

## **How to Get Fresh Produce into the Boston Food System: Example of East Boston and Chipilín**

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Boston is the largest city in New England and Greater Boston is the tenth largest metropolitan area in the country. This represents a lot of “eaters”, more of whom are interested in local sources of fresh produce. An understanding of the Boston food system is essential in order to be successful in providing these eaters with culturally appropriate local fresh produce. An important component of this food system is the growing immigrant population in Boston; for the first time in its history Caucasians of European decent are a minority. Boston is a city of neighborhoods, with many representing different ethnicities that have their own cuisine and culture, which strongly influence the types of fresh produce they prefer.

**Retail vs. Wholesale.** Retail sales of fresh produce among farmers in Massachusetts has increased significantly in recent years; retail sales are estimated to be much higher than wholesale sales among growers of fresh fruits and vegetables in Massachusetts. That being said; retail sales of Massachusetts grown fresh fruits and vegetables represent a very small percentage of total sales of fresh produce in Massachusetts, even during the growing season.

### ***Retail options:***

Farmers’ markets: There were 197 farmers’ markets in Massachusetts in 2009 and 24 in Boston proper. This is an excellent opportunity to bring fresh produce into Boston. For information on selling at farmers’ markets in Massachusetts, contact David Webber, Farmers’ Market Coordinator of the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (617-626-1754; [David.Webber@state.ma.us](mailto:David.Webber@state.ma.us))

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA’s). There are CSA’s in Boston, even though there is only one commercial farm with land in Boston that has a CSA (Allandale Farm; <http://www.allandalefarm.com/>). There are other commercial farms outside of Boston that offer shares to consumers that live in Boston (e.g. Stillman farm, [www.stillmansfarm.com](http://www.stillmansfarm.com); Brookdale farm, [www.brookfieldfarm.org](http://www.brookfieldfarm.org))

### ***Wholesale options:***

Supermarkets and Independent Grocery Stores. In 2006, there were 35 supermarkets in Boston. This included 27 chain stores: Shaws (9), Stop&Shop (9), Wholefoods (3), Supper 88 (3), Save A Lot (2) and Roche Brothers (1). The remaining eight are independent stores with at least 10,000 square feet and over \$2,000,000 in annual sales. Boston has more supermarkets per capita than many other major cities in the US, but there are still many residents that are more than 0.5 miles from a supermarket, limiting their access.

Corner stores (bodegas). There are literally hundreds of corner stores in Boston that are major sources of food items for residents. Many of them do offer fresh produce, but it is very limited,

due to lack of space and coolers. In ethnic corner stores, much of the fresh produce is made up of tropical root crops (e.g. yautia, edodes) and tropical fruit (e.g. mangoes, plantains).

Restaurants. There are thousands of restaurants in Boston and they represent an important market for locally-grown fresh produce. Many restaurants will use purveyors or “jobbers” to provide them with their produce. There are many farms that sell direct to restaurants. One example is Verrill Farms (<http://www.verrillfarm.com/>) which sells to 33 restaurants, 13 of which are in Boston. This also represents an opportunity to promote retail sales at their farm stands through the restaurants.



Chipilín produced at the UMass Research Farm for sale at a Latino store in Chelsea, Massachusetts.

### Example of Chipilín in East Boston

As an example of introducing culturally appropriate fresh produce into Boston, work done by UMass in East Boston is illustrative. East Boston, with a population of about 40,000, was dominated by Italian immigrants starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Italian immigrants coming to Massachusetts first moved to Orient Heights in “Eastie” before the North End became known as a destination for Italian immigrants. In recent years, the Latino population has exploded in this neighborhood; it is now home to the largest Latino population in Boston, estimated to be 70% of the total population. The dominant ethnicity among Latinos is Salvadorans; there are also large numbers of Brazilians and Colombians, among other Latino groups.

Several crops popular among Salvadorans and Brazilians have been researched at the UMass Research Farm in Deerfield MA and cooperating commercial farms. These crops were evaluated in markets serving the diverse communities in East Boston. These include pipián (*Curcubita* spp.), chipilín (*Crotalaria longirostrata*), taioba (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), and abóbora japonesa (*Cucurbita maxima* X *C. moschata*), and maxixe (*Cucumis anguria*).

Chipilín is an herb popular in Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Southern Mexican cuisine, where it is used in soups and also as an ingredient in tamales. This crop has been grown in Massachusetts for three years, at the UMass Research Farm and on two commercial farms, and has been evaluated in several markets that cater to eaters in East Boston. In interviewing members of the Latino community in East Boston, we learned that a high percentage of the Salvadoran population buys their fresh produce at a Market Basket store in Chelsea, MA. Market Basket has 62 stores in Massachusetts and New Hampshire and the store in Chelsea has the highest sales of fresh produce of all their stores; they have a new store that opened in 2009 that is one of the largest supermarket stores on the Eastern seaboard.

In order to introduce chipilín to the store, which had never sold it before, an event was promoted among the Salvadoran population on a popular radio program. Over 100 pounds of this crop was sold at this event, at \$5.99/pound. Due to the success of this event, this Market Basket store purchased chipilín on a weekly basis through their main warehouse in Tewksbury MA. They eventually began selling this crop to at least two of their other store locations outside of Boston, which also serve Salvadoran customers.

Another store identified by Latinos in East Boston as a popular place to buy Latino crops was an independent store also in neighboring Chelsea Mass. The owner, who is Cuban-American, was very much aware of her clientele (being mostly Salvadoran), but she was not intimately knowledgeable of Salvadoran cuisine, including chipilín. Most of the staff, including the produce managers, are Salvadoran and were very familiar with chipilín, making the introduction of this crop to this store easier than in Market Basket. This store averaged sales of 300 pounds/week, which was enough to justify direct deliveries by a grower cooperative in 2008 and a commercial grower in 2009.

Most of the crops mentioned above have been sold at the only farmers' market in East Boston at Central Square, located at the corners of Meridian, Bennington and Border streets. Chipilín produced at the UMass Research Farm was introduced to the market in 2008, where sales averaged over 40 pounds/week at \$6/pound. In 2009 a cooperating farmer with the Flats Mentor Farm, grew chipilín for sale at this market with excellent results.

In 2008, chipilín was offered to a Latino bodega (corner market) in East Boston. The difficulties with direct sales of this crop in this store were two-fold: they only wanted a 5 – 10 pounds/week, making individual deliveries difficult, and they were not well-equipped to handle perishable fresh produce, a common constraint with many corner stores.

One efficient way to provide chipilín to these smaller stores and restaurants, which also would buy small amounts and make individual deliveries difficult to justify, is to sell through a broker at Chelsea Market (the terminal market of Boston). This is where many of the owners of small stores and restaurants will buy their fresh produce (and other grocery items). Fresh chipilín was sold at one broker at Chelsea Market who has over 2,000 accounts in New England. The wholesale price was lowered by 15% to allow the broker to sell the chipilín at the same price as the wholesale price to other markets.



Chipilín produced at the UMass Research Farm being promoted and sold at the East Boston farmers market.