

# The Huasteca's Weekly Markets

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The Huasteca's weekly markets are the best places to appreciate the vast array of products available. The first way of classifying the markets is by size: the large ones, like the Tamazunchale market in San Luis Potosí, the Huejutla market in Hidalgo and the Tantoyuca and Chicontepepec markets in Veracruz, have more than 150 stalls. Medium-sized markets have between 50 and 150 stalls, like the Tepetzintla, Ixhuatlán and Zontecomatlán

markets are “foci” or “suns” in a revolving “solar system” because both large and small merchants go to them to acquire a series of products that they later sell in the medium-sized and small markets. With time, the medium-sized markets tend to grow, and the large ones tend to begin to set up every day instead of every week.

Regardless of their size, all the markets are part of the globalized capitalist system. Buyers and consumers do business in indigenous lan-

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markets in Veracruz; Xochiatipan and San Felipe Orizatlán in Hidalgo; and Aquismón in San Luis Potosí. Finally, the small markets have fewer than 50 stalls, like the Tancoco, Tantima and Ixcacoatitla markets in Veracruz, and Santa Cruz and Atlapexco in Hidalgo. As Julio de la Fuente, Alejandro Marroquín and Bronislaw Malinowski said in the 1940s, the large mar-

guages and Spanish, with traditional and modern products, combining magic and science, reciprocity and profit. Here, the customs of the past mingle with the events of the present in a process that balances and satisfies the needs of all generations.

#### A MERGER OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

In these markets, we find craft knowledge of old: palm hats from Tancoco, Veracruz; porcelain

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from Xililico, Hidalgo; saddlery, fiber products, hats and bags from Tantoyuca, Veracruz. Copper bells and vases from Tlahuelompa, Hidalgo rival for your attention with the different products from Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán. From Cuetzalan, Puebla, artisans bring napkin holders, dolls and wallet-shaped cigarette boxes. Smells and flavors from different places abound: the *zacahuil* or large meat tamales from Tepetzintla, San Sebastián, Chapopote or other parts of north-

These are all fruit of the land and sea that bring with them ancient knowledge, like that of the inhabitants of the Huasteca coasts, who, according to Friars Diego Durán and Alvarado Tezozómoc in *Relación de Huejutla* (An Account of Huejutla), in pre-Hispanic times preserved the shrimp, the river fish eggs or the fish with salt from Campeche.

Like in the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods, an important part of the tradition of mar-



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ern Veracruz; sausage and *cecina*, or dried, salted meat, from Tantima, Veracruz; cheese from Ahuatitla, Tecamate, Chontla and Santa María Ixcatepec, Veracruz; coffee from Ahuatitla, Hidalgo; dried shrimp from San Fernando, Tamaulipas or las Chacas (near Tampico Alto) and Tamiahua, Veracruz, which also sends salted fish and river fish eggs; pineapple from Poza Rica; *roatán* bananas from Álamo and Martínez de la Torre, Veracruz, or Tabasco; pork from Tlacolula, peanuts from Potrero del Llano, and lime from Tantoyuca (Xiloxúchil), all in northern Veracruz.

kets are the stalls of curative herbs. Pre-Hispanic *tianguis* indisputably sold medications. Several chroniclers tell us so. For example, in the tenth book of his *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain), Friar Bernardino de Sahagún wrote, “He who sells colors...also sells medical things, such as the tail of the animal called the *tlacuatzin*,” used to expel the baby in the birthing process. He also mentions that there were “many herbs and roots of different kinds” and all manner of specialists such as “those who

rub [patients'] heads with herbs called *xiuhquilit*, which are good for diseases of the head.”

Today, all kinds of herbs and remedies are spread out for sale on a mat: leaves of aromatic avocado, *palo de víbora*, *anonilla* (*Annona globiflora*), pigweed or Mexican tea, *hierbita vergonzosa* (*Mimosa albida*) and basil; plants purchased to cleanse or purge people attacked by evil air. But quartz is also sold, used by healers since the colonial period, and perhaps since pre-

the beloved, black to do harm. Before All Saints Day (November 1 and 2), the stalls selling these items are busier than the others. They sell candles to “light the way the dead take from whence they come and to guide them to where they’re going.” Pure wax candles are used for funerals. Tradition dictates that on December 24 and 31, people light candles, just as they do when they are in difficulties, threatened, for example, with a cyclone or a storm that endangers crops and the

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Hispanic times, to diagnose disease. The *piedra lumbre*, or burning stone, transparent like grains of salt, is useful for undoing witchcraft and for curing disease, “sweeping” or “cleansing.” Tobacco is also important in these rites and almost every market offers tobacco leaves, whose smoke allows healers to “read the disease.”

A wide variety of candles are available, used to protect people or to cure “bad wind” that causes headaches, or even to bewitch. Among the latter are those made of suet fashioned in the shape of a human being: white ones used to win over

community. It is said that “candles are the fountain of God and the saints,” that bring relief, and for that reason, they are used for all occasions. This is why they are sold throughout the year.

Of course, agricultural products deeply rooted in the indigenous culture, such as corn, beans, pumpkin seeds and tobacco, also can be found, as can products introduced early on by the conquistadors, like sugar cane, from which brown sugar and cane alcohol are extracted, products in much demand in the eighteenth century. Goods came to the markets, jostling each other for

room, from different latitudes: fruit like the *chico-zapote* or sapodilla, mamee, or tubers like the sweet potato and the yucca, or oranges, key limes, bananas, the *alberjón* or *arvejón* (peas) and *chipotle* or *chilpotle* chili peppers, the main wealth of the hot climes; or apples, pears, plums and peaches, the riches of the cold climes.

From ranches and communities come a rich variety of chili peppers: *auteco*, *pico de pájaro*,

indigenous for manufactured products and then sell to the markets.

Almost five centuries ago, many of these products were transported by *tamemes* or porters over a well-organized network of roads that linked up the different Huastec provinces with the Central Highlands, the Gulf Coast and even Oaxaca and the Mayan region. After the conquest, with the introduction of mules, muleteers would be the ones to link up the burgeoning colonial



With their products, personages, relations and different cultural manifestations, the Huasteca's weekly markets make it impossible for traditions and customs, like the *tianguis* itself, to be forgotten.

dry or *piquín*, and many more, which have been widely produced in the Huastec region since pre-Hispanic times. Condiments, herbs and plants like spearmint, pigweed, *chonacate* (onions), coriander, and other fruits like *pemuches* (*Erythrina*), chayote squash or vegetable pears, *jacubes* (a kind of cactus), nopal cactus leaves, limes, tamarind and ears of corn, or items used in rituals and ceremonies like copal, tobacco and alum. Also from ranches and communities come the pigs and chickens that *rancheadores* (a kind of intermediary) exchange with the in-

market. For more than four centuries, drovers continued to open up that network of roads, transporting goods to and fro from the coasts to the highlands all through the mountains.

Today, goods are moved by highway and local roads, on foot, on horseback or in motor vehicles; river traffic has practically ceased. Modernity has come to the markets. This can be seen in the large number of stalls that sell goods from far-off places and countries. The Orient, Europe and North America are present in the kitchen appliances, compact discs, cassette tapes,



tools and ornaments, among other items. In small and large markets alike, instead of birds of rich plumage like parrots and macaws, or richly decorated ceramics and carved conch shells, furs, jewels and the small copper hatchets traded among the different towns, or the wonderful textiles for which the Huastecs became so famous at the time of the conquest, today what we find are polyester dresses and fabric, clothing, articles made of plastic, hair ornaments, cosmetics, mirrors and cloth sandals, costume jewelry and a multitude of plastic or plaster dolls, and, in season, Christmas ornaments.

On the other hand, magical-religious products are in great demand, as are prayer books, images of saints the “El Señor del Retiro” (Our Lord of the Retreat) lotion, soap or spray, which, as the name suggests, is acquired to make anyone who wants to harm you think better of it. The pictures of “El Justo Juez” (The Just Judge) are good for averting accidents and fights. Saint Martin of Porres protects businesses and work, as well as warding off spells. The Child Saint of Atocha keeps sick children safe and gives the owner the strength to die well. Saint Francis of Assisi watches over animals and Saint Joseph is related to agriculture, water and medicine. A saint much in demand in these stalls is Saint Martin of Tours, the protector of merchants, and he can be acquired in the form of lotions, pictures and soaps.

The “atomizer of death” is purchased to do harm, while people always ask the “pyramid” for luck. The bright colors and variety of forms at first glance attract women’s vanity, but, what is actually being sold is protection, love and good luck with

their respective colors: red for love and money, yellow for protection and white for good luck.

#### A FINAL COMMENT

The Huasteca’s markets offer different goods that, regardless of their place of origin, are appropriate for the social subjects who combine and recreate them in what seems like a movement that involves physical and cultural needs. Thus, local products, both those of ancient tradition and those brought day to day from a myriad of places, are used and combined to make different dishes, to adorn offerings, to give the festive atmosphere color, rhythm and flavor. Local products do not clash with those from outside because the goods from the different traditions are open to being appropriated according to the great popular imagination, an imaginary that manages to include what seems alien. Each article sold in the market becomes necessary because it has or it acquires a meaning and the merchants know this. For that reason, year after year, they keep on selling them to perpetuate and recreate the many traditions like the festival of the dead.

Undoubtedly, with their products, personages, relations and different cultural manifestations, the Huasteca’s weekly markets are an institution that allow us to constantly renew our memories, and make it impossible for traditions and customs, like the *tianquis* itself, traditions that are part of our cultural heritage, to be forgotten. ■■■

