

The role of meat in everyday food culture: an analysis of an interview study in Copenhagen

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Interviews undertaken in a study of consumers' views on food quality were re-analysed with special reference to the narrative themes raised by consumers when describing their views on the quality of meat and meat products. Negative attitudes towards meat were frequently expressed, and with more emotion than comments about any other food. Being based on interviews made prior to the BSE crisis, the study gives evidence that the popularity of meat was in a process of decline already before this crisis. It was found that critical attitudes centred around the following four themes: the manner in which meat is produced and processed in modern agriculture and industry, the fact that meat derives from animals, the food culture associated with meat eating and the perceived unhealthiness of meat. In spite of their critical attitudes, the interviewees nevertheless consumed meat on a daily basis. This study suggests that negative attitudes towards meat are not necessarily associated with decreased meat consumption, but are associated with a tendency to re-structure meals with special reference to the role assigned to meat.

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Introduction

In a qualitative interview study regarding consumers' views on food quality in their everyday lives (Holm & Kildevang, 1996), it was found that interviewees raised topics concerning meat more frequently than any other food, and that their comments on meat were often expressed with more emotion than comments on any other food. Meat has traditionally held a central position in Western food culture. According to Twigg (1984) it is the food with the highest status in the hierarchy of foods. Meat is the most highly prized, the most sacred and powerful, but potentially also the most defiling food. Structural analyses of meal formats undertaken by Douglas and Nicod (1974) have shown that meat is the centre of meals. Its dominant position is also illustrated by the fact that its presence assigns

the name to a dish—even when meat is treated as a mere ingredient among others, as in a salad (Gvion-Rosenberg, 1990). The absolutely dominant position of meat in Western cuisine is even reflected in Western vegetarian culture; Gvion-Rosenberg (1990) has shown that vegetarian cookery and meat cookery share not only the same structure of meals and dishes but also similar perceptions regarding the value of meat and vegetables. In vegetarian dishes some vegetables are often used as if they were meat, and vegetarian restaurants often justify their dishes by making them appear as similar to meat dishes as possible. It has been suggested recently that this dominant position is on the decline, and in some Western countries an increasing number of vegetarians has been reported (Richardson *et al.*, 1993; Fiddes, 1991; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). In Denmark, where the present study was conducted, there are no overt signs of increasing vegetarianism. However, the massive incidence of critical comments about meat in our interview material called for further analysis.

It was therefore decided to subject the interview material concerning spontaneous reports and reflections about meat and meat products to a more detailed analysis.

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Material and methods

The data presented here, stem from a study of perceptions of food quality. Twenty consumers were interviewed qualitatively and in-depth about their thoughts and practices related to food and eating in their everyday lives. The purpose of the study was to analyse the manner in which consumers present their views on food quality. An interview guide was used, which yielded concrete and detailed narratives of meals and which aimed to avoid ideological or idealized reports of everyday food habits. The interviewees were contacted through two kindergartens situated in a small neighbourhood in the city of Copenhagen. Letters asking families to participate in the study were handed out to parents, who were anonymous to the researchers but known to the heads of the kindergartens. Forty letters were handed out and distribution stopped when 20 families had agreed to participate. The interviewees came from families with two adults in paid employment and with at least one child below the age of 6. In 11 cases women were interviewed, in one case a man and in eight cases both partners participated in the interview. Middle class and working class backgrounds were represented among the families. Their food practices were in most cases characterized by perceived time pressure as well as great concern about the food preferences and needs of their children. Shopping for food was mostly done on a day-to-day basis. None of the households included vegetarian individuals, but a few interviewees had formerly been vegetarians.

The interviews were open, relatively unstructured and focussed on a discussion of foods eaten or served. Each interview was of 1–2 h duration, was tape recorded and

transcribed *verbatim*. The material on which the present analysis is based regards all segments of the interview transcripts that contained comments or reports concerning meat. An initial analysis identified the concepts used and themes of discussion in each segment. These concepts and themes were subsequently subsumed under fewer and more general themes. The data from the interviews are presented here under the heading given to each such general theme. The software programme *Alpha* (Kristensen & Sommerlund, 1987) was employed in the analysis. A report concerning elements in the general perceptions of food quality has been published as Holm & Kildevang (1996). The interviews were undertaken in 1992.

Results

Attitudes towards meat

Favourable comments on meat and meat products were brief and not very informative. Taste, tenderness, leanness, cheapness and sometimes origin were mentioned in connection with positive comments, but never elaborated. Negative comments were more dominant in the interview material as a whole and particularly dominant in relation to meat. They also tended to be more expressive and points were frequently illustrated by anecdote. They centred around four themes: (1) modern production and processing of meat; (2) the fact that meat products derive from animals; (3) cultural and social aspects of eating meat, and (4) health.

In Table 1 negative attitudes towards the production and processing of meat are illustrated by quotations from the interviews.

Table 1. Negative attitudes towards meat production and processing. Quotations from interviews that serve to illustrate the production theme

Livestock welfare	<p>"I don't think pork is healthy any more. There are too many penicillin residues, and the pigs live a stressful life. We never buy it."</p> <p>"Pork is filled with penicillin residuals and the like. It is not good. Ugh—the way it looks in the cool counter. It's pale . . . It's because the juice won't stay in the meat. It may be due to many things; the animals are stressed and so on. . . . And pork roasts, they are pumped up. I find that disgusting too."</p>
Decreased quality of meat	<p>"The meat we get today is so boring—all this minced meat, and the chops are dry, we don't want to eat them. We would like to eat lamb chops, but there is no meat on them. Actually, meat has to be quite special if it is to be good."</p>
"Hidden" processing processes	<p>"I had a friend who used to work at this factory where they make liver paté. He said: 'If you only knew, what they pour into it!' That confirmed my suspicion, and I haven't bought it since then."</p> <p>"I get suspicious if things keep too long."</p> <p>"We saw this TV-programme about how the meat goes through the supermarket. First it is a roast, then it is chopped up, then it is turned into some kind of a paté and after that into dog food. That's how it looks too—we never buy it."</p>
New bacteria	<p>"It's not that I'm paranoid about bacteria, but I stopped eating red meat. The things you hear are so disgusting, I don't like it any longer."</p>

Concern about all phases of meat production was expressed in critical terms. The living conditions and welfare of animals in modern industrialized agriculture were seen as undermining the quality of meat. As a result, meat quality was perceived as decreasing both with respect to gastronomic quality and to healthiness. Since the interviewees had little knowledge about production processes in regard to meat products in industry or in the retail sector, much of their narrative concerned suspicions and anecdotes about what goes on in the food industry. Almost all negative comments on livestock welfare were made with reference to pork or poultry products. When beef was discussed, references to the welfare of cattle were never made. While animal welfare related to lamb was frequently described in positive terms: “*Sheep are not that industrialized. I think they are treated better than pigs*”.

In some interviews, the fact that meat derives from dead animals was brought up as an issue in the course of critical comments. An unease about eating dead animals was sometimes expressed in general and ethical terms: “*I don’t approve of the idea—that you have to kill in order to eat*”. However, problems in this regard were more often simply expressed as a sense of disgust: “*Chopping up a chicken. I hate it. It’s like chopping up a baby*”. Another interviewee expressed the problem a little differently: “*I don’t like ordinary cuts of meat. It’s probably the thought of what meat is. That is has been an animal. So I mostly eat minced meat*”. Several female interviewees who felt this kind of unease made the point that they wanted to become vegetarian. However, children were perceived as needing meat and male partners as wanting meat. These factors prevented women from pursuing vegetarianism any further. Some hoped, however, to change this in the future: “*When I get old or something, I’ll stop eating meat*”.

In cultural terms, meat was associated with the traditional food culture of the interviewees’ childhood: “[*I grew up on,*] you know, *old-fashioned food—potatoes and gravy and a piece of meat*”. Their current diet in contrast was described as being modern. This meant that the diet was more varied and contained more vegetables. The difference between traditional and modern diets, however, also involved a social distinction. Some interviewees had moved up the social ladder and become part of the urban middle-classes. The eating of lamb was seen as an element in this social process: “*I learned to eat lamb when I moved away from home*”. The eating of pork on the other hand was associated among middle-class interviewees with inferior or more traditional cultures: “*I don’t come from a roast pork family*”.

Working-class interviewees did not express reservations about pork. Working-class families would sometimes serve pork for guests, whereas middle-class

families would never do so. Several middle-class families made a point of the fact that they had eliminated pork from their diets altogether. This was not the case for working-class families.

Lamb was considered the best of meats among middle-class families, being perceived as modern. Comments about beef tended to be neutral, although in some families—especially working-class families—beef was a metonym for good food.

A gender theme was also introduced by interviewees. Men were seen as less inclined to cut down on their meat consumption. “*My husband wants meat on the table every day. ‘Real men need meat’, he says*”. With reference to this tendency, several women reported discrepancies between their own and their partners’ food preferences. “*Soup and porridge don’t satisfy his hunger. So I give in and cook meat and potatoes*”. This gender difference was confirmed by e.g. one man stating: “*There is a difference between men and women. Maybe it’s something physical. Sometimes we do need a little beef . . .*”.

A health theme related to meat eating was frequently brought up by interviewees.

Positive comments on the healthiness of meat were rare. Two interviewees discussed meat as a source of protein in positive terms: “*Children need meat on and off—in order to get protein. My son doesn’t like beans and lentils, so I give him meat. It would be better if he got his protein from other sources than meat*”.

“*About protein—my husband mentioned that he was afraid our daughter didn’t get enough of it, because she doesn’t eat meat. I never gave it a thought—that she might miss something. She eats lots of bread, fruits and vegetables. But maybe that’s not enough. I don’t know*”.

Apart from these two comments, other positive comments about meat in relation to health concerned lean meat in contrast to fatty meat.

Otherwise, the health aspects of meat were mostly commented upon in terms that were unfavourable to meat products (see Table 2).

It appeared to be commonly understood that meat was unhealthy. Many took this for granted and thus no arguments were presented in these cases. Others argued that modern food manufacturing is what undermines the healthiness of meat. To some interviewees meat was associated with fat *per se*, regardless of whether it was fatty or lean. Fat was not only seen as unhealthy, but also as unappealing or disgusting. “*I can’t swallow fat. I throw up*”. “*I find it disgusting—chewing on those lumps of fat. And I don’t like looking at them either*”.

Meat eating was associated with bodily feelings of heaviness, which were described as unpleasant.

Meat was discussed by interviewees in terms that conceived meat products as being the opposite to fruit and vegetables. The latter were seen as the healthy foods,

Table 2. The unhealthiness of meat. Negative comments that serve to illustrate the health theme

Unspecific comments	<p>“Eating meat is not good for you.”</p> <p>“I have a bad conscience about [eating meat]. Even though I eat a lot of it, I think it’s unhealthy.”</p> <p>“A healthy diet has to do with not eating meat.”</p>
Modern production and processing	<p>“I don’t eat pork because it is unhealthy. The pigs have illnesses and are filled with penicillin.”</p> <p>“He loves salami, but you shouldn’t have too much of it. It contains too much colouring.”</p>
Fat	<p>“First I thought we didn’t eat a lot of fat. But we do eat meat. Even if it is lean, the fat is there anyway.”</p>
Heaviness	<p>“Meat is hard to digest. Your body uses a lot of energy to do so.”</p> <p>“We have problems when we’ve visited my parents [and eaten meat]. We sit in the car [afterwards] and feel so heavy and lousy.”</p> <p>“Sometimes I go on a diet of raw vegetables only. It’s when I feel horrible, heavy and tired—when I have been eating too much meat.”</p>
Not green	<p>“I think there are more nutrients in fresh vegetables than in a dead cow. I believe more in the living than in the half dead.”</p> <p>“We eat ordinary things but I pin my faith on the vegetables we eat with it.”</p> <p>“She’s allowed one sandwich with liver paté—but I want her to have healthy sandwiches as well. So I give her slices of apple and the like.”</p>

by definition. This position, as the counterpole to healthy foods, seemed in itself to lend a negative value to meat.

Meat practices

The interviews included reports about everyday dinners served in the families. Sometimes these would include dishes which had a name—either a traditional Danish name (“frikadeller”, “forloren hare”, “hakkebøf”) or one that was seen as being more modern and international (“chili con carne”, “lasagne”, “moussaka”). In both types of dishes minced meat is a basic ingredient. In the traditional Danish dishes minced meat is shaped in the form of whole meat—be it a cut or a joint. The meat is served as the centrepiece of the meal along with different side dishes or trimmings, including potatoes, vegetables and a sauce—a meal form which is common in British food culture (Douglas & Nicod, 1974) as well as in Northern Europe. However, in the modern, internationally inspired dishes meat is used as an ingredient in the sauce and bears no resemblance to whole pieces of meat.

Sometimes families would eat hot dishes which had no name. These dishes were improvised and often composed of ingredients that happened to be available in the refrigerator or kitchen. In these cases a vegetable was frequently described as the element that inspired the dish, and with which the process of making the meal started: “*We were going to have a couple of zucchinis, some bean sprouts and mushrooms. And I wanted rice—I love rice. I decided to cut it all in small pieces and fry it. Then we found some meat and fried it along with it.*” Another interviewee describes a similar process. “*It was a coincidence really—I found this beautiful aubergine.*

I thought, I’ll buy that—I must be able to use it for something. The rest was Thomas’ idea. We already had meat in the freezer. We had the tomatoes, onions, cheese and milk. We only bought the aubergine that day.”

Meat was included in most everyday dinners, and in about two-thirds of such dinners minced meat was used. Minced meat was preferred because none of the families had planned menus, tending to decide somewhat spontaneously what dish they would prepare for dinner on the same day. Minced meat was considered versatile: “*You can make so many dishes from it*”. Contrary to whole pieces of meat, which demanded that “*everything must be planned in detail*”, minced meat was seen as a product that could be used “*for almost anything*”. Consequently, many interviewees reported minced meat as being part of the stock of basic foods always to be found in their households—in line with flour, sugar or margarine. Another reason for using minced meat was that it has a standard texture. Many felt that buying whole pieces or joints of meat could be risky, since one never knew whether the meat was tender or not. “*That’s why I prefer minced meat. You never have to sit and struggle to cut it into pieces*”. Finally, minced meat was not associated with any living animal. This factor was important for some interviewees personally. But it was more often seen as being important for their children, who were reported as refusing to eat whole meat because of compassion for animals.

Most weekend or festive meals were centred around meat. In many families red meat was considered the most appropriate meat product to serve for guests, and in several families the notion of “good meat” served as a metaphor for a good meal or for good food more generally. This, however, was not the case in some

middle-class families, who tended instead to describe a “good meal” in terms of its high gastronomic standards. They would emphasize that they served exotic dishes and used untraditional ingredients. In these families meals for guests would often include fish or shell fish.

Shopping

Almost all interviewees thought that the best quality meat could be obtained from a butcher. But half of the families never bought meat from a butcher, since there was none in their immediate neighbourhood. Most meat was bought in supermarkets, often when products were offered at bargain prices.

Seven of the 20 families would occasionally buy meat through private channels, i.e. friends or relatives who had personal contact with producers or retailers of meat. Meat bought through such channels was always reported as being of an especially good quality—whether it was described as being organically grown, not fatty or very tender.

Evaluation of the quality of meat while shopping was reported as being a difficult process. Contrary to vegetables and fruit, for which mould, change of colour and spots were seen as revealing signs of tainting, meat was seen as providing no visible signs of whether it was tender, tainted or full of bacteria. The only visible cue to quality was fat, which could be assessed from the labels or from careful visual investigation of the meat. Fat was seen as a certain sign of poor quality.

Ensuring a good quality of meat was considered a personal and individual task. Food control authorities seemed to play almost no role in the minds of the interviewees. Since quality assessments involved many uncertainties, a final evaluation would be based on diffuse impressions, the basis of which interviewees often regretfully admitted they were unable to describe in rational terms: *“The meat just didn’t appeal to me—whether it is psychological or what”* *“For some reason I never liked their meat. There are a lot of emotions involved, I suppose”* *“Vacuum packed meat doesn’t look nice—that’s why we don’t buy it”*.

Discussion

Critical attitudes towards meat consumption have been reported in several Western countries. Richardson *et al.* (1993) reported that 28% of UK consumers considered themselves to be in the process of reducing meat consumption and 15% classified themselves as “demi-vegetarians” (Richardson *et al.*, 1994). In Norway it has been shown that 40% of consumers are concerned

about their own meat consumption and that 20% claim to have reduced meat consumption (Bjørkum *et al.*, 1997). In a nationwide dietary survey in Denmark (Haraldsdóttir *et al.*, 1987) one-third of respondents claimed to be eating less meat than they had done 5 years earlier and only 10% to be eating more (unpublished material, Danish Veterinary and Food Administration). Breidenstein (1988) reported on the basis of consumer surveys in the U.S.A. that fewer consumers thought meat to be a necessary element in a satisfying meal and more claimed that they were considering cutting down or already had cut down their consumption of meat.

It seems to be well documented therefore that negative attitudes towards meat are widespread among Western consumers. The present study supplements these findings by providing detailed descriptions of some themes which may be significant in sustaining these attitudes.

Much criticism of meat centred around modern manufacturing methods, which were seen as lowering the quality of meat. Another part of the criticism related to the fact that meat derives from animals. This raised ethical dilemmas as well as a sense of unease or repulsion. Meat was perceived as unhealthy, and meat eating was associated with traditional or inferior cultures. The different kinds of criticism were emotionally intertwined. The lives of modern livestock was considered repulsive and the poor quality of meat from modern agriculture was not described in neutral terms but with emotional reference to the lives of the animals. It seemed that what consumers knew or felt they knew about production and processing methods appeared in a sense of disgust very similar to the negative emotion reported in connection with meats’ origin in living animals. The perceived unhealthiness of meat was related both to its perceived content of fat, its origin in the poor lives of modern livestock, industrial processing and to unpleasant bodily feelings. Often all critical elements were integrated in a diffuse sense of disgust or repulsion towards meat. In the light of these views, the need to reduce meat consumption was frequently referred to by interviewees in the present study as a social norm which needed no further explanation. This is in line with Fiddes’ view that modern critical attitudes to meat eating are anchored in a changing moral climate, in which the domination of nature is no longer seen as an unqualified value (Fiddes, 1991). Fiddes sees the rise of radical movements protesting against the wearing of furs, defending endangered species, protesting against the hunting of fox, deer and game and against the production methods and transportation of live animals in modern meat production, as signs of a new moral stance with regard to the use of animals (Fiddes, 1991). In the present study, interviewees discussed meat eating as a

moral issue only in a few cases. But criticism of modern livestock welfare was frequently expressed in sensual terms—as a sense of disgust, repulsion or as an aversion to the idea of eating meat from the animals of modern agriculture. This was frequently conveyed during interviews without any eloquence—sometimes as a mere sound of disgust accompanied by a grimace. This suggests that the broader discourses of animal rights and of the relationship of human beings to nature, discussed by Fiddes (1991), may not present themselves as a moral discourse in everyday life, but rather as sensual food preferences—including revulsion to the idea of incorporating over-stressed animals. The association between meat eating and traditional or inferior cultures also indicates that the current criticism of meat is based on a more general cultural change rather than upon a deliberated moral stance.

A different interpretation of the cultural change at issue is presented in a recent review of the literature regarding the relationship between gender and food, in which a hypothesis is proposed to account for documented differences between men and women in regard to their food preferences (Jensen & Holm, 1999). It was proposed that gender is widely employed in everyday food culture as a metaphor for food and *vice versa*, such that the distinction between male and female gender, conceived as opposites, is mirrored in those food practices in which particular foods are treated as opposites. According to this hypothesis, male gender and meat products are commonly employed as a metaphor of each other, while female gender on the one hand and vegetables and fruits on the other are related in a similar manner. While this hypothesis remains to be explored, it suggests that the more general cultural change which is reflected in changing attitudes to meat and in meat practices is one that regards changes in gender relations during recent decades.

Several elements of the negative attitudes towards meat eating which have been highlighted in the present study are similar to vegetarian motivations as analysed by Beardsworth and Keil (1992). Willets (1997) too, reported in a London study, that meat eaters were found to frequently express the same kind of criticisms of industrialised meat production as vegetarians. This raises the question of whether criticism of meat must lead to decreased meat consumption? Some studies have questioned whether consumers' own reports of reduced meat intake are associated with an actual reduction of meat consumption. Eastwood (1993) reports meat consumption in Europe as being relatively stable during the last decade, despite critical attitudes towards meat, while Richardson *et al.* (1994) find only doubtful empirical evidence for the reduction in meat consumption claimed by consumers. In Denmark, total meat consumption as

documented by food balance sheets increased from 81 kg/person/year in 1980 to 110 in 1992 (Fagt & Groth, 1992). Individual meat intake increased from 120 to 132 g per person per day from 1985 to 1995, according to national dietary surveys (Haraldsdóttir *et al.*, 1987; Andersen *et al.*, 1996), despite many consumer reports of cuts in meat consumption. The present study therefore cannot be seen as lending any weight to a conclusion that meat consumption will decline in the future. Rather, the critical attitudes towards meat which were reported by most female interviewees in this study may very well be related to the fact that meat consumption is very high in Denmark. Protein is abundant in the Danish diet. This may be the reason why meat as a valuable source of protein is hardly touched upon in the interviews. The criticism regarding the unhealthiness of meat may well be relative therefore—attitudes could change, if meat consumption actually declined. Willets' (1997) report of ex-vegetarians' views of meat as being essential for health also point in this direction. The same tendency may apply to other elements in negative attitudes towards meat.

Vialles (1994) has described how the transformation of live animals to meat in the slaughterhouse takes place by means of a process which is characterized by both spatial and functional separation of operations. The act of killing is dissociated in numerous small operations that obscure the actual moment of death. In the French abattoirs where Vialles' study was conducted the operations of this process are described by metaphors from the world of vegetables. As a result, the live animal, the act of killing and the meat products are disassociated in the work process itself.

Similar tendencies to disassociation have been explored in studies of consumer reactions. In a survey by Richardson *et al.* (1994), almost 20% of respondents categorized chicken as "not meat". Many consumers claimed to reduce meat consumption at the same time as their consumption of chicken increased. Negative attitudes to meat eating may therefore result in a changing structure of meat consumption. Fiddes (1997) argues along this line when he points out that changes in the marketing of meat—from the butcher selling flesh by the pound to the supermarket presenting ready-cooked meat in hygienic packs and ready-made meals—tend to ensure that the link between food eaten and the animal it comes from remains unclear.

For interviewees in the present study meat was still a dominant feature of both everyday and festive meals. Meat was neither re-defined as not meat nor bought ready-cooked or as part of ready-made meals. However, reports about how everyday meals were composed pointed to a potentially new position of meat in modern food culture.

Conclusion

The inclusion of minced meat in households' basic stock of foods due to its versatility, the many modern dishes in which minced meat is no longer shaped in the form of whole pieces or joints of meat, the frequency of meals that are composed around vegetables, all suggest that meat is accorded a new role in everyday food culture. From being the centrepiece of the dish, as well as the most important element in both dishes and meals, meat may be treated to an increasing extent as a type of ingredient alongside vegetables or cereals. This new role need not mean that meat is re-defined as not meat. It may merely imply that the relative importance of meat is reduced.

The present study shows that a sense of disgust and unease in relation to meat is also present among consumers who do not present a coherent, critical and morally based attitude to modern meat production. This suggests that negative attitudes towards meat are indeed frequent, also among consumers who are not articulate, critical consumers. The study also suggests that the reaction of consumers to this sense of disgust, at least in Denmark, is not to reduce meat consumption in general. Rather a process of restructuration of meals seems to be going on, in which meat is treated as an ingredient, rather than accorded its traditional role as the most highly valued part of the meal. This process is furthered too by a convenience motivation. The increased consumption of minced meat can be seen as a reaction towards the critical aspects of meat, as it hides the origin of meat and has a standardised and soft texture. At the same time it is a convenient product because of its versatility.

Whether the tendency to treat meat as an ingredient will in turn result in a decline in meat consumption is still an open question. It depends on how the meat industry responds to the negative attitudes towards meat eating among consumers. And it depends on whether these negative attitudes are indeed increasing and as widespread as the studies discussed here suggest. The interview material presented here stems from a small group of consumers living in the city of Copenhagen, most of whom were women. A gender difference with respect to attitudes towards meat eating is suggested by both the present and other studies (Jensen & Holm, 1999; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). There is evidence which suggest that men are much less critical towards meat and meat eating. There is need for further studies among both men and women and among different types of households in order to settle the issue as to whether the features indicated in the present study represent more widely based aspects of modern attitudes towards meat eating and of changes in food practices regarding meat.

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