

The author (right) interviews vendor Luz Dila in the Galería El Porvenir, Cali.
(Photo by Fabián Villa.)

RESEARCH

Lessons From a Traditional Food Market, Where Culture and Cuisine Converge

By Alex Reep

Surrounded by a symphony of cilantro, oregano, and citronella, I'm seated on the concrete floor of a bustling market listening to Luz Dila describe her routine as a *campesina* (farmer) in the outskirts of Cali, Colombia. On the busiest market days (Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays), she wakes up at midnight, hops on her horse, and trots about her farm to gather up bushels of freshly cut herbs and produce. She loads the bushels onto horseback, rides a few miles to the main road, ties up her horse, and catches a bus to the market at 3 a.m. Three hours later, she arrives at the *galería*, a traditional food market, where she tastefully arranges her produce on plastic crates and waits for customers to arrive. Most people are still sipping their first coffee of the morning, but Luz has been hard at work for hours.

On a typical day in a traditional Colombian food market like the Galería El Porvenir, you can go from shopping for

potatoes and *lulo* (a tart regional fruit), to having a chat with a *campesino* about the land they steward, to enjoying a filling, freshly cooked meal based on a family recipe. Comfort food abounds, like the *sobrebarriga a la criolla*—flank steak with *salsa criolla*, a tomato-based sauce, served on a bed of rice. Lines wrap around the block in the early morning for *sancochito de pescado*, a fish and vegetable stew that's brightened with a wedge of lime.

You can step back and admire people from all walks of life converging in the hunt for low-cost, high-quality traditional ingredients. *Galerías* are major players in the city's "food environment," the space where consumers make the food choices that are a part of their daily lives. The relative affordability, accessibility, convenience of preparation, and desirability of ingredients in the *galerías* all play a significant role in determining peoples' food choices, diets, and consequently, nutrition and health.

The city of Santiago de Cali, in the southwest of Colombia, is fortunate to have six traditional food markets, the Galerías El Porvenir, Alameda, Santa Elena, La Floresta, Alfonso López, and Siloé. These galerías provide more than food—they are local epicenters of social, cultural, and economic development that offer employment opportunities and locally grown ingredients used to preserve gastronomic traditions.

Over time, the pervasive sugarcane plantations in the Valle de Cauca and widespread lack of cold chain storage have resulted in decreased agricultural diversity and an increased reliance on imported shelf-stable foods (Aronson, 2019). As a result, the galerías have become one of the most affordable options for accessing fresh food products. They are a unique space in which vendors sell produce brought directly from farms, making the galerías the meeting point between the city and countryside and one of the only places where urban consumers can directly encounter the origin of their food.

The Importance of Local Food Networks

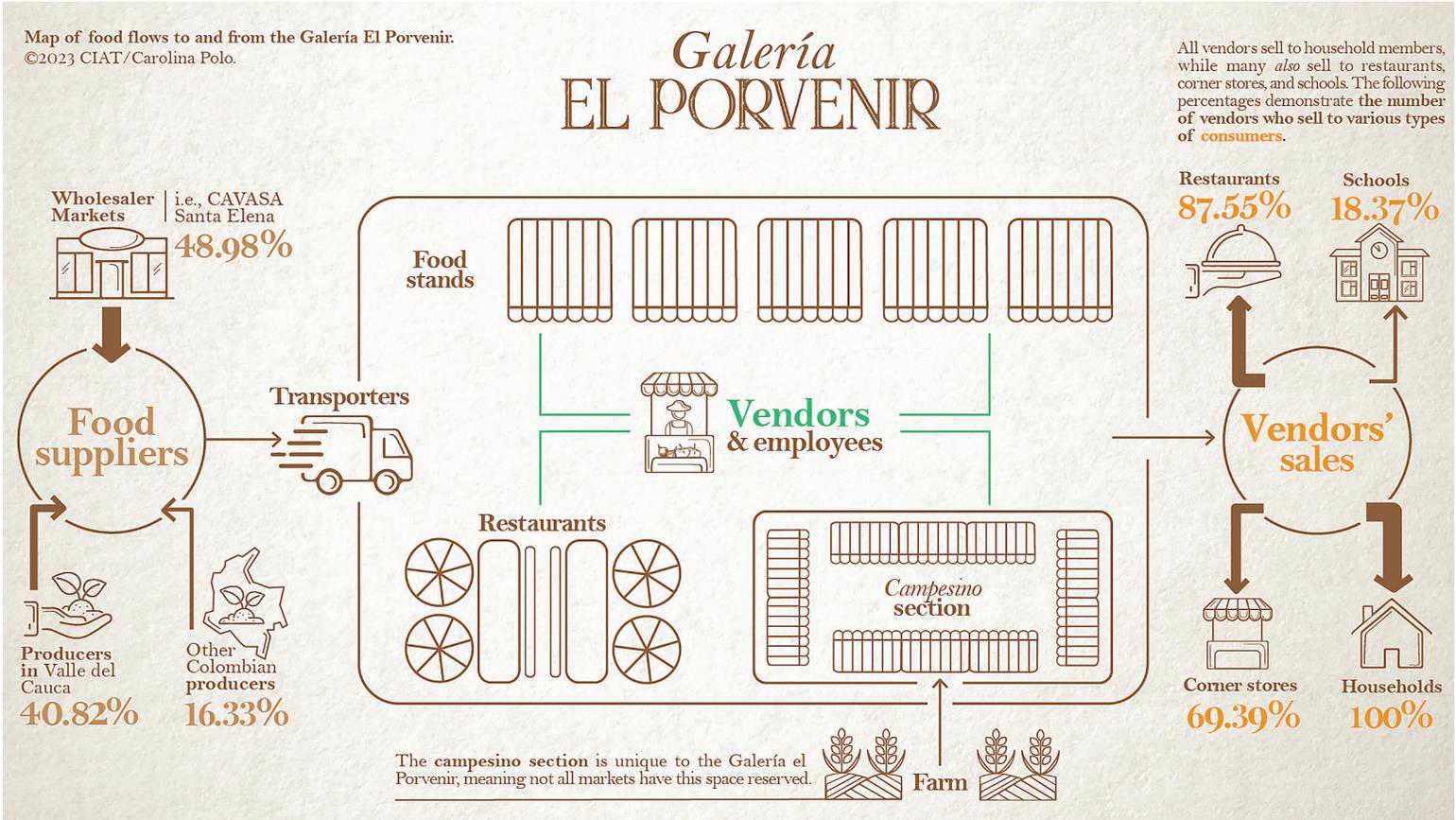
Food flow analyses in urban environments describe how a city obtains food from surrounding regions, which helps explain the ways in which a city feeds its populace (Moschitz & Frick, 2021). This information is important to stakeholders interested in making changes in the food

system to improve local food and nutritional security. The food supply chain does not include food consumption and disposal, but involves: 1) the primary production of food; 2) value-adding activities of storage, transportation, and processing; and 3) food distribution through markets (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2021). Traditional food supply chains are characterized as being spatially short, handling locally produced food, and involving a relatively small number of small-scale producers, intermediaries, and smaller enterprises (ibid.).

Measuring local food flows can help policymakers and other food system stakeholders to counter the complexities of the globalized food system by re-localizing the food supply. Additionally, using more locally sourced food products cuts the greenhouse gas emissions produced by transportation and storage. These efforts can help cities and regions increase their resilience in the face of globalization and increased anonymity of markets (Moschitz & Frick, 2021). Supply-chain disruptions caused by conflict and COVID-19, for example, have caused citizen-consumers and city administrators alike to acknowledge the importance of strengthening food systems at the local level and promoting diverse supply chains for local food products (Moschitz & Frick, 2021).

Traditional supply chains are described as “invisible in national statistics.” They are rarely included in

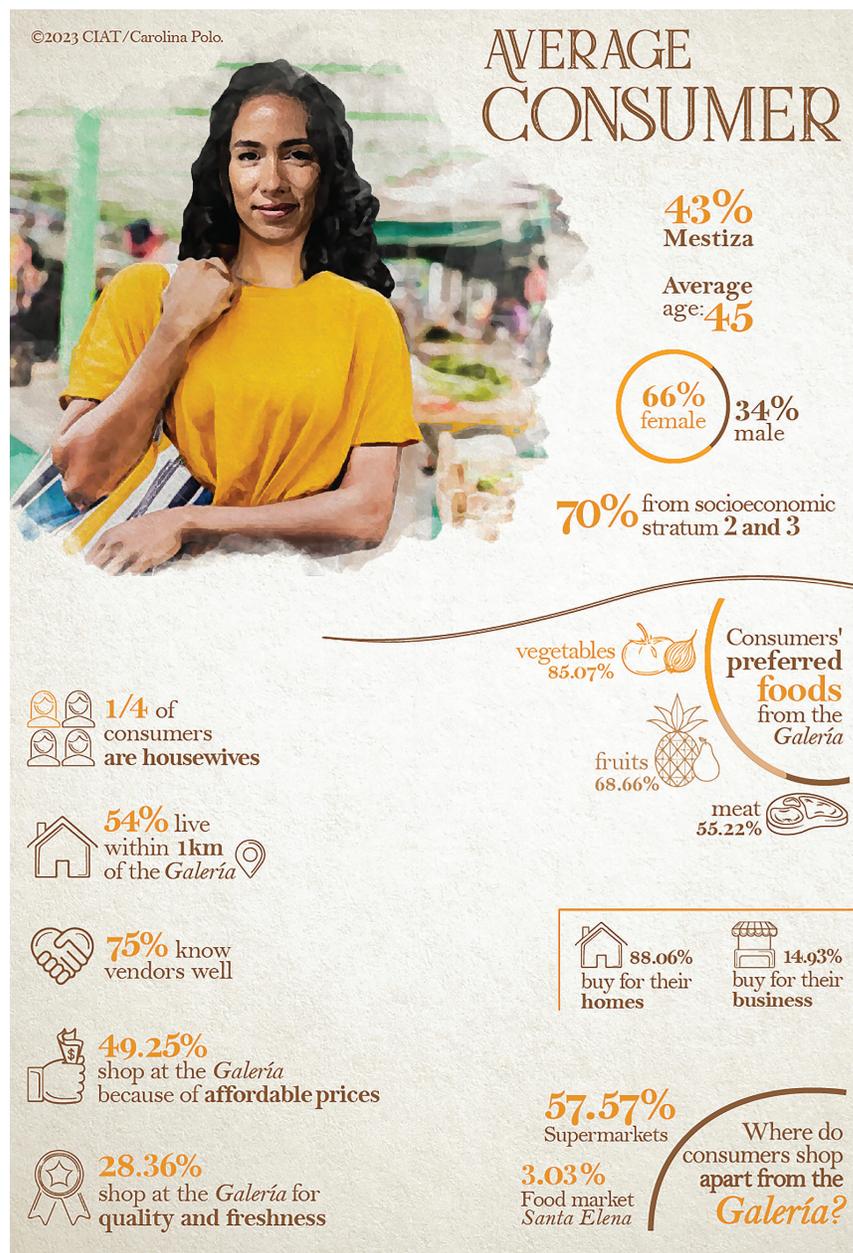
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governmental social protection programs, which makes them more vulnerable, despite their role as key nutrient providers filling gaps left by supermarkets and nontraditional food supply chains (FAO, 2021). The lack of data on food flows through traditional markets, a crucial market segment, limits the scope of city programs and challenges the ability to make improvements where structural changes are necessary. Additional studies of local markets and broader local value chains are required to develop informed policy that strengthens the resilience of local food systems for the food security of city residents.

With the support of a research grant funded by the Tinker Foundation and the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley, I spent two and a half months, from June through August 2022, working as a researcher with the Alliance of Bioversity International and the *Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical* (CIAT, International Center for Tropical Agriculture). I conducted a case study of the Galería El Porvenir marketplace in Cali, Colombia, to profile a segment of the city's supply system. This consumer study is described by the Alliance as "Lever 1," crucial for enacting change at the nexus of agriculture, environment, and nutrition, with the goal of "reshaping the food environment and consumer behavior toward healthy and sustainable diets" (Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture, 2019).

In the course of my research, I interviewed 116 market vendors and consumers in the Galería El Porvenir. These conversations offered insight into what food is being offered, what is in high demand, where the city's ingredients come from, and where they're going. Beyond food flows, the interviews explored markets' capacity to feed people with time and budget limitations, the price and perception of the quality of the food being offered, and what elements of these traditional markets should be considered in the development of policies to promote healthier and more sustainable diets. Data from less formal, traditional markets (such as Colombian galerías) are rarely incorporated into broader studies of



Key information about an average consumer at the Galería.

city food systems, which limits understanding of their value to the food security of locals, particularly lower-income city residents.

Who Are the Galería Consumers and Vendors?

The average galería consumer is a 45-year-old woman of *Mestiza* (Spanish and Indigenous) heritage, who buys ingredients for her household in a lower-income neighborhood of the city, very likely walking distance (within one or two kilometers) from the market itself. She likes shopping in the Galería El Porvenir because she appreciates the low prices, the proximity to her home, personal relationships with the vendors, and the freshness of the produce and meats. When she can't get what she's looking for at the galería, she'll visit a supermarket, where



Key information about an average vendor at the *Galería*.

she can find grains or processed foods in greater variety. Given that *galerías* are typically open only between 6 a.m. and 2 p.m., supermarkets are also conveniently open for people after their workday ends.

The average *galería* vendor is a *Mestizo* man, with a primary or secondary school education, who has owned his food stand for more than 30 years and doesn't sell anywhere else. He sources his products from merchants he likely doesn't know well, either in Cali or just outside, particularly the wholesale markets CAVASA and Santa Elena. In an average week, he'll sell to between 10 and 70 customers. The greatest threats to his business are the rising price of products, the high cost of transportation, and competition from supermarkets and other vendors in the *Galería* El Porvenir. He wastes very little food, if any

at all, because leftovers are discounted or donated.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The *Galería* El Porvenir offers an opportunity for people of all backgrounds to find fresh ingredients and to learn more about their local food system. Despite the fact that the majority of food vendors source their products through intermediaries rather than directly from small-scale producers, the majority of the market vendors and food processors (workers who wash, chop, and re-package ingredients) have family connections with the countryside. They bring ancestral knowledge and rural traditions to the *galerías*.

Everyday consumers are also extremely knowledgeable about the influence of global hyperinflation, the effect of Colombia's export-heavy economy, and the impact of wars, strikes, and supply-chain disruptions on the food supply system. People from a wide range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds readily discuss the consequences of agroindustry and monoculture cropping systems on Colombia's fragile biodiverse ecosystems.

A consistent theme from my conversations with both market consumers and vendors is a deep appreciation for food products from *campesinos*, who are a valuable component of the *Galería* El Porvenir and maintain their own section of the market. *Galería* consumers and vendors alike suggest that public policies and governmental subsidies should support

campesinos directly to: reduce agroindustry monocultures (and, thus, the use of chemicals in Colombian agriculture); increase the availability of organic produce for market consumers; and support agricultural livelihoods as a means of protecting the countryside from rural violence by offering productive alternatives for young people. Vendors recommend recognizing the *campesinos* in the *Galería* El Porvenir by adding signs in the *campesino* section advertising that it's an ecological or organic market. Yeisy Duran, the leader of the Asociación de Usuarios de la Plaza de Mercado El Porvenir (Asopor, El Porvenir Marketplace Users Association), argues that "everyone should help the *campo*, because it sustains us all."

Three major themes stood out in the conversations

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I shared with the vendors and consumers in the Galería El Porvenir. People were interested in ways to compete with commercial supermarkets, strategies to address price fluctuation while ensuring food quality, and the galerías' potential to have a positive impact on nutrition and food security in the city.

Competing With Supermarkets

Vendors want to revitalize the Colombian tradition of shopping at the Galería El Porvenir by improving the appearance of and experience within the space. Approximately one half of surveyed vendors (51 percent) and consumers (53 percent) emphasized the importance of improving the infrastructure, appearance, and hygiene within the Galería El Porvenir as a means of keeping food products safe and competing with supermarkets.

Among the surveyed vendors, 74 percent agreed that the best way to attract more consumers is to find a way to lower prices. Vendors proposed creating a galería vendors' union to compete with big markets that benefit from larger purchasing power, in addition to having the galería's administrative staff coordinate with intermediaries to facilitate sourcing food products for vendors, who typically work and negotiate alone.

Although traditional supply chains are often characterized as chaotic and inefficient, their flexibility offers a critical outlet to receive a heterogenous supply of food products from smallholder farmers and sell a range of affordable food products to urban consumers with a diversity of demands (Guarín, 2013). In contrast with global value chains and supermarkets, which enforce stringent procurement standards, the relative informality of traditional food markets allows them to absorb uneven supply from smallholder farmers producing food products with a lack of standardization. The ability to sell to a mix of traditional, modern, or transitioning agrifood systems is essential to the job security of small-scale producers, who globally account for one third of the food supply (Ricciardi et al., 2018).

Price Fluctuations and Food Quality

Shoppers in the Galería El Porvenir tend to be hyper-aware of changes in price (month to month, week to week, stall to stall), in addition to how the causes of unstable prices likewise affect food quality and availability. Forty percent of surveyed consumers attributed price fluctuations to increasingly variable weather conditions when extreme temperatures dry out the fields or rainstorms destroy crops, accelerate rot, and wash out highways. One patron summarized, "The climate is changing a lot, so the prices are changing, too."

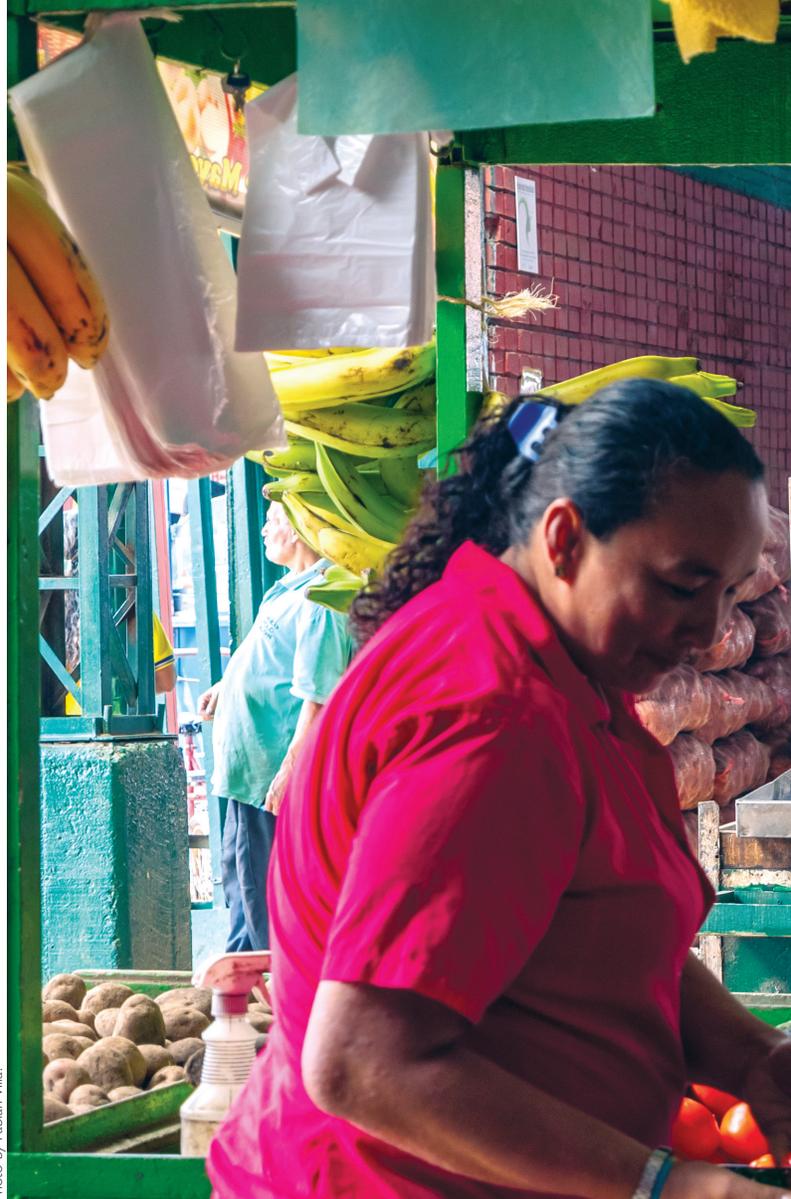


Photo by Fabián Villa.

Beyond environmental challenges, complications from the COVID-19 pandemic and roadway shutdowns during the national strikes of 2021 caused record-level transportation and supply chain disruptions in Cali over the past three years (2020-2022). As one consumer noted, "After the pandemic and national strike, everything changed. All the prices started rising. The prices go up every time we shop, and very few things become more affordable. Now, we've become accustomed to buying and using less, rationing."

Furthermore, several consumers and vendors connected the ongoing war in Ukraine with the rising prices of agricultural inputs like fertilizers and pesticides and, thus, the cost of everyday ingredients. "Ultimately," one consumer summarized, "it all depends on the international socioeconomic and sociopolitical situation."

Healthy Diets

Forty percent of consumers mentioned a need for greater educational campaigns to teach the public about what food is nutritious, where their food comes from, the benefits of a



In the foreground from left to right, El Porvenir vendors Yesenia Orrego, James Hernández, and Celso Elvis Ordóñez store produce at day's end.

healthy diet, how to buy fresh ingredients on a budget, and how to prepare food in a safe way that saves time and minimizes waste. Given their unique ability to serve and nourish people under time and budget limitations, one consumer noted that galerías can strategically help locals “increase our recognition that we are what we eat and that we’re lucky to have rich soil and nutritious agricultural products.”

Primary Lesson: Treasure the Galería

The marketplace paints a picture of a segment of Colombian life in this place and time: the crops grown in the Valle del Cauca this season, the myriad of people who influence the city (from the Pacific Coast to the Western and Central Andes), and the ingredients that feed the restaurant industry and citizenry of Cali. Lessons from the Galería El Porvenir case study can be applied to public policy initiatives to address the barriers that food producers face in establishing long-term economic profitability, in addition to the barriers consumers face in accessing fresh, affordable, and nutritious food.

The galería is a unique space that combines campesinos who grow a wide variety of produce, chefs serving traditional comfort food, knowledgeable and experienced vendors who know the best of their product, and consumers from diverse sectors of Colombian society. It reminds us that our consumption is an opportunity to promote conservation: when we buy local products grown in the unique environmental conditions surrounding our city, we promote small-scale farmers’ efforts to preserve ingredients that color our collective palates. There’s a reason why “galería” is a term used for both food and fine art.

Alex Reep is a Master of Development Practice student in the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley, specializing in sustainable agriculture and food security. She was the recipient of a 2022 Tinker Field Research Grant. A preliminary version of this article was originally published on the CLAS blog in December 2022. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Alliance of Bioversity-CIAT.

References for this article are online at clas.berkeley.edu.