

What is Cinco de Mayo really about and what exactly are we celebrating?

What is Cinco de Mayo?

Cinco de Mayo commemorates the historical event known as the Battle of Puebla fought in 1862, the date of the Mexican army's victory over France. It is also known as the Battle of Puebla Day.

Following the Reform War (Mexican Civil War), Mexican President Benito Juárez García did not have sufficient funds to make payments on Mexican debts to foreign governments. In July 1861 President Benito Juárez issued a moratorium in which all foreign debt payments be suspended for two years. Due to this, Mexico was then invaded by Britain, France and Spain who sought repayment of the outstanding debts.

The United Kingdom and Spain signed treaties with Mexico and peacefully withdrew and returned home. However, French Emperor Napoleon III did not withdraw, he seized the opportunity to establish an empire that would favor French interests. In late 1861 France stormed Veracruz with the intent to move on to Mexico City. On May 5th 1862, enroute to Mexico City, the French encountered resistance in Puebla. The Mexican army used many peasants, most not trained to fight as soldiers. Their pride gave them the courage and strength to fight for their country. The battle lasted from daybreak to early evening and was successful. The French army, known as one of the best in the world at the time, retreated after a loss of nearly 500 soldiers. This was a large morale boost for Mexico, which had fewer soldiers and military resources than France and represented a great symbolic victory. Although it was a battle won, it still was a war lost.



How did the United States benefit from the Battle of Puebla?

One of the interests Napoleon had in creating a puppet government in Mexico was to be able to provide guns to the Confederacy in exchange for Southern cotton, which was scarce due to the Union shipping blockages during the war. Since Mexico had won a great victory against France, it helped keep France from supplying the confederate rebels for another year during the U.S. Civil War. These 12 months were crucial to the Union Army's efforts to build up the Army and eventually win against the Confederate soldiers at Gettysburg, 14 months after the Battle of Puebla. Once the U.S. Civil War was over, Union forces were sent to the Texas/Mexican border to provide political and military assistance to Mexico to expel the French.

The next time you celebrate Cinco de Mayo remember what it also meant to the United States. What would have happened had the French won the Battle of Puebla? How would it have affected the U.S. Civil War had France continued to supply the Confederate Army? Would it have affected the outcome of the civil war? Could Napoleon have invaded a war torn U.S. once he built his empire in Mexico?

Cinco de Mayo is a date that deserves to be honored, recognized, and remembered by both Mexican and Americans. It should also be remembered as neighbors helping each other out in a time of need.



Cinco de Mayo in Mexico

Days after the Battle of Puebla, President Juarez announced the anniversary of the battle would become a national holiday. Despite his declaration, Cinco de Mayo is not a federal holiday and most of Mexico does not celebrate it. The United States celebrates the holiday more than Mexico does. Celebrations in Mexico are around the State of Puebla where the battle took place and is considered a major annual event. It is also a full holiday in the neighboring State of Veracruz.

Historical reenactments of the battle, parades, art festivals and meals with local cuisine are all part of the celebration in Puebla. Puebla also hosts the International Mole Festival during Cinco de Mayo festivities. Puebla has extended the celebration to nearly 20 days of cultural arts with concerts, dance exhibitions and theatrical performances that take place in the days leading up to, and on, May 5.

Mexican Independence Day ?

Cinco de Mayo is often misidentified as Mexican Independence Day. Mexican Independence Day is on September 16th and much more celebrating is done in Mexico for this holiday.



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Cinco de Mayo in the United States

HISTORIC

In the United States, *Cinco de Mayo* has taken on a significance beyond that in Mexico. More popularly celebrated in the United States than Mexico, these celebrations began in California and Nevada in 1862.

The critical timing of the French defeat at the first Battle of Puebla was not lost on Mexican-Americans and other Latinos living in California during 1862. California Latinos were ardent Union supporters. When their home countries won independence from Spain, they had unilaterally abolished slavery and established citizenship for non-whites. Now living in California, a free state, they saw the pro-slavery Confederacy as an existential threat.

In California and Nevada, Latinos gathered in *Juntas Patrióticas* ("Patriotic Assemblies") to celebrate both the surprise victory at Puebla and what it meant for the Union cause. With 129 locations and 14,000 members in California alone, these *Juntas Patrióticas* started meeting monthly in 1862. Over the course of the Civil War and the French occupation of Mexico City members of the *Juntas Patrióticas* paid dues as high as \$100 a month to support the war effort on both sides of the border. On Cinco de Mayo, there would be parades in the streets carrying the Mexican and American flags and the assembled crowds would sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* in English and *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* in Spanish. This was the start of the U.S. celebration of Cinco de Mayo.

TODAY

Cinco de Mayo is a celebration of Mexican-American culture and heritage particularly in areas with strong Mexican American populations. In Los Angeles, the tradition of celebrating Cinco de Mayo has continued without interruption since 1862, although the original reason and the history may have gotten lost.

In the 1960s during the Chicano movement (aka Chicano Civil Rights or El Movimiento) activists began looking for a way to honor their history and culture. They purposely identified and adopted the Battle of Puebla and May 5th as their day to celebrate. It was an important symbol and cultural pride along with social solidarity of the Mexican American community with Mexico's past. In the 1980s the celebrations became commercialized to what we know today with beer, tacos and margaritas. For those who participated in the Chicano Movement the celebration of Cinco de Mayo means so much more than an excuse for a fiesta. It isn't all about tacos and margaritas.

Let's take the opportunity to educate, inform and inspire each other. Celebrating the spirit of courage, strength, self-determination and the hard fought victory against all odds. Reflect on the friendship and sacrifices Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have made to build and sustain this country and their important place in the history of the United States. We need to recognize that since 1848 our freedom and liberty in North America was fought for and won collectively by Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Americans. This is the true meaning and spirit of the Cinco de Mayo.

Ways to Mindfully Celebrate Cinco de Mayo:

1. Share the Real Story! Many Americans are quick to celebrate by eating tacos and drinking margaritas. Take a few minutes to share the real story and the cultural significance of the celebration. Changing stereotypes starts with us.
2. Support Mexican Businesses. Instead of going to a chain restaurant offering Cinco de Mayo deals, try a local Mexican owned business. The celebration isn't just about food, expand your options to include other businesses like visiting a Mexican pottery store. Talavery pottery is a style that originated in Puebla.
3. Support the Mexican Arts and visit a museum that celebrates Mexican history and culture.
4. Okay, Back to the Food - Try ordering a Mexican dish that originates from the State of Puebla "Mole Poblano" or something made with poblano chilies.

