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The meaty mystery at the heart of China's economic growth

What kebab consumption says about the country's consumption

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OVER THE past few decades, the small, industrial city of Zibo has been best-known for its petrochemical output. In recent months, however, it has become the centre of a national barbecue craze and social-media phenomenon unlike anything China has seen before. Tourists have flooded the city in the central province of Shandong in the hope of munching its mythical kebabs, posting videos on Douyin, the local version of TikTok, and then departing. Arenas have been converted into makeshift dining halls in order to cope with the massed crowds. To ease constraints on the supplies of meat and grills, local banks have started handing out low-interest loans designed specifically for merchants in barbecue-related industries.

Zibo kebabs are the perfect treat for a budget traveller. They are consumed at low tables with a small stove, heated by coal. When the fat starts to drip, the meat is scraped into a thin pancake and dipped first into a garlic and chilli paste and then into a salty mixture of sesame and peanut. A bottle of the city's local beer, called Lulansha, comes to less than three yuan (\$0.40). Four people can eat and drink for hours on less than 350 yuan. The craze is about more than the simple