

Uruguay: Heaven for meat eaters, hell for vegetarians

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It is not easy being a vegetarian in Uruguay—one of the largest exporters of meat in the world.

"In Uruguay, they laugh at vegetarians, they think we are weird," says Laura Lacurcia, with a sigh.

The South American country has a peculiar claim to fame—it has three times more cows (10 million) than people (three million)—and is proud of its reputation as a carnivore's paradise.

So when the UN warned Monday that red meat "probably" poses a cancer risk, many Uruguayans merely shrugged.

"If someone wants to eat Uruguayan food and they are vegetarian, they are in trouble," joked Gustavo Laborde, an anthropologist and author of a book on the "ritual" that is the barbecue.

Non-meat eaters like Lacurcia have a tough time in the capital, which has a population of 1.5 million but is almost devoid of vegetarian or vegan restaurants.

Titina Nunez, of gourmet magazine "Placer," says there are a mere handful of vegetarian restaurants in the city.

"It is very hard for Uruguayans to avoid pizza or barbecue and there is a long way to go for us to get to gourmet levels," she said.

"When a Mexican or Japanese restaurant opens, they end up adding local meat dishes to their menu because if they don't, they close down."

Lacurcia became a vegan out of concern for animal welfare. She brushes off the incredulous reaction she invariably draws.

"You have to be very tolerant and laugh it off or ignore it," she said, smiling. "People regard us as strange beasts."

Her choice certainly sets her apart from the average Uruguayan, who chomps through nearly 60 kilos (130 pounds) of beef a year—over 20 kilos more than the average French person, for example.

Baby food and meat juice

The World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) alarmed many around the world with its findings.

It released a report analyzing 800 studies from around the world, concluding that processed meats such as sausages, ham and hot dogs aggravate the risk of bowel cancer, and [red meat](#) "probably" does too.

But many in Uruguay gave the findings short shrift.

Without meat on the menu every day, "Uruguay would not exist," said one diner at a typical restaurant in Mercado del Puerto, in the heart of Montevideo, where the fare revolves entirely around grilled meat.

Another diner feasting on meat saw a conspiracy in the findings: "Let's find out what the hidden interests are behind this information."

An unmistakable smell wafts through the capital every Sunday: that of the barbecue, which is central to family gatherings.

When a Uruguayan real estate agent takes prospective buyers to an apartment, first on his list of amenities to point out is the barbecue on the terrace.

Only after that will talk turn to other, secondary matters, such as the size of the place.

Nor can you mistake the smell of barbecue on the sidewalks, where workers set up improvised grills at lunch time.

Even on the online dating network Tinder, having a barbecue is a personal selling point—or so it seems from the profile pictures of the many men posing with a [barbecue](#) peeking out in the background.

Back at Mercado del Puerto, Jose Fernandez remembers how until the 1970s Uruguayan mothers would add meat juice to babies' meals.

"They would mix the blood of the meat with mashed potatoes," said the 66-year-old.

Even local nutritionists are skeptical of the cancer claims.

Rosana Viera branded the WHO findings "very alarmist."

"Uruguayan [meat](#) is very different from that produced in other countries," she said.

"Here, the cows are raised outdoors and this is what makes the quality—not just quantity—of their flesh different."

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