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Respect for street food

BY DAVID HAMMOND April 25, 2012 6:16PM

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A young boy of the dusty streets playfully slaps a mound of raw meat as the shopkeeper looks on, unconcerned; butchered poultry perches on tables and fish splay across the ground in the midday sun, unrefrigerated; flies swirl and dogs walk about brilliantly colored pyramids of tropical fruit and vegetables.

Admittedly, food safety standards in the immense, high-energy street market in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, are different than those in Chicago. This Southeast Asian souk could never get a pass from a Chicago health inspector. Not by a long shot.

Still, I broke defensive when a British visitor sneered that this thriving social and commercial hub was a "sh---- place."

Many would likely be appalled by food safety practices in even fine-dining kitchens, and we haven't forgotten the sickness and death brought on by tainted cantaloupe, spinach and the all-American hamburger.

Eating, anywhere, can be dangerous.

Perhaps in reaction to the sanctimonious superiority of tourists who look down upon such humble food zones, I gobbled down just-grilled fish, a skewer of tiny and spicy sausages, and a long rice roll stuffed with beans and taro.

Markets like these — vital centers of local spirit and food — deserve respect. Looking beyond their humble stalls, I admire the endurance of families who've continued for generations to bring forth the products of their hands and lands. That admiration grows when one considers many older people at this market must have endured the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. Here, there were monsters; now, amidst those angry ghosts, a community struggles to resurrect itself.

To minimize ever-present health risks at such markets, I avoid raw food and shellfish that could harbor dangerous bacteria. Instead, I grab fish and sausage fresh off the fire, at their safest and most delicious.

In Chicago, street vendors face strict regulation, and virtually none cook over open-flame — except at Maxwell Street Market. To experience the delicious adventurousness offered by street markets worldwide, Chicagoans can still visit this magnificent collection of pan-regional Mexican street food, cooked on site, full of flavor, proudly served.

The 100-year-old Maxwell Street Market continues to thrive on Desplaines between Roosevelt and Harrison, from 7 a.m. until 3 p.m. Sundays. Rest assured, food safety inspectors are always at hand.

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