

# Chiles, Markets, and the Liveliness of the City

THE MONTH OF AUGUST MARKS the peak of *chiles en nogada* season in Puebla, Mexico. These are stuffed *poblano chiles* bathed in a walnut sauce and sprinkled with pomegranate seeds and parsley leaves. This wonderfully attractive dish mirrors the colors of the country's flag, which makes it one of the most symbolic dishes in Mexican cuisine.<sup>1</sup> Many of its modern ingredients are locally grown and seasonal (*lechera* pear, *panochera* apple, *criollo* peach, pomegranate, *castilla* walnut, and the *chile poblano criollo*).<sup>2</sup> The time-consuming task of peeling walnuts' thin skin for the sauce as well as gathering all the ingredients can discourage people from preparing *chiles en nogada* at home; they instead eat them in restaurants.<sup>3</sup> Others attend fairs where the dish is sold and a prize is awarded to the best chile maker.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, not everyone can afford to travel to fairs, to cook, or to pay for this laborious dish. But two years ago, a group of street and market vendors, members of the forty-six-year-old Popular Union of Street Vendors—28 de Octubre (UPVA), began organizing a free “*chiles en nogada* fair-degustation” at one of the city's markets, the Hidalgo.

This event and other activities organized by UPVA vendors exemplify what Krishnendu Ray has invited us to rethink: marketplaces “as social infrastructure rather than as mere sites of capital accumulation, where people engage across cultural and natural categories, sometimes circumventing the logic of capital.” The Mercado Hidalgo and several others where UPVA sellers work show us markets' many possibilities and their potential as sites of urban democratization and liveliness.

Since 1973, the members of the UPVA have been fighting for their right to make a living on the streets and markets of Puebla. This struggle became increasingly difficult after Puebla's downtown became a UNESCO–World Heritage site in 1987, and city officials continue to remove street vendors from some of the most commercially attractive locations. As part of their fight, the UPVA was able to secure spaces in different markets across the city, one of which is the Mercado Hidalgo where the *chiles en nogada* event takes place. Against all odds,

the Hidalgo market became the political stronghold of the organization (where meetings and assemblies take place) and a space where its members continue to sell and make a living. While it is mostly a food market (fruits, grains, vegetables, meats, cheese, tortillas, and prepared food), customers also find clothes, flowers, shoes, and religious objects, among others.<sup>5</sup>

UPVA members have used the market for other purposes and their actions have contributed to the energy and democratization of part of the city. The Hidalgo and smaller markets also offer social and political events for their clientele and the communities around them. These activities include free haircuts for back-to-school children, events with Ayotzinapa parents in search of their missing forty-three children, and a feminist self-defense workshop for the modest cost of fifty pesos (2.5 USD).

UPVA vendors have been militant because of their bottom-up organizing and their political independence from political parties. These characteristics, however, have prompted political elites to try to eliminate the market and the union through a number of strategies. City officials and planners, for instance, have not protected the market from the fierce competition caused by the presence of large supermarkets. Thanks to poor urban and commercial planning, the Hidalgo market alone is surrounded by a Bodega Aurrerá (owned by Walmart but retaining its original name) and a Soriana Híper (a Mexican-owned supermarket) located 400 and 500 meters away respectively.

But vendors continue their struggle and have contributed to the liveliness of the city (or at least of this part of the city) by creating free community-oriented activities in the markets. In the case of the *chiles en nogada* fair and degustation, UPVA members cooked collectively, not so much to teach how to cook the chiles, but to encourage people to prepare the dish conveniently and inexpensively, and to buy all the ingredients at the market.<sup>6</sup> This year, at the opening of the fair, UPVA members prepared approximately seven hundred chiles (women doing most of the cooking) in the market's *plaza cívica*.<sup>7</sup> Vendors set up tables to chop the fruit, to grill and peel

the *poblano chiles*, and used *cazos* (large pots) on top of *anafres* (mobile charcoal stoves) to fry them and cook the stuffing. While cooking, UPVA members socialized with one another, breaking the monotony of their everyday work routines. A band opened the event, and organizers claimed that the music was a “good way to get rid of the stress and do a bit of dancing.”<sup>8</sup> Vendors displayed posters with photographs and descriptions of each of the chiles’ ingredients and their nutritional value.

Unlike other fairs, this one was not intended to sell the dish or to compete for a prize; the *chiles en nogada* were given free of charge to clients and friends to *degustar*, which means to taste and to enjoy. This *degustación* represents the “democratization of taste,” about which Ray talks. This happened at the market and was intended for a mainly working-class clientele, which is not often associated with tasting.

UPVA sellers also demonstrated that *chiles en nogada* do not have to be expensive. The organizers point out that customers who purchase all the ingredients at the Hidalgo—or at any other UPVA-run markets—can save a good deal of money. Each *chile en nogada* costs between 27 and 30 pesos (1.37 and 1.50 USD), including the oil and charcoal for the *anafre*. This contrasts significantly to the prices charged by established restaurants, which range from 140 to 700 pesos per chile (7 to 35.5 USD).

The *chiles en nogada* fair-tasting teaches us that “good food” can “be congruent with good livelihoods for poor people and a lively city.” *Chiles en nogada* are not street food but these vendors are making it accessible to all. It is an example of an inclusive project where vendors share an attractive dish, inviting people to appreciate it, to taste it, and to leave behind the stress of everyday life.


Finally, Ray is interested in studying markets “as social infrastructure of how democracy is built through everyday negotiations and engagement with difference.” As my book *Street Democracy* argues, UPVA vendors have been fighting for democracy since 1973, and they continue to struggle. These vendors see the streets and markets as democratic spaces. In this sense, Ray is right to include marketplaces as part of the social infrastructure that is needed for the construction of democratic societies. For this purpose, vendors have relied on old-time supporters and allies across class lines. One last example of this effort is the UPVA’s “Science at the Market,” an activity that combines science with food. People from Puebla’s Autonomous University (whose students have supported the organization for decades) and the National Institute of Astrophysics, Optics, and Electronics (INAOE) teach science to children for a few hours at several of the UPVA markets. In the middle of the

2018 poster that advertised this free event stands a typical wooden fruit box filled with colorful vegetables and fruits. Saturn sits next to a tomato, a chemistry lab glass stands behind a yellow pepper, an astronaut floats on top of the box, and two kids with a telescope look at space where planets and satellites go around the box. This year, INAOE scholars taught kids about the periodic table of elements. Once again wooden fruit boxes were used to build a large periodic table. Each fruit box represented a chemical element, and instructors related these elements to common objects used at the market or at home. “Science at the Market” demonstrates that these markets are much more than commercial spaces for the working class. They are sites of learning and community exchange, where an assortment of people continue to mingle.

## Conclusion

I have mainly referred to the Mercado Hidalgo in Puebla where vendors, clients, political activists, and university members come together for both economic and noneconomic reasons. Together they try to build bridges, making the marketplace, as Ray suggests, part of the social infrastructure of the Global South.

But the Mercado Hidalgo and other UPVA markets only represent a small fraction of the commercial activities taking place in Puebla. In short, they are not completely representative of what is happening in the rest of the city. In the southern part, for a radically different example, new neighborhoods and high-end commercial areas have been developed (in former *ejidos* or community-owned lands). Neighborhoods consist of gated communities, with “clusters,” and apartments in architecturally modern buildings, which are surrounded by American-like shopping malls, gyms, luxury car dealerships, and large supermarkets. The working class only accesses these areas by using public transportation. And they only go there to labor for the elite.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Puebla’s upper class uses their own vehicles to move around. Some women drive large vans, are accompanied by their maids in their uniforms to grocery shop at fancy supermarkets like City Market or La Comer; others meet friends at the exclusive restaurants and coffee shops while nannies oversee their toddlers. The difference between markets and high-end shopping areas is about inclusivity versus exclusivity. Markets welcome and invite many kinds of people who continue to interact. The high-end supermarkets offer expensive products that working-class people cannot afford. What we see in Puebla is precisely what Ray (referring to Harvey) points to as “the strange collision between neoliberalism and democratization.”

The *chiles en nogada* fair and degustation and “Science at the Market” show us that markets not only represent vendors’ achievements in building material and culinary infrastructures; these organized sellers have been able to contribute to the liveliness of the city and to the democratic ways that Krishnendu Ray so forcefully addresses. 

#### NOTES

1. For a discussion of *chiles rellenos* see Adolfo Castañón, “Tránsito de la cocina Mexicana en la historia. Cinco estaciones gastronómicas: Mole, pozole, tamal, tortilla y chile relleno,” *Foro Hispánico: Revista hispánica de Flandes y Holanda* 39 (2010): 45–46. For a culinary chat (*charla culinaria*), a recipe, and the meanings of *chiles en nogada* see Meredith Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican-American Women* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2006), 127–29.
2. Like most dishes, its ingredients have changed over time. According to Jeffrey Pilcher, *chiles en nogada* originated in the colonial period, but the dish was popularized after independence and, in some cookbooks, it was erroneously credited to Agustín de Iturbide. Jeffrey Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 33, 134. The sale of *chile ancho* (dried poblano chile) and other kinds of raw chiles has been a lucrative activity since Puebla’s colonial period. For a fascinating account of unlikely chile sellers see Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva, “From Chains to Chiles: An Elite Afro-Indigenous Couple in Colonial Mexico, 1641–1688,” *Ethnohistory* 62, no. 2 (April 2015): 361–84.
3. Some savvy producers from Santa Rita Tlahuapan, Puebla, now sell peeled *castilla* walnuts ready to use for the *nogada* sauce at Mexico City’s La Merced market and directly to the capital’s restaurants. Naxeai Luna et al., “Rentabilidad y competitividad del cultivo de nuez de Castilla en Sierra Nevada-Puebla,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Agrícolas* 7, no. 7 (September–November 2016): 1632.
4. The most famous of the fairs takes place in San Andrés Calpan, a town not far from the Popocatepetl volcano where some of the ingredients are grown. Redacción, “Llega a Puebla la Feria de Chiles en Nogada en San Andrés Calpan 2019,” *El Universal*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/menu/llega-puebla-la-feria-de-chiles-en-nogada-en-san-andres-calpan-2019> (accessed November 6, 2019).
5. For a history of this street and market vendor union, see Sandra C. Mendiola García, *Street Democracy: Vendors, Violence, and Public Space in Late Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).
6. Customers can buy the ingredients in bulk or in small quantities. UPVA members also seek to renew a relationship with Puebla’s producers who try to place their products at good prices, which benefits producers, sellers, and consumers. Event organizers want to make sure that the products found in their markets are of good quality. Noticampiña, “28 de Octubre Inaugura Temporada de Chiles en Nogada en Mercado Hidalgo,” *La Campiña*, August 14, 2019, [https://revistalacampiña.mx/2019/08/14/28-de-octubre-iniciaventa-de-productos-en-mercado-hidalgo-para-los-chiles-en-nogada/?fbclid=IwARumWvixNspAioWOB\\_eaV49gVbpodZMzGbVOCm5ofGgOgpIVjfofh1OWYQ](https://revistalacampiña.mx/2019/08/14/28-de-octubre-iniciaventa-de-productos-en-mercado-hidalgo-para-los-chiles-en-nogada/?fbclid=IwARumWvixNspAioWOB_eaV49gVbpodZMzGbVOCm5ofGgOgpIVjfofh1OWYQ) (accessed September 19, 2019).
7. This is an open-air space covered with a large plastic roof where UPVA members organize social and political events.
8. Mercadeando, video, August 14–15, 2019, UPVA Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/UPVA-28-De-October-454780724595823/](http://www.facebook.com/UPVA-28-De-October-454780724595823/); [www.facebook.com/mercadeando28octubre/videos/338846126996365/UzpfSTQ1NDc4MDcyNDU5NTgyMzoyOTcyMDQ0NTMyODY5NDE3/](https://www.facebook.com/mercadeando28octubre/videos/338846126996365/UzpfSTQ1NDc4MDcyNDU5NTgyMzoyOTcyMDQ0NTMyODY5NDE3/).
9. For a discussion of the social and economic contradictions of this part of Puebla, see Lizeth Mejorada, “Angelópolis: El suicidio de la ciudad,” *Manatí*, August 2019, [https://manati.mx/2019/08/16/angelopolis-el-suicidio-de-la-ciudad/?fbclid=IwAR1oTKo92oham4-Mw7CtXiK9LpCXij28156D\\_cBPigWepH5qHZcc6xij6Yo](https://manati.mx/2019/08/16/angelopolis-el-suicidio-de-la-ciudad/?fbclid=IwAR1oTKo92oham4-Mw7CtXiK9LpCXij28156D_cBPigWepH5qHZcc6xij6Yo) (accessed November 6, 2019). For an analysis of the origins of gentrification in Puebla, see Gareth Jones, “Gentrification, Neoliberalism and Loss in Puebla, Mexico,” in *Global Gentrifications: Uneven Development and Displacement*, edited by Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin, and Ernesto López-Morales (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2015): 265–284.