

# Merill

The Maltese Islands'  
Unique Rural Tourism  
Network



[www.merill.com.mt](http://www.merill.com.mt)



# What is the Merill Rural Network?

## DEFINITION

The **Merill Rural Network** is a *de facto* **social enterprise** bringing together a number of **farmers, breeders and artisans** operating in the **Maltese Islands** all of whom aspire to divert part of their products and services towards rural tourism activities.



# Mission:

Empowering Malta's **rural community** by envisioning a circular, sustainable economy where **rural tourism** supports **agriculture and crafts** and vice versa.

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# Why?

Despite its multi-functional role **agriculture** has always been underrated in Malta and the rural community is the last to be safeguarded in terms of policies. **Education** and **activism** are key to improve the status of the sector.

Moreover, Malta has long been afflicted by the phenomenon of **overtourism** with mainstream attractions, towns and beaches overwhelmed by visitors.

At the time of Merill's launch, the local rural community was almost totally excluded from any benefits that tourism may bring.

# Our Story

**2010**

Jeanette and Christian founded Merill, which was first meant as an '**ecotour venture**', organising sightseeing tours in the lesser-known areas of the Maltese Islands.

**2011**

They realised that they had to **engage the protagonists of rural areas** (farmers, breeders and artisans) if they wanted to access the nicest hidden-gems and to contribute towards the **long-term upkeep** of these vulnerable areas and traditions.

**2012-2014**

Merill started to be described as a **social enterprise**. It gained access to the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development**, under the LEADER program, promoted by the ENRD. Thanks to tangible and intangible investments, Merill could become more competitive on the market.

**2015-2020**

Set the blueprint for **rural tourism** in Malta. Kept on growing and becoming stronger thanks to the **relationships of mutual trust** established with the rural community. Mentioned by various academic papers as a best practice in **networking** and **community-based tourism**.

**2020 - 2022**

Merill established a new commercial arm **Malta Rural Tours**. It fostered further the connection with the **academic world** and other like-minded companies in Malta to promote local products. Launched **RuralCSR** initiatives. Reinforced its **internship** programme. Recognised as a **leader in Quality Tourism**.

# The three pillars:



## RURAL TOURISM

We encourage rural families to **diversify their offer through rural tourism** and understand better its value. The members make available their venues to host alternative experiences revolving around **local food and traditions**.



## LOCAL PRODUCTS

We **valorise and promote locally-sourced and genuine products**, grown through responsible agricultural practices. **We sensitize people** on the importance of eating local, seasonal and fresh.



## ISSUE ADVOCACY

We are committed to the **dissemination** of our experience, **catalysing** Merrill's effect, also thanks to the connection with the academic world. We educate the new generations by providing **internship opportunities** to deserving students willing to learn about **social entrepreneurship**.

# Rural tourism

## AS A WAY TO SUPPORT LOCAL IDENTITY

Merill encourages farming families to understand the value of **rural tourism**: thanks to its partner company **Malta Rural Tours**, the members of the network make available their venues to host **alternative experiences revolving around food and traditions**, and targets both locals and tourists.

Building on the trend of experiential and sensorial activities, we're helping farmers, breeders, and artisans to create their own strategies in order to **diversify their income**.

Generally speaking, industrialisation and globalisation are pushing us towards standard models, erasing our territorial identities and traditions. A **community-based** form of tourism can help these small-scale workshops and farms to be economically sustainable and preserve traditions and skills that would otherwise be lost.





# Local products

## RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT MALTESE AGRICULTURE

Merill helps its members to add value to their genuine produce, bridging the gap between consumers and producers and highlighting the potential of a sector which is under-represented.

The **gastronomy element** is very important in the experiences and tours that take place at our members' premises - for example in tasting sessions. Apart from the experiential element, Merill also promotes **eco gifts** with products sourced direct from the farmers and breeders. These items make for unique and truly sustainable tokens to be enjoyed as souvenirs, give-aways or eco-hampers.



# Issue advocacy

## EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM TO CATALYSE CHANGE

**Fostering relationships** is what our network is all about. We know that creating connections and getting people together in order to raise awareness is the best way to **prompt a positive change**. We also aim to **trigger public debates** as much as possible in order to gain better recognition for rural communities.

That's why we take part in national and international projects, collaborate with like-minded people and organizations and collaborate with the academic world.

We also host many students from all over the world offering them **internship opportunities**. Our believe is that it is essential to educate young generations on current issues and we often find that interns are motivated so much that they are inspired to replicate our model abroad.



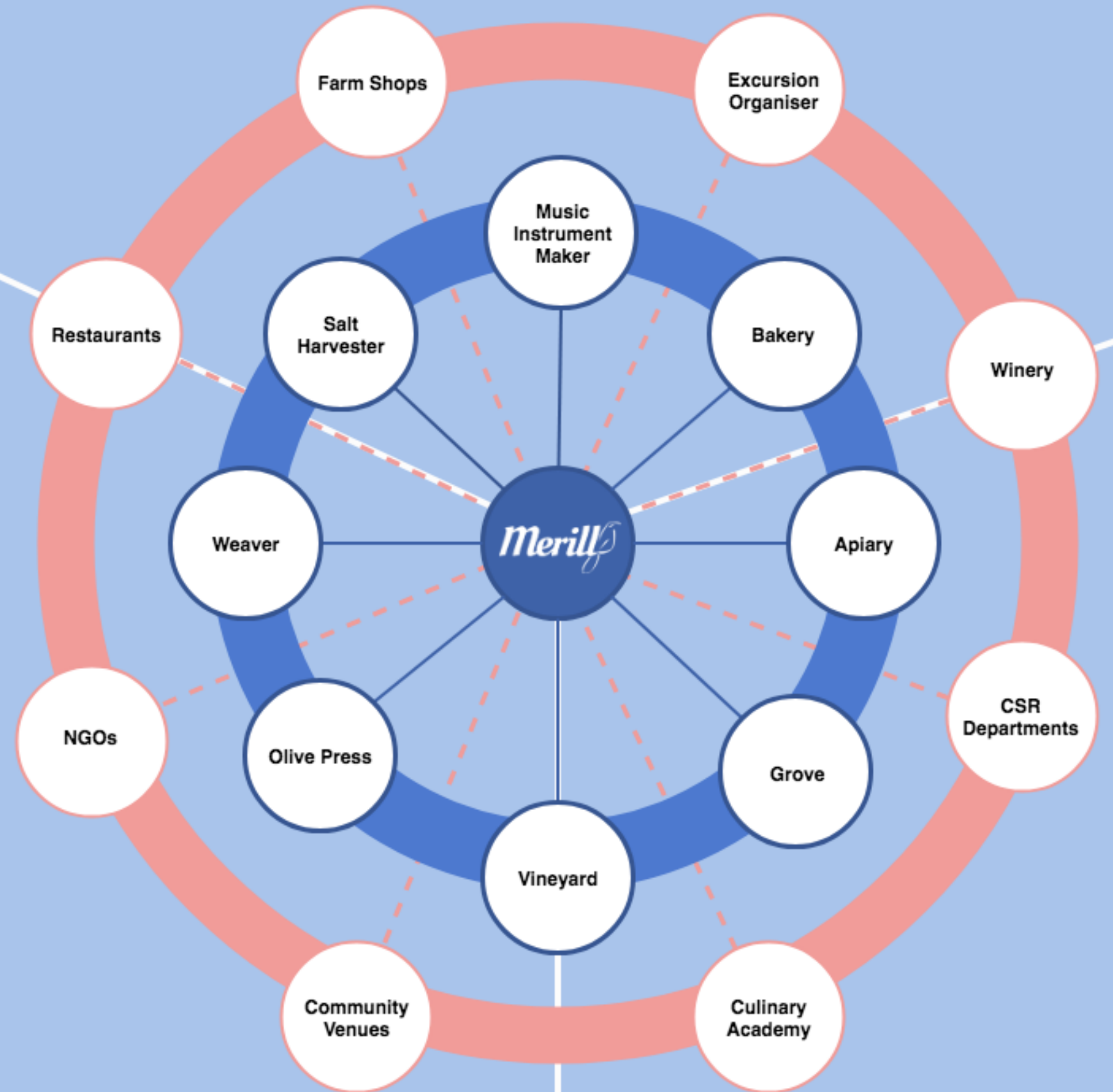
# The 'Hub & Spoke Model'

## MERILL'S BUSINESS MODEL

Merill is a social enterprise, therefore its main objective is to create **positive social change**.

Along the years the network evolved into a '**Hub and Spoke Model**'. Through this approach, Merill is the central fulcrum - i.e. the hub - and its role is to hold together the different members, partners, and collaborators within the network - i.e. the spokes.

Merill can be compared to a wheel: when everything runs as it should, the wheel spins smoothly, meaning that the social enterprise is achieving its goals.





# How can this work?

## OUR PHILOSOPHY

The 'Hub and Spoke Model' is possible as it is based on **healthy personal relationships** nurtured with time until we achieve **mutual trust** through **good communication** and **mutual understanding**.

Through this model, our members can rely on Merill to help them create their tourism strategy and build their brand identity, while they focus on their main agricultural or artisanal activity. In turn, locals and tourists empower these communities by taking part in their rural tourism activities.

# The 4 premises of alignment

## MERILL'S PRINCIPLES

These premises are based on the needs of both the rural community and the social enterprise. They also take into consideration the opportunities and challenges presented in the Maltese Islands.

Our members need to comply with all of these principles so that together we may establish a solid base for long-term sustainable partnerships.



Operate a  
functioning  
bona fide  
farm



Promote  
100% local  
whenever  
possible



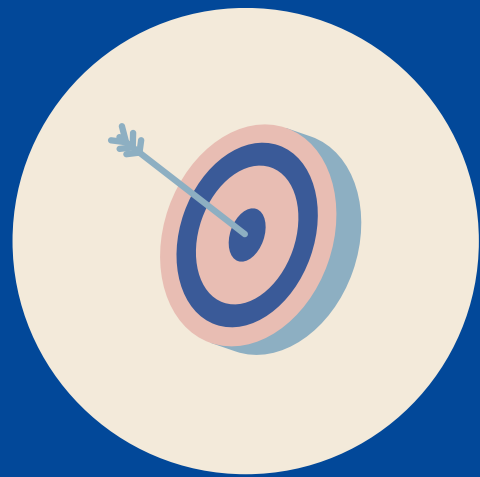
Be committed  
to provide  
value-added



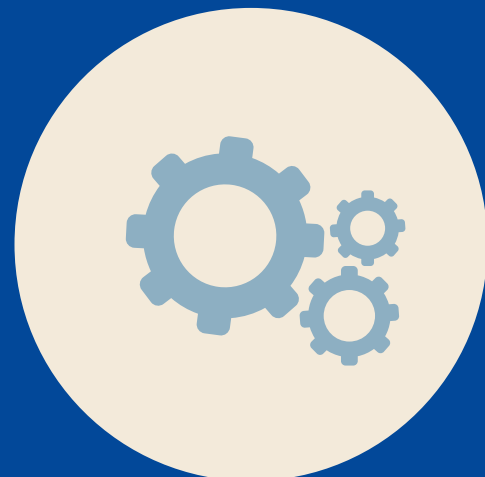
Show a  
propensity to  
long-term  
collaboration

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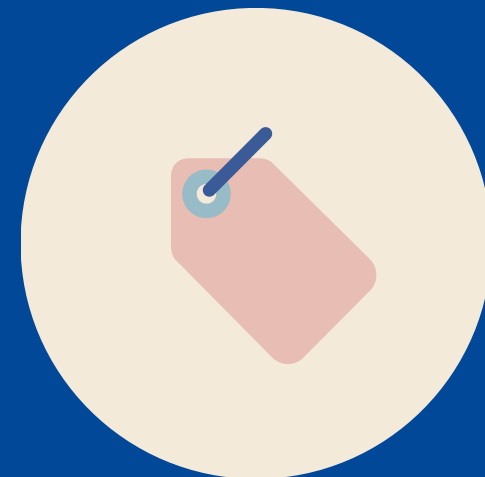
# Member Benefits



Tap into rural tourism without worrying about the logistics thanks to the collaboration with our commercial agent



Having a team of rural tourism professionals at your disposal to help you create and nurture your brand identity



Getting more visibility for your products and services while positioning them in conjunction with the Merrill brand



Keeping in touch with like-minded farmers, breeders and artisans to support Merrill's vision for better rural policies

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# Success Stories

GET TO KNOW SOME OF THE PEOPLE WHO  
HAVE ENTRUSTED US WITH THEIR BUSINESS



## TAN-NIXXIEGĦA OLIVE GROVE

In the year 2000, Charlie and Bella stood on a freshly purchased piece of barren and derelict land in the hills of Mgarr. Fast forward 20 years, with commitment and hard work they have transformed the wasteland into a flourishing and vibrant olive grove that provides a tranquil oasis of green away from Malta's bigger cities.

The **collaboration** between the Merill Rural Network and the Tan-Nixxiegha Olive Grove - also described as “**an open-air museum of Maltese flora and fauna**” - has enabled Bella and Charlie to **diversify the activities on this grove**, which were previously committed just to the production of olive oil. This place has turned into a **best-practice agri-tourism attraction** where visitors can get in touch with Maltese nature and enjoy other activities such as **tasting sessions and hands-on experiences**.





## DARMANIN SALT PANS

A tangible example of how the Merill Rural Network is able to **bridge the gap between local producers and consumers** can be provided by Darmanin Salt Pans in Żonqor Point, Marsaskala. These saltpans have been a in the hands of a **family of salt harvesters for at least eight generations** and to date they still adopt more or less the same *modus operandi*.



The collaboration with the Merill Rural Network has given birth to **guided tours at the location**, as well as **hands-on salt harvesting workshops** in order not only to market the local salt produced, but also to promote the artisanal skills of salt harvesters, their relationship with this piece of coastal landscape, and the awareness of the benefits of sea salt. After the process of drying, sea salt is packaged under the trademark of 'Darmanin Salt Pans' and sold locally or to tourists engaged in the experiences at the saltpans.





## ANTOINE TAN-NEWL

It is not just about food! The members of the Merrill Rural Network also introduce guests to **Maltese traditions**, such as **the art of weaving**. Antoine Vella owns a workshop in Rabat that is a must-stop for travelers seeking to know more about the skill. During the demonstrations, Antoine explains how cloth and other materials used to be made before textile factories existed, as well as provides details about the process through **hands-on experiences**.

Antoine has several items he produces on display for visitors to buy which turn out to be **authentic souvenirs** for their holiday. Thanks to the network, Antoine could also be actively involved in the **European Community's LEADER project**, which has empowered him to embrace digital marketing and enabled him to invest in specialised equipment to use in his workshop.



# Our Eco-Gifts!

**Handmade boxes** assembled with the products sourced by Merrill's partners and members, together with **eco gifts** - where the use of plastic or synthetic materials is reduced to a bare minimum. The main products promoted by the network are: **wine, honey, sea salt, extra virgin olive oil, cheese, jams, pickled vegetables, bakery products, and artisanal products.**





*Merill*