

Michoacán's Fairs A Lively Tradition

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Long a lively tradition fostering unity and entertainment for the public, Mexico's fairs have changed through the years. They have not only become one of the main spaces for recovering cultural tradition, but also a means for promoting the productive wealth of our cities and states.

About 2,446 fairs and festivities are held in Mexico every year, most dedicated to Corpus Christi and patron saints. During the colonial period in the Americas, the indigenous custom of gathering in the *tianguis*, or markets, to sell their products and buy basic necessities was used by evangelist friars to introduce Christian religious practices which survive until today as a mixture of festivities and religious observance.

Today, many fairs find the space to display a great variety of crafts, food, cattle and industrial, agricultural and cultural products, often part of the local cultural tradition. So, while the fairs' objective is to promote the sale and consumption of particular items, at the same time, they are an opportunity to publicize production techniques that have been transmitted from generation to generation, sometimes for more than 300 years. The towns where they are held retain the legacy of festivities and commemorate important events that continue to be of great social

significance: the solidarity among locals is strengthened, fortifying the links among participating towns.

MICHOACÁN'S FAIRS

Michoacán is one of the states that has the richest history and cultural wealth and that has preserved its roots the most nationwide. This can be seen in the more than 60 fairs held statewide annually.¹ In fact, several fairs and festivities date back to pre-Hispanic times, such as the Tarecuato *Atole* Fair, which centers around the thick, flavored beverage, *atole*. Before the Spaniards arrived *atole* was frequently used in trading in kind, particularly by Nahuatl salt merchants who went through the town on their route from the coast to Central Mexico.

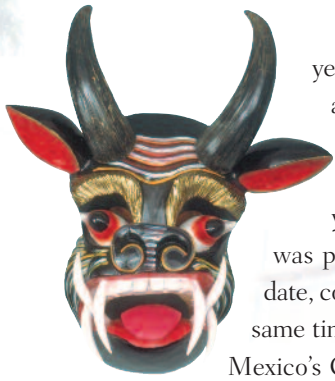
Ninety percent of Michoacán's festivities are rooted in Corpus Christi and the celebration of patron saints' days. One example is Tuxpan's Flower Fair in which the exhibition and sale of gladioluses commemorates the Apostle Saint James, the town's patron saint.

Another kind of fair pays homage to different trades. One very popular example of this is the town of Santa Clara del Cobre, where for 38 years, local artisans have been holding a fair displaying their imaginative, masterful work in copper ware.

But for longstanding festivities, Zitácuaro, located in the eastern part of Michoacán, cannot be beat: this year it will hold the 107th

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yearly fair, today known as the Zitácuaro Expo Fair. It was first held in 1897, and 83 years ago, February 5 was picked as the central date, commemorating at the same time the anniversary of Mexico's Constitution.

The fiestas have evolved over time. Some have become displays for the wealth of products and customs and traditions of each town. The most original and economically important in the state are the Morelia fair; the Santa Clara del Cobre Fair in the municipality of Salvador Escalante; Paracho's Guitar Fair; Senguio's International Mushroom Fair; and the Christmas Tree Ball Fair in Tlalpujahua.

There are also innumerable fairs that, while they have not become as prominent as those mentioned above, are important because they embody the history, customs and culture of the municipalities, as well as promoting local production.

300 YEARS OF SPICY TRADITION

An example of a fair that promotes regional production, fostering the tradition and history of the product itself, is the Chili Pepper Fair in the municipality of Queréndaro. It has the touch of history and tradition required to interest locals and outsiders alike at the same time that it fosters production and consumption of *criollo* chili peppers.

This is one of the state's most recent fairs: it has only been held twice (next August will be the third). More than 20 stands are set up in the town's main plaza offering visitors different varieties of *criollo* chili peppers: processed, dried and cooked in typical local dishes like *capon* (chili peppers fixed with eggs and sausage) or sliced and cooked. In Queréndaro, *criollo* chili peppers are mainly

grown for local consumption, but evidence shows that since 1520, they have been used in a wide variety of dishes in Michoacán cuisine all over the state. Even today, they are still only grown in Queréndaro.

During the fair, local inhabitants serve food made with *criollo* chili peppers, giving the local cuisine its distinctive taste. The town dresses up with a parade of floats; sports contests; concerts; lectures; pictorial, photographic, archaeological and craft exhibitions; competitions of local dishes; and the sale of local sweet rolls, like wheat, corn and garbanzo bean *gorditas* and egg bread.

What gives the Chili Pepper Fair its distinguishing touch, however, is the exhibition of the way the chili peppers are hand dried, a process passed on from generation to generation for more than three centuries, which gives the peppers their distinctive flavor.

For three days, local inhabitants take visitors on guided tours of the 40 hectares of chile fields, which yield only one harvest a year. They show them the drying process that has not varied for centuries: the chili peppers are placed on straw mats in the sun in the patios of the houses. This tour has been very popular among visitors to the two fairs that have been held so far.

There is also scientific interest in the *criollo* chili peppers: the National Autonomous University of Mexico is working with the Queréndaro township on a study after organizations like the World Development Bank showed an interest in it.

This is just one example among hundreds of the adaptation of traditions and customs to the need for social and economic survival in our country's towns. **MM**



NOTES

¹ The fairs are organized in coordination with the Michoacán State Commission for Fairs, Exhibitions and Events (COFEEEM).

