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BE A LOCAL

## You Are What You Eat

Attitudes about food are often irrational. Although insects carry a valuable source of protein, few would immerse themselves in insect cookery. Even though most Austrians will eat horsemeat, the recent scandal resulted in a widespread decline in consumer confidence. But there have been other scandals: *Schummelschinken* (modified ham that's 40% something else), *Analogkäse* (imitation cheese) and EHEC-cucumbers have all been in the news.

So should we be worried?

To address public concerns, the Austrian Academic Institute for Nutritional Medicine (ÖAIE) in collaboration with the Vienna Medical Association (Wiener Ärztekammer) organised a symposium on 14 June titled: What are We Actually Eating?

"Generally speaking, food products in Austria are safer than ever," said association president, Dr. Kurt Widhalm. In the public mind, however, it is difficult to differentiate between media-hype and a food scandal that could constitute an actual health risk.

Many experts agree with Widhalm. Dr. Ingrid Kiefer of the Austrian Agency for Health and Food Security (AGES) says that "of the 30,000 samples that undergo official testing every year, an average of only 0.6% are judged to be harmful." Which translates into an average of 180 total cases a year.

Residue of pesticides in food products are another concern. However, this is also unsubstantiated. In 2011, only 1.5% of the samples indicated high levels of residue, and none a health risk.

Still, Austrians can be whimsical about their well-being. The Austrian love for cigarettes has a long tradition, dating back to the 19th century heyday of the *Stammcafé*, where intellectuals would light up and socialise, in a wreath of cigarette smoke. As recently as 2008, the Guinness Book of World Records awarded Austria the dubious honour of the world's highest percentage of smokers, 36.6.

But if the food's safe, how much harm can there be in having a smoke?

– PJS