

Celebrating Cinco de Mayo

By

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Cinco de Mayo commemorates an unlikely but stirring military triumph in Mexican history. On May 5, 1862, at the Battle of Puebla, a Mexican army under the command of Ignacio Zaragoza defeated a better-equipped French force sent by Emperor Napoleon III, in a battle that came to symbolize Mexican resistance to foreign intervention. Although the victory did not end French occupation of Mexico as French forces later took Mexico City the triumph at Puebla provided a symbolic assertion of national sovereignty, resistance, and hope. The celebrations that followed in Puebla included parades, public speeches, communal meals, and eventually historical reenactments. Over time, Cinco de Mayo did not become a nationwide statutory holiday in Mexico, remaining concentrated in Puebla and among communities tied to the battle's memory.

The story of Cinco de Mayo in what is now the United States began almost immediately. As documented by historian and public-health scholar David E. Hayes-Bautista, evidence shows that as early as 1862 the same year as the battle Mexican immigrants and expatriates in California celebrated the victory. The Spanish-language newspaper published in San Francisco covered that on May 22, 1862, a community in the gold-rush town of Columbia, California, held festivities to mark the victory: toasts, patriotic songs, flag-raising, and communal gathering. This event is widely regarded as the first documented U.S. Cinco de Mayo celebration. Over the following years, a network of "Juntas Patrióticas Mejicanas" (Mexican patriotic assemblies) emerged across California as many as 129 such groups which met regularly, organized aid, and maintained memory of the Battle of Puebla. These assemblies helped institutionalize Cinco de Mayo as a recurring day of commemoration among immigrant communities.

By 1863, Mexican-American communities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other parts of California organized parades, public speeches, music, and communal commemorations. Through successive generations, waves of immigration and the formation of stable Mexican-American communities kept Cinco de Mayo alive, though often modestly and community-specific.

During the mid-twentieth century, as the Mexican-American population grew and with the rise of the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the holiday's meaning shifted. Cinco de Mayo began to be reinterpreted not only as a commemoration of the Battle of Puebla, but as a broader symbol of cultural pride, identity, and diaspora resilience.

Hayes-Bautista's research shows these early commemorations and immigrant assemblies maintained a sense of historical memory and pride, reinforcing cultural bonds that persisted across generations.

From the 1980s onward, commercialization and popular culture significantly reshaped Cinco de Mayo. Restaurants, bars, food chains, beverage companies, and media embraced the holiday as an opportunity for cultural promotion, often emphasizing food, drink, music, and entertainment. For many Americans of diverse backgrounds, Cinco de Mayo became a celebration of Mexican culture rather than solely a commemoration of the 19th-century battle. Nevertheless, many community leaders, educators, and activists sought to preserve the holiday's historical significance through cultural festivals, folklórico dance performances, mariachi bands, lectures, community dialogues. This dual nature celebration and commemoration enabled it to remain meaningful across diverse communities.

In California, the legacy of Cinco de Mayo as rooted in immigrant history translated into localized celebrations. In Santa Clara County, particularly in the city of San José, California, the holiday lives on in contemporary community life. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, San José held large-scale Cinco de Mayo parades and festivals, attracting hundreds of thousands of attendees. Over time, concerns over cost, safety, and crowd control led to the cancellation of the formal parade in 2011. Despite that, grassroots celebrations persisted through neighborhood gatherings, family festivities, cultural center events, and community-based performances.

Recently, Cinco de Mayo celebrations in San José experienced a revival, with increasing emphasis on lowrider culture, folklórico dance, live music, and downtown festivals. Lowrider cars customized vehicles with vibrant paint and hydraulics have become symbols of Chicano identity and heritage. In 2024, a lowrider parade was organized in collaboration with the local authorities, reflecting reconciliation between civic institutions and cultural communities. Media coverage described hundreds of lowriders cruising through streets, families attending performances by dance and music groups a public affirmation of cultural roots and intergenerational transmission of memory in Santa Clara County.

These local celebrations reflect the intersection of heritage, identity, and civic engagement. For many residents, Cinco de Mayo is not just a festive occasion but a means to educate younger generations, assert cultural visibility in public spaces, and build community solidarity across generations. Cultural centers, community organizations, and local schools often host heritage workshops, storytelling sessions, folklórico performances, applying the holiday's legacy to contemporary community life.

Institutional recognition has further reinforced its significance. Local government and civic organizations increasingly acknowledge the cultural heritage and importance of Mexican-American traditions integrating them into community events, public celebrations, and civic planning. These developments show that cultural communities, through persistent effort and adaptation, can shape public memory and ensure that celebrations like Cinco de Mayo remain alive, meaningful, and respectful of their roots even in changing social contexts.

While large metropolitan centers and major Bay-Area hubs often dominate narratives of Cinco de Mayo celebrations, smaller South-County communities such as Gilroy, California also contribute to the holiday's lived culture. According to a 2005 article in Gilroy Dispatch, a number of community events in Gilroy and surrounding areas were planned to mark Cinco de Mayo: a student-center festival at Gavilan College featuring folklórico dance, music, food, and public gathering; a celebration at the local Gilroy Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center including a parade of colors, mariachi and traditional dances; and historically, a downtown Cinco de Mayo celebration organized by community and business associations. More recently, in early May 2025, Gilroy's downtown business community organized the Heart of Gilroy Wine & Art Stroll a festival involving art exhibitions, music, food, local vendors, and community participation timing with the Cinco de Mayo. This year as well, the city of Gilroy held its first Cinco de Mile, a 1-mile kids' run, 5K and 10K run finishing at Christmas Hill Park focused on health and wellness. These accounts demonstrate that even in smaller cities, the holiday has been observed with cultural pride, communal gathering, and intergenerational participation.

The journey of Cinco de Mayo from 1862's Battle of Puebla to 19th-century miner celebrations in Columbia, to modern lowrider parades and multicultural festivals in San José, to community gatherings in Gilroy reflects the power of memory, identity, and community across time and place. It demonstrates how historical events can transcend borders, how immigrant communities carry heritage into new lands, how cultural memory evolves through changing social contexts, and how civic life adapts to embrace diversity.

If there are people who value memory, who educate their children, who gather in community spaces, who reclaim cultural expression, the spirit of the Battle of Puebla, of Mexican resilience, of immigrant hope lives on. Through continued celebration, education, cultural expression, and civic engagement, Cinco de Mayo remains not just a date on the calendar but a vibrant, living tradition that honors the past, engages the present, and inspires future generations.