

# Herbs and Spices Found in a Grocery Store Where Low-Income Mexicans Frequently Shop

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**Summary:** We used photography to document the herbs & spices available to a low-income, primarily Mexican community near our university. While we were looking for culinary agents, we failed to consider the importance of medicinal & functional herbs to this community. We attribute this “novel” finding to ethnocentric bias and encourage other researchers to involve community members in the research design process.

## Introduction

- Nutrition educators often advise consumers to use herbs and spices (H&S) to flavor food without adding excess fat and sodium.
- Behavioral interventions that promote H&S use may be effective in lowering sodium intake,<sup>1</sup> improving diet quality,<sup>2</sup> and influencing vegetable consumption among adolescents.<sup>3</sup>
- H&S intake in the US has been reported to differ among racial/ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup> Yet, research of H&S preferences in immigrant groups, particularly those from Latin America, has been limited.
- Understanding H&S preferences among various populations, including immigrant groups, will allow nutrition educators to deliver more culturally competent nutrition education to those groups.

**Objective:** Document and investigate H&S available to a low-income Mexican & Mexican-American community in New Brunswick, NJ.

## Methods

- H&S from the largest grocery store frequented by the low-income Mexican community in New Brunswick, NJ were analyzed for this descriptive study.
- With permission from the store manager, photographs were taken of all H&S for sale in the store.
- H&S from the photographs were documented in Microsoft Excel.
- When H&S names differed between Spanish and English, they were translated into English by a bilingual research assistant.
- An Internet search was conducted to discover the uses of H&S unfamiliar to the research team.

## Results

- Of all the H&S documented, 45 did not appear on previously developed lists of H&S used for culinary purposes in the United States.
- Of those, 21 were identified as having **medicinal and functional** uses, but were usually grouped with the other H&S at the store.
- Many of the medicinal and functional H&S are brewed into herbal teas and used for a variety of remedies (see Table).
- Many of these medicinal and functional uses had mixed evidence to their efficacy and/or were not available in the English scientific literature.

Fig. 1 & 2: Examples of photos taken at the grocery store frequented by Mexican and Mexican-American community members. Note the mixture of H&S for culinary and medicinal uses.



Table: Purported medicinal and functional benefits of select herbs and spices found in a Latinx grocery store in New Brunswick, NJ

Spanish Name	English Name	Medicinal/Functional Use
Ajenjo	Wormwood	Anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, pain relief
Arnica	Arnica	Anti-inflammatory, pain relief
Borraja	Borage	Respiratory treatment, anti-inflammatory, etc.
Bronquisan	Bronchial blend	Sore throat & respiratory treatment
Cola de caballo	Field horsetail	Edema, renal, & urinary tract treatment
Diabetisan	Sugar balance tea	Blood sugar regulation
Epazote de rama	Epazote branch	Gastrointestinal & intestinal parasite treatment
Flor de manzanilla	Chamomile flower	Anti-inflammatory, gastrointestinal treatment, etc.
Hercampuri	Hercampuri	Weight loss supplement, liver detoxifier, etc.
Hierba infante	Manayupa	Circulation improvement, skincare supplement
Hierba luisa	Lemon verbena	Gastrointestinal & insomnia treatment, pain relief, etc.
Hoja de aguacate	Avocado leaf	Antidiarrheal, anti-inflammatory, kidney stone treatment
Hoja de Guyaba	Guava leaf	Gastrointestinal, diabetes, & wound treatments, etc.
Hoja de sen	Senna leaf	Laxative, weight loss supplement
Hoja de tilo	Linden leaf	Anti-inflammatory, hypotensive, anxiety & stress reliever
Prostasan tea	Prostate care tea	Prostate & urinary tract treatment, BPH treatment
Ruda	Rue	Gastrointestinal, respiratory, & circulatory treatment, etc.
Té de kita kilos	Kita kilos tea	Weight loss supplement
Una de gato	Cat's Claw	Immune system booster, OA and RA symptom reliever
Valeriana	Valerian	Insomnia & sleep disorder treatment
N/A	Liver cleanser tea	Liver detoxifier, hypercholesterolemia treatment

## Conclusions & Implications for Practice

- A descriptive analysis of H&S in a Latinx grocery store in New Brunswick, NJ found that although many unfamiliar H&S were indeed culinary ingredients, 21 had medicinal and functional uses, with most of them being used in herbal teas.
- This “novel finding” may be attributed to **ethnocentrism**, a phenomenon in which outside cultures are evaluated using a dominant, “in-group” culture as a standard.<sup>5</sup> Ethnocentrism has been documented among healthcare professionals, even those who are also deemed “culturally competent.”<sup>6</sup>
- Involving community members in the development of culturally relevant nutrition education materials can mitigate misattributions made due to ethnocentric bias.
- It may behoove nutrition professionals to undergo more training on cultural cuisine and traditional medicine to better understand Latinx and immigrant populations.

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