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Why do so many Americans celebrate Cinco de Mayo?

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Mariachi performers marked the holiday this week in New York.

By Matt Rocheleau

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Each year on May 5, American retailers see a surge in sales of ingredients popularly used in Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine.

Tequila sales more than double at bars and restaurants across the US, and four in every 10 cocktails ordered is a margarita, up from the usual one in four.

Sales of beer imported from Mexico increase 15 percent. Meanwhile Americans eat more than 87 million pounds of avocados every time the holiday rolls around.

But, not everyone who partakes in Cinco de Mayo celebrations knows what the day is about, why it exists, or even what it commemorates.

So what is Cinco de Mayo?

Cinco de Mayo commemorates the Mexican army's defeat of a much larger and more powerful French army in 1862 near the city of Puebla.

The Franco-Mexican War did not end until more than five years later, but Mexico's victory in the Battle of Puebla helped slow France's occupation of the country and is viewed as having been a morale boost for the Mexican army.

Some Americans and others who celebrate Cinco de Mayo mistakenly believe the date is Mexico's Independence Day. That holiday, however, falls on Sept. 16, and marks the country's independence from Spanish rule in 1810.

Why is Cinco de Mayo celebrated in the US?

Historians say the first record of US celebrations over the Battle of Puebla came just three days after the battle's conclusion.

When Mexicans living in the town of Columbia, Calif. received news of the victory, they held festive gatherings, according to research by University of California, Los Angeles professor David Hayes-Bautista, who published a book about the holiday's roots.

The book, “El Cinco de Mayo: An American Tradition,” documents how the holiday originated in the US and how its meaning has changed over time.

Celebration of Cinco de Mayo became more popular after the US adopted a policy in the 1930s to improve relations with Mexico, and in the 1960s and 1970s during the Chicano Movement, when Mexican Americans fought for civil rights equality.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Cinco de Mayo became even more widely celebrated as companies commercialized the holiday, marketing and promoting their products, but diluting, if not ignoring, the date’s historical significance.

Does Mexico celebrate Cinco de Mayo?

Yes. But experts say that people living in the US generally make a bigger deal of Cinco de Mayo than people living in Mexico do. In Mexico, the holiday is mostly celebrated in Puebla, and nationally it is not considered a major holiday.

Puebla holds a parade and other festivities, but in many other parts of the country, it’s business as usual.

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