

Bolivia touts llama as healthy alternative to beef

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Danish chef Kamilla Seidler is carefully preparing steak tartare at Gustu, an upscale restaurant in the Bolivian capital La Paz.

But instead of the usual beef, she is making it with llama meat, a traditional favorite in Bolivia that is gaining new status as producers hail it as a healthier alternative.

"Before it was considered the [poor people](#)'s meat, but now it's the most expensive in the country," the 32-year-old chef told AFP.

The caper-dotted tartare she is making costs 75 bolivianos (about \$11) at Gustu, which opened three years ago to much fanfare and an article in Food & Wine magazine entitled "Is Gustu the World's Best New Restaurant?"

Thousands of kilometers away, llama herder German Churqui is thrilled at this new appetite for his product.

"Llama meat is good so we are hopeful the price will keep going up. Llama meat can be a good competitor" to other red meats, said the 45-year-old father of four, who keeps a herd of 150 llamas high in the Andes mountains, in the western district of Turco.

The llama, a long-necked pack animal known for its wool, has also long been a food source for indigenous people in Bolivia, a poor, landlocked country better known for its rugged high mountains than its haute

cuisine.

"Our ancestors consumed llama meat and traded it for wheat, barley, corn and coca," said Demetrio Luna of the Bolivian rural development ministry, which has launched a campaign to promote llama meat.

Several years ago, llama meat began popping up on high-end restaurant menus in the region, for example as a carpaccio served with quinoa and parmesan.

It has gotten a new boost from the World Health Organization's publication of a report last October finding that processed meat causes cancer and red meat "probably" does too.

Llama is a red meat, but Bolivia insists it is healthier than beef.

"Llama meat contains a high level of low-fat protein and generates low levels of cholesterol," the ministry of rural development said in a 2013 report.

'Healthier than beef'

Most of the 5,200 people who live in Turco depend on llamas to survive.

Churqui says one llama brings in around \$150. He sells between 20 and 40 of them a year, his sole source of income.

"That's what allows us to live," he said.

Llamas are found across the Andes region, in Ecuador, Chile, Peru and Argentina, but Bolivia is responsible for 60 percent of llama meat production, with 2.8 million animals.

In the western city of Oruro, Maria had just bought 16 kilos (35 pounds) of llama meat for around \$50 at the "Las Americas" market.

"I'm going to make roast llama. It's nutritional and healthier than beef," said the housewife.

But Bolivia is still a long way from being able to export llama meat, according to Jose Luis Rios, an agricultural technician in Oruro who said the entire production chain needs to be modernized to meet international standards, "from herd management, to feed, to animal health and genetic improvements."

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