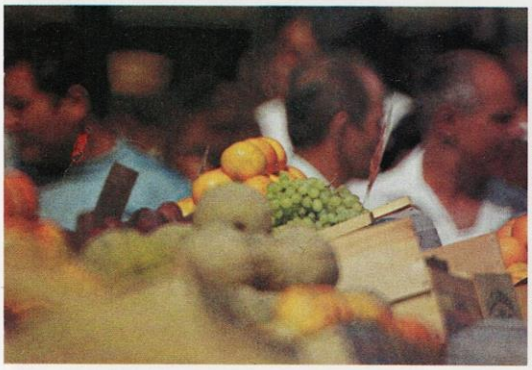
TWA Ambassador


By Vilma Barr



# Boston Markets Blend Food With History

Bostonians long have taken their food, and where they buy it, as a very personal thing. Like other enduring Boston institutions, it is inexorably interwoven with red brick, rhetoric, politics, dissent, action and quality.

In 1737, a group of aroused citizens who did not favor the organized and regulated town market system disguised themselves as clergy one dark night and literally tore apart the wooden Dock Square market shelter with their bare hands. From that time on, market structures have been made of sturdier stuff and, happily, Boston has retained its own unique market


heritage. Physically, the traditional market district stretches from the back door of new City Hall past Faneuil Hall and Faneuil Hall Market nearly to the waterfront, crosses the milieu of pulsating Blackstone Street and Haymarket Square, and then fans out through the narrow, pattern-defying streets of the Italian North End.

In our promotion-geared society, it's a miracle the market works as well as it does. There is no central management office, no publicity-oriented, spaghetti-eating festivals, no organized newspaper advertising. What it does appear to do is send out invisible but highly effective wave lengths inviting residents and visitors alike to come on over and discover for themselves the full flavor of its heritage and slow-steamed Indian Pudding.

A history of the 250 years of the Boston market area reads like a combined urban version of the *Perils of Pauline* and *Anthony Adverse*. But somehow it has come through the boys-night-out prank of 1737, fires, wars, the population migration, poor transportation planning, and no sensible parking system. Private citizens have begun to take an active part in the area's rejuvenation—a determined young developer has led the project to sleek up the great gray Faneuil Hall Market. Several officially sanctioned Freedom Trail stations are along the Haymarket-North End route, but the area is worthy of its own day-long exploration—a dual gustatory/educational experience.

For a full 360-degree view of a cityscape combining the old and the new, start at the Government Center subway stop exit. Look for the needle-slender steeple of Old North Church, its classic form rising over the melange of rooftops of the teeming, insouciant North End. Look right, at the

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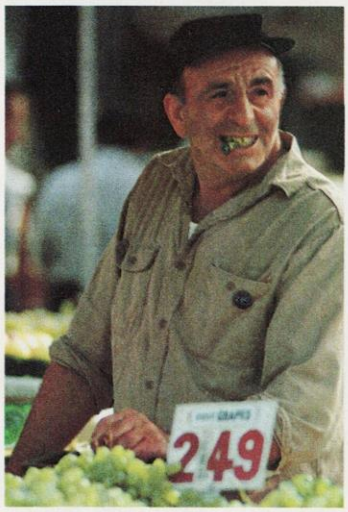
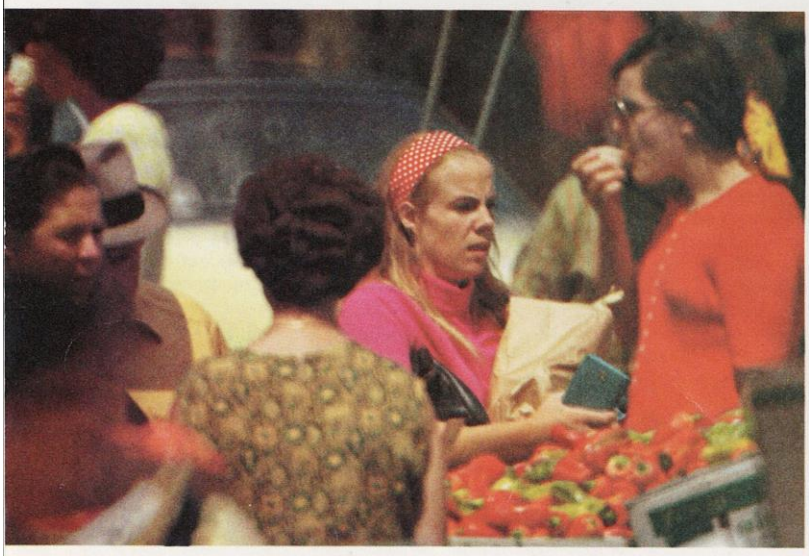
c. 1968 red-brick pattern of the Plaza melting into the delicate Flemish bond of Faneuil Hall and the massive stone slabs of the Faneuil Hall Market. In front is City Hall, the country's most contemporary government building.

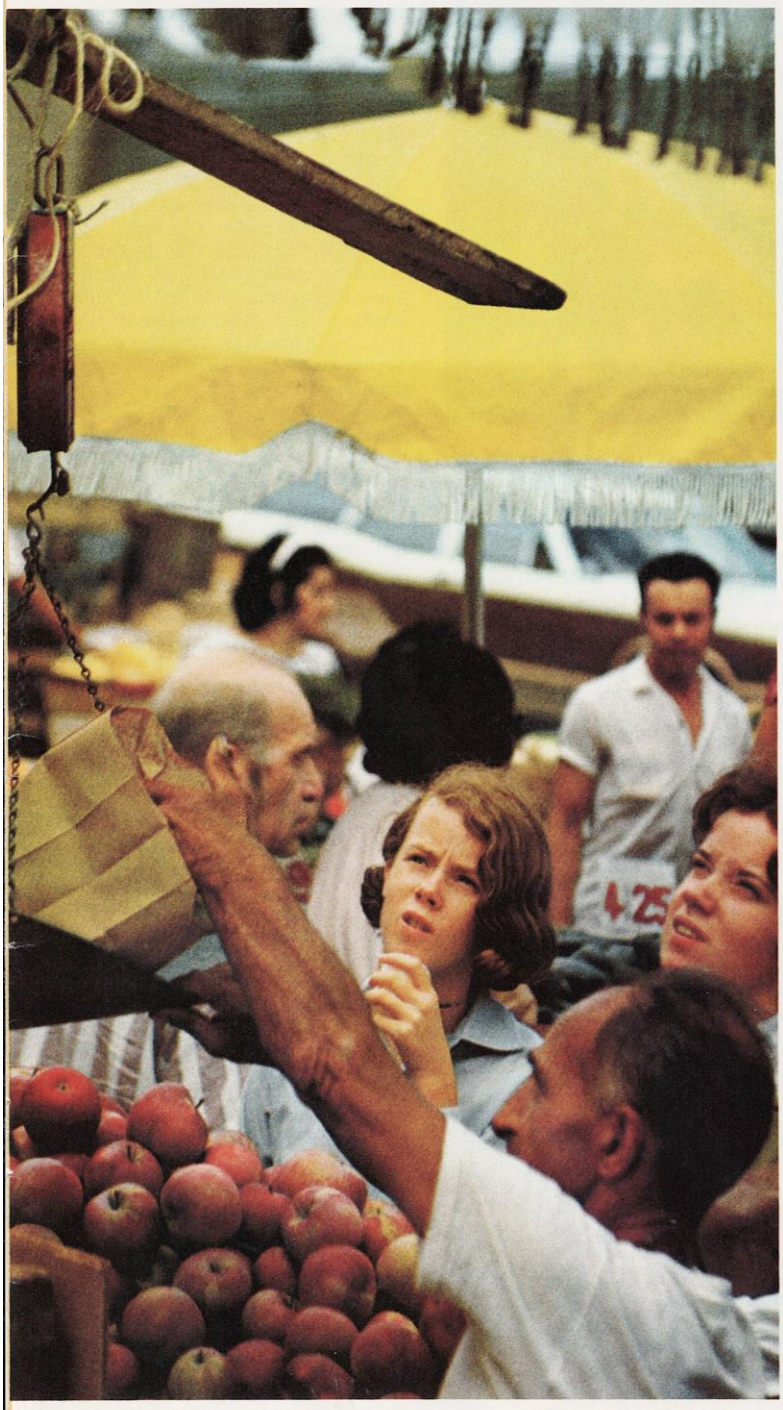
While policies and laws have been dispensed from City Hall for just the past three years, meat has been dispensed from neighboring Faneuil Hall's first floor, and oratory from the second, for the past 229 years (with a few short interruptions). The building began as the ultimate in public-spiritedness—an outright gift from citizen to city, with love. Peter Faneuil, of French Huguenot descent and one of the wealthiest colonials of the day, thought one-stop shopping he had enjoyed at the ill-fated Dock Square market should be revived, and if his fellow Bostonians were against a government-supervised market, then he would donate the shell and let private enterprise take over. He would even throw in a 1,000-seat public meeting hall above the market for good measure (even then Bostonians liked to combine their food for thought with the carbohydrate/protein variety). His generous proposition squeaked through by a mere seven votes (360 nay to 367 yea) and, in 1740, the foundation was laid. Two years later the capping-off ceremony anchored in place what has become the fanciful high point in the weather-vane manufacturer's art—the green, glass-eyed, hammered-copper grasshopper, symbolizing agriculture and copied from a vane atop London's Royal Exchange.

Handsome though the market was (it was enlarged to its current size in 1805 by master architect Charles Bulfinch), Faneuil Hall was not exactly




*Faneuil Hall, dwarfed in size but not in time by Boston's City Hall, still does business on the same old corner after 229 years, purveying ribs and roasts to meatbuying Bostonians.*





a socko-boffo consumer economic success. Competition from door-to-door peddlers and a still-strong anti-market faction kept stalls empty, and only two spaces were rented in its first year. Gradually, resistance ebbed, and by the beginning of the 1800s, shopping at Faneuil Hall became an accepted daily routine, accomplished by none other than the man of the house. It became ". . . a morning ritual, observed by all leading townsmen whether they set forth from Bowdoin Square, Beacon Hill, or the South End," according to a period journalist. "Determined mercantile figures, followed by a servant, turned down every respectable street to converge on Faneuil Hall. There they wandered, among mountains of meat, fish, fowl, vegetables, fruits, and dairy products. When all the makings of an early-afternoon dinner were stowed away in a servant's basket, the merchants marched off to counting houses along the wharves or offices in State Street."

Today, purveyors are reduced to a handful of wholesale/retail meat dealers. It's fun to purchase roasts from a butcher whose forebears came over in 1637 and liked to sail down from Maine, park their craft at the door, and buy a supply of ribs for 10¢ a pound and round for 8¢ a pound. Directly above the meatmen is the balconied meeting hall (a late 1890s restoration job) and on the third floor is the headquarters for The Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts, the oldest band of citizen-soldiery in America.

Now by merely crossing a small street, the visitor can bridge the architectural gap from the Colonial/Federalist Faneuil Hall to Alexander Parris' monumental 1824-26 achievement, Faneuil Hall Market. If it appears in need of a good sprucing up, it will soon get one, thanks to a sensitive businessman in the San Francisco mold (like Ghirardelli Square's William Roth and The Cannery's Leonard Martin) who has stepped in to give a noble building a new lease on life, and in turn to lease out currently vacant space for shops, offices, and traffic-generating service establishments. A joint venture between F. A. Stahl & Associates, architects, and Roger Webb's Architectural Heritage hopes to give Bostonians once again a pride-invoking "walkway to the

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sea" by restoring facades of the central building, with its green copper Roman Pantheon-like dome and Greek temple end porticos, and the flanking warehouse buildings.

The Market (also known as Quincy Market for Mayor Josiah Quincy whose early urban renewal efforts in the 1820s cleared blighted properties to make way for the 450,000-square-foot project) once was occupied by over 100 different firms doing a brisk inside/outside, wholesale/retail trade. It has fewer tenants today, but there are still some meatmen, as well as a first-rate cheesery and a candy seller.

Have a snack or lunch at Mondo's Restaurant on South Market Street (enormous portions at moderate prices —hamburg platter, $1.35; strawberry shortcake, $.75), or that fabled food institution, Durgin-Park. Durgin-Park serves 100% good food and is 101% pure legend. Founded a few years after the completion of the Market building, on its second floor, to serve meals to the market men and crews of the ships anchored virtually at its front door (subsequent land fill has pushed the shoreline out another quarter of a mile into the harbor), the restaurant has been doing a booming business for a century and a half. Its large menu lists a wide selection of meat, native seafood and specialty dishes, served in the large dining rooms nondecorated in no-decor. The long, thick boarding-house style plank tables have survived through generations of diners: a bit of functional atmosphere, and a great social leveler. (Closing time is 9 p.m.; reservations aren't accepted.)

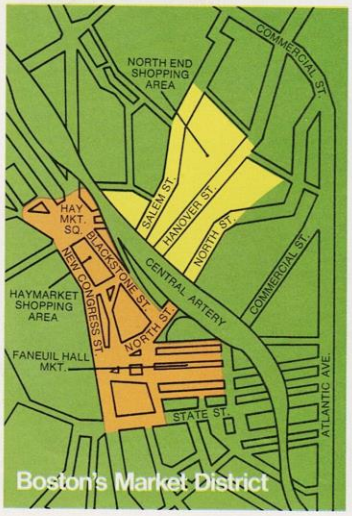
The Union Oyster House, at 41 Union Street in the heart of Haymarket, is another venerated Boston eating institution mixing history and fare. The building, which dates from about 1750, was once a home of Louis Philippe before he became King of France, and a publishing house. From the third floor came the Whig-leaning *Massachusetts Spy*. The restaurant fans out in several directions upstairs, so there is more to the seating than meets the eye from an outside-looking-in view.

Haymarket Square itself rumbles into life early Friday morning as the weekend greengrocers squeak, rattle,

Photos by Gerald Brimacombe

and roll their venerable pushcarts (the metal parts are often a century old) onto Blackstone Street and Dock Square. There are no reserved places—positions are on a first-come-first-get basis, although an unofficial gentlemen's agreement keeps everybody in just about the same place each week. The outdoor market functions all year long; only the most extreme weather keeps the vendors at home. Rent is nonexistent, although the store-front merchants do collect a stipend from the push-cart purveyors for electricity.

It isn't unusual for these weekend produce dealers to be veterans of 30 or 40 years "on the street." Often it's a family operation—possibly started




when they grew the food and trucked it into the city before dawn. Their prices, they insist, are still 25 per cent to 35 per cent lower than supermarkets.

Save time and energy for the Italian North End, reached by foot from Haymarket via a pedestrian underpass beneath the elevated Fitzgerald Expressway (re the aforementioned "poor transportation planning"). Work your way up to Old North Church with its charming garden, and Paul Revere's house (dating from 1670, and the oldest dwelling house still standing in Boston). Along the way, meander in and out of the shops along Salem Street (known to the cognoscenti as "Salami Street"), Prince Street, and Hanover Street; the pastry shops serving coffee, the bread bakers serving pizza, the cookie-maker venting a natural artistic bent with sculpture-quality marzipan. The shopkeepers are friendly and helpful, love to chat, give advice, recipes, preparation tips, fine points on recognizing cheese or cold cut quality, et al, so don't hesitate to ask them about the history of the olives in the foreign-stenciled barrel, or the luscious fresh filling of the *canneloni*.

Taste-testing as you go is an accepted activity of the North End panorama, from "Cat Pie" (a double-crust, filled concoction) to "slush" (a super-smooth water ice). For sit-down repast, take your pick from hearty to haute cuisine. On the hearty end of the spectrum is Regina's, at 11½ Thatcher Street, a pizza-only establishment where their carefully constructed tomato pie is baked in built-in brick-lined ovens. Stella's at 9 Fleet Street is deservedly renowned for superb food served with true flair; dress is from casual to formal, and it is one of the few places in Boston where you can have a complete dinner past 10 p.m. The European, at 218a Hanover Street, is a mid-point—fine pasta and pizza, but no *cafe diabolo* created from a table-side cart.

Come to Boston's Haymarket and the North End well prepared, prepared to get involved! Be not a spectator, "but an actor in an ever changing drama," advised the late George F. Weston, Jr., knowledgeable Boston chronicler. Be bombarded, in a delicious, multi-sensory way—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch—a full-screen presentation! Don't miss it!