One cool and rainy morning in June 2011, I found myself exploring the alleyways of Mercado Cuatro – a large and maze-like municipal market in Asunción, Paraguay. I was in the city doing research on traditional plant medicines for my M.A. in Anthropology, and I was still getting used to the capital and its markets. In retrospect, this first day of participant observation and preliminary conversation was abnormally quiet, as the regular hustle and bustle of the mercado had been temporarily replaced by an air of relaxation.

Feeling rather timid about my Spanish, I approached a vendor at the bottom of a street and began to ask about the plant remedies displayed on her cart. Her plants, she explained, are for drinking in maté, that is, a tea-like infusion of crushed plants and boiling water. But, she added, if I was interested in maté, first I needed a cup! Before I fully understood what was happening, the woman had shouted across the alley to a fellow vendor who, after rummaging through his wares, came over with a metal cup. Handing me a piece of paper and a pen, the woman asked me to write my name down. Then, pulling out a blue marker, she wrote my name on the cup in permanent ink. It was my cup now. But wait… I needed something else as well! Upon further instruction, the man from across the alley went back to his stall, rummaging once again through his supplies until he returned with a long metal straw that had a small perforated basket at the end. This was my bombilla, used for drinking maté from my new cup. With a glance at my name neatly printed on the cup, I had my first indication of the social importance of medicinal maté. I asked how much it cost, and paid the woman, thanking them both for their help. I walked away slightly confused but with a sense of accomplishment. I was now equipped to participate in my own research through the drinking of maté!

Maté is derived from the yerba maté plant – a member of the holly family indigenous to Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. The Jesuits first learned of the plant from the indigenous Guaraní people of Paraguay in the sixteenth century, and in the seventeenth century when they began to cultivate it, yerba was already embedded in a system of harvesting and transporting by the Guaraní. Setting up temporary settlements in the yerba regions east of districts such as Salvador and Concepción and stretching through central Paraguay to Curuguaty and San Estanislao, the Guaraní cut and dried the leaves in camps before carrying it back to their communities. Learning from the indigenous population, the Jesuits also established yerba plantations, which remained profitable until their departure from Paraguay in 1767. Following the withdrawal of the Jesuits the yerba industry continued to be supported and controlled by foreign investment, trade, and government regulation. Much of the land rich in yerba production, however, was sold or rented to foreign entrepreneurs following the Great War of 1864–70, which was fought against Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, and ultimately devastated Paraguay’s economy.1

Yerba maté has since become an international industry, being consumed widely in Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay,
and southern Brazil both in a manner somewhat akin to coffee drinking in North America and as an herbal remedy – a practice that has extended to Britain and continental Europe since yerba was initially brought back to Spain from Paraguay in the sixteenth century. As it has a high caffeine content, yerba mate is likely also beneficial to the contemporary busy lifestyle of Asunción. The leaves of yerba mate are usually dried and ground before being submerged in hot water. Tereré – cold mate – is more commonly consumed during the country’s hot summer months. Traditionally, this tea is sipped from a hollow gourd through a bombilla – a silver metal straw, which is equipped with a small basket-shaped filter on the end. As I discovered in my daily travels through the streets of Asunción, it is more common nowadays to drink mate from a large plastic thermos equipped with a carrying handle and a belt with which to fasten one’s metal drinking cup. In this way, the residents of Asunción are able to easily carry their mate with them throughout the day.

Daily Dose: The Everyday Custom of Mate Drinking

Upon my arrival in Asunción the first social custom immediately apparent to my anthropological eye was the seemingly continuous consumption of mate. Yet it does not take an anthropologist to notice this; mate is everywhere in the city. In the mornings, when I made my way from my residence to the closest major intersection where I could catch a bus to one of the markets, I was almost certain to pass the same street vendors at the same corners, with their small tables set up to display their selection of fresh and dried plants. Although male vendors were present, the majority of sellers I came across both on street corners and in city markets were women, and in speaking with both male and female sellers I came to learn that this is an occupation largely associated with women and women’s knowledge.

Knowledge of the various species of medicinal plants that can be used in mate is predominantly passed down via oral tradition in Paraguay, and as Juana, a middle-aged female market vendor, explained, “Only women learn about herbs because men work in other places, especially on the farms.” A 34-year-old male vendor also asserted that, when it comes to medicinal plants, “People believe more in women.” Although, as I discovered in my interviews, some men are taught about the medicinal properties of plants by their families (and on several occasions I came across young sons helping their mothers selling plants), it is predominantly a tradition confined to the women of the family. Despite this convention, some participants expressed concern that the younger generations of either gender are no longer as interested in learning the medicinal properties of the plants, and prefer to select their herbs solely based upon taste. In speaking with vendors I began to sense some apprehension regarding the future of the medicinal plant business. Despite this trepidation, however, the practice of drinking mate remains widespread, among men and women, young and old alike.

While the yerba mate plant is the foundation of the mate drink, I came to understand that these concoctions consisted of an array of plants specific to the individual’s taste, and that therefore vendors often offered at least a small selection from which to choose.

During my morning commute I paid particular attention to a table set up next to the bus stop for the number 3 line that took me to Mercado Cuatro – a market that sells everything from clothes to electronics to medicinal plants. Every day, no matter how cold or rainy, this woman sold her plants; often she had her daughter, son, or both to help. I watched in fascination as cars pulled over to the side of the road, from old battered vans to shiny black SUVs, leaving their motors running and rolling down their passenger windows. Usually, son or daughter ran to the window, took the order, and the work began. As quickly as possible plants had to be selected, ground, bagged, and handed over to the customers, who paid and then immediately went on their way. Occasionally, customers arrived on foot, but in this area of town – a significantly wealthier neighborhood than the majority of the city – through customers appeared to be more common. I even talked with one vendor who set up his table on the median of a major street. I rode by him every day on my way to interview plant vendors at Mercado Cuatro, and one day as I was on my way to seek interviews with some medicinal herb vendors in front of the nearby hospital, I walked by him and then doubled back. Watching him running to and from vehicles stopped at red lights, and even hopping onto buses delivering fresh ingredients for the bus drivers’ morning or afternoon mate, the importance of his informal occupation became clear.

This vendor, Luis, is a 34-year-old father of three, and every day he sets up his table at 7 AM, and sells his plants until the afternoon. They are all fresh, and he buys them from sellers in Mercado Cuatro. These plants are used in mate, he explains, but mate is not only drunk for pleasure, but also for health. The various plants that are added to one’s mate also provide one’s daily dose of medicine. Because these plants are so accessible, being significantly cheaper than biomedical pharmaceuticals (and even available at red lights), Luis explains that all people, whether old, young, rich, or poor,
prefer to treat themselves with medicinal maté. For the medicinal properties of the plants to have their optimum effect, Luis and the other vendors with whom I spoke explained that they must be consumed on a regular basis and over a long period of time, ranging from several weeks to several years. Hence, the custom of drinking maté is the perfect way to obtain one’s daily dose, be it cola de caballo (South American horsetail) for healthy kidney function, or agríal (clubbed begonia) to treat a temporary sore throat. Other plants, such as anise or menta (mint), can be added specifically for taste, and thus the pleasure of maté drinking is twofold: both healthy and tasty, and unique to each individual’s maté cup.

Intrigued by the range in taste and composition of this Paraguayan tea, I asked vendors what seemed to be the most popular plants with their customers, both for treating illness and for taste. When it comes to physical ailments, vendors cited a range of issues that clients commonly sought to treat, from ongoing and severe illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, and hypertension to temporary ailments such as coughs, colds, and gastrointestinal problems. While there are over five hundred species of medicinal plants available in Paraguay, some are more popular than others. As Silvia, a mother of five who operates one of the bigger indoor medicinal remedy shops in Mercado Cuatro, explained, every few years there are certain plants that emerge as “revolutions” within Paraguay, reputed to be either particularly effective in treating disease, such as noni (Morinda citrifolia) for treating cancer, or as cure-alls, such as moringa (Moringa oleifera).

Thus, the therapeutic aspects of the plants consumed in maté, though often drunk casually, are taken seriously. Esther, a 43-year-old mother of four operating a small indoor shop in Mercado Cuatro, told me the success story of a family friend as she stapled together packages of manzanilla
After drinking uña de gato (cat’s claw) for many months, this friend was pronounced free of his cancer. “It’s a revolution,” Esther says, “because the doctor said that he had four to six months to live.”

When it comes to enjoying one’s daily dose, every mate drinker has favorite tastes. Boldo (Peumos boldo), anise, and manzanilla are among those cited by vendors to be especially popular with their clients; anise and manzanilla in particular are valued for their taste. In addition to these more typical plants that are readily visible at the market shops and stalls, mate can include a variety of edible plants and plant products, some of which are also consumed in foods. Isabel, a professor of Environmental Research and Methodology at the Universidad Nacional de Asunción (the public university in Asunción), explains that many plants such as cilantro and rosemary are also used in cooking. Her favorite mate flavors are infused with chamomile and anise, orange and avocado leaves, and mint. Additionally, I learned that mate can also be consumed for taste alone. Just as each plant has its specific medicinal properties, each has its unique taste, and beyond its therapeutic effects mate is often drunk simply for enjoyment. While the flavor of each infusion varies depending on its composition, mate is distinct and pungent.

Yet while flavors are often sharp and heady, on chilly afternoons in July the hot tea is soothing to the throat and settles the sinuses.

The enjoyment of drinking mate also reaches beyond both the body and the palate; there are some plants infused in mate or tereré in order to improve one’s disposition. “Drinking the plants albahaca [basil] and lucema [Begonia coralline] makes you feel better when you’ve had a bad day, or feel sad or nervous,” he explains. Because the plants treat such a wide range of mental or physical ailments, vendors cited their use for almost any purpose and for anyone. “All kinds of people buy [medicinal plants for mate and tereré],” declares José, “even the President!” Furthermore, he adds that all the people “absolutely” prefer the medicinal plants, explaining: “Sometimes doctors ask for medicinal plants, which is unique. But they are Paraguayan,
and so they believe in the medicinal plants.” Thus, maté is a beverage enjoyed within Paraguay across social and economic demographics – both an individually shaped concoction and a socially shaped practice.

The Social Life of Maté

Maté and tereré are carried around in large termos (thermoses) and consumed throughout the day. These termos are typically decorated and personalized. In markets like Mercado Cuatro many of the busier alleyways are lined with carts displaying termos, bombillas, and maté cups in an array of styles. While some are more traditional in appearance – the outsides lined with leather, carved with scenic agricultural landscapes or with traditional Paraguayan harps and guitars – others are more contemporary, boasting illustrations of popular television and movie characters, or in bright colors and designs. It is clear that termos are marketed according to age, sex, and popular culture, and sometimes even serving as a fashion statement to match one’s outfit. Moreover, beyond aesthetics, termos often have a deeper connection to their owners. As my Paraguayan research assistant explained to me, people often decorate their termos with emblems of their favorite soccer teams, or the names of family members or significant others. Upon purchasing a new cup, vendors routinely ask what name should be drawn on or, in the case of leather-lined cups, burned into the outside. In this way, the practice of drinking maté is conceptually tied to one’s social world, the termo acting as a conduit. These drinking vessels were also offered to me as an “authentic” symbol of Paraguayan culture.

In perusing the many market stalls offering termos, mate cups, and bombillas, I began to suspect that the more traditional termos were often marketed toward tourists and visitors who wished to take home a symbol of their visits to Paraguay. Some mate cups, for example, are made of animal hoofs or horns, and yet as I learned from someone who had purchased one, these are completely impractical to use, because the glue holding them together changes the flavor of the hot mate. Yet this sort of mate cup is readily available in areas and marketplaces that tend to receive higher tourist traffic.

Although mate is personalized in terms of the particular treatment it provides (whether treating an illness or serving as a caffeinated morning or afternoon pick-me-up), these termos exhibit part of a social dimension to mate drinking that is in itself distinct. As it is typical in Asunción to find termos strapped to hips, bags, or the palms of hands virtually everywhere one might venture, it is also commonplace to find it being shared within social circles. Many times while riding the city buses I found myself watching the bus drivers engage in casual conversation with acquaintances across the aisle, passing a maté cup with a bombilla back and forth as they chatted. Even guards patrolling embassy gates and the presidential palace were equipped with termos to share. In classes at the Ecologia Humana (Human Ecology) school of the Universidad Nacional de Asunción, students passed their cups along the rows to their friends as I presented my research project. Professors never failed to offer me a warm drink of maté when we sat down for meetings or interviews, and whenever I was welcomed into the home of newly made acquaintance, the host’s cup was always passed toward me. It became clear that sharing maté is a way to build and maintain relationships. As the medicinal properties of the plants infused into each cup benefit the physical health of those who drink from it, relationships are also supported through the promotion of health.

Food and Drink for Health: Future Directions

The social interaction that occurs between vendors and consumers in the markets of Asunción ultimately builds upon both cultural and economic realities. It ensures the socioeconomic stability of both consumer and vendor, who are able to establish a merchant-client relationship. Furthermore, the vending of plant medicines upholds a traditional medicinal practice that comprises a pivotal social element which biomedicine intrinsically lacks. Within the busy urban lifestyle, the drinking of maté is incorporated on multiple levels: providing an informal yet steady occupation for the vendors whose livelihoods depend on this custom, sustaining an economically accessible and culturally relevant mode of everyday healthcare, and delivering a product pleasant to consume and share. The practice of drinking maté hence promotes both personal physical health and social health within Paraguayan communities.

Maté drinking also represents an interesting example of the utilization of food and drink as medicine. Throughout the world, the intake of medicine in the form of food and drink is not uncommon; medicinal food and drink traditions have been explored in locations such as northern Nigeria, Cuba, Bolivia, and northwest Patagonia, to name but a few. In the case of Paraguay, while some medicinal plants are also used for cooking, maté provides the primary pathway through which traditional plant medicines are ingested. What has emerged as particularly thought-provoking in my research in Asunción is the prevalence of – and preference
for – traditional medicinal tea consumption, despite the urban accessibility of biomedical pharmaceuticals. Although the expense of pharmaceuticals certainly creates a barrier for some Paraguayans to access these medicines, my interviews with participants and my observations (even in wealthier areas of the city) have indicated that there is much more to this model of medical pluralism than cost, including links among drinking maté, medicinal plants, and cultural identity. Future research can explore these connections further, investigating the relationships among agriculture, consumption, and interpretations of health. Specifically, it would be interesting to investigate perceptions of medicinal food and drink in relation to locally grown foods and native plant life.

As the medicinal qualities of herbs are both pharmacological and cultural, it is essential to explore the multiple levels at which vendors and customers in Asunción, and in other communities throughout the world, encounter these plants, in order to grasp their full significance. While the tradition of drinking medicinal maté remains strong in Paraguay, it will be interesting to see how this practice endures and develops, both amid transformations in the local landscape and native plant life and alongside its pharmaceutical alternatives.

Notes
3. Ibid., 157.
4. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants mentioned.