

Where can you find traditional Central and South American foods and plants?  
.....In neighborhoods where immigrants live and shop.

**in East Boston**

Ray grocery store 101 Meridian St. near the Maverick T stop on the Blue line  
Machu Picchu Restaurant on Somerville Ave in Union Square, Somerville, for traditional Andean corn on the cob  
Tesoro Market Chelsea Street. For central and south American products  
Cancun Taqueria. Near the Maverick T stop

**in Lynn and Chelsea**

There are many small and medium grocery stores Near the Bunker Hill Community College, Chelsea site  
And on Market Street in Lynn  
El Quetzal Restaurant?? Lynn?

**in Allston & Somerville**

Like some other supermarkets, Market Basket in Union Square, Somerville, has an entire Goya aisle  
La International Market on Somerville Ave has dry goods and some produce

**Food and Plants of Mesoamerica**

The following information is From Aztecgarden.com (<http://www.aztecgardens.com/foods.html>) unless otherwise noted

**Amaranth (amaranthus spp.)**

(Spanish: Amaranto; Nahuatl: Huautli or Huauhtli)

Archaeological evidence suggests that indigenous peoples of the Americas first began cultivating amaranth between 5,000 and 7,000 years ago. The use of amaranth in Mesoamerica as a food probably began with the Mayas, and subsequently spread to other indigenous groups in Mesoamerica. Amaranth was one of the most important crops for the Aztecs, who are said to have produced 15 to 20 tons of amaranth a year. There exist roughly 800 species of amaranth. The species grown in Central Mexico is known as *amaranthus hypochondriacus*. Amaranth is rich in proteins, amino acids, calcium, phosphorous, magnesium, potassium, zinc, and iron. Leaves of the amaranth plant are also edible, and are a good source of vitamins A and C, calcium and phosphorous.

For the Aztecs, amaranth served both as a food crop and as an important part of their religion and rituals. Amaranth seeds, mixed with human blood, were used to create sculptures representing Aztec deities. This is probably one of the main reasons that the Spanish attempted to eradicate the cultivation of Amaranth during the Conquest of Mexico, as the Spanish considered this practice primitive and pagan.

Despite the efforts of the Spanish to destroy Aztec culture, the cultivation of amaranth has thankfully survived to this day. The cultivation and consumption of amaranth is once again very popular, especially in Central Mexico. It is mostly found in the form of [alegrías](#), blocks of amaranth seeds mixed with honey, raisins, peanuts, and other nuts. In Mexico City, once the geographical center of the Aztec empire, you can find vendors selling alegrías on virtually every street corner.

**Beans (Frijoles):**

Beans were another important crop for the Aztecs. The most common beans eaten were black beans, kidney beans, and tepary beans. There are dozens of unique ways to cook beans, and they are widely consumed in Mexico and throughout the world. This is an extremely nutritious and

versatile crop. Tlacoyos, a delicious stuffed tortilla, is a typical food from the state of Mexico and a typical food from Mexico City. Frijoles de Boda is a rich and spicy dish typical of the state of Colima.

**Vanilla:**

Vanilla is a tropical orchid that produces a highly prized seed pod. Vanilla's scientific name is *Vanilla planifolia*. The pods are generally harvested early and taken to be fermented. The seed pods can grow up to around 10 inches long. These orchids need to mature to about 11 feet long before they start producing these precious seed pods. Vanilla is an important flavoring in many Mexican dishes.

**Chile Peppers (Spanish: Chile):**

Chiles belong to the genus *Capsicum*, and the family *Solanaceae* (the Nightshade family). Other members of the nightshade family include eggplant, tomato, and potatoes.

Modern botanists believe that chiles were originally cultivated in South America. Their migration north may have to do as much with animals spreading their seeds as with human interaction. Birds especially are important agents in dispersing chiles seeds, and probably help to distributing them throughout the Americas. Birds aren't affected by the heat of spicy chiles and so their stomachs don't completely digest the seeds, which makes them excellent mediums for transporting the seeds during their migration

**Cacao (Chocolate):**

Cacao is actually a large fruit that grows on a small to medium sized tree in tropical regions of Mexico and Central America. The seeds of cacao are the source of chocolate. The seeds are dried, roasted, and ground to make the cacao powder that is the basis for chocolate.

Cacao was used extensively throughout Mesoamerica. The Mayas, Aztecs, and Olmecs were all thought to have cultivated cacao. The Aztecs used the beans as a form of currency. Because it was considered such a precious crop for the Aztecs, only the upper classes consumed chocolate, usually in the form of a beverage.

**Cactus (Nopal):**

Nopal (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) is an edible cactus that was consumed throughout Mesoamerica. The tender cactus pads make an easy and quick meal, as they can be harvested and eaten raw or cooked. Nopal was also prized because it is associated with cochineal, an insect that is used as a natural red dye. Nopal has gained a reputation internationally as it seems to ease the effects of diabetes. Studies have shown that eating nopal can reduce blood sugar and cholesterol levels.

**Corn (Maiz):**

Corn is one of the most important food crops of the Americas. For the Maya and Aztecs, corn was more than just a food; it was a vital and sacred part of their culture. This is also true for modern Mexico.

The cultivation of corn probably began over 8,000 years ago in central Mexico and Central America. Ancient corn cobs were found in the Guilá Naquitz cave in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico and the San Marcos cave in Tehuacán. Corn was first thought to be domesticated from *teosinte*, an annual grass growing wild in Mexico and used as a fodder plant.

It is believed that the ancient peoples of Mexico began to select *teosinte* plants that had larger seed heads until they eventually achieved the modern corn cob that we see today. This process probably took several generations.

Due to domestication, humans have transformed corn into a plant that can no longer self-sow. Modern corn requires someone to break the hard, tightly bound cob and plant the seeds. Wild *teosinte*, however, is very fragile and the seeds easily fall off and grow new plants. Without

human interaction, modern corn would cease to exist.

**Honey (Miel):**

Honey was used extensively in Mesoamerica. The Mayas especially made use of honey to flavor their foods and beverages.

**Huitlacoche (Cuitlacoche):**

Huitlacoche is a Nahuatl word that translates roughly to “excrement of the Gods.” This rather unappetizing name is strangely appropriate for this odd but delicious food of pre-Hispanic origin.

Huitlacoche is actually a fungus that grows on corn during the rainy season. It grows as grayish lumps on the corn cob, and is harvested and cooked with onions and various spices. In the U.S. it is known as “Corn Smut” and is eradicated from corn fields. In Mexico, it is prized and means that the corn cobs will get a higher price in the market.

**Pulque/Agua Miel:**

The **Maguey Cactus (Agave americana)** is found throughout central Mexico and was a very important plant for the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican cultures. The maguey produces the once sacred beverage **pulque**, which is the fermented juice extracted from the flower stalk. Before turning into pulque, the juice is called **agua miel** (honey water), which is a highly nutritious drink still consumed today in rural areas. Maguey fibers can be used for rope, clothing, and other products. The Maguey is also known as the **Century Plant** and now grows throughout the world.

The Maguey’s English name implies that it only flowers once every 100 years, which is incorrect. The plant typically blooms at maturity, about 20 years, depending on the species.

**Squash (Calabaza):**

Native peoples of South America are thought to be the first to have domesticated squash. Eventually, the seeds were traded and made their way to Mesoamerica. In many cases, squash were valued more for their tender edible seeds than for the flesh.

**Potatoes: from [www.indepthinfo.com/potato/history.shtml](http://www.indepthinfo.com/potato/history.shtml)**

The history of the potato has its roots in the windswept Andes Mountains of South America. It is an austere region plagued by fluctuating temperatures and poor soil conditions. Yet the tough and durable potato evolved in its thin air (elevations up to 15,000 feet), climbing ever higher like the people who first settled the region. The tough pre-Columbian farmers first discovered and cultivated the potato some 7,000 years ago. They were impressed by its ruggedness, storage quality and its nutritional value. Western man did not come in contact with the potato until as late as 1537 when the Conquistadors tramped through Peru. And it was even later, about 1570, that the first potato made its way across the Atlantic to make a start on the continent of Europe.

**Tomatoes: from [www.tomato-cages.com/tomato-history.html](http://www.tomato-cages.com/tomato-history.html)**

The Tomato History has origins traced back to the early Aztecs around 700 A.D; therefore it is believed that the tomato is native to the Americas.

**Peanuts: from [www.aboutpeanuts.com/infphis.html](http://www.aboutpeanuts.com/infphis.html)**

The peanut plant probably originated in Brazil or Peru, although no fossil records exist to prove this. But for as long as people have been making pottery in South America (3,500 years or so) they have been making jars shaped like peanuts and decorated with peanuts. Graves of ancient Incas found along the dry western coast of South America often contain jars filled with peanuts and left with the dead to provide food in the afterlife.

Peanuts were grown as far north as Mexico by the time the Spanish began their exploration of the New World. The explorers took peanuts back to Spain, where they are still grown. From Spain, traders and explorers took peanuts to Africa and Asia. In Africa the plant became common in the

western tropical region. The peanut was regarded by many Africans as one of several plants possessing a soul.

**Avocados:** from [www.indexfresh.com/avocado\\_history.htm](http://www.indexfresh.com/avocado_history.htm)

The avocado is native to the area stretching from the eastern and central highland of Mexico through Guatemala to the Pacific coast of Central America. There is evidence indicating that avocados have been utilized in Mexico for a period of 10,000 years. The Spanish Conquistadors discovered the fruit, native to the Americas, which the indigenous people of Mexico, Central America and South America had been using for thousands of years.

Thanks to Hilary Pollak for her research on Mesoamerican food and recipes, and to Eugenia Colindres for taking the time to give us a tour of Chelsea grocery stores.