The Culture and Politics of Street Food in Los Angeles

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Contemporary Los Angeles has the largest, most diverse population of Latinos in the United States—and reportedly the second largest population of Mexicans outside of Mexico City. It also has one of the most diverse representations of Latino gastronomy in the United States as well as a rich history of Mexican cuisine. The city’s increasingly popular contemporary Latino food scene contrasts sharply with the situation of residents of low-income Latino neighborhoods where access to affordable, healthy food is a struggle.

In this Microseminar we will discuss the history of Latino cuisine in Los Angeles from the mid-nineteenth century till today and talk about the contemporary Latino food scene—trucks, market stalls, and restaurants. By studying Latino food culture in Los Angeles, students will have the opportunity to examine the wealth of Mexicana/o and Latinx food knowledge and traditions as well as the creative ways communities are challenging the inequality that leads to food deserts in working-class communities.

On the second day of the microseminar, we will explore in detail one aspect of Latino food culture in Los Angeles: the culture and politics of street vending. We will discuss the vendors and activists’ recent battle waged in Los Angeles City Hall to legalize street vendors, a struggle linked to discrimination and hostility towards immigrants. Until Spring 2018, Los Angeles was the only major city in the United States where street vending was illegal. L.A. County has an estimated 50,000 sidewalk vendors; 10,000-12,000 of these vendors sell food on the city’s sidewalks every day. Yet, until recently they received citations, had merchandise taken away by police, and lived in constant fear. I will discuss the street vendors’ mobilization during the past several years and the recent legalization victory. We will discuss the impact of the law on the future of street vendors and the city’s residents and business owners.