

Uruguayans defend national drink after cancer warning

June 17 2016

It was potentially devastating news for Uruguayans: a warning that their national drink, mate, could cause cancer if consumed hot.

But the plucky South American country, already grumpy after being knocked out of the Copa America football tournament, found a silver lining as they faced an affront to their cultural identity.

News came from the World Health Organization on Wednesday that drinking very hot liquids poses a cancer risk.

That was hard to swallow for a country where in every park and square folk sit slurping mate, an herbal infusion brewed with hot water.

"Everything is better with mate," said student Valentina Nunez, 24, sitting with her gourd and a flask of [hot water](#) on a university campus in Montevideo.

"It's like a companion," said her friend, Jessica Aliz.

But the WHO report also brought salvation for lovers of the ground green leaves, whose champions include Argentine-born Pope Francis and Uruguayan football icon Luis Suarez.

Along with the hot-drink warning, the WHO removed mate from a blacklist of drinks whose contents were thought to cause cancer.

The WHO in 1991 said coffee and mate—pronounced something like "mattay"—were thought to have carcinogenic qualities.

Now it says it is the heat, not the contents, that poses the tumor risk.

In the case of mate, "its components actually lessen the damage from the temperature," stopping cells from mutating into tumors, said Nelson Bracesco, a biologist researching mate at Uruguay's state medicine faculty.

"That has been proved in a test tube. It remains to be tested on humans or animals," he said.

"It would help to explain why in Uruguay imports of mate leaves have increased strongly and the type of esophageal cancer in question has been decreasing in recent years."

Drink of champions

With three million inhabitants, Uruguay is tiny compared to its mate-rich neighbors Argentina and Brazil.

But in mate-drinking terms, it is a giant.

Argentina and Brazil are the region's biggest mate producers, but Uruguay consumes more per head than any of these countries, according to industry estimates.

Walking in the street, sitting in the park or standing on the bus, Uruguayans can be seen everywhere cradling their mate gourd with a thermos under their arm.

The gourd, a hollowed-out pumpkin, is filled nearly to the brim with

mate leaves. The water is added in small doses, sometimes over a period of hours. The infusion is consumed by sucking on a metal straw called a bombilla.

"It's not like a quick coffee," said Aliz. "It is always there. It lasts longer, you top it off. To drink mate, you have to take time out."

Bracesco says his research shows that mate boosts the drinker's concentration and physical well being.

"It is part of our culture," said Jorge Vera, 72, who sells mate gourds and bombillas in central Montevideo.

"It is expanding outside our region—even more so now that the pope is an Argentine who drinks mate."

Francis has been photographed in his white papal robes with a gourd in hand.

So has Suarez, the striker with Spanish football champions Barcelona, arguably the best-known Uruguayan abroad right now.

"The first thing I do in the morning is make mate," says Rossimary Baron, 33, a Brazilian living in Montevideo.

She moved to the Uruguayan capital four years ago from Rio Grande do Sul, a Brazilian state where mate is drunk from giant gourds.

She says the drink makes her feel "at home."

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Citation: Uruguayans defend national drink after cancer warning (2016, June 17) retrieved 26

April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-06-uruguayans-defend-national-cancer.html>

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