

The West Side Market: A Kaleidoscope of Cleveland's Cultural History

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The West Side Market is the stage upon which is played out the drama of the constantly evolving multi-cultural history of the greater Cleveland community. The great moments of world history can be traced vividly within the waves of immigrants arriving here, in the Market: the Irish Potato Famine; the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the Russian Revolution. The Market House becomes the place where personal dramas can be witnessed, where ethnic life becomes a cacophony of sounds and tastes and smells.

The history of the West Side Market site traces the trail through the development of the Western Reserve and the greater Cleveland community through the 19th and 20th centuries.

Informal oral history "portraits" of classic Market vendors will be presented through excerpts and anecdotal commentary. Meet this tribe of unique individuals, illuminated through their personal stories of ethnic traditions, harsh immigration, family struggles and exotic offerings. Hear the tales of family survival, of the entrepreneurial spirit, of spunky independence. Appreciate the guarding of traditions and nurturing of small delicacies that enhance the strong flavor of Cleveland's remarkable global community.

Introduction

"To Market/To Market" an old-fashioned family story

Like the bald eagle, the great urban market has become an endangered species in the American landscape, chased from its natural habitat by our advancing mechanized society. But, happily, there are the few survivors, and in these cool, computered times there still exists a Market place where real people push and shove, They yell and laugh and care about each other. They try to give each other what they need: the time of day, the touch of hands, something for their money. The sign outside reads: WEST SIDE MARKET. Come by yourself, you're not alone. Bring the kids, they don't know what it's like in here. Bring Grandma, the old-timers were kids once in this place.

Come on inside, discover for yourself why people hang around here, won't let this bustling Market close. Maybe it's the seduction of such sour and sweet smells. Sauerkraut by the barrel, sausage by the yard; the acid whiff of sheep's milk cheese, the stabbing scent of candied ginger send you reeling passionately, trying to push closer. The closeness of the place is part of what you love. It doesn't matter what you want—you'll find it here.

Generations of fathers and sons and mothers and daughters have stood guard over this Market with their work ethic, their toughness, their view of the world and especially their sense of belonging. These vendors are not all nice guys. Some drink too much, some slip you rotten apples. But, they greet you by your name! You are expected here. You arrive, eager for the give and take, the good-natured jostling. And every Market day becomes a holiday.

To find the West Side Market, look for the clock tower. Thrusting above the urban landscape like a lighthouse out of the water, the tower rises almost 150 feet from the sidewalk to hover over the vaulted roof of the Markethouse. The covered arcades of outdoor stalls run along the north flank of the enormous building, then take a right turn to frame the activity of the loading docks. Inside and outside, nearly 200 stands are crammed with every imaginable edible.

The tower stands as an audacious landmark, exclaiming the importance of the public Markethouse. Elegant hemingboned brickwork decorates the shaft beneath the clock; a copper dome tops off the beacon which has guided devout generations to the Markethouse.

From the beginning, this was a market site, long before the building was established. Paths hacked across the uncharted Western Reserve intersected here on the river bank. Pioneer farmers dragged slaughtered carcasses to trade, staining with commerce this spot in the wilderness. Land was portioned out, people settled. Paths becoming lanes, becoming streets—laid out, erased, redrawn. For over 200 years the Market Square has been held safe—documented first in handwritten family deeds, then notarized in civic documents.

Just below the clock a narrow ledge girds the great square tower. From that precarious aerie you get the view across the Cuyahoga River to the skyline of downtown Cleveland. The great market place is tied to the heart of the city by a firework of bridges spanning the Cuyahoga River Valley below. Looking out to that grim industrial valley you learn what made nineteenth century Cleveland a lure for countless immigrants seeking the new chance. The river and the great lake combine in the ideal setting

for the mills, factories and foundries, pulling hordes of hope-filled works across the oceans, as they answered the siren's sweet call to a better life.

The word went out in every tongue: Come, build your new life here. But the new life had to be seasoned with something of the old. Please, where can I find oregano, juniper berries, the garlic sausage I need to hold my family together? These comestibles are unknown here? Step forward, sausage maker, step forward, baker, step forward, old woman holding herbs in your knotted kerchief. Grind the spiced pork, knead the hefty black bread, plant the precious seed. To market, to market. Soon it will be found here.

Today, this Market place is completely out of sync with modern life. Don't these vendors know their lifestyle is obsolete? Who ever heard of someone getting up at three o'clock on a dank morning to bid on the choicest melons? The son doing the job because the old man can't load the truck anymore. No air-conditioning, never a vacation, not once in a whole lifetime. Nothing packaged in advance. The custom cutting, the weighing, wrapping the tying the parcel with string!

It gradually becomes clear that the West Side Market has its own clock: everyone in it is living within a time warp. The clock in the tower looms large. It sings out the forgotten time, protecting against change. Sheltered under the glinting dome, its four faces caressed by huge bronze hands, the clock in its tower marks defiance: the folks in here cheerfully choose to ignore the humming, humorless world outside.

They invite you to linger long enough to hear some of their stories, these families who think they can go right on ticking to their own clock. So, come inside. To enter into this Market is to join in an ancient dance. The almost-remembered ritual step, the strangely familiar dissonances, pulling you in toward your vague sense of belonging. And, you do belong—because you have always been here.