

Research sheds light on the history of food at the Olympic Games

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Almost 130 years have gone by since the first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896. During this time, sports practices have come a long way. What and how athletes eat has also changed a lot,

especially among Olympic competitors.

In fact, the diet of Olympic athletes from 1896 to the present day is the subject of the first thesis to come out of the doctoral program in Health and Psychology at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC). This research, carried out by the FoodLab and Epi4Health at the UOC's Faculty of Health Sciences and led by researchers F. Xavier Medina and Laura Esquiús, has gathered a wealth of anecdotes to help tell the story.

"At the first Games there were no Olympic villages, the athletes were amateurs, they drank wine, and like the ancient Greeks, they still believed that eating a goat's leg would give them the strength of a goat. Today, we have to prepare 50,000 meals a day, provide good information, include vegetarian options and ensure sustainability," notes the author of the thesis, Xavi Santabàrbara Díaz, a graduate in Physical Activity and Sports Sciences, who also holds two master's degrees from the UOC.

Titled "Evolución y cambios en la nutrición deportiva, la provisión de alimentos y la gastronomía en los Juegos Olímpicos de la era moderna (1896-2020) [Evolution and changes in sports nutrition, food provision and gastronomy in the modern Olympic Games (1896-2020)]," Santabàrbara's [research](#) analyzes the reports of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on all the Summer Olympics from 1896 to 2020 from the point of view of sports nutrition, keeping in mind that war forced some to be canceled and that the pandemic delayed the last.

Although another nutrition-centered research group had already reviewed these reports, what sets Santabàrbara's study apart is its multidisciplinary approach.

"Research tends to focus on the nutrients that improve performance, but little has been done to understand where we come from and why this is

the case. The Olympic Games are the ultimate sporting event, and we wanted to take our research further and study all the factors that influence sports nutrition at such an event," the paper states. "Sports nutrition has moved from anecdote and myth to a well-established specialization based on scientific evidence. The Olympic Games are proof of this."

Gastrodiplomacy: Korean kimchi and Japanese rice and fish

These factors include the gastronomic characteristics of each country and their influence on the food that athletes will find in the Olympic Village.

"At Seoul 1988, the organizing committee used food to promote the country. It's a great example of gastrodiplomacy. Since then, kimchi has been known all over the world," Santabarbara explained. In the case of Barcelona, however, the priority was to transform the city rather than promote Catalan or Spanish cuisine.

In another example, Japan was reluctant to consider its diet as appealing to athletes until the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, when its national women's volleyball team won the gold medal.

"Their coach explained the athletes' diet, which consisted mainly of rice balls and fish. It changed the way people looked at Japanese food," he said.

From the Olympics to 20th-century history

Santabarbara's in-depth analysis, which also covers aspects such as [food supply](#), catering companies and sports supplements, reflects the changes

that have taken place in society and in athletes' diets over the course of the 20th century.

"Sports nutrition has moved from anecdote and myth to a well-established specialization based on scientific evidence. The Olympic Games are proof of this. At the beginning of the century, for example, protein was considered the single most important nutrient. By the mid-1940s, research had shown that it was carbohydrates that provided energy, and after the Second World War, their importance was taken into account at the Helsinki Olympics," he noted.

What's in store for Paris 2024?

Santabàrbara is now waiting to see whether the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, due to be held this summer, will meet the IOC's three main [sports nutrition](#) goals: focusing on local production and reducing the cost of transporting raw materials; applying clear policies to maximize food use and reduce waste; and promoting plant-based protein options.

"In a couple of years' time, when we have the report, we will see how this has been achieved. We will also see how Paris has positioned its food and that of the country. And, above all, sustainability will be a challenge," said the researcher, who plans to continue his research on the subject.

According to Santabàrbara, major sporting events such as the Olympic Games "can contribute to [social development](#), economic growth, health, education and environmental protection, especially if they form part of consistent and sustainable long-term policies at local, regional and national levels."

More information: Xavi Santabàrbara, [Evolución y cambios en la nutrición deportiva, la provisión de alimentos y la gastronomía en los](#)

[Juegos Olímpicos de la era moderna \(1896-2020\)](#)

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