

## Analysis of lamb meat consumption in La Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina

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### ABSTRACT

Argentine ovine meat enjoys a favorable reputation due to its production under extensive farming systems; however, its consumption remains low. This is particularly relevant in a global context in which the food crisis and widespread access to information have led contemporary consumers to consider not only price or traditional intrinsic attributes of foods, but also their contribution to health. Nevertheless, consumption levels remain low. The aim of this study was to characterize ovine meat consumption patterns in the city of La Plata, Argentina, during the period 2021–2022. A mixed-methods approach employing both quantitative and qualitative research techniques was used. Survey questionnaires were administered to 380 household representatives aged 18 years or older. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results showed that 62% of respondents did not consume ovine meat. Among consumers, 61% reported doing so because they liked its taste. Male predominance was observed among consumers, purchasers, and individuals responsible for cooking. Lamb was the animal category purchased by 85% of respondents. Occasional consumption (44%) and consumption at home (68%) were the most frequently reported patterns. Overall, ovine meat consumption was low. Therefore, advancing efforts to address factors associated with ovine meat consumption is relevant as input for contemporary policy discussions and for the transformation of the regional ovine sector.

**Keywords:** Argentina, consumer, lamb meat, marketing.

## Análisis del consumo de carne ovina en La Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina

### RESUMEN

La carne ovina argentina es un producto que goza de una buena imagen por ser obtenida bajo sistemas de producción extensivos, sin embargo, su consumo es bajo, aspecto de importancia en un contexto global donde la crisis alimentaria y el acceso generalizado a la información han hecho que el consumidor actual tenga en cuenta no solo el precio o las tradicionales características intrínsecas de los alimentos, sino que también valora su contribución a la salud. Sin embargo, su consumo es bajo. El objetivo del presente

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trabajo fue describir el comportamiento del consumo de carne ovina en la localidad de La Plata, Argentina, durante el periodo comprendido entre 2021 y 2022. Para el estudio se emplearon técnicas de investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa, mediante encuestas de tipo cuestionario, a 380 representantes del grupo familiar mayores de 18 años. Los datos se analizaron por estadística descriptiva. Se observó que el 62% de la población encuestada no consumía carne ovina. De los consumidores, el 61% lo hacía por gusto. Se observó predominio masculino como consumidor, comprador y al momento de cocinar. La categoría animal adquirida por el 85% de los encuestados fue el cordero. El 44% la consumía ocasionalmente y el 68% en el hogar. El consumo de carne ovina hallado fue escaso, por ello, avanzar en el abordaje de los aspectos inherentes al consumo resulta de interés como insumo para la discusión política contemporánea y la transformación del sector ovino regional.

**Palabras clave:** Argentina, consumidor, carne de cordero, *marketing*.

## INTRODUCTION

Argentine ovine meat enjoys a strong reputation for its quality and sustainable production. This attribute is particularly relevant within a global context characterized, on the one hand, by severe food scarcity and, on the other, by the universalization of information. These conditions have led consumers to consider not only the traditional intrinsic characteristics of food products, but also their contribution to health, the environment, and animal welfare.

Historically, sheep farming has been an important productive activity in the province of Buenos Aires, located in the Pampas region the principal agricultural–livestock zone of Argentina. However, the full meat production potential of this species has not yet been realized, nor have the agro-environmental advantages characteristic of the region been fully exploited.

Currently, small flocks oriented toward meat production for self-consumption are maintained in the province of Buenos Aires. Under these conditions, most sheep are raised with limited emphasis on efficiency, and the species is not considered a profitable economic activity. Animals

are generally allocated to poor-quality fields with minimal forage availability. This has contributed to the perception of sheep as a factor in pasture degradation and a promoter of land desertification. As a result, the species has lost relevance for livestock producers, who do not incorporate it into their production plans (Moya & Lazzarini, 2013).

The province of Buenos Aires comprises 25,688,253 hectares 15% of Argentina's total surface area of which approximately 300,000 hectares (1.5%) are dedicated to ovine production. In 2023, of the 12.6 million head of sheep in Argentina, the province contributed nearly two million (Servicio Nacional de Sanidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria [SENASA], 2023). This represents 14.47% of the national stock, distributed across 22,658 establishments, positioning the region third nationwide after Chubut and Santa Cruz. These latter provinces belong to the Patagonian region, characterized by a monoculture of sheep production oriented toward high-quality fine wool for export, making Argentina one of the leading producers on the American continent (FAO, 2023). In the case of

Buenos Aires Province, it holds the largest proportion of ovine establishments in the country (25.1%), of which 60% manage up to 50 animals, 32% manage 51–250, 5% manage 251–500, and 3% manage 1,001–5,000 sheep (SENASA, 2022).

Regarding national slaughter, ovine processing has declined notably for more than a decade, with 94% of ovine meat destined for domestic consumption. Between 2009 and 2020, per-capita consumption ranged from 1.06 to 1.86 kg/year; in 2020 and 2021, annual consumption was 1.1 kg per capita (Consortios Regionales de Experimentación Agrícola [CREA], 2021). Although emphasis is often placed on low consumption levels in Argentina, ovine meat is not a staple in most countries; rather, it is typically a specialty product consumed during festive or seasonal occasions (Goizueta & Sánchez, 2011).

It is important to highlight the role of ovine meat in regional economies, as it supports the development of strategies aimed at enhancing sectoral growth and leveraging a highly valued and necessary resource. To this end, numerous authors have characterized ovine meat consumption in various parts of the world. Mao et al. (2016) analyzed Chinese consumers and their preferences for beef and mutton, concluding that consumption patterns were determined by the relatively stronger economic conditions of southern China, whereas in northern China they were shaped by consumption habits and product availability. Additional factors such as economic considerations, religious beliefs, environmental concerns, dietary habits, and price were also shown to influence beef and lamb consumption across Chinese regions. In Latin America, Pessoa et al. (2018) and De Oliveira et al.

(2024) evaluated the profile of ovine meat consumers in Brazil, where sheep and goats are traditionally and regionally important species with potential for expansion into growing urban markets. These studies examined variables such as consumption level, reasons for non-consumption, consumption frequency, purchase location, factors influencing purchasing decisions, preferred cuts, and consumption of edible offal. In Chile, Rodríguez et al. (2025) characterized consumption of *cordero de Chiloé* as a differentiated ovine meat product with geographical indication. In Argentina, studies have progressed across several provinces of the Pampas region, including Córdoba (Agüero *et al.*, 2010), central Santa Fe (Acetta et al., 2023), and Buenos Aires Province (Lagrecia et al., 2009; Pastorelli et al., 2015).

In the field of consumer behavior, Boragnio (2021) theorized about the particular relationship between consumers and food, shaped through social learning and cultural heritage. In this regard, it is essential to interpret ovine meat consumption not only through descriptions of its attributes as a food product but also through the integration of diverse variables, including its intrinsic characteristics, consumer health, cultural identity, territorial dynamics, and the evolution of products and livestock producers. Such knowledge is necessary for any action aimed at expanding the productive sector through the stimulation of consumption.

Therefore, the objective of the present study was to describe ovine meat consumption in the locality of La Plata, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina, during the period 2021–2022, as input for the design of public policies and for guiding the agri-food chain.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques, was used to study consumer behavior. The data collection instrument consisted of a questionnaire with closed and semi-open questions, administered individually and in respondents' homes. The survey was previously validated to identify potential comprehension issues. The surveyed population resulted from a random sample of informants representing their household (sampling unit), consisting of residents aged 18 years or older in the locality of La Plata, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina, during the period 2021–2022.

The variables included in the instrument were designed to characterize consumer perceptions, including reasons for consumption and non-consumption, factors guiding product choice, valued organoleptic attributes, usual purchasing channels, criteria for product selection, methods of preservation and preparation, and potential product substitutes.

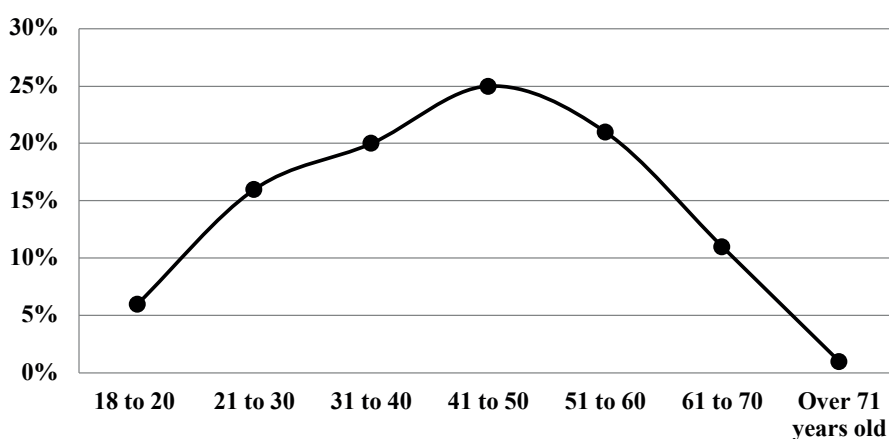
The sampling frame for assessing consumption was calculated based on the total population of La Plata according to the 2019 census. The sample size was estimated using the finite population probability formula, considering a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and  $p$  and  $q$  values of 0.5. This resulted in a sample size of 380 sampling units. Descriptive statistics were used for data analysis.

For the calculation of annual per-capita ovine meat consumption, the 104 sampling units identified as consumers were considered, representing a total of 406 individuals.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of all respondents surveyed in the locality of La Plata, 68% were women and 32% were men. The most represented age group was 41–50 years. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents by age.

When asked whether they consumed ovine meat, 62% reported that they did

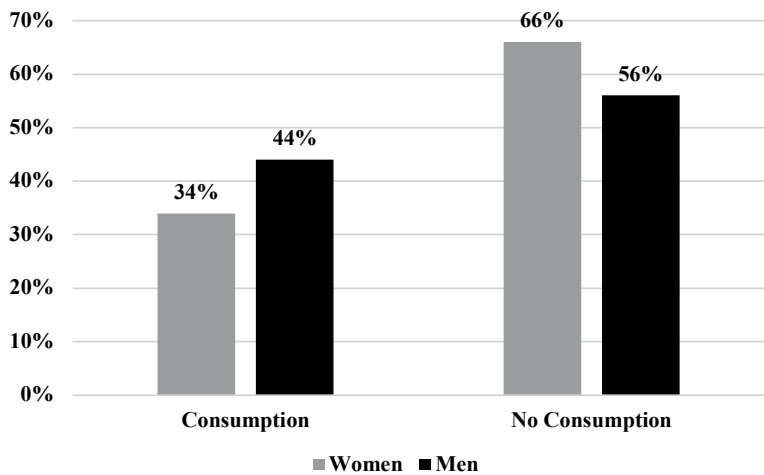


**FIGURE 1.** Distribution of respondents by age group (percentage).

Source: own elaboration.

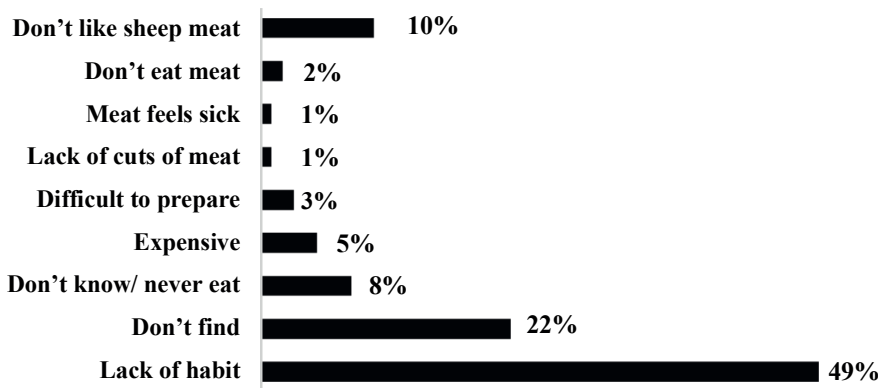
not, while 38% responded affirmatively. This level of consumption was lower than that reported by Agüero (2010) in the province of Córdoba and nearly half of that recorded by Acetta (2023) in the province of Santa Fe. When consumption patterns were analyzed by sex, men were found to consume ovine meat more frequently than women (figure 2).

Regarding the reasons for non-consumption, the most relevant findings were that 49% abstained due to lack of habit consistent with observations by Agüero (2010) in Córdoba and 22% reported not consuming it because it was not readily available, among other reasons (figure 3). These two motivations coincide with the findings of Acetta (2023), who identified



**FIGURE 2.** Distribution of ovine meat consumption by sex (percentage).

Source: own elaboration.



**FIGURE 3.** Reasons for non-consumption of ovine meat (percentage).

Source: own elaboration.

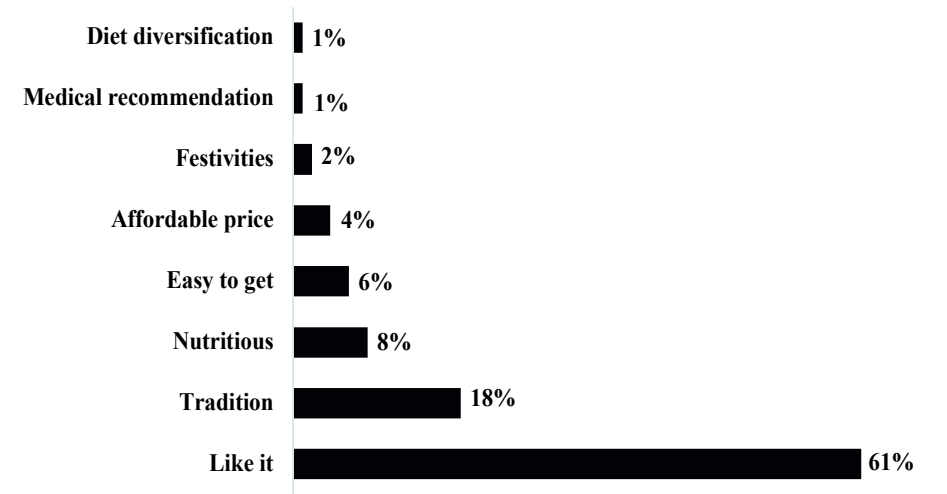
them as the principal justifications for non-consumption.

Based on the reported reasons, 13% of respondents can be classified as true non-consumers: 10% stated that they did not like ovine meat, 2% were vegetarians or vegans, and 1% reported experiencing adverse effects after consumption. In contrast, 87% did not consume ovine meat for reasons unrelated to product affinity, including lack of habit, limited availability, unfamiliarity, high cost, difficulties in preparation, or lack of appropriate cuts.

Among the motivations for consumption, 61% cited taste and 18% cited tradition (figure 4). The primary reason for consumption was therefore the pleasure associated with taste. As Bourdieu (as cited in Boragnio, 2021) notes, “tastes” include cultural capital as a structuring factor of consumption; in this sense, festive and traditional consumption reported by 20% of respondents aligns with this conceptualization. In the study conducted by Mao et al. (2016) in China, the main

motivation for consumption was consumer preference for the meat, a finding that also aligns with results reported by De Oliveira et al. (2024).

Regarding purchasing behavior, men were identified as the individuals most explicitly responsible for acquiring ovine meat (32%), followed by relatives or friends (15%), women (12%), and respondents who indicated no specific purchaser (41%). Based on the types of relationships that different social groups establish with food, it is possible to infer the degree of formal or informal interaction consumers are willing to engage in to obtain this product. In this study, the variable “ovine meat producer” was included as a particular feature of the local supply chain, given that 41% of respondents purchased meat directly from producers, similar to findings reported for the province of Santa Fe by Acetta (2023). Other purchasing channels included traditional butcher shops specializing in beef (36%), butcher shops specializing in pork (8%), direct



**FIGURE 4.** Motivations for ovine meat consumption (percentage).

Source: own elaboration.

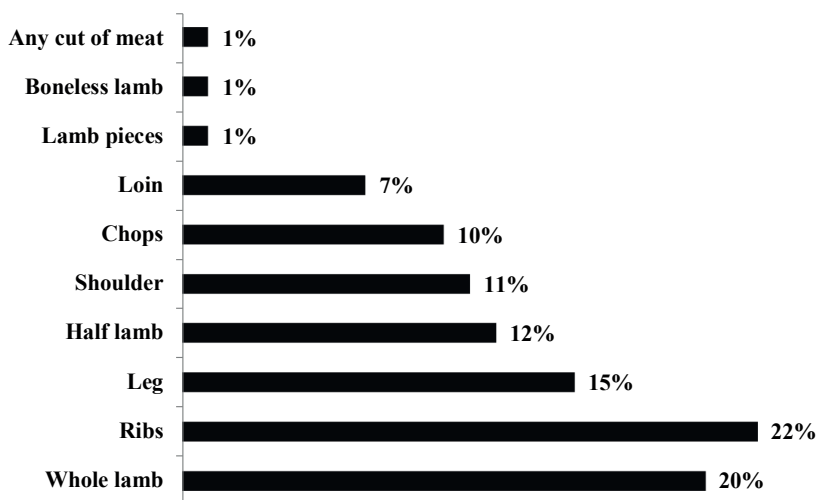
purchases from slaughterhouses (6%), supermarkets (6%), shops specializing in poultry meat (2%), and other unspecified outlets (1%).

With respect to the animal category purchased, 85% reported buying lamb, 9% purchased castrated male sheep (*capón*), and 6% adult ewe. Regarding preferred cuts, 22% favored ribs, 15% preferred the leg or hindquarter, and 20% opted for whole lamb (figure 5). The preference for cuts such as the hindquarter differed from the findings reported by Pastorelli et al. (2015) in La Plata.

Another important factor to consider is the role of organoleptic characteristics, which serve as key dimensions influencing purchasing decisions and shaping consumer preferences. To evaluate these features, emphasis was placed on sensory attributes based on the visual appraisal of the product. Regarding the color of raw meat, 48% of consumers preferred lighter-colored meat, 30% preferred meat of intermediate coloration, 14% expressed no preference,

and 8% favored darker meat. For perceived fat content, 54% described the meat as lean, 35% as fatty, 7% as very fatty, and 4% as very lean. In contrast, consumers in Brazil perceived ovine meat as fatty (Pessoa et al., 2018; De Oliveira et al., 2024), which constituted one of the main reasons for non-consumption or rejection, as fat was associated with strong flavor and odor consistent with the consumption of adult categories in that country.

Tenderness, referring to the texture of meat in the mouth, was also investigated because it is one of the attributes that most strongly influences acceptability due to its impact on the eating experience. According to Mao (2016), tenderness is a key aspect for Chinese consumers, as it determines the preferred preparation method for ovine meat. In the present study, 82% of respondents considered the meat tender, consistent with the findings of Agüero (2010), while 18% reported that it was not always tender.



**FIGURE 5.** Frequency of consumption by ovine meat cuts (percentage).

Source: own elaboration.

The price that a consumer seeking gratification is willing to pay for a product depends on the credibility of the promise that the product will satisfy their expectations and on the intensity of those expectations (Bauman, 2007). For this reason, respondents were asked about their perception of the value of ovine meat relative to beef, the latter being culturally the most valued and recognized animal protein in Argentina. Of the respondents, 52% believed ovine meat should cost the same as beef, 26% were willing to pay more, and 22% would pay less. Rodríguez et al. (2025) found that 56% of consumers in Chile were willing to pay 41% more for differentiated ovine meat.

When consumers were unable to obtain ovine meat for various reasons, they were asked which meat they would choose as a substitute. Beef was the preferred alternative (35%), followed by pork (27%), chicken (15%), goat meat (5%), rabbit (1%), and no specific preference (17%). These results were similar to those reported by Lagreca et al. (2009) for the city of La Plata.

A factor that influences purchasing decisions is the interplay between commensality and food preparation, which leads consumers to plan strategies for storing and retrieving ovine meat for future use. In this regard, 60% of consumers reported not freezing ovine meat, 29% did freeze it, and 11% stated that it depended on the situation. The average storage time for frozen ovine meat was 26 days, with a minimum of 2 days and a maximum of 180 days. The most common thawing method was defrosting at room temperature (51%), followed by no specific preference (20%), microwave thawing (15%), and thawing in the refrigerator (14%).

Boragnio (2021), referring to Pierre Bourdieu's work on "tastes," notes

that culinary practices, eating habits, and food strategies shaped by domestic economy and the gendered division of labor determine preparation methods in addition to cultural capital. Frequency of consumption defines opportunities for interaction between consumers and the product: 44% consumed ovine meat occasionally, 25% on festive occasions, 15% one to two times per month, 14% weekly, and 2% only when the price or product was accessible. Regarding place of consumption, the home was predominant (68%), followed by meals offered by others (16%), no preference (14.5%), and consumption exclusively in restaurants (1.5%). Similar patterns of occasional or celebration-related consumption were reported by Agüero (2010) in Córdoba and Rodríguez et al. (2025) in Chile. In contrast, Pessoa (2018) and De Oliveira (2024) documented primarily weekly and biweekly consumption frequencies in Brazil.

Considering the variables associated with the person responsible for cooking and the cooking techniques used, a strong male predominance was observed (65%), while 24% reported no preference and 11% identified women as the primary cooks. Regarding cooking methods, direct heat on a grill using embers was the most preferred (40%), followed by roasting over an open fire on a spit (23%), baking (21%), stewing (14%), and other unspecified techniques (2%). Preferences for degree of doneness indicated that 42% of respondents preferred medium-cooked meat, 35% fully cooked, 12% juicy, and 11% very well done. An important aspect that enhances the eating experience is the choice of side dishes. The preferred accompaniments were raw vegetables (36%), potatoes (31%), cooked vegetables (20%), and rice or pasta (6%).

Some respondents reported consuming ovine meat only with bread (6%), and 1% indicated that the side dish varied depending on the preparation method.

Finally, the average annual per-capita consumption calculated from the data was 1.11 kg/person/year, with a minimum of 0.125 kg/person/year and a maximum of 21.4 kg/person/year. Consumption in the locality of La Plata was similar to the national average for the same period (CREA, 2021). This may be associated with the limited or absent integration of ovine meat into daily diets, consistent with Goizueta and Sánchez (2011), who noted that ovine meat is almost always a specialty consumed on festive or seasonal occasions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The characteristics of consumers, together with the practices and customs surrounding ovine meat consumption, constitute elements shared within a cultural framework whose understanding is essential for any action aimed at promoting sectoral growth through increased consumption. This underscores the importance of studies focused on a thorough understanding of demand in order to align it more effectively with supply.

Initially, it was observed that strict non-consumers are few compared with individuals who do not consume ovine meat for reasons unrelated to taste. This suggests that behind the high proportion of non-consumption lies a potential consumer base; therefore, this segment should be strategically targeted when designing promotional initiatives.

In general, consumers reported eating ovine meat because they enjoy it and due to family traditions. When relating

consumption patterns to respondents' sex, men not only consumed and prepared ovine meat more frequently but were also primarily responsible for its purchase. The predominant procurement method was direct acquisition from producers, followed by purchases from traditional butcher shops specializing in beef. In the locality of La Plata, the most purchased ovine category was lamb, commonly acquired as a whole carcass, with the rib section identified as the preferred cut. Regarding perceptual evaluation of organoleptic attributes, consumers favored light-colored, lean, and tender meat, which is consistent with the preferred animal category (lamb). Most respondents purchased fresh meat for immediate or near-immediate use, whereas a smaller proportion froze the product for consumption within a month. When lamb was unavailable, it was mainly substituted with beef or pork. The predominant cooking practices involved direct heat, either on a grill or spit, typically accompanied by raw vegetables. Regional consumption was comparable to the national per-capita average and is considered very low but with potential for growth.

Ovine meat is incorporated into the culinary routine not through daily consumption owing to limited availability throughout the year or the price–yield relationship but rather through specific social interactions, such as festivities, end-of-year celebrations, Christmas, or Easter. This type of occasional consumption, combined with the involvement of relatives or friends in purchasing, the direct relationship established with producers supplying whole lambs, and the role of an adult host opening their home to others, highlights the ritual and symbolic value of the practice. It reflects the establishment of agreements and roles,

planning, reinforcement of bonds, and collective identity.

In contemporary societies, consumption practices and their relationship with products are fundamental for the articulation between production and social reproduction. Therefore, these aspects must be considered in current political discussions aimed at strengthening local development and enhancing territorial public–private networks. Maintaining traditional consumption, engaging younger generations and new consumer segments, and advancing productive changes that enable lamb to appear more frequently on household tables represent a multifaceted challenge one that could position the regional ovine sector as a significant productive opportunity.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no personal conflicts of interest, nor any conflicts involving other individuals, organizations, agencies, or institutions that could inappropriately influence the present article.

### COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS OF EXPERIMENTATION

No animal experimentation was conducted.

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*swine, sheep, and bees. Studies aimed at value addition* (80120240100036LP).

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### DECLARATION ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The authors declare that artificial intelligence was not used for the development of this research.

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