

Americans misunderstand Cinco de Mayo history

Most Americans are under the mistaken impression that Cinco de Mayo is a Mexican independence day

By Eun-Kyung Kim
St. Louis Post-Dispatch (KRT)

ST. LOUIS — It's a holiday often mistakenly celebrated as the Mexican Fourth of July, to the surprise of many Mexican natives.

"Cinco de Mayo has nothing to do with Mexican independence from Spain, far from it," said Guillermo Rosas, a Mexico City native. "If you were to rank the most important celebrations in Mexico, this would probably come a distant third or fourth."

The holiday has come to evoke images of exotic dancers rhythmically stamping to mariachi bands, as well as loaded plates of spicy food and pitchers of margaritas and cerveza. While many Hispanics embrace the holiday as a cultural celebration, just as many lament its escalation into a promotional gimmick.

Cinco de Mayo, or the fifth of May, commemorates an 1862 battle in Puebla, Mexico, in which a small troop of Mexican soldiers defeated a much larger French force. France ultimately displaced the Mexicans, but its rule over Mexico was short-lived.

"Across the border, it simply is not celebrated very much," said Jose Limon, director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at the

University of Texas at Austin.

Rosas said he remembers getting the holiday off from school as a child. Politicians also liked to deliver speeches at the Puebla battle site. But that stopped more than two decades ago, and when Rosas came to the United States in 1995 to attend a doctoral degree program at Duke University, he was amazed by how Americans celebrated Cinco de Mayo with such gusto.

"I was very surprised that Americans of all backgrounds knew about the celebrations. I would have assumed that Sept. 16, which is the main holiday in Mexico, would be somehow best-known, much as Mexicans know that the Americans celebrate the Fourth of July as their main national holiday," said Rosas, who teaches Latin American

politics at Washington University.

He also was surprised that nearly everyone he met believed that Cinco de Mayo was a celebration of Mexico's independence from Spain.

Limon pointed out that even some Hispanics of Mexican descent aren't aware of the history behind the holiday.

"A lot of people use the occasion to celebrate their heritage in some very generalized way," he said. "But even as people are celebrating and going to various festivities, they have no idea what they're celebrating, except that somehow it has to do with Mexican-Americans and Mexico and it has the Spanish words, 'Cinco de Mayo' attached to it."

There are about 24 million U.S. residents with Mexican ancestry, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — about 9

percent of all U.S. residents.

Eileen Wolfington said the holiday had never been a big deal to her — or her Mexican mother, who immigrated to the United States in her 20s.

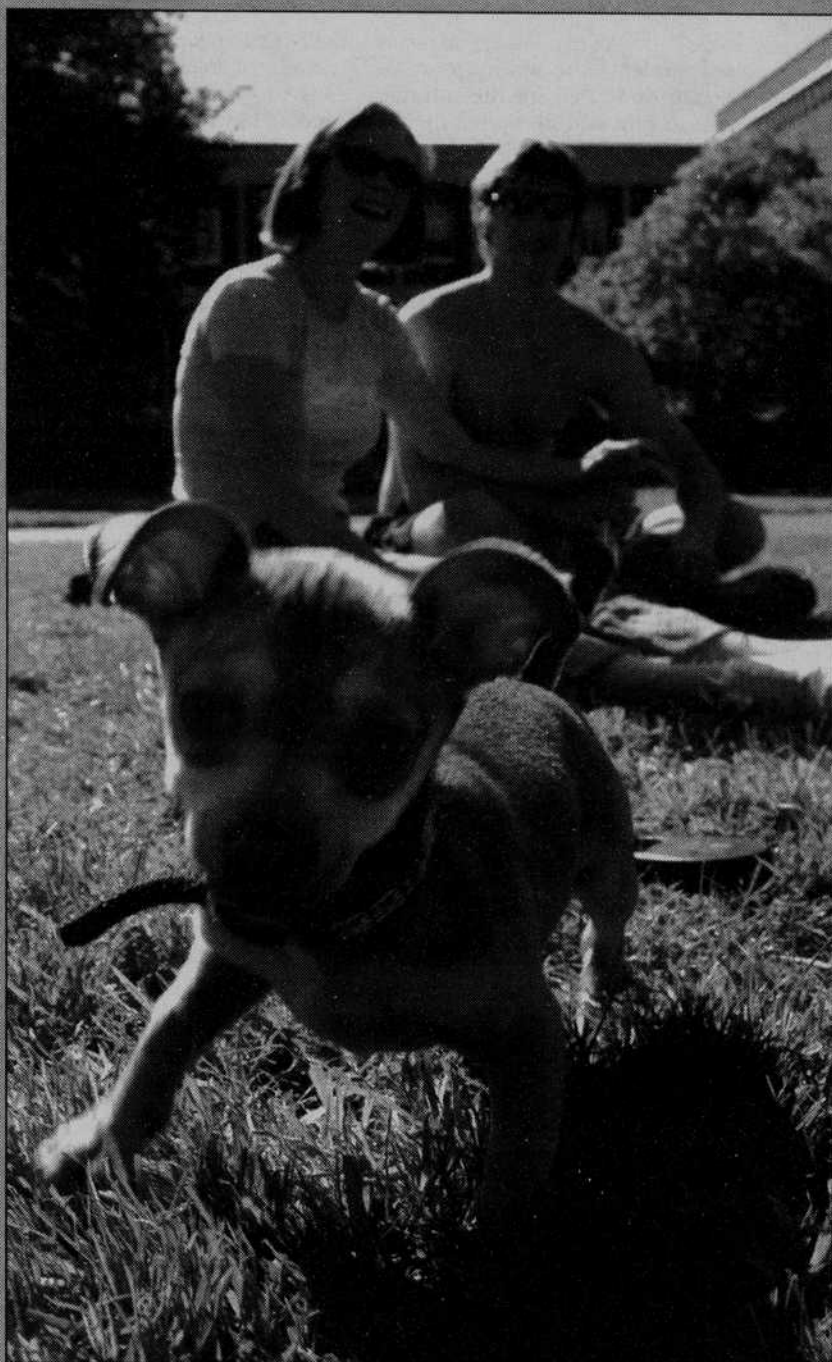
"I didn't even know what it was when I was growing up," she said. "My mom never said, 'Oh, it's Cinco de Mayo, let's go out.'"

It wasn't until Wolfington got older that she learned about the holiday.

"And then I thought to myself, another way for the for-profit world to commercialize an event that people don't even know what the heck they're celebrating," she said.

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A sunny Monday



Tim Bobosky Photographer

Lulu, a Chihuahua, frolics near the library as her owners, journalism graduate student Molly Hendrickson and senior finance major Levi McClain, enjoy the sun Monday afternoon.



Tim Kupsick Photographer

Wushu Club member David Ng, a pre-journalism major, does a flying kick in the EMU Amphitheater on Monday. Eight other members of the UO Club Sports group participated in the performance.

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