

## Destination HISPANIC AMERICA

By Ann Malaspina

Evening falls along Roosevelt Avenue. Salsa music floats from car windows. Beneath the elevated train tracks, a taco truck pulls up to the curb and opens for business. Stores turn on their lights: *Consultorio Médico, Productos Peruanos, Restaurante Salvadoreño*.

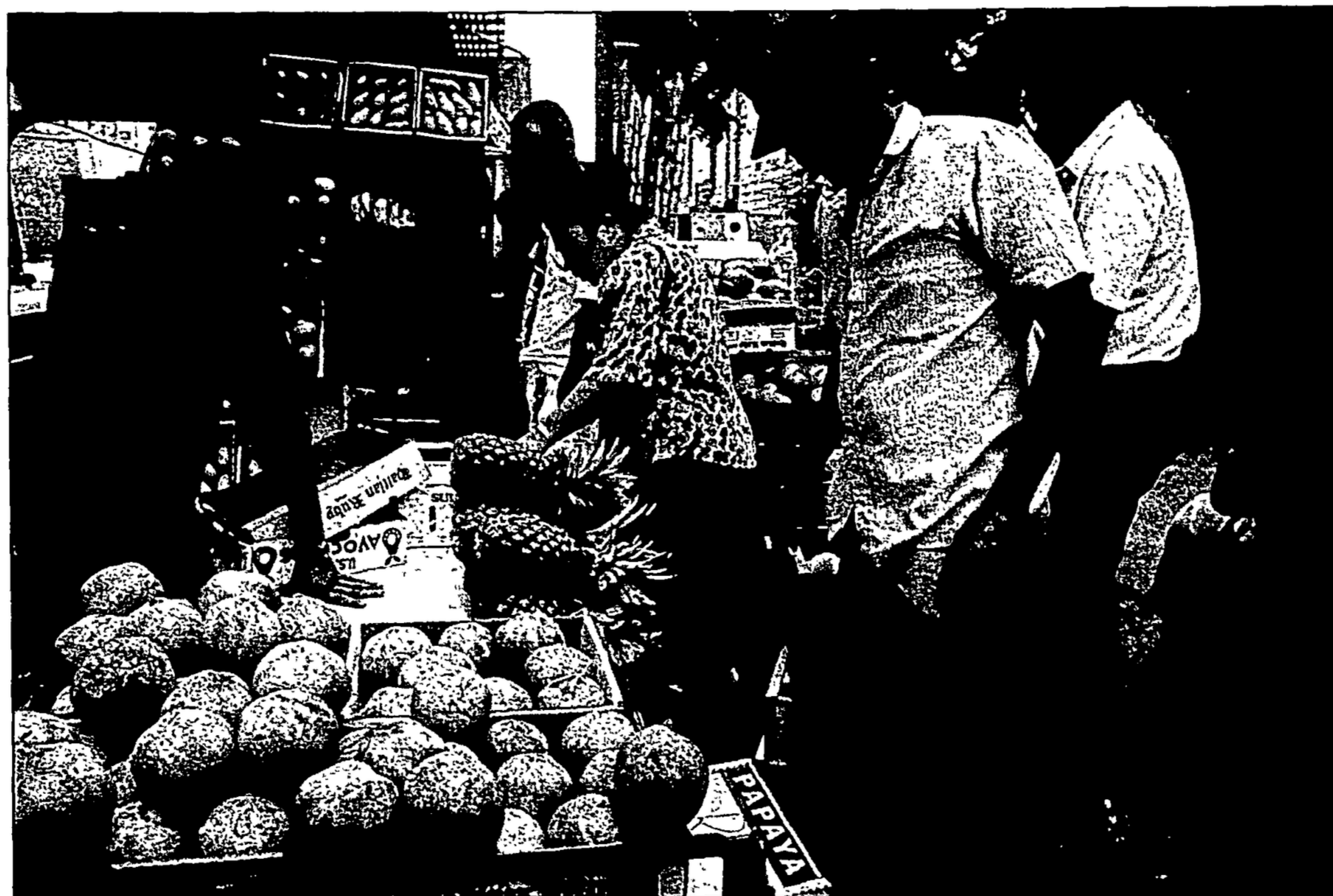
Along the sidewalk, a Dominican vendor bends over his fruit stand and slices a mango. He flavors it with salt and lemon juice before handing it to his last customer of the day. Men gather at corner newsstands to read *El Diario, Noticias del Mundo*, and other newspapers. A Guatemalan couple—the man in a straw hat and the woman in an ankle-length skirt—stroll by.

Roosevelt Avenue and nearby streets in Jackson Heights form the heart of Queens' fast-growing Hispanic community. Every Spanish-speaking country in the world is represented in this crowded, colorful neighborhood, where Bolivian bakeries and Colombian meat markets coexist with Korean restaurants and Indian sari stores.

Across the East River from Manhattan, Queens is the largest of New York's five boroughs. It is a flat, sprawling mix of tree-lined streets, red brick apartments and multifamily houses, factories, parks and shopping centers. First inhabited by native Americans, then Dutch settlers and, later, European immigrants, Queens is now home to Indians, Asians, and Latinos.

The first influx of Hispanics to New York began after World War II. Until 1965, most were Puerto Ricans who settled in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

Although the Bronx has the largest Latino community, almost one quarter of the city's Spanish-speaking residents live in Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, Co-



Street vendors sell their wares along Roosevelt Avenue.

# QUEENS: NEW YORK'S HISPANIC CROSSROADS

rona, and other neighborhoods in Queens. In the past 20 years, Queens' Hispanic population has skyrocketed, from 153,691 in 1970 to 381,120 today. Hispanics now comprise 19.5 percent of the borough's population, up from 7.7 percent in 1970.

"There are some very nice, liveable, middle-class, middle-income neighborhoods in Queens. Also, there are better schools," says Evelyn Mann, director of the population division in the Department of City Planning.

Hispanics have brought new life to the borough, filling pews at churches, creating cultural events and energizing business districts. "You have a community in need of services and goods," Mann says. Yet, immigrants can find New York overwhelming. They may need help finding housing and jobs; learning English is often the first challenge.

Carlos Ledée, a Puerto Rican, helps the youngest newcomers. As supervisor

of the bilingual program in School District 24, Ledée has seen the number of Latino students rise from 9,000 in 1985 to more than 12,000 in 1991. At least 80 languages are spoken in the district, from Laotian to Macedonian, but Spanish-speaking students will likely account for half the district's 26,000 student body next year. "This minority is not a minority," observes Ledée.

One hundred and four bilingual teachers help mainstream the children. Children who are illiterate in their native language face the worst difficulties, says Ledée: "We have Nicaraguans and Dominicans who never went to school."

Immigrants also find help at the Queens Borough Public Library. Through its New Americans Project, the library offers ESL (English as Second Language) classes, cultural events, Spanish materials, and programs to help immigrants adjust to New York. "There is no equivalent to the American public li-

brary system in Spanish-speaking countries," explains Alan Wagner, assistant project director. More than half the 3,000 ESL students are Hispanic.

Hispanic businesses have opened across Queens, including restaurants serving specialties from Peru, Cuba, El Salvador and other countries. *La Pequeña Colombia*, a popular Roosevelt Avenue spot, opened seven years ago after owner Gilberto Garrido noticed another Colombian establishment had more customers than it could handle.

Diners feast on dishes such as *plato montanero* (ground beef, fried eggs, fried pork, griddle cake, avocado and fried banana), *arroz con camarones* (shrimp rice), and *arepas con queso* (cheese-filled corncakes). "We've been very successful," says Blanca Escobar, co-owner and Garrido's sister. The family owns a second restaurant down the block.

Roman Catholic churches, once predominantly Irish American, welcome His-