

## A taste of South Africa

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By Alix Norman

Halfway through the interview, I realise that biltong is to the South Africans what Marmite is to the British... a staple of the national diet that brings a comforting taste of home to expat life. And while I simply cannot survive without Marmite toast for breakfast, to our colonial cousins it's biltong that makes the world go round. Which is why the advent of the Vouni-based home industry 'Melina's Biltong' is so greatly welcome.

"This is one of the South African things I missed in Cyprus. Until now!" writes one happy customer on the website.

"Melina's Biltong reminds me of South Africa!" suggests another, adding – with capitals for emphasis – "The Only Place to buy this in Cyprus!"

And a third – who is either a master of colloquial Afrikaans, or suffering from an extreme biltong high – exclaims: "Jislaaik, ouks, this is the real stuff!!!"

Glowing testimonials indeed (I'm not sure there are many Brits who could get quite so extravagantly enthusiastic about Marmite) and proof positive that Melina's Biltong has filled a gaping hole in the local market. But, for those of you who aren't quite sure what all the fuss is about (if you know exactly what biltong is, and are tearfully jubilant you've found a great source, skip ahead!), let's just add a bit of biltong background to facilitate matters...

From the Dutch for rump ('bil') and tongue ('tong'), biltong is an air-dried meat marinated in a tasty blend of herbs, and has been a staple on the subcontinent for years. Developed in the 17th century by the early Dutch pioneers, it's a result of climatic requirements: the settlers soon discovering that extreme desiccation of meat would create a product that was low carb, high protein, wonderfully sustaining and surprisingly tasty. And now it's here in Cyprus, homemade in Vouni by Nicole and Ronnie Rogoff, both of whom appear to have a bent for the biltong-making business. And, much like the biltong of the Dutch settlers, it all started with necessity...

"We'd been in Cyprus for a couple of months," explains Nicole (both have spent many years of their lives in South

Africa; Ronnie being born in the country while Nicole hailing from Kent), “when my husband started craving biltong!” The pair put the word out and discovered a small local source which, unfortunately, soon ran out. “So we thought we might as well make our own; we’d done it before, and there was clearly a market for it here in Cyprus. And it all developed from there, really.”

“To make biltong, we use a good piece of Silverside beef with lots of external fat on it,” Ronnie reveals. “We have a big, dedicated butcher’s block in our kitchen that we use for slicing the meat – sharp knives being absolutely crucial to this process,” he adds with a smile, “before layering it into containers and adding the marinade.” Covered in a mixture of basic herbs and spices (red wine vinegar, coarse salt and brown sugar) as well as a secret ‘Melina’s spice mix’, the meat is then sealed and left for up to 24 hours.

“Then there’s the hanging process,” he continues. “We have a special room in our house, which is fly-free and kept at a constant temperature to aid the drying. The meat is hung on butcher’s hooks and air dried” – a step greatly aided by the hot, dry conditions shared by both South Africa and Cyprus – “and, depending on the time of year, this can take anything up to 72 hours. Obviously, in the summer months, the meat will dry very quickly, and if it’s very humid, we’ll also fan dry the air as well.”

It all sounds fairly complicated. But apparently, that’s only half the battle: packaging biltong correctly is quite a task, it transpires.

“Packaging has probably been our greatest challenge to date,” says Nicole. “We’ve invested in a vacuum-sealing machine and use a European-approved product imported especially from Germany – it’s not something you can buy locally, unfortunately. And we’ve also been working on our labelling and presentation: luckily, Ronnie is very creative and has designed a special display box that goes on the counter in shops and bars and so on.”

What with shops and bars, restaurants and even rugby games (“South Africa, rugby and biltong all go hand in hand,” laughs Nicole, “so we tend to sell quite a lot at local games!”), the biltong business appears to be booming. “We sell two varieties: original and chilli, either in snack packs or as a whole piece. It turns out that people quite like to sit in front of the telly and carve their own slices,” she laughs, “and it goes very well with a cold Keo or a glass of local red!”

With the ability to deliver anywhere on the island – almost immediately, it’s worth noting! – Melina’s Biltong is the perfect example of an effective, local cottage industry. And though Nicole and Ronnie have found an ideal gap in the market, they’re quite happy to keep the business small and friendly. “We’re quite happy it’s the size it is, to be honest,” Ronnie explains. “We might expand in terms of flavours, but not with regards to volume; we don’t want this to take over our lives. It’s a fairly stress-free process,” he concludes, “as long as you can maintain a good sharp knife!”

Knives aside, Melina’s Biltong is clearly bringing the best flavours of South Africa to Cyprus. And as someone who once cried in the supermarket when the Marmite ran out, I can only empathise with all you South Africans out there who have finally found a place to buy the true taste of home. Jislaaik, ouks! Biltong is here!

### **Melina’s Biltong**

Traditional South African biltong produced locally. For orders and information, visit [www.melinasbiltong.com](http://www.melinasbiltong.com) email [info@melinasbiltong.com](mailto:info@melinasbiltong.com) or call 96 611802

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