

Fruteros!
Interview with Rocio Rosales
LDRC

In the book *Fruteros* Rocío Rosales writes about the lives, loves, journeys, struggles and obligation of the workers involved in the street-side cut-fruit industry in Los Angeles. To write the book Rosales, a professor of sociology at UC Irvine, immersed herself within the immigrant society of fruit vendors whose rainbow colored umbrellas and ice-cooled plexiglass cases dot the corners of the county's boulevards and byways. The 2020 book, *subtitled Street Vending, Illegality, and Ethnic Community in Los Angeles*, gets at the nitty-gritty of mutual aid in the familial and home-town networks supporting and holding the precarious work of this underground trade that operates daily in vivid colors. We emailed Rosales questions about her book and her experiences.

Is the kind of fruit vending that you write about, with frutereros cutting and spicing fruit in public spaces, unique to California in the United States? Are there any other places in the States, you're aware of where the networks of fruit vendors you describe are established?

The type of fruit vending I write about happening in Los Angeles has certainly started to pop up in other parts of the country, or at least in some adjacent states. On a recent drive between El Paso and Phoenix, I stopped to pump gas in some more rural areas and saw a single fruit vendor set up near the I-10 exit and gas stations. In the past, I've seen these lone vendors near gas stations when I would drive between Los Angeles and Oakland, but I had never seen them outside of the state of California. Last December was my first time seeing a fruit vendor in Arizona. I'm sure it's a model that is easy to replicate and I wouldn't be surprised if it exists in other parts of the United States. And, of course, Latinos – the primary customer base of this type of product and who are most familiar with this set up – can be found all over the country so where they are, the vendors are.

One of the things that impresses me about fresh fruit vending in LA is the ubiquity of the skills and tools vendors use for their trade; the carts, cutting boards, juicers, and spice bottles they all have. When I engage a frutero my favorite moment is after a fruit is cut, how they'll use the side of their knife to slide it from the cutting board onto what appears to be a small plastic dustpan. This way they can just dump the fruit in the bag or plastic container they're selling me without touching the peeled and cut fruit. Does this tool have a name? Was this exact choreography from peeling, to slicing, to spicing as effortless to learn as it appears for a master frutero to execute?

When I was out on the streets interviewing and helping vendors, I was always impressed with the ingenuity of the vendors' tools and the speed of their process. In some cases, they adapt materials or tools from one arena to another. Other times I'd see vendors invent devices that helped them work more efficiently. I was always amazed. I'm familiar with that little dustpan

tool and know, personally, how crucial it is to speed. But I don't know if it has a special name. Vendors called it "la palita."

I don't think the choreography was easy to learn. It wasn't for me certainly and I never got very good at it. I do recall vendors teasing each other for their slow speed when they would get started on the job. I also know vendors would sometimes reference cutting themselves with the sharp knives as they learned the trade. But, because you can lose customers if you're too slow, they have to learn quickly. The longer they do it, the more beautiful the choreography becomes. Sometimes when they do multiple fruit salads at once for a single customer in a hurry you can really marvel at the skill and artistry of it. Which reminds me of a book by some fellow sociologists called *The Skills of the Unskilled: Work and Mobility among Mexican Migrants* where the authors (Hagan, Hernandez-Leon and Demonsant) really make a strong case for the substantial technical and interpersonal skills that Mexican migrants have by virtue of their extensive work lives.

Are the hometown networks, familial ties, chains of support and obligation that you discovered in your study true to other sectors of the street food industry in LA as far as you're aware?

They are. Other sociologists have written about hometown networks and how entire communities come to dominate industries through them. And it's easy to understand why. Bosses take suggestions from their best employees and if an employee recommends his cousin and then they recommend their former neighbor, you can quickly see how hometown networks make hiring easier. If you go up to any restaurant in LA with immigrant workers, I'm sure that the majority of the immigrant workers will be from the same region or hometown. It's all networks.

In fact, I was recently with a friend whose dad and cousins and uncles (from a small town in Mexico) all worked as cooks and bus boys and valets for the Magic Castle (the magician's exclusive clubhouse) in Hollywood. Another network, another industry. And maybe my next ethnography if I can get access!

What was your initial attraction to studying frutereros?

I wanted to study Latinos in the informal sector. I moved to Los Angeles in 2005 for graduate school and I was drawn to the rainbow umbrellas. At first, I went for conversation and community. I was desperate to speak Spanish and hang out with other Latinos (after days spent in graduate seminars using all kinds of academic jargon). Then I realized it would be interesting to study this community and write about their lives. I often noticed how public fruit vendors seemed but also how invisible to others they could be. I hope my book makes people stop and see vendors as people full of vibrant life trajectories.

Street food vending and purchasing in Los Angeles can be a powerful moment of contact between people of different classes, language, cultures, and legal status in Los Angeles. I am

wondering if you have any personal reflections on the portal to other-worlds that street vendors provide.

Once, while helping a vendor sell on the corner, I decided to start counting customers. I just wanted to get a sense of how many customers came through on any given day. Within a few hours I had counted over a hundred people. As you note, all kinds of people stop to get fruit. And each interaction comes with little pieces of information, of insightful conversation, sometimes of useful advice, sometimes of funny anecdotes. So much happens on a street corner. These vendors are repositories of LA life. They see and know so much. I could write a whole other book just focusing on the interactions on the street – maybe one day I will.