

STEPHEN SMITH

Sound Body

For new Americans, a poorer diet

For Luis Guerrero, they are the tastes and smells of childhood: mango and yucca and plátano. Savory and bewitching — and nutritious.

At the age of 14, Guerrero emigrated from his native Santo Domingo to Boston. Over time, he stopped eating those tropical fruits and vegetables, and his once taut frame turned flabby.

"Why?" Guerrero said. "It

was seeing what most of you guys eat. So I was eating McDonald's, Chinese food."

The story of Luis Guerrero is the story of many immigrants to the United States, where the streets are paved not so much with gold but with burgers, fries, and super-sized, value-priced, on-the-run meals.

Last month, at the nation's premier gathering of public

health specialists, researchers revealed the eating habits of 662 poor women in Massachusetts.

Their finding: Women who had most recently immigrated to the United States ate more fruits and vegetables than either native US residents or women who had immigrated years earlier. The American-born women ate 2½ fewer servings of fruits and vegetables every day than recent immigrants, the Harvard School of Public Health study found.

It was a discovery that affirmed a decade's worth of research showing that immi-

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grants often reach US shores with an affinity for healthy foods, only to succumb to relentless fast-food marketing and the equally relentless pressures that come from being poor in America. The consequence: Children of immigrants are more likely than their parents to join America's epidemic of obesity.

The Harvard researchers found that when immigrant women first arrived in the United States, their cultural heritage maintained a fierce hold.

"In their countries of origin, food was central to family, food was central to life in general," said Tamar Dubowitz, who presented the research at the annual convention of the American Public Health Association. "Eating held a different priority."

But, over time, the best of intentions fray from a lack of money, a lack of time, and a lack of family support.

"There are pressures to assimilate, too — part of it is eating the way people eat here," said Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, a Harvard specialist who focuses on racial and ethnic disparities in health. "And when people are on a limited budget, it's easier to go for a \$1 or \$2 McDonald's meal than to eat what you would eat in your home country."

Margarita Figueroa, who participated in a related Harvard study designed to encourage immigrant mothers to eat well, used to do most of her food shopping at Americas' Food Basket, right in her Dorchester neighborhood. But the whole chain, which had catered to a Hispanic market, was shuttered last month.

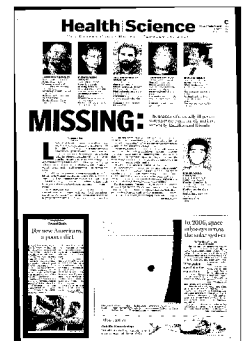
"Now," said Figueroa, who has a 3-year-old son, "I don't know where to go."

To get the food she likes, Figueroa will have to travel to Dedham — or settle for more expensive food closer to home.

And, sometimes, it's not just a matter of cost. It can also be an issue of time.

The Harvard researchers conducted extensive interviews with 44 low-income women from Boston and from the Springfield region. The women, both those born in the United States and those who had immigrated, spoke of having too little time to prepare nutritious meals, too little time to shop for nutritious food.

"Quite simply, the most inexpensive foods are energy-dense, nutrient-sparse foods," said John Cook, a nutrition researcher at Boston University's School of Medicine. "It can be very rational for low-income immigrants to rely on fast food and conven-



ience foods, principally because they get more energy for the money they spend.”

So what can be done to keep immigrants from picking up the unhealthy eating habits of their new land?

Nutrition specialists said there's much to learn from the experience of immigrants. For one thing, it shows the importance of intervening early to reinforce good habits and discourage bad habits, said Karen Peterson, director of Public Health Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health.

One way to do that, specialists said, is by making sure that immigrant women and children who are eligible for federal aid programs get signed up. Another way: altering those federal initiatives.

Last year, an advisory panel that Peterson sat on recommended reforming the federal program that supplements the diets of poor women, infants, and children, known as WIC.

That panel suggested, for instance, that fruits and vegetables be substituted for the juice that's now provided to older infants. The recommendations are being weighed by the US Department of Agriculture.

Some solutions can be found in the heart of immigrant neighborhoods, where corner stores are likely to stock fruits and vegetables, Dubowitz found. There's less produce in low-income neighborhoods inhabited by native-born Americans.

It is, she said, classic supply and demand: Recent immigrants want produce, so the stores in their neighborhoods supply it.

Shops like Pimentel Market, a corner grocery in Jamaica Plain, festooned with a mural of a bodacious woman striking a seductive pose with a strawberry. Five years ago, Luis Guerrero became owner of that Centre Street market.

Many of his customers are fellow Dominicans. And they have one demand: Give us the fruits and vegetables of our homeland.

And so he does.

Inside the shop, merengue music hangs in the air, and fruits and vegetables glisten in a five-shelf cooler, watched over by a benevolent army of patron saints. Guerrero figures he sells \$1,000 to \$1,500 worth of fresh produce every week.

He's also become one of his own best customers. Guerrero has forsaken the fat-laden food he'd filled up on when he first moved to Boston, substituting it with healthier fare.

And those 20 extra pounds? Gone.



Luis Guerrero's patrons want their homeland's fresh food.

