

The meanings of meat

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Invitations to dinner more often entail the consumption of meat than does an evening meal alone at home. A new study by LMU researchers shows that the willingness to forego meat is highly context dependent.

The barbecue season opens as soon as temperatures are tolerable—and the menu is almost always dominated by steak, sausages and other [meat](#)

[products](#). Plant-based foods are treated as more of an afterthought on these occasions. The combination of heat and [meat](#) is a ritual that goes back a very long time, and the modern barbecue continues to follow the ancient recipe. LMU researchers Gesa Biermann and Henrike Rau have now taken a closer look at the implications of cultural practices linked to [meat consumption](#) for efforts to reduce the ecological impact of dietary behavior. Their study, which recently appeared in the journal *Appetite*, reveals that the cultural meanings of meat, and the customs associated with food and its contexts, have specific connotations of which few of us are conscious. "Meat is an intrinsic component of the barbecue experience," says Gesa Biermann, "just as in Germany we seem to have agreed on a bowl of cereal with cold milk as a suitable meal to have in the morning."

Hence, in order to understand the everyday significance of meat, the [social function](#) of eating practices must be taken into account. For instance, it makes a difference whether one goes out to dinner or cooks at home, whether one eats in the company of others or alone. "The most important insight in this regard is that eating at home and eating at a restaurant are quite different experiences," says Biermann. "People are more likely to eat meat at a restaurant than at home, and cooking for others—whether family members or guests—also likely coincides with more meat consumption than eating alone. This was also true of the flexitarians among our research subjects." As Biermann explains, the term "flexitarian" is now used to refer to individuals who have consciously reduced their consumption of meat to no more than approximately once per week in favor of a more sustainable diet.

These findings indicate that the nature of the occasion plays an important role in determining what one chooses to eat or cook. Most bookings at restaurants are made to mark special occasions. "In our society, the status of meat as a luxury makes it particularly appropriate for special occasions," says Biermann. This is also true of cooking for

guests at home, and hospitality implies a wish to make an impression. In such situations, an "eating event" can carry a normative and emotional significance.

The results of the study underline the crucial role of the perceived significance of different eating practices for the issue of environmentally sustainable nutrition. In certain contexts, meatless menus are still widely regarded as unfitting. In order to promote a switch toward more sustainable diets across society, the authors argue that meatless meals must be endowed with the allure that makes them acceptable for special occasions. "Plant-based meals must evoke the response 'I'm going to treat myself tonight,'" says Biermann. This in turn suggests that—in addition to politicians and [business interests](#)—[celebrity chefs](#), social media influencers and best-selling authors could all play an important role in making sustainable nutrition more popular.

More information: Gesa Biermann et al. The meaning of meat: (Un)sustainable eating practices at home and out of home, *Appetite* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2020.104730](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104730)

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