I understand Baltimore has elaborate decorated horse drawn produce wagons, their drivers are called Arabbers; New York City has fleets of licensed large and small boxy yellow and metallic carts slinging all manners of hotdogs, knishes, and falafel; and Portland basically invented the gourmet roach coach. But here in Los Angeles when we discuss with outsiders the arrangements of nourishments available for purchase on our streets, it can sound like we're speaking a whole other language. And we are. For many in the United States the range of the summer-time ice cream man or the nouvelle-food-truck defines the option of available street-side-foods. Los Angeles, like other metropolises in California, conspires for a richness of experiences due to the peculiarities of geography, economy, and legal framework.

As the nighttime air descends, up rise inviting strands of small piercing lights announcing the presence of heavy spits of meat, bins of colored salsas, cilantro and onion. Some places use wood or charcoal grills. They smell exceptionally warm. Some have gas fired comals. Some shape their masa into tortillas right there on the spot, others remove them pre-prepared from a plastic bag.

In the winter-time around the holidays there are foods you can buy on the sidewalk near where you get your Christmas tree. In the morning before you get on the subway or go into school, there's specific things you can only get then as well. And on Sunday afternoon by the Catholic Church or on a Monday night in-front of the Evangelical church, there's food for that too.

A constant during my 15 year afternoon commute down Melrose was the raspado vendor with the impressive line at the intersection of Normandie. You can see raspaderos lots of places, but either this guy was super friendly or his raspados were exceptional. People where always three-deep. They'd que by the cart, or sit on the wall separating the parking lot from the sidewalk and street.

The early morning honk of the bicycle horn announcing the presence of the tamalero on the street. Was it the same guy who'd sing out "tamale, tamale, tamale", or another vendor announcing his arrival there in my world?

When my daughter was young, a young elote guy walked our neighborhood. I'd buy us both an ear from his bucket. I'd refuse the mayo because I just can't conscious mayo + butter + cheese with all that spice and citrus. In my broken Spanish I asked him if he made money at this one dollar at a time? He said yes. I looked at his white sneakers imagining the many neighborhoods he'd walked that afternoon.

They say there are food deserts in LA, but does this consider all the converted vans serving as produce shops? I understand there aren't grocery shops in Chinatown these days, but what should we feel about the elderly pensioners bringing in extra money with their micro-shops of bananas, avocados, or durians laid out on cardboard on the pavement?

> When I spend time in a park, I want to follow the guy in the cowboy hat and boots. He has the big stick supporting balloons at the top. Or it's rammed through with lances of cotton candy. Where did he come from? Where will he go?
>
> Rather than a Lakers game I want a competition between fruteros. A Top Chef sort-a game, judged on the elegance of the movement of the knife and pan. Conducting speedier and speedier operations on colorful fruits that land with a plop in the big plastic cup. Side bets would be placed on the trompo guy flicking pineapple butts onto stacks of hot al pastor.

James Rojas the LA native and scholar of "Latino urbanism" tells me on the phone that the scale of street-food we know today is a relatively new phenomenon. The growth has been conditioned by the changing nature of labor available to immigrants in the city of LA. His family for instance settled in East LA in the 1920's from Northern Mexico, as refugees from their Revolution. Rojas says they acculturated into middle-class union jobs and wouldn't have sought work on the street as recent immigrants may need to. Rojas tells me a step-grandfather of his worked as a Coyote in the 1950s. He says he bragged to him how he could land one of his clients a great paying union job indoors at Kaiser Steel just by getting a good suit on them.

Street-food has always been a factor in LA with tamale carts (operated by all sorts of people) a standard feature of our streets from the 1880's through the 1920's. Hot dog carts go back too. Yet an *LA Time's* article from 1971 penned by John Pastier, then the paper's architectural critique, laments the unrealized potential for LA's street eating facilities; both outdoor dining and genuine street-food. Among other things Pastier speculates that the dearth of street-food is due to the modern city's focus on the streets as a site for efficient movement rather than as a source of pleasure. This echoes a speculation of Rojas', who suggests that the Anglo obsession with public space as site for transportation and trade conflicts with an indigenous/Latino/Spanish understanding of space as a place to *inhabit*.

The LA Times doesn't start recognizing street-food as we know it today until the late 1980s, with the seminal writing of food critique Johnathon Gold. It is funny to read Gold's early articles. He deems it necessary to explain what common things like pupusas or tacos are.

The European born philosopher Ivan Illich has an interesting line on the place of streets in Mexican culture:

> *What a difference there was between the new and the old parts of Mexico City only 20 years ago. In the old parts of the city the streets were true commons. Some people sat on the road to sell vegetables and charcoal. Others put their chairs on the road to drink coffee or tequila. Others held their meetings on the road to decide on the new headman for the neighbourhood or to determine the price of a donkey. Others drove their donkeys through the crowd, walking next to the heavily loaded beast of burden; others sat in the saddle. Children played*

in the gutter, and still people walking could use the road to get from one place to another.

Such roads were not built for people. Like any true commons, the street itself was the result of people living there and making that space liveable. The dwellings that lined the roads were not private homes in the modern sense - garages for the overnight deposit of workers. The threshold still separated two living spaces, one intimate and one common. But neither homes in this intimate sense nor streets as commons survived economic development.

In the new sections of Mexico City, streets are no more for people. They are now roadways for automobiles… (Ivan Illich, Silence is A Commons, 1983.)

In other writings Illich discusses how economic development created modern poverty by destroying the connection a family had with a place. Putting them in a system where they were forced to go to work for someone else rather than find a means of support within the conditions of their lives. In turn LA's contemporary street-food vending is a bit of a return to this pre-enclosure system. Vendors enter into a micro-economy of their own production, by marketing prepared traditional foods.

I am attracted to street-food because it offers an intimate cosmopolitical encounter, or at least the idea of it.

A taco stand opened on the end of my block. Two decades ago there would be a man at the same corner in the afternoon. Surrealy he dressed in dirndls and held milk jugs in his hand. He always had questionable face-paint. He'd stand there for hours at a time swinging the milk jugs back and forth as cars went by and mumble something to the river of traffic. The taco stand was really good, its salsa's stood out, but it to went away before I could establish rapport with its operators.

The sidewalk is where I say hello to a stranger. I share a bite with them and delight in the quality of the affordable comforting food under the canopy of the cloudless night sky. For a moment we make that our sidewalk spot in the city.