



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.

Left: Mural depicting Tlatelolco market by Diego Rivera. Palacio Nacional, Mexico City.

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: ¿quexquich ipatuih inin matzactli ihuan xitomatl?
Please tell me, how much is this pineapple and this tomato?

Cehce matzactli, chicuey tomin. Macuilli xitomame caxtollitomin.
Each pineapple, 8 pesos. 5 tomatoes, 15 pesos.

Tepitzin onicahquicamat. Nimitzomotlauhtilia, zan yolic xinechmolihui.
I understood very little. Please (be so kind as to), tell me very slowly.

Nicnequi ome matzactin ihuan xitomatl.
I'd like 2 pineapples and a tomato.



The market at San Juan Chamula, an indigenous community in Chiapas, Mexico



Merchants from Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Florentine Codex.

Nican ca - Here you go (in payment. Literally, 'here it is')

Tlazohcamati - Thank you

Ma cualli cemilhuitl - 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.

Market Vocabulary

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.



Above, An Aztec Market (drawing by Ellen Cesar-ski). Four vendors sell two slaves to three buyers. The slaves have on wooden collars. One demonstrates her cotton spinning skills. (Michael Smith, *The Aztecs*)

Left: Mesoamerican corn types. Arqueología Mexicana "El Maíz"(vol.25)

Fruit and Vegetables

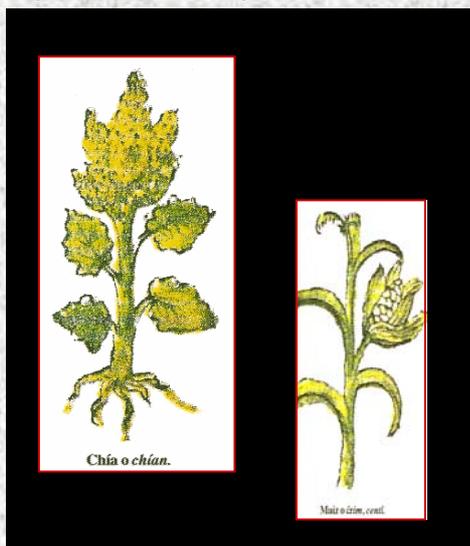
- Nopalli - Cactus leaf
- Elotl - Fresh corn cob
- Xitomatl - Red tomato
- Tomatl - Green tomato usually used in salsa (sauce)
- Chilli - Chilli. These had different names depending on the type
- Etl - Bean
- Metl - Maguey plant
- Ahuacatl - Avocado
- Ayohconetl - Squash (Tatuma squash, like courgette)
- 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.
- Necuatl - Aguamiel
- Atolli - Atole. A corn-based drink mixed with chillies or fruit.
- Xocoatl - A bitter cocoa-based drink.

Extreme left: Chían, a staple seed. Left: Centli or corn. Arqueología Mexicana (vol.31)

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

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 Quanacacatl= chicken meat
- Mazatl= deer Mazanacatl= venison

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

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

Tlaxcaltin - 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.



Above: A tortilla machine in Michoacán market. Arqueología Mexicana

Precious goods

Coztic teocuitlatl - Gold

Ihuime - Feathers

Ulli - Rubber

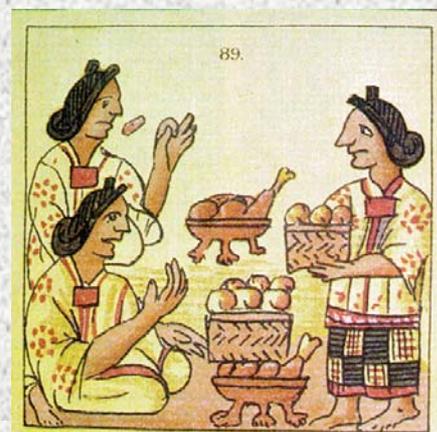
Amatzcaltin - Shells

Chalchihuitl - Jade

Quachtli - Folded cloth, cape or mantle

Cacahuatl - Cacao bean

Euame - Hides



Above: Women preparing food in the Florentine Codex

Currency

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



Left: Mexica merchants trading for Quetzal feathers in Zinacantan - Florentine Codex. Centre: A Jaguar warrior costume probably made from jaguar hide - Matrícula de Tributos. Right: Various precious materials including quachtli (folded cloth or capes) - Florentine Codex.

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