

Maxwell Street Market Guide, 2011-12

By David Hammond



Maxwell Street was the location for a thriving urban open-air market with roots in the late nineteenth century.

In the 1960's, I used to come down to the market with friends to hunt down old car parts. By that point, the market was in decline. I vaguely remember guys huddled around oil cans filled with burning scrap wood, card tables set out selling men's shirts and tools, and the unmistakable smell of Polish sausage and onions griddling up at Jim's Original, which once stood at the corner of Maxwell and Halsted.

Around the beginning of the twenty-first century, University Village went up and the Maxwell Street Market (MSM) went elsewhere.



The MSM moved to Canal in 1994 and to Desplaines in 2008. In the old market area, you can still see the pentimenti of old facades, though they've been razed or so totally renovated as to be unrecognizable by former denizens of this now upscale barrio. Although there are no longer bluesmen or many of the humble folks who once lived in this area, bronze statues of these former denizens suggest in a rather sad and coldly non-ironic way the heritage of this historic neighborhood.

Getting There

Today's MSM is now located on Desplaines, usually between Roosevelt on the south and Harrison on the north side. The MSM is open for business every Sunday, in any kind of weather, from around 7AM until around 3PM. If it's a beautiful day, it's usually good to arrive before 10AM because it's probably going to be crowded; after 2:00PM or so, food vendors sometimes start running low on products. On average, a walk around the market takes around 2 hours.

You can get there by CTA, car or bike.

CTA. Take the Orange or Green El train lines to Roosevelt. You can then walk about a mile west to Desplaines or take the #12 bus west (toward Central/Harrison) to Roosevelt and Jefferson. From there, walk less than one block west to Desplaines.

For a more "scenic route," take Pink or Green El train lines to Clinton; walk two streets west to Desplaines and then about a mile south, passing:

- **Haymarket memorial**, just south of Lake, commemorating the "riot" or "massacre" (depending on your political perspective) of 1886 when a bomb was thrown at a meeting of striking workers, killing police and civilians.
- **St. Patrick's Church**, 711 W. Monroe, Chicago's oldest church (go ahead, walk in); as you move past the church headed south, glance around to your right and you'll see Greektown across the expressway.
- **The Chicago Fire Academy**, 558 W. DeKoven, between Jefferson and Clinton, built at the location where O'Leary's cow is said (by subsequently discredited reporters) to have kicked over a lantern, starting the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Car. If you're Mapquesting, use the intersection of Roosevelt/Desplaines as your destination. We usually park in a metered spot on Clinton or Jefferson, but there are several lots, including one that seems decently priced on Clinton around 14th Street and one that's much closer at Polk and Jefferson that charges only \$8.00 for pretty much the whole day.

Bike. There are designated bike lanes on Roosevelt, Taylor, Halsted, Clinton and Canal. Kozy's at Desplaines and Polk offers several bicycle racks.

Meeting at the MSM Marker



If you're meeting friends at the market, a good place to convene is at the MSM marker at the northwest corner of Roosevelt and Desplaines. Our tour begins and ends at this intersection.

The MSM is divided into two aisles, one on the west and one on the east side, running the length of the market. The following guide assumes you'll move with the unwritten law of MSM flow: counter-clockwise. From the MSM Marker, walk across Desplaines to the east aisle and head north, toward The Loop. Wherever the market seems to end (which varies on any given Sunday), make a U turn and then start back south along the west aisle.

Although my main interest at the market is gustatory, I have found a lot of "deals" here, and you may very well discover some stuff you need at low prices...especially if what you need are socks or tools or slightly off-center notions. (I've bought several pairs of pre-worn blue jeans for 3 bucks apiece: a very good deal).

One of the charms of the market is that despite new city regulations regarding its operation, it's still very much a changing environment, so some of the vendors listed on the following pages might very well not be there the day you visit. However, we've tried to list places that are, more often than not, there almost every Sunday.

Blue Van Churros -- *Headed north from Roosevelt/Desplaines*

You've seen churros before – the long pastry tubes usually stored in plexiglass cases. As with tortillas, once you've had a fresh churro, it's going to be hard to go back to the ones sitting sadly for hours in their plastic sarcophagi. I'd recommend you wait until the end of your tour to buy your churros, as they're rather dessert-like. You can have them filled with chocolate, vanilla or strawberry.



You can buy churros elsewhere in the market, but before buying churros anywhere, peek in, see if they're making them fresh, and if they're not, don't buy.

The line in the photo suggests that this place delivers the goods.

This may be one of the few “food trucks” in Chicago that’s actually allowed to prepare food on the truck itself; as of this writing, local regulations require that food sold from trucks in Chicago must be prepared in a licensed commercial kitchen and sold prepackaged. How does this truck get around that rule? It’s another Maxwell Street mystery.

Viva Mexico Restaurant



A relatively new stand, Viva Mexico represents a not entirely though certainly understandable trend at the market: vendors offering a wide menu rather than specializing in one or two items.

We found the fried plantain to be an excellent “foundation” food: simple, not very spicy, and providing a solid start for a morning of eating.



The plantain is starchier and firmer than a regular banana, so it holds up to griddling. If you sample it, make sure you have it drizzled in condensed milk – the sweet creaminess is very complementary to the caramelized fruit.

Tacos D.F.



Tacos D.F. (Distrito Federal, Mexico City) is a small, friendly little tent, and I haven't been able to quite determine in what ways these tacos are distinctively typical of those made in the style of Mexico City (the nice man behind the grill explained they're served on tortillas, which doesn't really help).

There are a few less usual items here that are worth tasting, particularly if you've not had them before:

- **Suadero:** beef brisket, served in a taco.
- **Cabeza:** head, including meaty cheeks.
- **Cecina:** common in northern Mexico, this beef has been dried to preserve and concentrate flavor; then it's rehydrated and griddled.

Whatever you select here, make sure you pile on some of the cabbage/tomato/lime salsa that's available in big containers on each table.

Birrieria La Tapatia



On a cold morning, a spicy cup of birria (meat-based broth), with raw onions and cilantro, is an excellent way to create a warming fire in the belly. At the bottom of this cup was an inch or so of very tender, tasty beef. For added capsaicin heat, there are plastic containers of chiles arboles on the tables.



Tamales Oaxaqueños

At this stand, you'll find tamales in the style of Oaxaca, a state in Mexico known for much deliciousness (e.g., the legendary Seven Moles of Oaxaca).



I deeply admire the rectangular Oaxacan tamales, filled with chicken, steamed in a banana leaf, which adds a slightly acidic artichoke tang, and splashed with salsa verde and crema. You can also get the more familiar cylindrical tamales filled with pork and red sauce, as well as sweet tamales, which are colored and flavored with strawberry. Recently, these good people have expanded their menu to include tacos dorados (fried) of potatoes and chicken, which I'm sure are fine, but you can get tacos at many places at the MSM, and the real allure at this stand is the eponymous tamale.

No one I've taken to the MSM to have these tamales Oaxaqueños has failed to rave about them.

El Huarache Chilango

At their old Canal St. location, the stand with the sign “Ricos Huarachos Estilo D.F.” did a booming business – big place, always crowded, long lines.



A huarache (literally, “slipper”) is a flat corn meal disk, with an inner layer of black beans, griddled and then topped with meat or cheese. I usually go with the steak “bandera,” so called because the green salsa, white cheese and red salsa reflects the Mexican flag. Priced around \$4.50, these huaraches are best sampled earlier in the day as they tend to sit in grease toward the end of the day.

The newly dubbed El Huarache Chilango, run by the same people as were at the old location, is in significantly smaller quarters. “Chilango” is slang for a person who hails from Mexico City, D.F.



If you're not in the mood for fried stuff, consider seafood. The seafood cocktail is a little pricey (around \$7), but the shrimp consommé (prepared, no doubt, from all the shrimp shells left over from making the cocktails) is very tasty. Make sure to have servers sprinkle the soup with cilantro and onion. Only \$1.50 – a genuine MSM bargain.



Champurado – a corn-based drink lightly flavored with chocolate, sugar, cinnamon and vanilla, enjoyed in the Americas for centuries – is sold all over the market in big thermos containers. In the following picture, there's also atole with pineapple, avena (thin oatmeal with cinnamon, served hot), and rice with milk.



Arroyos Tacos

This stand has been around for a while (first picture below is from their old Canal street location, but it looks the same now). I like Arroyos' stand because it usually smells good...and it offers a few items that you will have a hard time finding anywhere else in the city.



One menu selection I've not seen in other Chicago Mexican restaurants is buche, pig esophagus and/or stomach. The man behind the counter told me it was stomach, but the chunks of dark meat in there suggested it could have included esophagus and perhaps other organ meats (some pieces looked a little like pancreas). The meat is very mild, and the texture smooth and almost creamy. The chunks of onion and cilantro stem add a pleasant crunch, and the sauce (which could use a little more heat; add accordingly) had good flavor without a hint of the deep funk sometimes associated with gut meat.



Arroyos' menu also lists a few other items you might consider:

- **Montalayo:** a sheep sausage, slightly spicy.
- **Chicharron:** saucy pig skin, which is very tasty, though you might want to share one taco as this dish presents a lot of fatty meat for one person to eat...but it is way worth having.
- **Consommé de chivo:** this light, goat-based broth may have been created in the process of preparing birria, which is traditionally made of goat, steamed so as to collect juices, covered with some kind of chili paste and then roasted. Note that some stands advertising birria are not serving goat but rather beef, which can be tasty, too, though I prefer to eat the traditional animal in this dish.

Street Stands All Along the Way

MSM produce stands offer some interesting and low-cost opportunities to buy and experiment with sometimes unfamiliar fruits and vegetables. You'll see many vendors selling the bright magenta hibiscus leaf that can be used to make a tea or the traditional sweet drink, agua de Jamaica. In the photo below, behind the hibiscus leaf are tamarind pods, which contain a sweet, sticky paste that kids like to chew.



The young lady (below) is selecting nopales (paddles from the prickly pear cactus), which are peeled and lightly steamed for a salad or sautéed and used to top meat or fish dishes. Right above the nopales are Mexican guavas; to the right of the guavas are mamey (a fruit of thick, dense meat) and peppers (you will find most varieties of chilies at the market, fresh and dried and usually quite inexpensive).



This man is selling fresh huauzontle, a Mexican vegetable that's been around for centuries. This taste is reminiscent of spinach or broccoli (and like broccoli, it consists of tight clusters of flower-like buds attached to a somewhat fibrous stalk). You can sometimes find huauzontle being served at the market: a stalk is usually rolled in an egg mixture and griddled and sometimes served with Mexican cheese.



If you need to use a restroom, the least frequented (thus cleanest) porta-potties are on the north end of the market, southwest corner of Desplaines and Vernon.

When you reach the northern end of the eastern aisle, take a left and head south along the western aisle (actual end point of the market varies).

No Name Stand, Maybe My Favorite -- *Headed south from Harrison and Desplaines*

I'm very fond of this little tamale stand with no name. It was located in a similarly out-of-the-way spot at the old MSM on Canal Street, and it is staffed by a friendly family. The tamales are modest, but flavorful, never failing to satisfy and only a buck.



Thermos tamales are usually pretty cheap – sometimes as low as two for a buck (dos por \$1) – though try to get them earlier in the day before the masa gelatinizes and gets all rubbery.

Rubi's and Manolo's

Rubi's and Manolo's (the first owned by a man and the second by wom man) are two classic MSM stands. At the Canal St. incarnation of the MSM, these two stands were located side-by-side; now, they're separated by a few other stands but they're still within 20 yards of one another.



Don't be fooled by the slick look of this menu, this place serves up some good stuff, much enhanced with fresh tortillas:



As with churros, once you've had fresh tortillas, you'll have a hard time ever eating store-bought versions ever again. Fresh tortillas have the taste of recently ground corn; they're moist and soft, absorbing the sauces ladled upon them while retaining the flexibility to be held tightly without splitting.

Rubi's frequently has a spit of seasoned meat rolling vertically in front of a charcoal fire. From this spit, slices are cut for tacos al pastor – if the spit is turning, and the meat is caramelizing, ask that your taco be made of meat cut directly from the spit.

Rubi's serves tacos with some ingredients not usually found at your standard brick and mortar taqueria:

- **Nopales:** cactus leaf, mentioned above.
- **Huitlacoche:** a blue-toned fungus that grows on corn; it has been enjoyed on this continent since the days of the Maya and Aztec. Midwestern farmers called it “corn smut” and tried to eradicate it before they realized there was a market for this fungus, which is very mild, creamy, with an earthy, mushroom taste.
- **Flor de calabasa:** zucchini flower, usually griddled along with onions; cheese is frequently drizzled on top; the taco is very light and tasty and just might be vegetarian (hard to say what it was fried in).

In the spirit of always trying to sample foods I've never had before, I recently bought a taco de costilla salsa verde from Rubi's. Flavor was excellent – tangy sauce balancing fatty rib meat – but it was way harder to eat than a pork chop sandwich (an old school MSM favorite): there were three rib bones hidden beneath sauce, cilantro and onion, so basically one must chew tasty bones and eat saucy taco separately, which seems kind of crazy, but I'm glad I tried it.



Manolo's was first brought to my attention in an article Rick Bayless (Topolobampo, Frontera Grill, Xoco) wrote for *Saveur* around the turn of the century.

Manolo's is renowned for pork in excellent green or red mole. The stand also features the legendary Masa Madonna, who is sometimes spotted, eyes downcast, focused, Olmec stern, committed to the corn paste pressed beneath her fingertips, turning out handcrafted tortillas that may make you weep.



"The Best King of Tacos," sez Time Out Chicago magazine. You've got to admit the place has range, but most importantly: toda la tortilla es hecho a mano.

During warmer months, you can purchase elotes, corn-on-the-cob grilled over charcoal until the kernels get spotty here and there with caramelized goodness, then topped with a choice of condiments. I go “con todos,” and get parmesan-like cheese sprinkles, squirt of lime, chili and crema (or mayo, whatever they have). It’s a rich yet simple street grunt, usually pretty cheap, eaten on a stick all over MSM and Mexico City.



Notice on the grill with the elotes are tamales caseros (closed or “blind” tamales), which contain simply corn meal, kind of sweet, and to my taste needing a blast of salsa to perk them up. Of course, if you have kids in tow, this is a safe bet for a non-aggressive, non-threatening snack.

Taqueria la Flor de Mexico



This stand, which I do not believe had a presence at the Canal St. MSM, offers a range of items, and their operation is tight: you can usually order and move on without a lengthy wait. Here you'll find a few items worthy of note:

- **Tinga:** a stewed and shredded meat (usually chicken), sometimes quite mild.
- **Al Pastor:** marinated pork meat, cooked on a spit "shepherd-style." The fatty, spicy juice percolates through the meat as it cooks, resulting in a crispy deliciousness (before you order, make sure the meat on the spit is nice and toasty looking on the outside – if the fire is out around the spit, you'll probably get re-griddled al pastor meat, which isn't bad but is not optimal).
- **Flor de calabaza:** zucchini flower, usually mixed with some of the squash itself, served in a quesadilla.

The Green House

The Green House is an old standby at the market, and it's a fairly large place so it's a good location to stop and sit if you're tired of walking and noshing. On many weekends, The Green House is big enough to straddle the center aisle, with access from either east or west side aisles.



Green House menu items of note:

- **Tortas ahogadas:** literally, a “drowned sandwich,” a French-type roll (a holdover from France’s colonization of Mexico), filled with meat (usually pork, a gift of the Spanish) soaking in a tomato broth (indigenous America’s contribution), somewhat piquant, sprinkled with pickled onions, a delicious mess to eat. This sandwich is generally associated with Jalisco. At this stand, these sandwiches may be listed as “Pambazos.”
- **Pozole:** a hominy soup (usually of chicken or pork) that is traditionally sold on weekends at some Mexican restaurants. Menudo is a variant of this weekend soup, and it’s made with tripe (stomach) and is allegedly a good cure for hangovers (not for nothing this soup is big on Sunday mornings). A red version of this soup is typical of Jalisco, the green version is more common in Guerrero.

At The Green House and many other stands along the route, you will see horchata advertised: this cool, sweet, rice-based drink provides very good balance to spicy food. You’ll also see big plastic containers of fruit flavored “aguas frescas,” and these are a very pleasant alternative to soft drinks and a great deal (about \$1.50 for 20 ounces or so). However, if you go for the soft drinks, consider paying a little extra for a Mexican Coke. This version of America’s favorite drink, bottled in Mexico, contains real sugar rather than high fructose corn syrup (taste the difference: cleaner and lighter on the tongue). Caveat emptor: word on the street is that some Mexican coke is no longer using pure sugar, so check the label before you buy.

Pupusas y Tamales Mama Lula



If you have children along for this tour, and they haven't eaten much yet, here is where you'll find kid-friendly and authentic pupusas from El Salvador. Pupusas are flat pancakes of finely ground cornmeal, stuffed with cheese (sausage, frijoles or what-have-you) and griddled. Condiments include a type of sauerkraut of cabbage, carrot and vinegar.



It sometimes takes a while for the nice ladies to griddle up your pupusas, but they're really good and well worth the wait.

Eye Ball Taco Stand

There are foods that seem odd to Western eyes at many ethnic markets, and MSM's contender for Oddest Damn Edible is the eye ball taco at this little stand that has no obvious name.



Although it seems a bad idea to eat nerve tissue from the head (unless you've exhausted all other routes to Creutzfeld-Jakob), I do applaud a vendor that's supports the consumption of animals from head to tail:

- **Machitos:** intestine, though this word sometimes refers to other types of organ meat
- **Sesos:** brains
- **Cachete:** cheeks

My support, however, seems not enough to fill the chairs at this place, which serves a discriminating and seemingly limited audience (though that can change at a flash: lines beget lines, and sometimes it seems people line up for a stand just because others are, so, hey, it must be good, right?)

I had an eyeball taco once. It was terrible, though I earned bragging rights, which give me no pleasure at all to exercise.

Before you go home, consider some produce from the fruit vendors located on Taylor and Desplaines or right near the end/beginning of this tour, next to the Blue Van Churros. You can buy entire flats of berries and other fruits for single digits, then pull your car along Roosevelt near Desplaines and load up – actually, on second thought, though MSM is no longer regularly referred to as The Cheat You Fair, you can never be too careful: better to pick out what you want, pull up your car, THEN pay and load up.

Jim's Original

Strangely and sadly, one food you will find almost absent from the current MSM is the legendary Maxwell Street Polish (there's sometimes a small stand selling them, but for the most part they've pretty much disappeared from the market). The absence of this signature sausage is symbolic of how this market has changed over the years.

Jim's Original opened over 70 years ago, and it's credited (on their website) with inventing the Maxwell Street Polish: griddled onions and kielbasa with mustard on a bun. The first location of Jim's was at the corner of Maxwell and Halsted, but with the University of Illinois's expansion and the gentrification of the area, Jim's moved nearby to 1250 S. Union.



Jim's is a short walk (under a quarter mile) from Roosevelt and Desplaines: just head west over the Dan Ryan expressway, and turn south (left) just past the expressway on Union; look for the bright yellow buildings (one of these yellow buildings is Jim's and the other is Maxwell Street Express – these stands have been undergoing a Hatfield-McCoy type conflict for some time now).

If you do visit Jim's Original, you might as well walk a little farther south and west to take a look at the corner where this historic urban market began: go south about a block to Maxwell Street and take a right for another block or so; where once stood Jim's is now a Jamba Juice. Weep. Move on.

Print Resources

Berkow, Ira, Maxwell Street, Survival in a Bazaar. Doubleday & Co., 1977,

Grove, Lori; and Kamedulski, Laura, Chicago's Maxwell Street. Arcadia Publishing, 2002,

Youtube clips

There are some incredible clips of old Maxwell Street on Youtube; here are some of my favorites, but you can just search “Maxwell” and you’ll come up with loads more.

Robert Nighthawk and some of the dirtiest dancing ever:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oypAbJj-fEs>

Vintage footage featuring the legendary Chicken Man:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8RZkWYpxPU&feature=fvw>

Carrie Robinson, singing and dancing:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQP4Unmr2aA&feature=related>

Gorilla Gourmet

Years ago, Mike “Sky Full of Bacon” Gebert and I produced a video about a group of food enthusiasts (at the time, we were Chowhounds) who toured the MSM on Canal St in search of authentic deliciousness. You can still find the video online, and it’s free:

<http://www.motionbox.com/playlist/show/a09fdab01c1b28>

Help Keep This Guide Up to Date

I’m always interested in hearing about the new kinds of chow that periodically pop up along at the Maxwell Street Market. If you eat something there that you think is worthy of note, shot me an email: David@DCHammond.com.