

The luxuries of produce

By Ximena Carranza Risco

HAVANA – On a hot afternoon, a woman entered one of Havana’s best-stocked food markets on a dangerous mission: buying potatoes.

None were to be seen. She walked past rows of vegetables and fruits, evidently uninterested. Finally a vendor approached with the forbidden words she hoped to hear: “Potatoes, miss?”

The woman nodded. Sliding two fingers into his mouth, the vendor whistled loudly to alert a large man sitting by an empty stand in a dark corner of the market. El Gordo, as he is known in the market, motioned her to come forward. Minutes later, a third man arrived carrying a black tote bag. Inside were eight potatoes.

“In Cuba, you go to jail for selling potatoes,” El Gordo said, grabbing his wrists as if placing handcuffs on himself. “This is illegal business.”

For many Cubans, finding enough to eat has become increasingly difficult. The changing economic system, along with a tourist onslaught, has brought prosperity to some but left others scrambling for food.

“For a Cuban like me, it’s too expensive,” said Angela, a 57-year-old peanut vendor at a Havana park. “That is Cuba’s biggest problem, and it’s only going to get worse.”

Cuban agriculture has struggled to meet demand for decades. The continuing US trade embargo and the 1990 collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s main trading partner, have left the island unable to import fertilizers, pesticides and food. The Cuban government has also failed to administer its state farms, which cover [over 70%](#) of agricultural land, efficiently enough to produce what Cubans want and need.

In recent years, swarms of hungry tourists have thrown Cuba’s already fragile food system even farther off balance. Food prices have soared as private restaurants and hotels compete with Cuban households for fresh produce.

Potatoes, which only the Cuban government is legally allowed to sell, end up in black markets together with other scarce products like fish, lobster and eggs. All are sold at prices that only foreigners or rich Cubans can afford.

Increased demand has meant that even staples like tomatoes are becoming luxuries for many Cuban families.

Since 1962, the government has provided Cubans with ration books to subsidize the purchase of basic foods like rice, eggs, beans, and sugar. Yet many Cubans say the rations are insufficient. Costlier foods like fresh produce and fruits are not included.

Last May, to address this growing frustration, President Raúl Castro announced that the government would begin setting price limits for certain fruits and vegetables. He promised to protect consumers from suppliers and vendors who he said profit at the population's expense.

“We can't ignore the irritation that many citizens feel due to the unscrupulous management of food prices by middlemen, who only care about earning more,” Castro [said](#).

In Cuba, cheap but low-quality food is available at price-controlled state markets. Private markets offer better quality at higher prices. Price controls have also led to the emergence of a black market.

This complex system, which is still taking shape, has led not to food security, but the opposite: stark and growing inequality.

“Sometimes a certain product is in season, but it doesn't reach the state markets,” said Oreysi, a vendor at a state-run market in Havana. “The farmers sell it first to the commercial markets, who can pay more.”

A tour of markets in Havana reflects this divide.

One small state-run market offered only a few pumpkins, yams, wrinkled peppers and bruised plantains. Fruits and leafy greens were nowhere to be found.

Yet at a commercial market less than a block away, fresh garlic was stacked high. Plantains, peppers, pineapples and papayas shone brightly next to piles of celery, lettuce and cucumbers.

Prices at these markets, however, are out of reach for most Cubans. More than [70 per cent](#) of the Cuban labor force is employed by the state. Average monthly salaries are under \$25.

Sitting on a sidewalk in Old Havana, 93-year-old Rubén looked at a plastic bag between his feet containing three yams that he had just purchased at a nearby market.

“Food and clothing used to be the cheapest things in Cuba,” he said with frustration. “But now you have to scout to find food you can afford, and you still eat like a dog. Salaries are too low and the price of food is too high.”

Tourism has also pushed food prices up. Last year a record four million tourists [arrived](#) in Cuba, and the number is expected to rise. Owners of the more than 1700 private restaurants here can pay high prices for the best quality produce.

“Our customers here are mostly tourists and the private restaurants,” said Evangelina, a vendor at a commercial market in Havana. “Only those with money can afford to buy food here.”

While many Cubans scramble to find food, farmers and vendors have found ways to profit from the new system.

Barbara, who sells fruit and vegetables at a commercial market in Havana, quit her job as a literature teacher four years ago. She used to make about \$20 per month. Now she makes three times that.

Growing inequality and the government’s inability to curb it are stoking discontent.

“The government only cares about the restaurants and the hotels,” said El Gordo, the vendor who secretly sells potatoes. After one sale, he pocketed 60 Cuban pesos, about three dollars. That is the equivalent of three days’ salary for an ordinary Cuban, but easily affordable for owners of private restaurants.

“The food is for them,” El Gordo said. “Food is not for Cubans.”
