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By Mauricio Lima, AFP

Open markets, closed pocketbooks: Though there is a wider selection in their markets, such as this one in Mosul, some Iraqis have a hard time putting food on the table because prices are rising faster than wages.

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Markets' prices shelve thrill of new selections

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BAGHDAD — There's more food available in Iraqi markets than ever before, but prices are skyrocketing.

"I can buy everything — chicken, canned meat, canned mushrooms, even Pepsi," says Souad Hamid al-Yassar, 50. Bananas, soft drinks and foreign canned products were virtually non-existent during much of Saddam Hussein's regime when war, mismanagement and sanctions imposed by the United Nations crippled the country's economy.

Now, nearly every day there is something new. Iraq was once considered a breadbasket of the Middle East, and much of the produce sold in stores is grown locally. But grocery shelves are now also stocked with foreign delicacies as well, thanks to open borders and more disposable income. American spaghetti sauces and European cheeses fill stores specializing in the new imports.

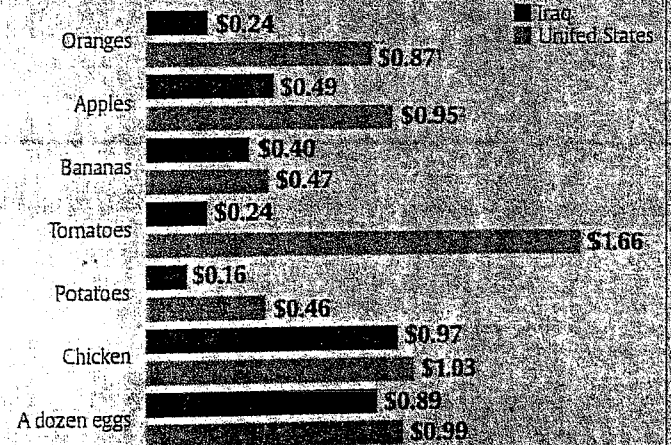
Fruits and vegetables are sold as they always have been: piled high on wooden carts on street corners and the long alleys of the souks, or open markets. Bright yellow bananas hang on strings above deep green lettuce, plump tomatoes, lemons and oranges in mountains of blending colors.

Al-Yassar goes to the open-air market and butcher every few days. Her son is a translator for U.S. officials; dangerous work it brings in a handsome salary of \$450 a month.

The problem is many salaries have lagged way behind price increases. Some prices, for even the most basic foods, have doubled since the toppling of Saddam.

The price to eat

Since the war, food prices have skyrocketed for Iraqis. More food is available, but prices have increased broadly for all items. Most food is still cheaper than what Americans pay. The cost of several grocery items (prices per pound, except for eggs):



1 - Navel oranges.
2 - Red Delicious apples.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Department of Agriculture.

By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

An estimated 48% of Iraqis are unemployed, according to the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry, though accurate numbers are hard to come by.

"I cannot find a job with the army or police because I will be killed the next day," said Haythem Butros Yukhana, 30, who has to support an extended family of seven on the few dollars he makes per day when he can find work as a street cleaner.

Yukhana's family has to carefully choose when they splurge for things like meat. They use all their rations every month.

Rations cost a few pennies per family and date to the 1990s

when UN-sponsored sanctions devastated the economy.

The monthly rations of rice, beans, tea, sugar and other items were given out to sustain the population. The program is still in use.

The staples of most Iraqi dishes are rice, tomato paste, beans or meat and vegetables such as eggplant, spinach and okra. When there is a little extra money, families can make a trip to a sweet store filled with fresh breads, baklava or warka, small baked cookies usually filled with dates or nuts.

By Jill Carroll