The Náhuatl pages:

How to get around a pre-Hispanic market!

Find out how to ask questions and name fruit, vegetables, every day and luxury items in a Mexican Tianquiz (market) speaking Náhuatl...

What astounded many of the Spanish conquistadors when they first entered Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City, was the great market of Tlatelolco, to the north.

Accounts from Hernán Cortes and Bernal Díaz del Castillo describe that Tlatelolco accommodated more than sixty thousand people in trading activities. They also claimed that this market could provide everything to nobles (pipiltin), priests (topixqueh), artisans and land workers (macehualtin) alike from lake scum (compost from the bottom of Lake Tetzoco) and fuel, to luxury goods, slaves and animals. The market was divided into distinct sections, each selling a certain type of merchandise.

Here are some phrases that would help you in an Aztec market or ‘tianquiz’. These can also be used in contemporary Mexico, around the Mexico City area. Please consult the Aztec Pronunciation page to get a general feel for Náhuatl phonetics. Although prices are stated in contemporary ‘pesos’, in ancient Mexico you would trade with cocoa beans and special folded pieces of cloth or capes called quachtin.

### Asking for...

**Xinechmolihui: ¿que xquich ipatiuh inin matzactli ihuan xitomatl?**

*Please tell me, how much is this pineapple and this tomato?*

**Čehce matzactli, chicuey tomin. Macujli xitomame caxtoli tomin.**

*Each pineapple, 8 pesos. 5 tomatoes, 15 pesos.*

**Tepitzin onichaquicamat. Nimitzomotlauhtila, zan yxicil xinechmolihui.**

*I understood very little. Please (be so kind as to), tell me very slowly.*

**Nicnequi ome matzactin ihuan xitomati.**

*I’d like 2 pineapples and a tomato.*

**Ničan ca** - *Here you go (in payment. Literally, ‘here it is’)*

**Tlazohcamatí** - *Thank you*

**Ma cualli cemilihui** - *Have a good day.*

Letters that are underlined indicate that they should be emphasized when spoken. The Náhuatl shown here is formal; a language approach that is very traditional to the Mexico City area.
What did the Aztecs buy in markets?

This is a short Náhuatl vocabulary guide to what goods could be found in pre-Hispanic markets, not only in the Aztec capital but throughout Mesoamerica. Cholula, on the other side of the Popocatepetl mountain, as well as Coyoacan in the southern valley of Mexico, were other key trading centres for the central highlands. Pochtecas (merchants) were responsible for trade circulation throughout Mesoamerica.

Fruit and Vegetables

Nopalli - Cactus leaf
Elotl - Fresh corn cob
Xitomatl - Red tomato
Tomatl - Green tomato usually used in salsa (sauce)
Chilli - Chilli. These had different names depending on the type
Etl - Bean
Metl - Maguey plant
Ahuacatl - Avocado
Ayohconetl - Squash (Tatuma squash, like courgette)
Ayoxochitl - The yellow flower that grows from the squash plant.

Types of Corn

In the picture above, you can see purple, red, white, orange and yellow cob–like shapes. Throughout Mexico one can find corn of many different colours. To make matters more complicated, corn has always been sold in different forms and stages of growth. Here are some examples:

Xilotl - Cob of unripe corn
Elotl - Fresh corn cob
Centli - Dry cob of corn
Tlayolli - Dry grains of corn

Drinks

Atl - Water
Octli - Pulque. Made from fermented maguey plant.
Necua - Aguamiel
Atoll - Atole. A corn-based drink mixed with chillies or fruit.
Xocoatl - A bitter cocoa-based drink.

Meat

The word nacatl is used to say meat. It is added on to the end of the word identifying the type of animal the meat comes from. For example:

Quanaca = chicken
Quanacanacatl = chicken meat
Mazatl = deer
Mazanacatl = venison

Interestingly, the word Nanacatl signifies mushroom, for its meaty texture.

Household Items

Acomitl - Large, vase-shaped receptacle
Comalli - Clay plate for heating corn tortillas
Comitl - Pot
Copalli - Incense
Metlatl - Flat stone on which seeds and other ingredients are ground with a stone handle.

Animals

Itzquintli - Dog
Michin - Fish
Quanaca - Chicken
Mazatl - Deer
Tochtli - Rabbit

The Bare Necessities!

Molli or Chilmulli - Sauce. Different from today’s Mexican chocolate, chilli or nut ‘mole’ sauce. This, according to Molina, was a chilli sauce.

Izatl - Salt
Necutli - Honey
Tlaxcalli - Corn tortilla
Tlaxcallin - Corn tortillas
Tototetl - Egg
Chían - A small seed from which oil was made. Nowadays, the seeds are put into lemonade, where they become jelly-like in substance.
**Precious goods**

Coztic teocuitlatl - Gold  
Ihuime - Feathers  
Ulli - Rubber  
Amatzcaltin - Shells  
Chalchihuitl - Jade  
Quachtli - Folded cloth, cape or mantle  
Cacahuatl - Cacao bean  
Euame - Hides

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**Currency**

The cacahuame (cacao beans), as well as quachtin (folded pieces of cloth or capes) were the principal forms of money accepted in markets.

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**Sources:**


