



# Mexico City Markets Stores for all Five Senses

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*Tlatelolco Open-Air Market, a mural by Diego Rivera in the National Palace.*

Listening to ingenious sales pitches; touching the fruit to see if it's ready to eat; feasting your eyes on all manner of forms and bright colors; awakening memories with evocative aromas: all this is something that only happens in traditional markets. Launching all five senses when you go shopping is something unlikely to happen on computer screens or in labyrinthine supermarket aisles, the two places that have recently dominated commerce.

Amidst the spread of cybernetic online sales and the interminable surface areas of supermarkets, these small neighborhood outlets persist and not even the most dazzling modern offerings have managed to darken them.<sup>1</sup> Buying and selling in public plazas has a long tradition in Mexico and is directly linked to the country's history. Their origins date back to the Meso-

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Photos by students from the Mexico City Autonomous University, San Lorenzo Tezonco campus. Since 2010, the Click! Photo Laboratory has sponsored more than 15 collective projects with the participation of approximately 1 200 students, coordinated by photography professors from the undergraduate communications and culture program. The photos from some of these projects have been published as books, while others have been exhibited in different places like the San Juan and La Nueva Viga Markets, the Talavera House, the Xochimilco campus of the Autonomous Metropolitan University, and the Cali Cultural Center in Colombia. See the Click! Photo Laboratory online bookstore at <http://www.blurb.com/usr/store/labclick>.

American settlements, where next to every ceremonial center was a *tianguis*.<sup>2</sup> These public spaces were not simply places for trading; they were true community centers where intense social life went on through different activities regulated by one or several authorities.

### THE TATELULCO MARKET

In the area that is now Mexico City, the oldest and one of the most important markets we know of was the Tlatelolco (or Tatlulco) *tianguis*.<sup>3</sup> Here in this immense commercial center divided into sections —that the recently-arrived Spaniards dubbed “neighborhoods”—, the *pochtecas* (merchants) gathered to trade products of all descriptions: from live exotic animals; fruit, vegetables, and legumes from the fields; prepared food; medicinal herbs and minerals; ceramic utensils; all manner

of textiles and jewelry; to extravagant, expensive objects from other towns.

Just like today, everyone, locals and outsiders, natives of the place and foreigners, delighted in wandering through the markets. Bernal Díaz del Castillo left us an account of how amazed the conquistadors were at the Tlatelolco *tianguis*:

From the time we arrived at the great square called Tatlulco, since we had not seen such a thing, we were astonished at the multitude of people and goods there and the great concert and order there. And the principals who went with us showed it all to us, each kind of good, and each had situated and assigned its own place. . . . Then other merchants who sold clothing and rough cotton cloth and items made of twisted thread and peanut vendors who sold cacao, and thus there were as many kinds as exist in New Spain.<sup>4</sup>

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#### WHEN IN ROME, DO AS THE ROMANS DO

It is no surprise that during the viceroyalty, the Spaniards would try to replicate the model of local markets, building a great number of them in other cities. In the early eighteenth century, in the middle of the capital city's Zócalo square, the Parián Market was inaugurated, in addition to the commercial area that included the Merchants' Arcades and the Flyers' Market. Besides selling basic foodstuffs, the Parián offered extravagant luxury items shipped in by the Manila Galleon. In the early nineteenth century, the Parián was demolished and commercial activities were moved from the city's center to a nearby neighborhood.

Under the government of Porfirio Díaz, the La Merced Market was built in 1890. Measuring 85m x 12m, it was the first distribution center for the entire city, where merchandise was still delivered by boat on canals.<sup>5</sup> Over time, La Merced Market grew to more than 3 000 stalls, and became the central market for the entire country. The huge number of services concentrated around this market, like eateries, saloons, hotels, brothels, and public baths, among others, turned it into a community, just as the pre-Hispanic *tianguis* had been. A lively social life developed around La Merced, generating legendary stories and beloved characters that still endure in the memory of its inhabitants. It was not until 1982 that the new distribution center for the whole country was inaugurated in Mexico City's borough of Iztapalapa, replacing La Merced, although the latter continues to operate.



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#### THE WORLD'S BIGGEST MARKET

Describing Mexico City's Distribution Center is as interminable a task as actually viewing its 327 hectares. Suffice it to provide a few data about what goes on there every day to eloquently illustrate the dimensions and importance of this commercial center, the world's largest, almost a city in itself: every day, 350 000 people carry out commercial transactions there, while 450 000 walk its hallways, including buyers, truckers, and employees. About five million buyers go there every month; every year, more than US\$8 billion worth of commercial transactions are carried out there, and it distributes 30 percent of the country's fruit and vegetable production.<sup>6</sup>

#### TWENTIETH-CENTURY COMMERCE

Mexico's political and social upheaval in the twentieth century's first decades had an impact on all spheres of social life, including food supply and commerce linked to agriculture and animal husbandry:

The Mexican Revolution brought with it extremely serious problems, one of which was the sudden drop in agricultural production both because of the lack of manpower and the fact that many haciendas were abandoned by their owners. It also affected commerce, since communications difficulties impeded the normal flow of goods. No more markets were built during the first half of the twentieth century; rather, little mom-and-pop stores and fruit-and-vegetable shops began to proliferate in the new neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup>

Around the mid-1950s, the Mexico City government developed a plan to provide local neighborhoods with access to perishable goods: a market was built in every borough of the city. Each one had a specific socio-political structure: a manager, a representative an-



swerable to the borough administration; a system for renting and purchasing stands; security; and, in some, even a daycare center for the merchants' children. Under the administration of President López Mateos (1958-1964) alone, 88 of these markets were built. In some cases, well-known architects were commissioned, such as the case of the Coyoacán, San Pedro de los Pinos, and La Lagunilla Markets, built by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, who also designed the National Anthropology Museum, the Azteca Stadium, and the Basilica of Guadalupe. Other markets were established in buildings recognized as architecturally very valuable, such as the Abelardo Rodríguez Market, located in the old San Pedro y San Pablo Jesuit College, where visitors can still see beautiful murals painted by Diego Rivera's students.<sup>8</sup>

Years later, street markets were also set up in some neighborhoods, inspired by the ancient *tianguis*, where small producers offered their wares directly without intermediaries. Today, these pink-awning-covered itinerant markets set up in different places every day of the week and no longer only offer very fresh fruit, vegetables, fish, fowl, beef, and pork; today, as part of

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modernity, they offer an abundance of stalls with multiple products, mainly made in China.

#### OVER HERE, *MARCHANTE!*<sup>9</sup>

What follows is a list of the most representative markets today in Mexico City, worth visiting, whether for their products, their tradition, or simply to delight the eye:

**San Juan Market.** This is considered the city's gourmet market. You can find delicacies and exotic ingredients like lion or eagle meat; several varieties of insects like grasshoppers and ants; a wide variety of mushrooms and other fungi; and Asian products. This market guarantees quality . . . as it does high prices.



**Nativitas and Jamaica Markets.** The Nativitas Market is situated in the borough of Xochimilco, considered the city's nursery, where shoppers can find plants from different regions of Mexico at surprisingly low prices. The Jamaica Market is the metropolitan area's biggest florist shop, where an immense variety of flowers come in daily from around the world.

**New La Viga Market.** This is a maritime enclave, where you have to literally fight to not drown among all the fish and seafood. It's a good idea to go very early, or later in the day if you want to witness the seafood auctions.

**Sonora Market.** You'll find every kind of traditional medication and herbal charm here: for love, for love lost, for the evil eye, for rheumatism, or for your liver.

In this market's ancient tradition, you can find medicinal products and herbs, remedies used by shamans and traditional healers for almost any complaint of the body or soul. You could say that this is one of Mexico City's most frequented museums.

**Coyoacán Market.** Here you'll find everything normally sold in a market, but also something extra: food stalls and costumes. No one can resist its traditional Mexican food or the secrets of its stalls for curing last night's hangover —on weekends, it's standing room only at the stalls selling tostadas, barbecued pork, savory turnovers, freshly-squeezed juices, and traditional fruit smoothies. Also, it offers everything needed for every festivity, be it the Day of the Dead, Independence Day, or Christ-

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mas: piñatas, ornaments, typical clothing, ingredients for traditional dishes, and, of course, costumes, including movie characters, animals, or even polemical public figures. But the Coyoacán Market also sells crafts, toys, modern fashions, and technology. That's why it is a favorite of locals and outsiders alike.

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In Mexico, you go to the market with your five senses on alert. Yes, you go to buy, but also to let yourself be seduced by everything there. Buying and selling is an adventure that transcends the acquisition of merchandise. It means being part of the encounter of ancestral traditions, indescribable aesthetic reference points, figures like those found in the movies, and an irresistible array of items to satisfy the hedonist lurking inside all of us.

Over Here, *Marchante!* **NMM**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Every borough in Mexico City has at least one traditional market, in addition to the street markets (previously called "itinerant open-air markets") set up in different areas every day of the week.

<sup>2</sup> From the Nahuatl word *tianquiztli*, meaning "market."

<sup>3</sup> Tlatelolco was a city bordering on Tenochtitlan. A reproduction of this market can be viewed at the National Museum of Anthropology.

<sup>4</sup> Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2000), p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth century, almost all the lakes in the Valley of Mexico had dried up, but water transportation was still used to move merchandise from other regions. See "Historia de los mercados en México," [http://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=gastro nomia&table\\_id=106](http://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=gastro nomia&table_id=106).

<sup>6</sup> <http://uneabasto.com/informacion-de-central-de-abastos.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Gobierno de México, "Historia de los mercados en México," [http://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=gastro nomia&table\\_id=106](http://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=gastro nomia&table_id=106).

<sup>8</sup> Among the painters of these murals are Raúl Gamboa, Ángel Bracho, and Pedro Rendón.

<sup>9</sup> The term "*marchante*" comes from the French word "*marchand*," which means merchant, but in Mexico, *marchante* is the customer.

