Detroit's 'Shameless Old Lady'

The Eastern Market

Henry Malone
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The Eastern Market is one of those places you must love. She is quite an old woman by now, and part of her (the Gratiot Central Market) was recently gutted by flames: But you love her, for she is very real and genuine—the Lotte Lenya of our local architecture.

She lives just east of the city's newest "Ditch," on Vernor near Russell. Confined mostly to bed, she sprawls over a five block area, languishing in meat-packing houses, vegetable stalls, and exotic wholesalers of olive oil, dried apricots, noodles, and wine. She is always vaguely reminiscing her halcyon days, when she was a young immigrant speaking Yiddish and Italian.

Superficially, she is a cold thing. Surely she is the coldest place in Detroit any time of the year. A bitch in the winter, cool and marvelous in the summer. Yet inside, her busy heart is always warm; a last remnant in our city of those days when people wore their souls on their sleeve, and cardboard in their shoes.

What you come to love most about the Eastern Market is her penchant for remaining real —for staying true to her taste for fresh tomatoes, middle-Eastern bread, and her bottomless appreciation for the smell of rich spices, crazy-colored fish, and flowers.

Like an old Hill woman standing in front of her shack with a shotgun waving off the revenue agents, the Eastern Market remains, despite the ugly efforts of Urban Renewalism, a mighty bastion against the subtly-evil forces of Plastic and Creeping Howard-Johnsonism.

The reasons for her unflagging defensiveness are simple enough. Blame it all on two vital factors. (1) fresh food is not only better but cheaper when you buy it direct—ergo, blame it on the poor people living in the area who seek bargains. (2) Immigrants—Italians, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Germans, Armenians, Arabs, Hungarians, Polies, Russians—and the Afro-American immigrant from the South—they have not lost their intricate taste for the food of their native homeland. Quality has been built into the cuisine of these people for hundreds if not thousands of years. Blame it on their taste—their recipes that demand an extraordinary variety of foodstuffs.

So blame it all, thank God, on the poor and on the immigrants.

How does it work? In the center of what is known as the Eastern Market there is a long partially-sheltered stall—a raised concrete strip. extending more or less from Vernor, northward about five blocks. This is the true "Farmer's Marketplace."

The City of Detroit leases out individual spaces to each farmer on a yearly basis. Once you have a space it is yours for life, as long as you keep paying your dues. The spaces are about ten feet wide and perhaps twenty feet deep. You back up your truck behind your space, unload your merchandise, and make the necessary preparations for selling.

We have all heard it said that the Farmer's Marketplace opens for business about 3 a.m., and we have all dreamed of getting up early one day and making it down there at opening time, before dawn. Essentially, this is a false notion, a kind of Romantic legend among the "Ethnic Hippies."

In fact, no across-the-counter selling legally takes place until 6 a m. The farmers, and their children, do indeed arrive daily (never on Sunday) about 3 or 4 a.m., but they do not sell until 6. You might ask—then why do they get there so early? The answer is interesting and obscure.

Even though no public sales occur before 6, the big-league supermarket chain buyers (usually shopping briskly in teams of two, wearing fur-trimmed overcoats, and sporting enormous cigars) quickly dissolve into the early morning scene of the marketplace. They informally ear-mark or order for their stores so many cases or bushel-baskets of this or that item. Before 6 a m., in other words, many of the "sales" have already informally occurred. Perhaps some of the best (or the worst) merchandise is already gone, loaded for delivery elsewhere.

The farmers, most of them of German origin, come a very long way, sometimes even from little known places in Central Ohio. There is a metal plate above every space that indicates the farmer's name and address. It would be a pleasant game to find out, for instance, who had come the longest distance. The fringe benefits of this game would be terrific; the sights, the sounds, the smells; a Real Trip.

From 6 a.m. 'til noon the farmers reign supreme in the Eastern Market -it is their kind of one-man show. Business whirls exclusively around them. When they're not selling, they're warming their hands over a fire or loading a box on a truck. But at noon they are joined by the "retailers," and foods not grown by local farmers come on the scene quickly; oranges, pineapples, coconuts; food from out-of-state brought in by the big "professionals."

These professional retailers, lacking their own labor force, are responsible for preserving that undercurrent of tragic and raggedy Afro-Americans that haunt the corners of the marketplace.

In a conversation with one of these old "loaders," I learned that he spends most of his winters at the Wayne County General Hospital (in something like a long-term drunk tank for vagrants) and his summers working 6 or 7 hours a day loading and unloading the "retailer's trucks" for $2 and a bottle of wine. Sometimes, he said, they don't pay anything—just provide the wine. He said he slept, like most of the others, in the condemned and abandoned shacks that circle the Eastern Market area.

It even seems very odd, and even suspicious, that the City of Detroit, so efficient in its handling of the licensing of spaces for farmers, has not yet cracked down on the exploitation of these "retailers" who have enslaved these local black gypsies—laughing and joking with their "boys," patting them on their heads, buying them a bottle of wine and getting a day's worth of work for nothing.

Everyone has to find their favorite place in the great market. Most settle for the Samuels Brothers Delicatessen, once they've found it. It is one hell of a cafeteria. The potato pancakes, for instance, are clearly with- out equal in the city. And don't forget to order a huge side-dish of sour cream with your "latkes." Here you will also find the best clam chowder and chocolate eclairs in Detroit.

The little-known area of the market lies in shadows, just east of the farmers' stalls. There is a certain mystery down those small side streets, smelling of blood and dampness. Here is where you find the refrigerated meat-packing houses and the slaughterhouses.

Like the White Hart, you must find "The Butcher's Club" for yourself. There are no signs, no guideposts. The building itself is undistinguished, even dilapidated. But inside—that's something else!

Though a bar, in essence, The Butcher's Club (an informal name) is Detroit's only Yugoslavian restaurant. Jura Begeechevitch (phonetic) is the owner, and has been for the last thirty years. Until recently you could hear authentic Yugoslavian music being played here, informally. His wife is the cook, a great cook at that. She makes, as the menu on the wall describes, "sarma" (stuffed cabbage), "brazneechee" (Yugoslavian shish-kabob), and "chevahcheecha" (an indescribable combination of skewed hamburger meat, chopped onion, hot peppers, sliced tomatoes, and bread).

Jura is beautiful and real, though he hauntingly resembles a Hollywood character actor. He has created for himself and his clientele a truly human-sized universe in an ugly city, an authentic oasis in a desert of cellophane—wrapped Annie Fannies and Playboys.

If you're lucky enough to find Jura, give him our regards. Sit down. Relax. Have him pour you a glass of "shlivoveetsa"—the famous plum cognac of Yugoslavia. Then sit back and look around. Discover that you are really in love with her—The Eastern Market—the old beautiful bitch.

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