

# The consumption of meat in Brazil: between socio-cultural and nutritional values

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## Abstract

This paper aims to address the two main spheres of valuation of meat consumption in Brazil: on one hand, the socio-historical aspects and, on the other, the nutritional aspects. To this end, the authors understand the symbolic food bias and consider the relevance of historical experience in the consolidation of eating habits. This paper begins in the context of colonial Brazil, with the inclusion of discursive values related to the consumption of meat. It presents characteristics of meat consumption in Brazil, intensified with the urbanization process from the 19th century. The nutritional speech is noteworthy, developed from the 1930s in Brazil, which ensured the idea of meat as food par excellence, dividing Brazil between those who have access to that food and those who do not. It highlights the importance of meat in the Brazilian food culture, represented especially in steakhouses. It also considers the demonstrations against the consumption of meat permeated by different ideological, ethical, aesthetic and ecological spheres. It intends, therefore, to crisscross lines of these different approaches, emphasizing the different symbolisms that cover the increased meat consumption in Brazil.

**Key words:** Meat. Nutrition. Food history. Symbolism.

## Introduction

Having the perspective that eating as a social practice is rich in representations and imagery that involve choices, classifications and symbols that organize the various worldviews in time and space<sup>1</sup>, we intend to discuss in this article the historical-cultural and nutritional factors that raise beef to the imaginary and commercial level as an essential food of popular and gourmet Brazilian cuisine, whether at home or eating out. Much of the world's population gives such a significant importance to meat that this raw material is considered fundamental in shaping their meals, a factor that justifies the interest of food technology and science in relation to meat as a consumer product.

According to Fiddes<sup>2</sup>, meat would be the sovereign food in different contexts, cultures and social groups. In the food hierarchy presented to us, beef would be at the top, followed by white meat (chicken and fish) and, below, animal products such as eggs and cheese. We emphasize that, for common sense, chicken and fish are not considered meat, as well as sausage and giblets. Finally, are vegetables, which are considered insufficient to form a meal and therefore only represent a complementary role to main preparations.

Aware of the above, we know that, in Brazil, nutritional surveys have gained social relevance from the 1930s. We note, however, that the symbolic value of beef in Brazil is previous to the nutritional praise of that food. In this sense, we present in this article, originally, historical elements that underlie the symbolic value of beef. Then, we reflect on the symbolism of beef in Brazil from nutritional studies and data regarding the consumption of food from the middle of the twentieth century.

## Historical aspects of the taste for beef in Brazil

The combination of the diffusion of meat consumption in Brazil to European colonization is common. Câmara Cascudo<sup>3</sup>, for example, highlights in his classic work *História da Alimentação no Brasil*, the Portuguese participation in early breeding for food, such as cows, oxen, bulls, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, roosters, pigeons, ducks and geese.

Anthropologist Paula Pinto e Silva<sup>4</sup> states that hunting was the main feeding activity of South American indians. According to Cascudo<sup>5</sup>, the indians enjoyed fish, but if they had a choice, they preferred hunting meat. The presence of hunting in the Brazilian native diet was recorded in the accounts of travelers and chroniclers of colonial times. We cite as an example the description of the Calvinist minister Jean de Léry, who lived in Antarctic France in 1556, a French colony established in Rio de Janeiro during this period:

*The tapirucu meat has almost the same taste of the ox; savages prepare it their own way; amerindians bury deep in the ground four wooden forks, framed at a distance of three and a half feet; over them they seat poles with a inch or two fingers away from each other, forming a grid of wood, which they call boucan. They all have it in their homes and over it they put the meat cut into pieces, lighting a slow fire underneath, with dry wood that does not make a lot of smoke, turning the meat every fifteen minutes until well roasted. As they do not salt their meat to save them, as we do, this is the only way to maintain it.<sup>6</sup>*

*Tapirucu* was how the Indians referred to the tapir. It is interesting to note that when they tried the meat of native animals, they always expressed the taste compared to the European standard. Regarding the preparation of the meat, it could be roasted or smoked on the *moquém*, as they called the big stick used for such an act, aiming its conservation. In this excerpt, Lery highlights the lack of salt in the making of the flesh.

From the above, we note that people ate meat in Brazil before the Portuguese colonization. Whereas the novelty brought by the Europeans was farming cattle, especially the cow for food consumption, we believe that this practice, regarding its processing into dried meat, was an initiative of the colonizers. Thus, metropolitan cuisine, which was founded on the triad of meat, bread and wine, in the colony was adapted to the local reality into (dry) meat, beans and cassava.<sup>7</sup>

We identify cattle farming in Brazil since the eighteenth century, when the first Portuguese settlers entered the northeastern backlands. In the context of the nineteenth century, Prince Maximilian Von Wied-Neuwied, naturalist and ethnologist who came to Brazil to learn about the nature and the indigenous population, drew attention to eating habits in the Brazilian backlands:

*The eating habits in this region are substantial and contain milk, used for consumption of both men and animals as well as to manufacture cheese, which is not usually sold, cassava flour and dried meat [...] the inhabitants of these [distant regions] invariably consume flour, black beans and beef<sup>8</sup>.*

We emphasize that the geographical isolation of the region has allowed many traditions from that initial context to be preserved until the contemporary period. Mário de Andrade in his travel diary to the Northeast in January 1929, wrote: “The food is very monotonous. Flour, beans and dried meat”.<sup>9</sup> The Northeastern scholars Gilberto Freyre, Câmara Cascudo and Josué de Castro highlighted the backland food culture by the consumption of beef. Cascudo and Castro underscored the dried meat as the main form of consumption of beef in colonial Brazil. It had such importance in the consolidation of the Brazilian nation that Paula Silva<sup>10</sup> pointed it on the tripod of colonial Brazil, along with the flour and beans.

The populations of the coast of Brazil were more in touch with European habits. Thus, Salvador, one of the main urban centers of colonial Brazil, was the site of production flow from the interior: cattle, leather, sugar and tobacco. Even with the presence of products imported from Portugal, such as almonds, olive oil, tea, cheese and wine, the European population that inhabited the colony was always longing for the food of their land. The adaptation of metropolitan products to the local supply did not please the Portuguese. One example is the opinion of D. Luís de Almeida, who arrived in Salvador in 1768 and found much of the meat consumed in Brazil to be tasteless.<sup>11</sup>

After the discovery of gold in Minas Gerais in the eighteenth century, the socioeconomic axis of the Brazilian colony became Rio de Janeiro, through which the gold production of the colony flowed to the metropolis. In 1808, with the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in Rio de Janeiro, the city experienced the opulence of the presence of the court. According to Tânia Lima<sup>12</sup>, the quality of the meat produced in Southeastern Brazil was one of the biggest obstacles to the adoption of the European way of life in that context. Without extensive pastures, the supply came from the interior (Minas Gerais, Goiás, Mato Grosso do Sul, São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul).

Meat production in Minas Gerais is subsequent to the discovery of gold. In this context, there were prohibitions of both sugar mills and cattle farming in the region. This is because the metropolis, greedy for wealth, sought to concentrate all production possibilities of the inhabitants of this region in the mining activity.<sup>13</sup> Pork was thus at the center of the domestic economy in the mines and until today it is one of the hallmarks of the cuisine in this region, where supplies of beef came from Bahia and Rio Grande do Sul.

Cattle farming was the main activity of the south during the colonial period. Initially, the cattle in this region only met the demand for local food consumption, with only the leather being sold. This was the main food product in the region, consumed the indigenous way: the meat was roasted in large cuts away from the fire, seasoned with its own fat.<sup>14</sup> When referring to this technique, Cascudo identifies it as the root of the gaucho barbecue, currently one of the hallmarks of Brazilian cuisine. For this, he recalls that “Father Martin Dobrizhoffer found it in 1743 among Argentines and Paraguayans abipones, and Saint Hilaire ate this kind of juicy but extremely hard beefsteak, in 1820 in Rio Grande do Sul”.<sup>15</sup>

“Charque”, as dried meat was called in the South, began to be produced and marketed in the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> English merchant John Luccock, who lived in Rio de Janeiro between 1808 and 1818, made reference to charque in his notes about life in the colony: “The most common foodstuffs are dried meat or charque, imported from Rio Grande, prepared cassava flour and beans; poultry, eggs and soups are the delicacies”.<sup>17</sup>

On the coast of Paraná, *barreado* excels in food culture, a highly cooked meat served with cassava flour and bananas. There is much debate about the origins of this dish. Cascudo<sup>18</sup> identified the preparation technique in the Brazilian indigenous culture, which puts the game into closed containers to cook on ditches heated with coals. According to the research by Mary Henriqueta Gimenes,<sup>19</sup> the technique of making the *barreado* is also associated with Azorean culture. In the late eighteenth century, many inhabitants of this Portuguese archipelago migrated to the south of the country, initially to the region of Santa Catarina and then to the coast of Paraná. The rump, a typical dish of Açores also made based on the cooking of beef, was prepared in clay pots heated for several hours in ditches or in volcanic vapors, with bread as main accompaniment.

When referring to meat as the main ingredient of *barreado*, Gimenes highlights: “For those who are absolutely unaware of *barreado*, it is often a surprise to discover that, although characteristic of the Paraná coast, it is a dish made of beef”.<sup>20</sup> The dish gained cultural significance precisely by the scarcity of meat in the diet of coastal inhabitants, for whom fish was more accessible. Consumption of *barreado* was restricted to periods of *fandango* celebration and carnival. We note, in this example, another case of the potential of uniting food rituals that have meat in their centrality.

In the Brazilian nineteenth century, the presence of the Portuguese royal family in the colony demanded an air of sophistication in meals. In the book *O Processo Civilizador*, Norbert Elias<sup>21</sup> relates the establishment of standards of behavior to the self-image of certain social groups. By consolidating concepts such as courtesy, civility and civilization, the groups belonging to the upper strata of European society consolidated a specific code of behavior, initially restricted to medieval courts, then reaching other extracts of society. In this sense, notions of civility and civilization arrived in Brazil with the Portuguese.

The rules of etiquette, present in European courts since the Middle Ages, were thought to contain the natural violence involving eating, both in terms of hunting as in the social struggle for food. For Visser,<sup>22</sup> the meal is seen as a strategy to conceal this violence. Since the Middle Ages, the members of the aristocratic group were known as “meat eaters”. While the peasants ate this ingredient in stews, aristocrats preferred its consumption roasted.<sup>23</sup> The ways of eating at the table, in this sense, were quite considered in the centrality of this delicacy. Thus, the knife, a male weapon used in hunting and fighting, was brought to the table originally in this context, for cutting the meat.<sup>24</sup>

The French haute cuisine, constituted in the post-revolution period, extolled the consumption of meat as a symbol of power and prestige, while famine ravaged Europe at the end of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> The highlight of the meals in the French culinary art was the moment of cutting meat. In this regard, the French food critic Grimod La Reynière wrote:

“While cutting might be hard to learn [...] it was something that added prestige to a talented man. Everyone should learn to cut meat, because it is a skill that often makes the person a useful and highly sought guest”.<sup>26</sup> This art that should be learned was reserved for men.

The way of life of the French court influenced many European courts, including the Portuguese. In the oldest Portuguese gastronomic treaty, *Arte de Cozinha*, written by the royal cook Domingos Rodrigues in 1680, we note French influences, especially with regard to techniques for food preparation and service. We highlight the centrality of the meat, which stands out in the first part of the work: “way of cooking various delicacies of any kind of meat, lots of variety of pastries, cakes, pies”.<sup>27</sup>

Following the trend of metropolitan civility, in nineteenth-century Brazil meat was the main dish on most menus. We note the relevance of meat also in recipe books of the nineteenth century. A large percentage of the pages of *O Cozinheiro Nacional*, a book that portrays the desire for more nationalized eating habits by the Brazilian elite, is dedicated to meat recipes, first cow, then calf, then lamb, pork, poultry, turkey, hunting and wild birds. For the anonymous author of this work, “beef is indispensable to the cuisine and offers a number of different parts, each of which has a special job, which an experienced chef recognizes at first sight”.<sup>28</sup>

Urbanization enabled meat consumption among the middle classes, once its access was facilitated. In the study on the restaurants of Curitiba in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, by Débora Carvalho,<sup>29</sup> we observed a frequent supply of meat on the menu of these locations. At lunchtime simpler restaurants offered chopped steak on the menu, and the more sophisticated ones offered steak. The barbecue stood out as a gastronomic novelty offered by the restaurants of the early twentieth century.

Among the first restaurants in Curitiba, we highlight Bar Palácio, opened in the context of the 1930s in a region that was synonymous with modernity in the town, on Barão do Rio Branco street, the first planned street in the city across from the state government palace. Known as a bar, this restaurant gained projection in the history of the city by the popularity of the dishes that are the flagships of the house: the Paraná barbecue, which is roasted on the grill, and the *grisel mignon*, made on the stove.<sup>30</sup>

From the 1960s, the supply of gaucho barbecue, roasted on iron skewers, began to spread in Brazil. Among the pioneers of this potential Brazilian market is Albino Ongaratto, a farmer from New Brescia. In Sao Paulo, he opened the Churrascaria 477 in Jacupiranda, on the edge of the BR 166 highway. The success of the business motivated a number of other young people in the region to migrate to other parts of the country to bake and feed many people with what they knew how to do best, the barbecue, a habit of the colony on Sundays.

If initially the barbecue was served by the *à la carte* system, as it is in the traditional Bar Palácio in Curitiba, later came to be marketed by the rodizio system. The novelty seems to have appeared in Churrascaria 477. According to the Association of Steakhouses of São Paulo (ACHUESP), the system was born because of a confusion generated by one of the waiters at the site, which mistook the meats ordered by the customers, generating their discontent. To appease customers, then, Mr. Albino Ongaratto, site owner, decided to offer every meat at every table, charging a single price for the service. And, since all customers enjoyed the novelty, he decided to implement the method of distribution, which was copied by many other establishments in the same category in Brazil and abroad. However, Hernandez, in his book *A arte do Churrasco*, quoted by Copetti,<sup>31</sup> records that it was at Churrascaria Mathias, in Sapiranga, that this way of serving emerged.

It is important to mention that, in the rodizio system, meat consumption is extrapolated, since the consumer has a wide variety of options available and can eat them in whatever quantities they want, without this consumption being prohibited, questioned or imposed. Currently the steakhouses have become an attractive segment, besides offering meats, they offer flexibility, variety, time autonomy to the consumer and accommodation for different habits and tastes.

From the above, we believe that both the taste for meat and its consumption is a historical-cultural construction.<sup>32</sup> Beyond the physiological issues, we emphasize its use as display of economic power and therefore social projection. It is also an argument of social cohesion, with its centrality reserved in the celebratory events. We evidence, thus, that the meat, beyond fulfilling biological functions, also takes care of the social functions.

## Breakdown of the nutritional praise in meat consumption in Brazil

As we read the letters written by historian Maria Thereza Lacerda to her friend Raquel, published in the book *Café com Mistura*, we observe the centrality of meat in the Brazilian middle class meals. In a letter dated July 5th, 1983, Lacerda wrote:

*Your letter gave me great joy. With it I see that you appreciated my experiences and would like to know more about this ancient home world, of which I was a protagonist and witness. So today I will dwell in meat, arguably the most important item of our petty bourgeois tables, a dish of resistance in the wonder South, be it a filet mignon steak or the humble ground beef. We, who are not vegetarian nor macrobiotic, much less naturalistic, need to eat meat at least once a day in order not to feel that unpleasant empty stomach feeling - a problem that does not afflict the Northeasterners, since they discovered the secret to filling their bellies with water and cassava flour, lucky people<sup>33</sup>.*

The meat, “food par excellence”, was indispensable in the daily menu of Brazilians who had the purchasing power to buy it. Lacerda continues stating that “the decision of the menu, in 80% of the cases, depended on the meat, the base plate; all accompaniments were in the background”<sup>34</sup>. We note Lacerda’s mention of the Northeasterners, as eaters of “cassava flour with water”, a debatable argument regaining the relevance of meat in the culture of the Northeastern backlands, the first context of cattle farming in Brazil.

Josué de Castro, one of the precursors of nutritional studies in Brazil, was from Recife. He sought, in his research, to demonstrate the backland eating habits beyond the common idea of cassava flour with water. In his food map presented in *Geografia da Fome*, the consumption of beef is highlighted in the Northeastern backlands region, the Midwest and the South. In the other two regions determined by him, the Amazon and the sugar Northeast, there would be a limit to the consumption of beef, restricted in the second region to the charque.<sup>35</sup>

For Castro, these regions consist in their areas of endemic hunger in the country, in which at least half the population would present clear deficiency manifestations in their nutritional status. In the Amazon region, the main problems cited by him were in insufficient production, the difficulties of shelf life due to climatic conditions, lack of transportation and the low purchasing power of the population. Differently from this region, in the sugar Northeast, the nutritional deficiency of the population would be a result of the monoculture activity of the sugar cane, which limits the food production in the region.<sup>36</sup> We observe, in this direction, that in the context of the legitimation of nutritional studies in Brazil, the symbolism of the meat was associated with its nutritional potential of main protein source.

For the Regulation for Industrial and Sanitary Inspection of Animal Products (RIISPOA), meats are “aged muscle mass and other tissues that accompany it, including or not the corresponding bone mass, which comes from animals slaughtered under veterinary inspection”. The regulation classifies them into red meat (beef, pork and lamb), poultry (chicken, turkey, duck, quail, etc.), seafood (fish, lobster, shrimp, oyster, etc.) and game (non-domestic animals).<sup>37</sup> We note, therefore, that the concept of meat generally refers to the edible parts of edible animals - mammals, birds, fish, mollusks, crustaceans, reptiles, amphibians, turtles, insects.

In nutritional terms, meat is a very rich source of proteins of high biological value, which means to be nutritionally complete for containing essential amino acids. Note that proteins are considered builders of the body and are present in almost all tissues and body fluids. Thus, the highest nutritional value of meat is its amino acids, that have 95% to 100% of use in the human body, which leads to a very significant nutritional balance.<sup>38-41</sup> The fats of long chain fatty acids (omega 3, omega 6, omega 9) found in meat also advocate the nutritional relevance of this food.



This is because these fats enable the transport of fat soluble vitamins and have triglycerides and phospholipids, substances essential in forming the sheath of nerve cells. The meats are also rich in water-soluble B vitamins (thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, pyridoxine, folic acid, pantothenic acid and cobalamin), besides vitamin A, from the fat-soluble group, biologically active only in foods of animal origin. Vitamin E, considered an antioxidant, is found in higher amounts in beef. Moreover, the meats are rich in minerals such as iron, which is a key element in the formation of blood hemoglobin. Beef is also a very rich source of zinc and calcium.<sup>38-41</sup>

We point out some other negative factors related to meat consumption, which, in excess, can increase the level of cholesterol.<sup>39, 41</sup> There is strong criticism in the contemporary period, to the industrialization of meat production, responsible for much of the environmental pollution. In the health aspect, the consumption of hormones by animals raised for slaughter and the slaughter and storage method have also been controversial aspects that question the quality of much of the meats sold.<sup>38, 40</sup>

With regard to the social, we remind you that the food map of Castro, which highlights the inaccessibility of this food in various parts of the country, either by limiting production and distribution, or by the purchasing power of low-income groups. And despite white meat having a high consumption nationwide, beef has a much stronger symbolic representation for all Brazilians. We believe, therefore, that the high price of meat is accompanied by its symbolic value of food “par excellence”.

Despite this problem that involves the consumption of meat, researchers such as Reis et al.<sup>42</sup> consider that the increased meat consumption in developing countries is irreversible. In the commercial and cultural relationship of globalization, there is a strong tendency for the symbolism of meat as food par excellence to be adopted by countries that are in contact with developed countries with high consumption of beef. We highlight in this sense that countries like the U.S. and Australia had a per capita consumption of beef from 43.8 kg to 37.5 kg in 2006, respectively, while Brazil had a consumption of 29.6 kg in the same period.

These data demonstrate the great potential of the domestic meat market in Brazil, which has tripled the demand for meat in the last 30 years. A comparative study that evaluated the evolution of household food availability, based on the Household Budget Survey (POF) in the last decades also concluded that the participation of meat in the Brazilian diet generally increased by almost 50% between 1974 and 2003.<sup>43</sup> The population growth, urbanization and rising income levels have encouraged increased consumption of beef.

The increase in both production and consumption of meat, grounded by the taste and the socio-nutritional value of this food, has faced opposing discourses in the contemporary Western context. The discussion permeates social, environmental and health aspects. By exploring the ecological aspects of this issue, we highlight the alienation of the consumer, while having easy access to meat in supermarkets, detaches it from its animal representation. Thus, the consumer sees this eating habit naturally and insensitively. There is no bond of the meat “form of pleasure and nutrition” with elements that lead consumers to associate meat to the slaughter of animals, which suggests that social representations of meat consumption, in general, are independent of the representations of animals .

However, according to Barros, Meneses and Silva,<sup>41</sup> two ways of thinking are related to the way humans interact with other animals and are perceived by some consumers. The first one refers to the “welfarist” vision which holds that animals should be treated “humanely,” and should not be subject to unnecessary suffering. This position assumes that animals can be used by humans as long as their safety and quality of life are ensured. Yet the theory of animal rights believes that nonhuman animals have inherent value that should be respected. The theory of animal rights does not accept the use of animals for experiments or for human consumption, not simply because these activities cause suffering to animals, but because such use violates the fundamental obligations of righteousness which we have regarding nonhuman animals.

With this philosophy in mind, based on ideologies and various symbologies, is that many people have become and consider themselves as vegetarians: vegans, lacto-vegetarians, lacto-ovo-vegetarians or ovo-vegetarians. Many are only semi-vegetarians, not consuming only red meat (while consuming white meat, milk and eggs); others consume milk and eggs and reject meats (regardless of source); many consume only milk and dairy and reject meat and eggs; others only consume eggs and reject milk and meats; and some groups only consume foods that do not suffer from any form of slaughter or harvesting or poaching.

Every individual, with their characteristic of thought and action, transforms their food, their eating in different ways, but opposition to the consumption of red meat is a constant in the different symbolic universes placed here. Citing ethical, aesthetic or biological reasons, red meat is the representation and approximation of the blame, because it is associated with pollution, toxicity and destruction. We can not forget that the ecological imaginary values plant products instead of animal products.

Other factors related to security issues are: contamination by pathogens, pesticides and biological agents, antibiotics and/or hormones and the possible presence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or more commonly “mad cow”) concern today’s consumers. This consumer

fear, for real or imaginary issues, has opened spaces for products described as natural or organic, which are obtained without the use of improper products or products considered harmful to one's health. Security has become a matter of vital importance to consumers.

Currently, this debate has not yet determined whether the consumption of meat brings more benefits or more harms. We believe, however, that with regard to the Brazilian social imaginary, meat is still a food needed in everyday diet. We observed this relevance in a situation where the consumer, due to medical imposition, has to restrict the consumption of meat. Unlike what would happen if they were vegetables or legumes, the measure is seen as a penalty process. Not even the spread of "natural" food or the speeches of those who disapprove of the consumption of meat managed to get out of this input the role of lead character in the daily diet of much of the world's population.

Even with the pro and con arguments, meat consumption in ecological, nutritional and even cultural and ideological spheres, taste and preference for that food that has historical basis, seems to assure the market expansion of sugarcane in the western world.

## Final remarks

Even before the arrival of Europeans in Brazil, we noted the consumption of game meat among Indians. The arrival of the Europeans brought livestock farming for slaughter, especially cattle, and appreciation of this ingredient in meals.

Along the lines of European meals, meat was a central food in the menu and an argument of social distinction, due to its restricted access. Even before the development of nutrition studies that reinforced the significance of this food to people in a dietary level, we observe a myriad of foci of valorization of meat, whether by its association with force, or by the possibility of social distinction.

Thus, if on one hand there is an ideological foundation that ensures its growing consumption in the contemporary Brazilian market, on the other hand, there is a reaction, also ideological, contrary to its consumption. We presented, in this sense, aspects that demonstrate the representativeness of the flesh, since these ideological confrontations exceed specific data, such as the nutritional value of the meat, demonstrating precisely the symbolic values that permeate this food.

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