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What is Cinco de Mayo?

BY SOPHIA WATERFIELD

On Sunday, cities across the U.S. will be putting on parades and festivals to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. But what is this Mexican tradition all about?

What Is Cinco De Mayo?

Literally meaning “Fifth of May” in Spanish, Cinco de Mayo is a day of celebration remembering when, in 1862, General Ignacio Zaragoza defeated French troops at the Battle of Puebla, which is southeast of Mexico City.

Even though the French did not leave Mexico for another five years, it is considered that this day was a turning point following the French invasion of Mexico in 1861. The battlefield where the victory took place is currently maintained as a park.

Is Cinco De Mayo Mexico’s Independence Day?

No. Mexico’s Independence Day takes place on September 16 and celebrates the movement to free Mexico from Spanish rule, which began in 1810, according to Encyclopedia Britannica.

Why do we celebrate Cinco De Mayo in America?

According to Professor Margarita Sanchez, Wagner College, Cinco de Mayo is less celebrated in Mexico and more in America. The reason for this resonates loudly to this day.

In an article for Wagner College, the professor explained that the news of the victory in Puebla reached Mexican gold miners working in California, just over a year into the American Civil War. With of repeated Union defeats dampening the spirits of the workers, coupled with the uncertainty of freedom in the Americas, the news of the Puebla victory seemed to be the morale boost the miners needed.

In 1863, Californians held a celebration to commemorate the victory at Puebla. This served as a way to “show support for the struggling Mexican government and, by extension, for the cause of freedom throughout the Americas,” explained Sanchez.

Today the message of freedom lives on in Cinco de Mayo celebrations as Mexican immigrants and their descendents settled in the U.S. Sanchez wrote: “For them, Cinco de Mayo symbolizes the desire to keep an identity and a soul.” She goes on to say that the day is also a reminder of the contribution Mexican immigrants have made to the U.S.

However, another opinion is that Cinco de Mayo celebrations originated in America for other reasons. Jeffrey M. Pilcher is a professor of Mexican cultural history and the author of the prize-

winning book, “¡Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity” as well as his latest book, “Planet Taco.”

In a blog he wrote for George Washington University, Pilcher states that while the battle victory was celebrated for the first anniversary, it was later “associated with the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz.” When he was overthrown in 1910 the celebration “went out of fashion.” In the U.S., it was then primarily celebrated by “wealthy exiles” who were loyal to Don Porfirio before being adopted by the wider Mexican American community and then by “major corporations” who wanted to target ethnic consumers who had emigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s.