A selection of conchas, churros, and other baked goods for sale at Mercadito Hispano in Bowling Green, KY

MARKET REPORT

Mercadito Hispano in Bowling Green, Kentucky, offers visibility to a minority within a minority.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

Photos by Grace Ramey

Jackelin Guillen, a Mercadito Hispano employee and a cousin of store manager Jose Gonzalez, bags pastries for a customer on February 10, 2024.

IF YOU ASKED ME TO PICTURE A LATINO mini-mart, I'd imagine a place that looks, smells, and sounds much like Mercadito Hispano in the Little Mexico neighborhood of Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Piñatas hang from the ceiling. Locally made tortillas sit on the shelves, along with tostadas from El Milagro, a multimillion-dollar Chicago company that distributes regionally. A butcher counter does a brisk business in chorizo, arrachera, and carne asada. A hot tray holds freshly made chicharrones. Spanish is the lingua franca.

But a closer look finds products not typically available at many Latino markets in the Bluegrass State.

Bags of Zambos, a Honduran snack brand that specializes in plantain and yuca chips, share space with Doritos and Takis on the chip rack. The freezer stocks dough to make empanadas, a flaky turnover popular across Latin America but more common in Central and South America. A request for a quesadilla will be answered with a question: Which kind? The Mexican dish made of a tortilla filled with melted cheese? Or the Salvadoran version, which is similar in texture and flavor to sweet cornbread? Mercadito Hispano serves both.

Mercadito Hispano is a rarity in the South: a Salvadoran-run Latino market in an industry dominated by Mexicans.

Salvadorans are the third-largest Latino group in the United States, behind Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. But in the American South, they remain a minority within a minority. In Kentucky, for instance, census figures show Salvadorans are just the sixth-largest Latino group, numbering about 4,300 people. By comparison, over 100,000 people of Mexican descent live there—more than 50 percent of the state's Latino population.

Such demographic disparities lead to something Central American scholars and activists call "Mexican hegemony"—the idea that when we talk about Latinos in the United States, too often we talk only about Mexicans and Mexican culture. That's what makes a place like Mercadito Hispano so important—it offers Latino representation in a city where Latinos make up less than 9 percent of the population and showcases a facet of el Sur Latino that doesn't get enough attention.

Gloria Escoto opened the store in 2000, transforming a long-abandoned dry cleaner into a market and restaurant. After leaving her native El Salvador in the 1980s, she initially settled in California. Then, in 1993, she moved to Bowling Green when the furniture company she worked for at the time relocated there. Today, she focuses on baking Mercadito Hispano's bread: fluffy bolillos (French rolls), conchas (a bread roll studded with sugar that looks like its namesake, a seashell), and other Mexican and Salvadoran pan dulces.

Her son, Jose Gonzalez, is the store manager.

"They're the pioneers," the thirty-four-year-old says of his mother and other older relatives who still help. "I'm trying to make it [all] fit."

He was about three when his family moved to Bowling Green. Home life was "very Salvadoran," Gonzalez remembered, while school wasn't. "Having to switch to Spanish at home, it felt like there was a huge disconnect."

Gonzalez felt further angst about his Latino identity when he started to work at Mercadito Hispano as a preteen, and customers poked fun at his Spanish. He described himself as a *no sabo* kid—a term of deprecation used against the children of Latino immigrants who didn't learn Spanish or care much for the customs of their parents.

He originally kept working at Mercadito Hispano after high school out of "a heavy sense of responsibility." But as the years went on, Gonzalez came to appreciate the role his family's business played in the community.

"I love helping the community, because I see my mother in these situations twenty years ago," he said. "They'll bring in papers that they need me to read. Then they'll try to tip me. I'm like, 'No—just buy something here!'"

As the market manager, Gonzalez has focused on making Mercadito Hispano a hub—not just for Salvadorans, or even Latinos. He wants it to be a place where the city's different cultures can meet to share shopping notes or sit down for a quick meal with food everyone can relate to. In the produce aisle, Central Americans and African migrants alike pick up plantains and yuca. Mexicans favor jalapeños stuffed with cheese and chicharrones. African American customers enjoy the chicharrones, which they know better as pork rinds.

Burmese prepare costillas (pork ribs) similarly to Latinos, Gonzalez said. "For white customers, I try selling them pig stomach, and they say, 'You mean hog maw?'"

His sister, Melissa Escoto, is the operations

Mercadito Hispano manager Jose Gonzalez helps a customer on February 10, 2024.

manager at Mercadito Hispano and also is in charge of the tres leches cake, putting playful spins on the Latino classic by giving it flavors like cookies and cream or Fruity Pebbles. Every fall, they also bake pan de muerto, the anise-flavored bread customarily consumed on Day of the Dead. In recent years, Mercadito Hispano has also offered rosca de reyes, the Latin American version of king cake that Catholics traditionally eat on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany.

Gonzalez is beginning to lean on Mercadito Hispano's role in Bowling Green as an established business. His family owns the building that houses Mercadito Hispano and leases the adjacent space to Delicias Los Amigos, a Central American restaurant. Every Wednesday, he invites food trucks to park in front of Mercadito Hispano "to help them gain a bit of notoriety." In 2022, Gonzalez and other Latino restaurateurs held the city's first-ever Latino food festival. Last fall, he helped to organize a Day of the Dead display at Bowling Green's annual Harvest Festival.

But even as he helps other Latinos, Gonzalez is also excited that Salvadoran culture is becoming more visible the South. Pupusas, El Salvador's most famous dish, are a telling example. They're griddlecakes made from masa stuffed with cheese and another ingredient—sometimes carnitas, sometimes beans—then topped with pickled slaw called curtido. Mercadito Hispano sells pupusas; so does Delicias Los Amigos.

"They [non-Salvadoran] customers started to care about pupusas just four years ago," Gonzalez said with a laugh. "Corn, pork, and cheese—doesn't get more Southern than that! Those ingredients break down the wall, so that the pupusa is no longer foreign."

He then thought about that for a bit. "This is the cuisine we thought we brought over," he finally said, "but it was already here."

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