

# Research brief: Meat consumption affects N-use – and meat narratives affect Danish self-identity and society



**dNmark**  
research alliance

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## Summary:

The Danish public is well-informed about the health and environmental issues caused by high levels of meat-consumption: and yet Danes average per capita among the biggest meat eaters in the world. Since narratives about meat have various and overlapping functions for individuals and society, strategies for reduction of meat-consumption must be tailored to each function.

## Projects and Methods

1. 'The Meat Dogme Blogging Project': participants pledged to eat less or no meat for at least four weeks, and to write about their experiences. Research was qualitative: surveys, interviews, and journal analysis; and quantitative: measurements of decrease in nitrogen (N)-use resulting from reduction of meat-consumption. Our interdisciplinary data showed that completion of this self-challenge resulted in an increased awareness of diet and an incentive to eat less meat – but that the practice is too demanding to be effective on a large scale.
2. The 'Meaty Matters' Online Blog: entries on the Cork Environmental Forum website and Facebook page providing talking points for hundreds of viewers about the various aspects of the meat-consumption debate. The blog included an analysis and summary of journal entries from the Meat Dogma project and was launched as an example of online networking. A blog such as this can be used on the websites of all of the stakeholders in this issue.
3. The Meat Dogma (Challenge) Project: reduction of meat in institutions

## The Meat Challenge Project; reduction of meat in institutions



*'Tina and I have used several hours making various alternatives to traditional meat dishes. Some of the older children have been loitering around the doorway to the kitchen in the hopes of getting a taste ahead of time, but we keep telling them that they must wait until their parents come to fetch them. At last we're ready, and the plates filled with bite-size portions speared on toothpicks are arranged decoratively on the table. All the parents come through this way from the playground and can't miss the great posters that Lizzy has made advertising our novel event. Little Charlotte has been hovering for quite a while, and finally her mother has arrived. Evy gets a photo of her rapt face as she watches Mom pour the toasted sunflower seeds into a tiny cup to take away with them.'*

(Taste Samples Day at Ta'Fat daycare center, Horsens, DK., 2015)

The Meat Challenge study project was conducted in cooperation with the daycare center Ta'Fat in Horsens, Denmark. The center normally made lunches with two or three meat items each day, but agreed to a four-week dogma period – from September 2, 2015 to September 30, 2015 – of two meat-free days and three days with only one kind of meat each week. Because the group of participants in the second study consisted primarily of children under the age of six, we consulted with the pedagogues at the daycare on their behalf while forming the conditions of the challenge period. The children's families were also contacted in order to ensure their acceptance of the changes in menu for the four-week period. The dogma period for the Ta'Fat daycare center started with a kick-off event in the form of a taste samples day, and I am using it as a case study of the taste sample strategy. Many of the older children had been aware that I – an unknown adult – was working in the kitchen and that something special was going to happen in the afternoon. The food worker and I insisted that they wait until their parents came to pick them up before being allowed to try the extra dishes. This was a good way to build up the children's anticipation.



"Taste samples of dishes with less meat"

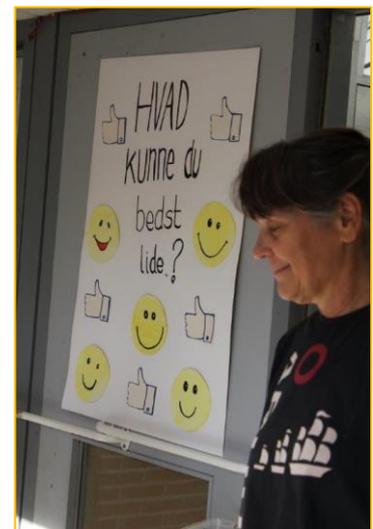
The weather was warm, so the children had been outside playing most of the day. We arranged our stand in the passageway between the outside playing area and the locker room. One of the pedagogues made some posters advertising Taste Samples Friday, and these decorations brought attention to the stand and made it look very cheery and festive.

By the afternoon, many of the children were very excited, herding their parents over to the taste sample area as soon as they arrived. Most of the parents were also interested in sampling the new dishes that they were, in fact paying for. The good weather made it conducive for people to linger and chat with each other and the staff, while tasting the various dishes. Eating the new foods together with their parents enabled the children to be more accepting, and many of them tried tasting things after their parents ate a sample and then encouraged them to try it.

The most attractive aspects of meat are the taste and texture, so an entertaining presentation of a fully vegetarian alternative is needed. One of the samples in the kick-off was presented as a taste competition between two versions of Spaghetti Bolognese. Version A had ground beef and Version B had a soy product which has a taste and consistency very similar to ground beef.

Apart from the two different kinds of protein, the same ingredients were used in the pasta sauce. The identity of each version was kept a secret until after people had cast their votes on the best taste<sup>1</sup>.

The Ta'Fat kick-off event shows several strategic principles that must be considered when planning an event (as I have learned from the bitter experience of two previous taste sample events that failed). The location of a food-tasting event must be very central, either in a central and easily accessible part of the city, or centrally located for the target group.



"Which did you like best?"

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<sup>1</sup> The vegetarian dish won 22-17!

A taste sample event has a much greater chance of success if it is held at a place and time where a large and highly populated event is already occurring. In other words, people who are already coming to an event are more willing to try a free taste sample at a stand within the event than they would be to try those same samples at a stand on a street corner. It helps if the taste sample event has a clear association with the larger venue. People who are interested in the main event will be more willing to try a taste sample that is part of the concept of that event.

### **Family as the key to a reduced meat diet:**

The normal way for individuals to experience a full membership in community and society is to live by social norms that are actively practiced or implicitly understood. The family functions as the first community for the individual, and modern daycare institutions often function as the first society for the individual. The approach of the current generation of young parents to parenting is based much more on teamwork: partners in a project. Young fathers do not seem to experience the role of active fatherhood as a threat to their masculinity. Because of this opening, strategies for meat-reduction can possibly be aimed at meat-loving men through the narrative of responsible father. Family fathers normally have a desire to be good examples for their children, and one way of being a good example is by supporting narratives of a healthy diet.

For example, the family fathers who came to pick up their children at the daycare center were very supportive of the taste sample event. They encouraged their children to try different things by taking samples themselves. Many of the men remarked that they had never tried this kind of food before.



A man can be a good example as a family father by tasting meat alternatives in front of his children, so one strategy is to construct a situation where he can do this. It is a strong narrative for a young child to watch his father eat a new food and then be encouraged by his father to eat it as well.

## The significance and potential of commensality

Meals can be narratives of commensality, even if the individuals at the table are not eating the same foods. I will use a taste sample from the Ta'Fat kick-off as a last example; thin, blanched slices of celeriac are coated in bread crumbs, sautéed, and then served with rémoulade. This food was so popular that it is still part of the lunch menu. This vegetarian alternative has been named and given an identity: the children call it 'sellerifisk' (Celery-fish). It has become a part of what they normally eat in the daycare center and is even served side-by-side with fish fillet. A meal can also be a practical narrative of the hybridization of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food regimes, so long as there is a non-critical acceptance of the different foods. In this scenario, the family and the daycare center are the two formative foundations for the lifestyle of modern urban children. Parents might subsequently include the more popular dishes in the menu at home, extending the normalizing effect to all of the generations in the family. Even if they don't, parental acceptance of foods at the daycare center is enough to enable the same kind of hybridization found in any respectful cultural interface.

## Conclusions

Dietary narratives enforce a concern for adequate protein levels in non-animal foods.

Because men have a biological proclivity to hunting, meat is psychologically associated with maleness – and meat-consumption narratives are symbolically associated with masculinity.

Daycare centers constitute the first society for Danish individuals, and the societal meat-consumption narratives that they practice become a life-style norm for young children – and for their future families.



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