

Rio de Janeiro tests new recipe against childhood obesity

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Chicken with potatoes, carrot-and-cabbage salad: it looks like a detox meal, but it's the menu at a school cafeteria in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which is seeking new ways to fight childhood obesity.

Nearly one-third of children in Brazil are obese, an epidemic city health officials and [community leaders](#) are seeking to address in innovative ways, enlisting school cafeterias and taking their message of healthful eating to the street.

"Cake? There's no cake here," laughs cook Neide Oliveira as she chops onions for the 650 students of Burle Marx public school in the Curicica neighborhood on Rio's west side.

Additive-packed snacks and cookies are also out, after [city officials](#) banned ultraprocessed foods from schools this year.

Instead, students are discovering classic Brazilian fruits and vegetables that are often overlooked these days, like yams, okra and persimmons—which many kids initially mistook for tomatoes.

Judging from how students devour their lunch, the program is having an impact.

"I like everything they make here, and it's good for my health. At home I eat a lot of junk food, like pizza and hamburgers," says 15-year-old Guilherme.

'Epidemic'

"Childhood obesity is an epidemic, not just in Brazil, but worldwide," says Marluce Fortunato, nutritionist for the Rio city government.

The city is responding with a program at public and [private schools](#), asking teachers to educate students on healthy eating habits.

Thirty-one percent of Brazilian children and teens are overweight or obese. A recent study by the Desiderata institute found more than 80

percent of five- to 19-year-olds reported eating at least one ultraprocessed food the previous day, such as sausages, soda and pastries.

"Science has shown these products are very detrimental to our health and are responsible for 70 percent of chronic diseases worldwide," pediatrician Daniel Becker told AFP.

And in children, they can lead to a double-barreled problem: obesity combined with malnutrition, which can damage learning ability and attention span, he says.

Temptation just outside

But changing eating habits is a challenge.

Ultraprocessed foods are made with ingredients designed to "addict the tastebuds," and have a market advantage over [natural products](#) given their mass distribution and cheaper prices, says Becker.

Sitting next to Guilherme, his friend Lucas, 14, is feasting on his chicken, rice and beans. But he admits that after school he regularly buys chips outside.

Fortunato says schools need parents' help.

"It's easier to educate [young children](#). Once a person's way of thinking is set, it's a challenge to introduce new concepts," she says.

She mentions the example of a father who complained to the school because his son started asking for natural juices at home, which are more expensive than their sugary, additive-heavy counterparts.

'Barbie eggs'

Still, some adults manage to change.

At age 60, grandmother Vera Lucia Perreira discovered organic vegetables—and fell in love.

"They're not just healthful, they're tasty," she says.

"My seven-year-old granddaughter already eats better" than previous generations, she beams.

Perreira is one of 160 women involved in a project called Organic Favela, launched 13 years ago to transform eating habits in the poor Babilonia neighborhood.

The project runs workshops for residents, and also uses creative approaches, like healthful recipes painted in graffiti on neighborhood streets.

Founder Regina Tchelly also works with schools. Her mission: get children to have five colors of natural foods on their plates.

"We teach people to make avocado butter" and "'Barbie eggs'" —dyed red with beets, she says.

The 42-year-old entrepreneur is the author of a cookbook that won Brazil's top literary prize last year, the Jabuti, in the creative economy category.

'Sweet poison'

At the national level, a high-visibility ad campaign launched in March seeks to raise awareness of the health risks of ultraprocessed foods, enlisting celebrities and experts to spread the word.

The campaign, called "sweet poison" ("doce veneno," in Portuguese), wants the government to tax ultraprocessed foods and use the proceeds to subsidize healthful ones.

"It's hard to change, but that doesn't mean people have to be prisoners of their ideas," says Perreira.

"We have to open their minds to look differently at food, for the sake of our future."

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