



## A Reflection on Cinco de Mayo

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I was recently interviewed by Univision, the largest Spanish-language television network in the country, about Cinco de Mayo and what has become a popular celebration in the U.S. This then begs the question of why is it more fervently and boisterously celebrated here than in Mexico, and why it has been seemingly embraced by so many non-Mexicans?

To begin, let me respectfully remind readers that Cinco de Mayo does not commemorate Mexican independence from Spain—that is *16 de Septiembre*. On May 5, 1862, an under-sized and relatively ragtag group of Mexican soldiers scored a stunning victory over a better-armed, professional French army at the city of Puebla. It appears that, for a variety of complex reasons, Napoleon had his sights set on Mexico, which, as a new republic, he thought was easy prey. However the staunch Mexican republicans thought otherwise. This dramatic and unexpected victory, while not stemming the tide of a short-lived French occupation, nonetheless served as inspiration to the Mexicans—that they could pull it together and defeat a neo-colonial power and, in doing so, further strengthen national pride and advance nation-making. In Mexico, Cinco de Mayo is a relatively low-key commemoration of the feats of these nation-building patriots. It is part of Mexican national DNA.

DNA does not acknowledge borders. So, not surprisingly, Mexican immigrants bring this inborn trait with them and, understandably, Chicanos (“Mexican Americans who aren’t kidding,” to quote my friend Dan Guerrero, son of the legendary cultural worker Lalo Guerrero) have also embraced Cinco de Mayo, almost by osmosis, as something important to memorialize. However, it is here that the character and significance of Cinco de Mayo shifts, and is accentuated, becoming a bigger deal on this side of the physical border. Why is this? I am not a historian, sociologist or psychologist. My best educated “Chicano” guess is that to celebrate Cinco de Mayo is to demonstrate pride is one’s *Mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) in an environment that is not always welcoming, where we are not always valued, and where our culture is not always validated, much less taught. Importantly, the anti-imperialist significance of Cinco de Mayo only stokes nationalist fervor.

OK, so why, in the U.S., has Cinco de Mayo been embraced by so many non-Mexicans, Latinos and non-Latinos? “On Cinco de Mayo, Everybody’s Latino!”—so reads the slogan of the National Cinco de Mayo Festival, celebrated annually in the shadow of the Washington Monument and organized by the Maru Montero Dance Company (Maru is Mexican). While the festival’s performance schedule features *ballet folclórico* groups (traditional Mexican dances), it’s as likely to also feature a Dominican Merenque band from New York City. During the interview with Univision, the Colombian-born cameraman remarked that the Mexicans and Mexican Americans are not only impressive in their numbers, but also in their pride, and that this has likely served to attract other non-Mexican Latinos to celebrate something that commemorates nationhood in a place that is a long way from their countries of origin and in a way that also inspires pride in their own country and culture. A viable explanation I thought, but how do you explain the St. Patrick’s Day-like atmosphere that rivals today’s Cinco de Mayo celebration? Is it that non-Latinos are trying to embrace us *mexicanos* by not only eating tacos and pouring salsa over everything (by the way, salsa has apparently replaced catsup as our country’s most popular condiment), but by actually acknowledging a critical juncture in our shared national history? Or, is it that the two largest Mexican breweries, followed by their U.S. peers, have promoted the heck out of Cinco de Mayo and encouraged beer busts on the cusp of the outdoor-friendly summer months?

Hey, I enjoy my green beer every March 17<sup>th</sup> and, honestly, while doing so, I'm not necessarily contemplating how this revered saint led efforts to Christianize the polytheistic Irish natives in the fifth century. The point is, that while celebrating dates that make us feel good and that allow us to revel in our own particular or appropriated identity, we might also want to pause and contemplate the true significance of what we really celebrate—before we tip our glass.