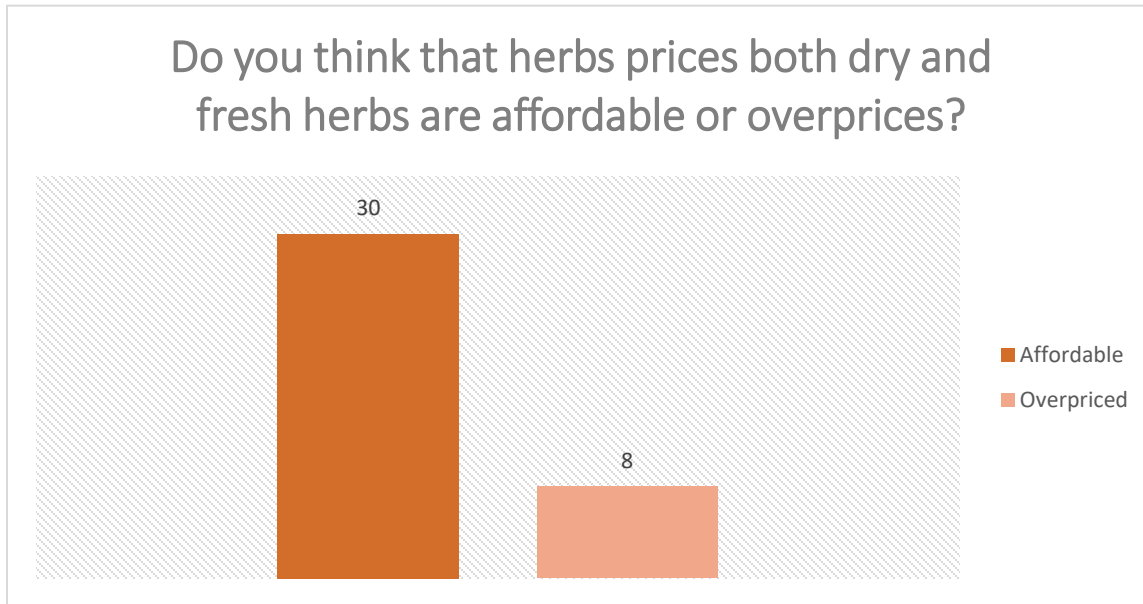


Figure 12

**4.1.10. Question10. What is your opinion on when herbs are being used with pastry?  
Example. Peach basil tart, mint chocolate ice cream, berries and thyme yogurt cake.**

As seen on Figure 13 Twenty-five said that that they like herbs when being used in pastry products, on the other hand two do not like the idea and four others never tried it.

Their opinion of those who likes herbs used in pastry product said that they are quite tempting, if it is used properly it is not a problem for them, it gives the pastry a unique taste, and element of freshness and helps balance the flavors better. On the other hand, the once that said that they do not like it in pastry product or severed tried it they like it better in savory product such as roasted meat and do not have any idea.

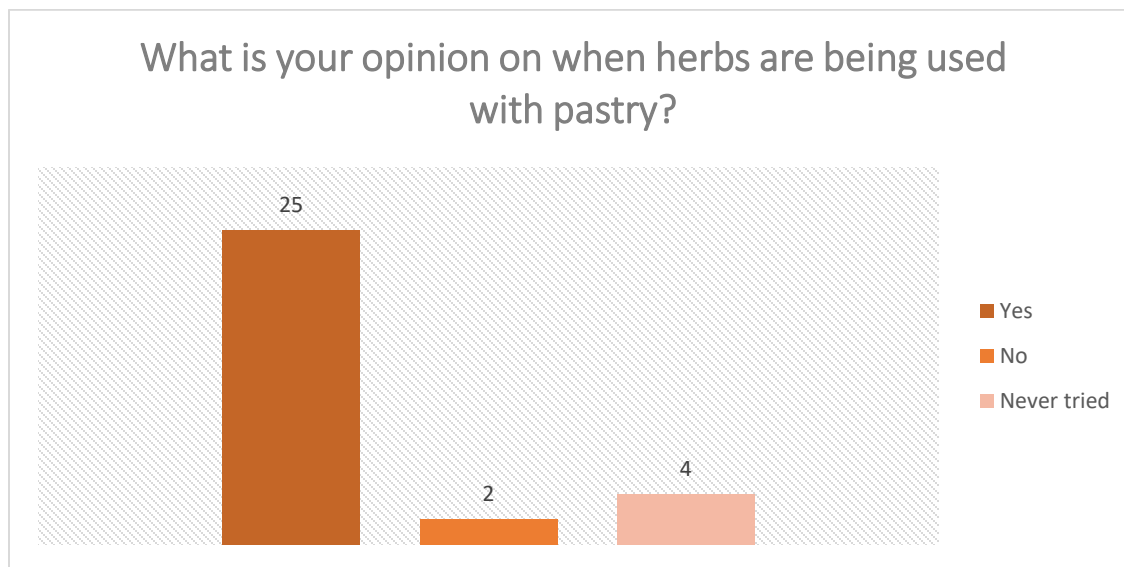


Figure 13

## **4.2. Methodology**

The research found by the author is both quantitative and qualitative because from the quantitative side the author found numerical data from questionnaire for example when the author asked them to rate the herbs from most popular to least popular, the author found out also some statistics what herbs does the Maltese people grow the most, like to use the most as well. From the Qualitative side the author found out opinions, reasons from the participants that dis the questionnaire about which herb they use with a certain type of meat, or what is there opinion when using herbs with pastry product and also opinion about what they think of fresh and dry herbs. The method that the author has used for literature review section where from websites, books, journals, Maltese recipes from the seventies and the questioner that the author did. Some of the topics that the author decided to do about there was a lot of information for example like the difference between the fresh and dry herbs, but topics like the History of herbs in the Maltese Cuisine and the Maltese Cuisine there was lack of information. For the History of herbs in the Maltese Cuisine the author only found a few pages from where the author can find and do her researched only from one book. The author was going to categories it by how the Arabs, French and the English introduced herbs in Malta but only ended up mentioning few details about the French because there was no research to do the research needed for the long essay and about the Arabs and English nothing was found. When the author wanted to do research about the Maltese Cuisine not a lot was found which for this case it didn't make any sense and ended up eliminating the topic of Maltese Cuisine due to lack of Books and research. When the author did the questionnaire there where some problems as well. The author forgot to mention the age and gender on the questionnaire, but the good think is that the author knows who filled up the questionnaires. The participants who filled the questionnaires where mothers who cook for their family, lecturers from the Institute of tourism studies, students as well and some of the authors colleges which are chefs.

### 4.3. Conclusion

To conclude, in this dissertation we have seen that herbs has an amazing history in Malta how it was introduced due to Malta was concurred by a lot of attackers. We can see how herbs where used and developed in different recipes and even from the questionnaire different uses from herbs such as it can be used for food, essential oils and so much more. Finally, we have also seen from the questionnaire what people think when it comes to using herbs in different items, how they use it and more

While doing this long assignment there where some issues which some were fixable some were not. For the research section the issues that the author had where that she wanted to include a brief of information about the Maltese Cuisine but there aren't any books, websites where the author could have found her research to do her research. The research that she found was more based about the history and traditions of Malta and still there isn't that much about this as well because of this the author ended up eliminating the research about the Maltese cuisine from her long assignment. Another issue was when the author needed to find information about history how herbs where introduced in Malta. The author wanted to categorize it how the English, Arabs and French introduces herbs in Malta but ended up doing this research section about how it got introduced the first time and how the Maltese started and for what they where using herbs and still the author only found few pages from once book to do this section. For the Methodology section the author chose to do questionnaires and included ten questions which where bot quantitative and qualitive. The issue with this was that the author forgot to mention for the participants to add their age and gender. Another issue from the questionnaire was that some of the participants skipped some of the questions and some of the answers didn't make any sense for example someone who did the questionnaire was confused when mentioning herbs because he or she was mentioning spices instead, some of the answers where not as the author needed them tm be filled.

The implications arising from the findings are that in Malta we are surrounded with a big variety of herbs that do not either get used, use them well or know about them, so this research it trying

to show and explain that in Malta we have a lot of good ingredient that some don't care or do not know about and need to be more aware, share more knowledge about these things because someday we might not have any of these product and since we have them now we have the time to learn more about herbs. There is also an issue about these types of research because there is lack of awareness, knowledge, research and books especially with the youngsters when they are still at school they need to be taught about these kind of research so they will know more about their own country and its culture, cuisine and traditions. In the future since the author is not going to continue her degree level for now she also encourages students from Institute of tourism studies to continue about this research because it is a very interesting subject to learn about and there is a lot more, and if the student is studying to be a chef it very important to have knowledge about this because in the future it will help you to create menus easier and more creative.

The author found the information that was needed for this long assignment from online books, books from her school library, websites, journals, Maltese recipes from the seventies and the questionnaire itself that the author did.

In this long assignment the authors has researched about history of how herbs was introduced in Malta, the difference between fresh and dry herbs, she analyzed Maltese recipes from the seventies and learned more how they use to use herbs and learned more what is the opinion on herbs from Maltese people who are mothers who like to cook, students that are still studying to become a chef, chefs and lectures from the institute of tourism studies.

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## 6. Appendices

### 6.1. Questionnaire draft

#### The usage of herbs in the Maltese cuisine (questionnaire)

1. What are your favorite herbs?

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2. Do you use herbs in your cooking?

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3. Do you use fresh, or dry herbs, and is there a reason why?

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4. Do you grow your own herbs? If so, which herbs do normally you grow?

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5. What herbs do you like to use with:

A. Chicken(roasted chicken, chicken broth)\_\_\_\_\_

B. Pork (roasted pork, pork stew) \_\_\_\_\_

C. Fish (lampuka, Aljotta) \_\_\_\_\_

D. Rabbit (rabbit stew, fried rabbit ) \_\_\_\_\_

E. Beef (beef olives, roasted beef) \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you think that in the Maltese Cuisine a lot of herbs are used? **Is there a reason to your answer?**

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**7.** List these herbs from most popular to lest popular that you think are being used by the Maltese.

- ☐ Fennel (buzbiez)
- ☐ Parsley (tursin)
- ☐ Thyme (saghtar)
- ☐ Rosemary (klin)
- ☐ Mint (nanieh)
- ☐ Sage (salvja)
- ☐ Bay leaf (werqa randa)
- ☐ Coriander (kosbor)

**8.** What herbs do you usually use during the season of?

Winter \_\_\_\_\_

Summer \_\_\_\_\_

Spring \_\_\_\_\_

Autumn \_\_\_\_\_

**9.** Do you think that herbs prices both dry and fresh herbs are affordable or overprices?

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**10.** What is your opinion on when herbs are being used with pastry? Example. Peach basil tart, mint chocolate ice cream, berries and thyme yogurt cake.

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