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The Washington Post

May 20, 1983, Friday, Final Edition

SECTION: Weekend; Weekend Getaways; Pg. 9

LENGTH: 848 words

HEADLINE: LEXINGTON'S SIX SISTERS: MARKETS WITH A SENSE OF NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY

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BODY:

Lexington Market--from the oysters down at Faidley's to Pollock Johnny's "works," you could get lost in it. But it has six little sisters -- city markets where, instead of Lexington's 160 stalls, there are 30 or so.

In the middle of downtown, Lexington Market is everybody's supermarket; they come from all over Baltimore and its suburbs to shop or enjoy a sort of perambulating smorgasbord. But the smaller markets -- Belair, Broadway, Cross Street, Hollins, Lafayette and Northeast -- give a greater sense of neighborhood and community.

"Here we have neighborhoods that survive on us," says Steve Walder, a merchant and the president of the Market Association. "People come every day to buy their bread and their bacon and their milk. They don't shop once a week; they shop daily."

At Nick's, one of several fish stalls in the Cross Street Market, four live turtles leer up from a basket on the floor. "That's Maryland terrapin," says the man behind the counter as he tries to yank apart live crabs clinging to each other by the claws. "They're not snappin' turtles," he assures a visitor. "They're kissin' turtles."

Cross Street Market serves a true melting pot: the white-collar worker of Federal Hill, the old Baltimore resident, the blue-collar worker and the homesteader of the Otterbein area who bought a dilapidated house for a dollar and is "rehabbing" it.

The market's a real shopping experience, with the emphasis on shopping, for meats and fresh poultry, vegetables and fish. (One seafood stall next to a raw bar sells eight graduated sizes of shrimp.)

But for shopping and noshing in equal measure, there are the north and south sheds of Broadway Market on Fells Point.

Broadway Market's shoppers and merchants form a microcosm of ethnic Baltimore: Greek, Polish, Korean, black; young professionals and older people moving back to the city; and the families of the men who work the tugboats berthed in the harbor a block from the market.

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Between the market and the water is a park, where you can sit in the sun and watch the tugs or contemplate the irony across the street where the Fells Point Art Gallery flanks The Port Mission.

The market's south shed has the appearance of a train station: Inside, looking out on Broadway from a stool at Aliceanna's Kitchen (eating curried chicken salad on croissant), or at Fells Point Coffee Company (eating cheese danish), you feel as though you're riding in a train -- only the people outside are moving.

They come clear across town to eat Carolyn Krysiak's spareribs, a big helping with deep-fried potato quarters for \$3.25. Highly seasoned and heavy on the salt, it's Krysiak's own recipe, of which she's justifiably proud.

She's one of the newer merchants in the south shed -- and if you want a squid sandwich or tempura, try here. In the north shed, you'll find a raw bar along with, among others, an Italian deli, a Polish deli, a salad shop and, for the romantic, a candy-and-flower stall.

The market is immaculate, probably owing to a robust competition between north and south. "It's just like the Battle of Gettysburg," says the Market Association's Walder. "They both want the same thing, but they fight over it."

Walder runs Steve's Poultry and Bakery in the Belair Market in a black section of east Baltimore. "Right now, I'm the only fresh-made-on-the-premises bakery in the markets," he says. Much of the baked goods at his stall is heavily sugar-coated, but not the sweet potato pie, mellow yellow at 85 cents.

In recent years, the range of merchandise in the city markets has opened up a bit, says Walder, to include "plants and flowers and novelties and wigs." The approach, he says, is "going back to the old concept -- instead of being a supermarket, it's all under one roof, but it's individual merchants." And there are some things you just can't get in supermarkets. "We sell a lot of brown eggs. People around here grew up on them. They pay more for them because they're brown," an average of 10 cents more a dozen.

At Lexington Market and Broadway Market, a dairy called Castle Farms sells fresh cottage cheese scooped to order and butter sliced to order, "things that you buy in the supermarket already packaged," says Walder. "People come up and say, 'Give me a dollar's worth of this.' Can you imagine saying, 'Give me 50 cents worth of cottage cheese'?"

For the merchants in the markets, weekdays are slow, except for lunchtime. "All week you're getting ready for the weekends," says Walder. "Then, excuse the expression, all hell breaks loose."

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

Baltimore's city markets are open Monday to Saturday. Hours generally are 8 to 5:30 Monday through Friday, 6 to 6 Saturday.

BELAIR -- Gay and Forrest Streets, Oldtown Mall.

BROADWAY -- Broadway and Fleet Streets.

CROSS STREET -- Light and Cross Streets, Federal Hill.

HOLLINS MARKET -- Hollins and Carrollton Streets, Union Square.

LAFAYETTE MARKET -- Pennsylvania Avenue and Laurens Street.

LEXINGTON MARKET -- Lexington and Eutaw Streets.

NORTHEAST MARKET -- Monument and Chester Streets.

GRAPHIC: Picture, Market, by Pamela Kessler.