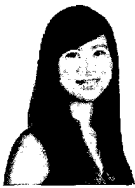


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April 16, 2013



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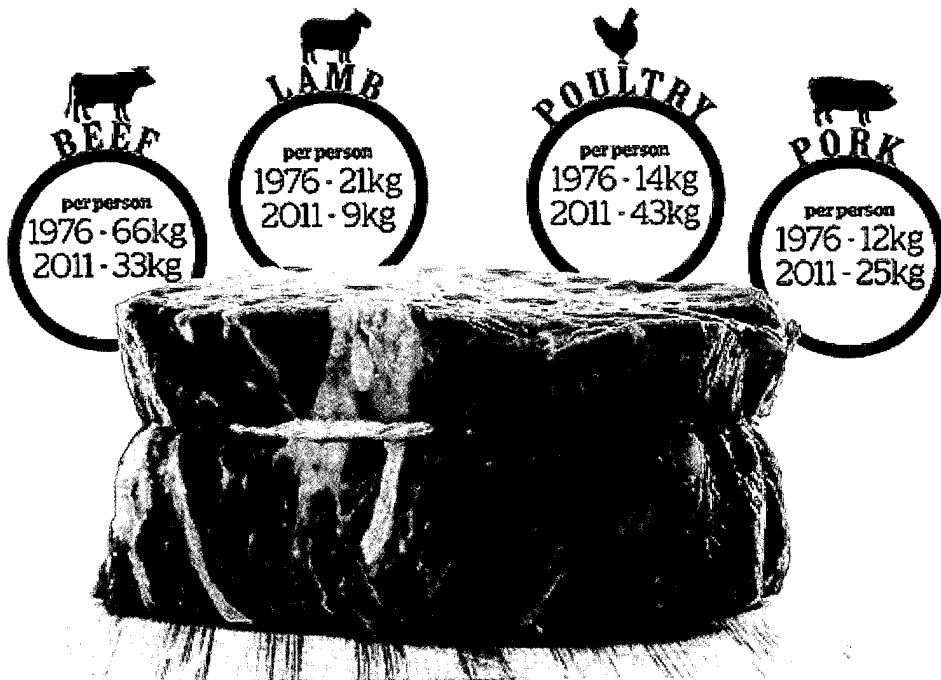
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New migrants, price, ethics and health are driving a shift in our meat choices, national pride, writes Inga Ting.

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A nation's tastes change: statistics show that Australians are now clearly favouring poultry and pork over beef and lamb.

Australians have always been among the world's most enthusiastic meat eaters. But changing consumption and ethical considerations are playing a greater role in decisions about what Australians put on their plates

While they remain among the biggest per capita consumers of meat - second only to Americans - the latest Australians are increasingly favouring chicken and pork over red meat, which has traditionally been considered. For decades, beef has been the most widely consumed meat in Australia. But estimates by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Sciences show per capita consumption of beef in Australia has halved over the past 25 years while chicken and pork consumption has doubled and tripled respectively.

These trends are in line with global figures, which suggest chicken is poised to overtake pork as the most popular meat. According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation, pork accounts for more than 36 per cent of total meat consumption at 33 per cent. The poultry sector, however, is the fastest-growing meat sector worldwide, consistently expanding year on year since the 1960s, according to a 2011 FAO working paper.

A nation of meat eaters

Although the hierarchy of the meat consumed in Australia has been turned on its head, Australia remains a highly carnivorous nation. With an average per capita intake of about 116 kilograms a year, Australia is second only to the United States, which consumes about 123 kilograms a year, according to the FAO.

Food historian Professor Barbara Santich, of the University of Adelaide, says Australia's long-standing appetite for meat is a result of the intersection of colonial attitudes towards meat, which were developed in a home country where it was scarce.

"In England, it was always a prestigious food and still is a prestigious food," Santich says. "You can grow your own meat, but it is more scarce, which gives it a luxury value."

Unlike England, however, meat in the new colony has historically been "incredibly cheap", Santich says, "on a pound-for-pound basis".

Given the importance of meat to the first settlers, it is not surprising that meat has developed powerful social and cultural significance. Professor Deborah Lupton, of the University of Sydney, says meat in Australia, particularly red meat, plays a central role in male identity.

"In Australia, meat is seen as men's food," Lupton says. "It's heavy, it requires a lot of digestion, it's dead and it's hard to chew. Whereas women's food is food like salad, which is light, easy to chew and so on."

Consumption falls

Despite this historical and cultural backdrop, Australia's overall meat consumption has plummeted from the 1980s to the 2010s.

At the same time, health concerns, price fluctuations and immigration have helped to fuel a dramatic change in eating habits.

In constant dollar terms, chicken and pork have become cheaper while beef and lamb have become more expensive. This is particularly true in the more developed world.

Nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton, of the University of NSW, says the changing ethnic composition of Australia and the influx of immigrants have altered Australia's "foodscape" over time.

"If we go back to the days when I grew up, we had meat three times a day - sausage or bacon with eggs for breakfast, meat again for dinner," Stanton says.

The spread of Asian and Mediterranean cuisine in particular has introduced a greater range of meals in which meat is not the central focus.

Santich says health concerns are driving the shift from red meat.

"Another thing is the negative publicity given to red meat from the 1970s, when the cholesterol spectre was first mentioned. It has since been shown to have been made, that may or may not have been proven, between red meat consumption and cancer and heart disease."

Negative publicity about red meat has been matched by marketing campaigns promoting the health benefits of kangaroo.

Food ethics researcher Associate Professor Rachel Ankeny, of the University of Adelaide, says another major concern for younger Australians, of looking to native sources of meat.

"Think back 15 to 20 years," Ankeny says. "You couldn't get kangaroo. It wasn't even legal to sell it as meat. Focus groups, especially among young people, that they prefer it because it's less fatty and it's cheaper."

Seeking the broader picture

While several studies show that in developed countries, health concerns provide stronger incentives than cost, many believe the two are converging in Australia to produce a gradual shift in diets.

Leading epidemiologist and public health researcher Tony McMichael has contributed extensively to both climate change and human health. He is a member of the science advisory panel to the government's Commission on the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University.

He says the social, economic and environmental repercussions of meat consumption are beginning to weigh in.

"I think there's a growing awareness of the cruelty of many aspects of intensified meat production," he says. "There's certainly a growing awareness of the consequences, including now the methane and greenhouse gas story."

"At the fringe we've overcome our squeamishness about eating kangaroo and realised in any sensible substitution for meat eaters really should be those animals that are indigenous to the local environment."

As red meat consumption rates continue to fall in Australia, producers will look increasingly to foreign markets.

There is plenty of demand. Between 1995 and 2005, per capita meat consumption grew at an annual rate of more than four times faster than the developed world, which grew at 0.6 per cent, according to the FAO.

"There's an international moral dilemma we face here," McMichael says. "Even if consumption of red meat is reduced in our major exporter, so we are producing many more animals than we need to eat and boosting our greenhouse gas emissions."

Judith Friedlander, a postgraduate researcher at the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney, has been widely accepted among researchers in the field that the world would benefit from reduced meat intake in high-income countries.

"The ridiculous thing is that we have an epidemic of obesity and the overweight in the developed world - and at the same time, a large proportion of the population is malnourished," Friedlander says. "This is why we should be striving to reduce our meat consumption - to a level that is sustainable."

Changing attitudes

The prospects of the international community adopting this strategy - known in academic circles as "convergence" - are admittedly slim, but evidence suggests Australians are increasingly turning to plant-based diets.

For example, market research company IBISWorld reports that last year Australia's organic farming industry grew by 10 per cent, up from 15 per cent in the previous five years, fuelled "by growing consumer interest in sustainable food production and rising disposable income." The growth in organic trade sales reflects increased concern about the impact of consumer choices on developing countries. According to IBISWorld, organic trade sales in Australia and New Zealand in 2011 reached \$202 million, an increase of 10 per cent on 2010.

Fair Trade sales in the region nearly trebled between 2009 and 2010, from \$50.7 million in 2009 to almost \$150 million in 2010.

Australian attitudes indicate a desire to expand plant-based food intake which is why, Friedlander suggest: meat substitutes, also known as meat analogues or novel protein foods.

"A trend to watch is 'flexitarianism', so anything from a 'part-time vegetarian' to someone who just likes mo non-animal proteins," she says.

However, says Ankeny, the bottom line is that there has been a shift because of all these concerns - health colliding.

But ultimately, what influences consumers could be cold, hard cash.

"At the end of the day people say they try to do the right thing but price does make a difference," she says

"A lot of these product lines remain out of the range of the average consumer and people are not going to idealised, pasture-fed, organic, ethically raised animal product."

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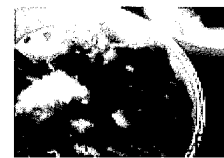
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