

Mexican Markets, An Enduring Tradition

The *tianguis* has survived since pre-columbian times

It might seem that, in modern Mexico, the traditional market—the *tianguis* with its oriental traits that dazzled Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conqueror—has disappeared to give place to the modern supermarket.

Supermarkets multiply throughout Mexico City—*Gigante*, *De Todo*, *Aurrera*, *Sumesa*. They stand as monuments where order and polyethylene reign and offer their produce, canned, industrialized, completely hidden, wrapped, weighed. Frozen vegetables, packaged meats, canned soups, sophisticated sweets, selected wrapped fruit, are ready to be placed in practical self-service carts. Seldom is there an attendant to lead the way through this consumer's kingdom, bereft of human contact.

In contrast, the *tianguis*—the traditional market—will always offer the unexpected: an infinite variety of fresh and natural colors, smells and tastes, the pleasure of observing, selecting and even tasting the fruits, the vegetables, the cheeses before deciding which to buy: the pleasant chit-chat with the *marchantes* offering their merchandise, "what can we offer you, sir", "what would you like", "try this mango, it's really sweet", "here, let me throw in some chiles, as an extra".

In one of his murals, the great Mexican painter, Diego Rivera, depicted the prehistoric market of Tlatelolco where they sold "all kinds of merchandise to be found on earth, from household goods to food, jewels of gold, silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, stone," according to the letter in which Hernán Cortés describes the market.

The *tianguis*—with its stalls pitched under colored cloths—survived into the colonial period. The *Lagunilla* market continued the native tradition and the *San Juan* offered one of the widest selection of fruits, vegetables, cotton and pottery. The Plaza Mayor itself was a kind of gigantic *tianguis* in the period of the Viceroy Revillagigedo, with its great storehouses of corn and wheat which were assaulted in 1692, to the cry of "Down with the Viceroy and the aldermen who are starving us to death". Later—in the second decade of Independence—there was another riot in "El Parian", near the main square, which was considered the center of commercial power.

The *tianguis* survived—then as now—the vicissitudes of history, and if the *Volador* market disappeared to make way for the Palace of Justice, there appeared others such as *Mixcalco*, *San Cosme*, *2 de abril*, and the *Merced*. The *trajineras*—long, narrow canoes propelled by one oar—reached the *Merced* through canals stretching from the villages of *Xochimilco* and *Chalco*. The *trajineras*, loaded with colored flowers, moved slowly through canals bordered by large trees.

The *Merced*—for a long time a wholesale warehouse—was a market offering the widest variety of Mexican fruits and vegetables; jicamas, avocados, zapotes (sapodilla plum), tejocotes (hawthorn fruit) and chiles of all kinds.

As Mexico City grew, the markets in the neighboring villages—Coyoacan, Mixcoac, San Angel—became citified and began to compete with the central ones. They also diversified and began to specialize—flowers and sea-food in *San Juan*, wholesale fruit in the *Merced*, furniture, antiques and books in the *Lagunilla*, herbs in the *Sonora* market. The herbalists, possessors of the old magic and tradition of the medicine men, offer remedies to every evil, tlanicalla for inflammation of the stomach, goat heads for calcium for the bones, Yingseng tea for sexual inadequacies and to counteract cholesterol, spiritual waters to cure envy, quail's eggs and orange blossom tea for the nerves, talismans, pyramids, diabolical masks. The vendors, proud of their trade, transmit the ancient secrets they have inherited although they cannot avoid having alongside their herb-filled stalls the plastic articles, wristwatches and pocket calculators,

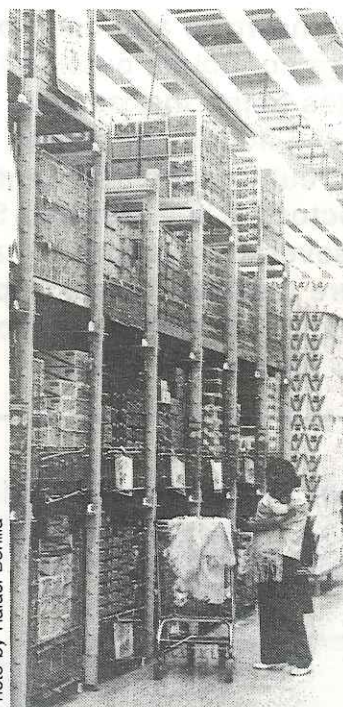


Photo by Rafael Bonilla

A self-service store: impersonal service.



Photo by Rafael Bonilla

Selling vegetables at La Merced market.

the modern contraband offered mainly in the *Tepito* market.

The old market of the *Merced* has lost the lavishness of food and craft work for which it was famed. Its warehouses have been moved to the Center of Provisions and its eating places do not offer their original variety, when one could order dishes of wild boar, *moles* (sauces made from a mixture of chiles) and hand-made tortillas. Not far from there, the *San Juan* market survives fires and earthquakes. Japanese, Catalan and Swiss restaurant-owners go there in search of sea-food, cheese, ducks, rabbits, lobster tails and even pheasants. These markets are housed in constructions equipped for them in the 50's when the city's mayor launched a campaign against the insanitary street *tianguis*. Strict rules of hygiene were imposed and the markets were moved off the streets.

But now the classic *tianguis* has returned in the form of the mobile markets, nomadic *tianguis* that appear each day of the week on different streets, reviving the custom of 'market day'. There the housewives arrive eager to rake the mountains of fruit and herbs, imagining the dishes they will concoct with epazote, pepper or coriander. The authorities who want to avoid traffic jams and impose rules of hygiene are powerless against this urge. And so are the self-service stores with their 'comfort', their efficient and impersonal service. Perhaps, because of this the Mexican *tianguis* has endured through the centuries.

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