

CINCO  
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MAYO

# Salsa, Fajitas and Mariachi

By LAUREN MONSEN

Celebration of Mexican heritage is widely observed in the United States.



Members of the dance group Danza Teocalt perform during the Cinco de Mayo celebration in Los Angeles, California.

When the Cinco de Mayo (“fifth of May”) holiday is observed in the United States, the annual festivity honors the Mexican heritage of a growing number of U.S. citizens, with a focus on Mexico’s distinctive cuisine, folk dances, colorful costumes and Mariachi music.

What many celebrants might not realize is that the holiday has evolved significantly over the years, often bearing little trace of its origins. Cinco de Mayo is not, as some believe, Mexico’s Independence Day, which is September 16. The fifth of May holiday commemorates the victory of outnumbered and largely indigenous Mexican forces over the French army at the Battle of Puebla in 1862, following a tumultuous period in Mexico’s history.

According to historians, Cinco de Mayo not only recalls an underdog victory for Mexico, but also represents the triumph of indigenous people over foreign conquistadors. As such, the date might have more complex significance for Mexicans than for their Mexican American counterparts, whose absorption into their new homeland has become part of the immigrant narrative of the United States. But if the meaning of Cinco de Mayo has evolved for Mexican Americans, it is no less an expression of pride in the traditions of their Mexican forebears.

As U.S. demographic shifts begin to reflect a growing Latino presence—with greater political and economic clout than ever before—Americans have become increasingly familiar with many Latin cultural imports, particularly Latin music and food. These imports have been embraced by the U.S. mainstream to such a degree that some remarkably successful hybrids—such as Tex-Mex cuisine—have emerged. The popularity of Latin traditions in general, and Mexican ones in particular, have helped to transform Cinco de Mayo festivities in the United States into a celebration of all things Mexican.

Today, communities across the United States observe Cinco de Mayo, from small border towns in Texas and Arizona to metropolitan hubs like New York, Los Angeles, Cleveland and Atlanta. The holiday, now virtually ignored in Mexico, has become a vibrant annual event in many U.S. cities, with a strong

focus on Mexican food and music, and traditional costumes in red, white and green, the colors of the Mexican flag. Typical Mexican fare—salsa, guacamole, empanadas, enchiladas, tamales, burritos, fajitas—tops the menu at these festivities.

To many celebrants, Cinco de Mayo is also a warm expression of friendship between the neighboring countries of Mexico and the United States. In Los Angeles, for instance, Mexican dignitaries are invariably guests of honor, and the mayor of Los Angeles addresses the crowd in Spanish.

As Mexican influence continues to be felt throughout U.S. society, Cinco de Mayo celebrations are likely to spread even further, just as the holidays of other immigrant groups have been adopted by Americans: for example, St. Patrick’s Day, long honored in Ireland, is now observed almost everywhere in the United States.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were an estimated 28.3 million U.S. residents of Mexican origin in 2006, and that number is expected to grow. People of Mexican origin now make up nearly one-third of the residents of California and Texas, and U.S. trade with Mexico was valued at \$347 billion in 2007. Mexico is second only to Canada in trade with the United States.

With prominent Mexican Americans having served in Presidential Cabinets and in other positions of authority, this fast-growing demographic group will continue making significant contributions to the United States—in policy circles, in the professions and in popular culture.

In the United States, the success of Cinco de Mayo is another manifestation of the vitality of a large and restless country that was built by the hard work, talent and imagination of its immigrants, from the time of its founding in 1776 to the present day.

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Lupita Robles cooks fajitas during the Cinco de Mayo celebration in Lufkin, Texas.

**For more information:**

Cinco de Mayo

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9389223/Cinco-de-Mayo>

The history of Cinco de Mayo

<http://www.mexonline.com/cinco-de-mayo.htm>