
Marketing the Fertile Crescent:

The reinvention of the public market tradition in New Orleans

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Under Spanish rule in the late 18th Century, New Orleans began to enjoy the beginnings of what came to be among the more highly developed public market systems in the North America. The system served many purposes: to link regional farmers, fishers and hunters to urban consumers, to serve as gateway for global goods from the Port of New Orleans, like Central American bananas, to enable those on the economic margins to gain a foothold in the economy as business owners and to build social cohesion among a culturally complex colony. By the time post-World War II America promised air-conditioning, new housing, supermarkets and automobiles with the escape from the smelly, messy inner core of the city, the 32-strong public markets were already in decline.

Despite this decline, the collective memory of markets remained important footnotes for a city that, even to this day, maintains an uncomfortable relationship with the forces of American homogenization. Many wholesalers, bakers, grocery stores, and restaurants cut their retail teeth at one of the city’s public