

markets of the world: MEXICO CITY





MARKET DAY at La Merced

The Mercado de la Merced, one of the largest marketplaces in Latin America, is the heart and soul of Mexico City. This bustling market gives life to many of the city's 19 million-plus residents. For some, it's carrying on the family legacy by working the same stalls started generations ago; for others, it's a place for people-watching and a meal after church on Sunday. Whatever the case, this is much more than a place to shop.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLARE KLEINER

Walking up the stairs of the Metro station, I can already smell the faint but certain aroma of something good. It's not a specific scent, but rather a combination of a dozen or more savory and sweet and spicy trails that coax me to climb faster and investigate the root of this tempting bouquet.

After I round the corner and shimmy through a revolving door, I'm suddenly in the middle of what feels like rush hour on an ant farm. Hundreds of people navigate the narrow pathways, stopping quickly to eye piles of fruits, vegetables, cheeses, meats and literally thousands of other food and non-food items. Vendors pushing fast-moving dollies heaped with bags of produce whistle at patrons to move aside or suffer the consequences. To say the place is chaotic would be an understatement.

The main section of la Merced, as the locals call it, spans over an entire city block and houses hundreds of stalls selling everything from potatoes to piñatas. It is housed in what looks like a giant airplane hangar, and it's very difficult to figure out where it begins and ends. There is no official map of the market, so the best approach is to wander, knowing it is impossible to cover the entire place in one day. The market is loosely divided into sections: produce, meat, witchcraft novelties, and clothing and household supplies, but it's not unusual to find a fruit stand in the middle of what looks like a shoe section. Since my main motivation for visiting la Merced is for the food, I set out to taste what the market had to offer.

After turning a few corners I find myself in the fruit and vegetable section. On one side, papayas with the thin, brown skins pulled back reveal their naked orange flesh; on the other, bulging, overripe bananas lay in piles marked with discount signs. Slices of crisp apples, mounds of cut-up pears and mini piles of mango

chunks entice patrons to take a taste—something most vendors not only welcome but encourage. It's not unusual to have produce samples shoved in your face as you walk by.

Some of the produce considered ordinary here is highly prized (and expensive) in the United States. One example is the zucchini blossom, an ingredient that's found on many high-end menus state-side. In Mexico City, it's a common ingredient used in a variety of dishes, and dozens of produce stands at la Merced carry beautiful, large bunches of these yellow blossoms, known here as *flor de calabaza*, for a fraction of what they cost in the U.S. Zucchini blossom quesadillas are available at many of the various fast food stands in the marketplace.

There is pride in the often backbreaking and sometimes tedious work of the market vendors. Many vegetable merchants put together soup bags, which are basically plastic bags of three to five chopped vegetables commonly found in Mexican soups. I meet a quiet young girl who sits for hours, patiently shelling peas for her father's soup bags. One by one, she pulls out each pea by hand, and then carefully arranges them in bags already filled with chopped carrots, onions and corn. When I am leaving the market later in the day, the girl is still there, plucking peas out of their shells. She smiles at me as I walk by.

THE FLAVORS of la Merced extend well beyond the 24,000 tons of fruits and vegetables that move through here every day. It is also home to hundreds of prepared food stands, selling a mind-boggling array of authentic Mexican street food.

My first snack break is at a food stall that looks especially busy. Between two benches piled with patrons, a woman stands over a hot, bowl-shaped griddle. She grabs some masa mixture and rolls it into a ball with both hands before

pressing it out into a long oval shape. She then slaps the tortilla down onto the searing-hot griddle. This tortilla is the basis of a *huarache*, so named because the tortilla is shaped like the sole of a shoe (“huarache” means “sandal” or “shoe”). The tortilla is then topped with your choice of meats, cheeses and shredded lettuce and salsa. I opt for just cheese and lettuce as I know this will be just one of several snacks I'll have at the

market. The huarache is warm, delicious and very spicy from the red-hot salsa. I pay my twenty-five cents (in pesos), wipe the sweat off my brow and head toward my next culinary adventure.

Though I don't have much of a sweet tooth, there's no denying the appeal of the vast variety of traditional Mexican sweets sold at the marketplace. Thick bricks of pecan pralines, hunks of *dulce de coco* (sweet clusters of candied



coconut), candied orange peel, and candied sweet potato are all popular here. I buy a hollowed-out lime stuffed with sweet coconut shreds, which tastes much like a Key lime pie without the graham cracker element. Some sweets, however, are downright intimidating. One stand offers what look like shiny, metallic pumpkins, which I realize are whole, candied squash. Even my local friend and translator is taken aback by the sight



of these black, goeey mounds.

Just as I step back from the scary pumpkins, a man carrying a basket of *churros* walks by. The smell of hot, fresh-fried cinnamon-laced *churros* sends my taste buds into a frenzy. Longer and crisper than ones I've had in the States, these Mexican donuts are light and airy without a trace of grease. For a mere ten pesos (about ninety-five cents), we are treated to a half-dozen of these wonderfully sweet treats.

Grocery items make up a large por-

tion of the prepared foods for sale.

Cheese is popular here, and generous samples are common from the well-meaning but aggressive vendors. You can taste everything from fresh *crema* and milky *queso fresco* to sharp *cotija* and mild *asadero* cheeses. Thick slabs of crunchy *chicharrón*, or fried pork belly, are stacked high under heat lamps and are usually eaten with fresh guacamole. If pork fat isn't up your alley, industrial-sized bags of imitation *chicharrónes* (made from wheat) are sold along with

How and When to Get There:

La Merced is open every day from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Some websites say the market is closed on Sundays, but I went on a Sunday so I know that's not true! The best way to get to La Merced is by taking the Metro, which is the subway in Mexico City. Get off at the Merced stop; the market entrance is directly in the subway station. If you are going by taxi, it may be best to ask the driver to take you to the Merced subway station. Walking to the market is not recommended, as the surrounding neighborhood can be unsafe.

What to Watch For:

When choosing a food stall for snacks or meals, check for cleanliness and organization. If you see unkempt or sloppy conditions, move on to another vendor. Stalls with lots of customers are obvious good choices. Basic rule? Use common sense.

When Sampling Food:

Be careful when sampling fruits or vegetables. Though some vendors use filtered water to wash their produce, many do not and it is impossible to tell the difference. Mexico City water is notoriously undrinkable, and eating produce that has been rinsed in unfiltered water can make you sick.

Other Tips

Take small bills and change. Most merchants don't have change for large bills. Learn a little Spanish before you go or go with someone who speaks the language. Many of the merchants do not speak any English.

Bring your own cloth or mesh bag if you plan to shop, or buy you can buy one at the market.

potato chips, cheese straws and fried onion-flavored crisps.

The most colorful and popular items at the market are the spices. Piles of jade oregano leaves, brick-red chile powder and earthy yellow cumin form Technicolor dunes on stark white tables. Dozens of varieties of hot and mild, fresh and dried chiles—the largest selection I've ever seen—are picked over and carefully selected by discriminating cus-

tomers. Most impressive are the heaps of black, brown and reddish *mole* pastes on display, completely exposed for proper inspection. Customers point to the paste they want, and the vendor, using what looks like a dough cutter, scoops up the desired amount and plops it into a plastic bag. From the rich texture and color of the pastes, I can only imagine what luscious creations will be made by the cooks who buy them.



IF A PIG'S HEAD severed from its body is something you'd rather not see, the *Supermercado de Carnes* is one you'll want to skip. It is here that whole hogs hang from gigantic meat hooks, bearing witness to bones and cartilage broken with a swoop of a butcher's knife. It is here that you'll find the inexpensive yet prized parts of animals that are the basis of so many traditional Mexican staples, like *menudo*. And it is



here that the pungent smell of raw fish can penetrate even the most tightly-pinched nostrils.

Mexicans generally embrace the “other” parts of animals, and it's apparent in the displays of brains, tongue and pig's feet that lie side-by-side on the display tables. There are wild turkeys and yellow-skinned chickens and fat ducks, many completely whole. Large bags filled with skin and giblets seem popular with the customers. The odor, ranging from fresh blood to rotting flesh, seems to go

unnoticed by the locals.

But in order to appreciate the *Supermercado de Carnes*, one must sample what wonders can be created from its seemingly unappealing offerings. Go back into the main market and find a food stand selling *tacos de barbacoa*, a taco typically made from the meat of a steamed cow, sheep or goat's head. Add a few dashes of hot sauce, take a bite, and gain insight into what Mexicans have known about the “weird parts” for many centuries: they're usually the best parts.