

SHARING THEIR INDEPENDENCE NATIVES FROM A VARIETY OF CENTRAL AMERICAN NATIONS WILL REMEMBER THEIR ROOTS AND CELEBRATE THIS WEEK

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

While many expatriates remain loyal to their country of origin throughout the year, Independence Day back home often renews memories and intensifies feelings of patriotism. It's also a time of increased interest in traditional customs and food.

"When we come here, we keep our traditions, our cultures and our beliefs," said Cristy Andriano of Miami, Guatemala's Counsel General in south Florida since 1997. However, Andriano pointed out that Guatemalans in south Florida have a difficult time coming together to celebrate their commonality. "There are 23 different cultural groups in south Florida from Guatemala," she said, referring to a plethora of indigenous groups that each maintain cultural distinctives among their food, dialects and dress.

"Each indigenous community has their own clothing," explained Irma Claros of Davie who runs the Guatemala Restaurant on West Davie Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale. "You can see a lot of them if you go up to Indian Town near West Palm Beach."

In fact, many of the indigenous Guatemalans who live in southern Palm Beach County don't even celebrate the region-wide Independence Day that is celebrated by most south Florida immigrants from the Central American countries of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala along with local Mexicans on September 15.

Central American independence celebrations, which include parties, dances, patriotic commemorations and lots of typical foods, date back to September 15, 1821 when Guatemala declared its independence from Spain. Although some of the other neighboring countries did not receive word of this declaration for several months, all dated their sovereignty to the September 15 date.

"We don't celebrate the holiday because we did not get any independence on that day," asserted Lucio Perez-Reynoso, the Executive Director of Lake Worth's Guatemalan-Mayan Center. "The Counsel is right when she talked about the divisions among the Guatemalans. She represents the government of Guatemala, but she does not represent the Mayan people."

Perez-Reynoso said that during the civil war of the 1980s, "the government killed so many Mayans, and thousands of them fled to the United States and settled in Indian town and Lake Worth."

As a result, Perez-Reynoso said that most Mayans in south Florida relate more to the American community than they do to other Guatemalans in the area.

Thus, instead of celebrating Independence Day along with other Central Americans, those of Mayan ancestry will be celebrating the festival of San Miguel in late September. The actual dates of that festival in Guatemala are around September 26 or 27, but Perez-Reynoso said that the south Florida celebration was scheduled for last evening at the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church in Lake Worth.

The event involved a ceremonial dance focusing on the relationship of animals and people living in harmony. "It began as a religious ceremony, but today it's more of a cultural event," Perez-Reynoso said. In addition, Mayan families planned on serving popular indigenous food including Paches, a type of tamale with meat and sauce.

Meanwhile, among those Guatemalans who will celebrate Independence Day, Claros said that she does not intend to change her menu for the holiday. "I don't need to change, I serve typical food all of the time," she said.

Among the items on her menu is Carne Asado, a general description for roasted meats such as chicken, beef or pork, and Sopa Gallina, a type of chicken soup.

Claros said she expects that most of her customers will carry out enchiladas rellenos (a tortilla filled with meat, cheese, peppers and other ingredients) or meat-filled tacos for their Independence Day parties.

For Costa Ricans, the holiday wouldn't be complete without gallo pinto, a typical dish of rice and beans that is also popular among Nicaraguans. "We can't live without it," said Kim Villegas, a Costa Rican who lives in Coral Springs. "We take it with us where ever we go."

Villegas said that while she has become very accustomed to life in the United States, she seeks out Costa Ricans with whom to share her culture. But, that is hard for her, because, unlike many other immigrant groups from Latin America, Costa Ricans do not settle into easily identifiable communities. Instead, they have spread out throughout south Florida. "There is a big group in West Palm Beach who have a folk dancing group, and I have heard that a group of Costa Ricans in Deerfield Beach have their own soccer team," she said. "But they are hard to find."

"We Costa Ricans are known for our quality soccer," affirmed Shamus Hillier of Fort Lauderdale who grew up in Costa Rica. "Our team played here in the Gold Cup two months ago."

"Independence Day is very important in Mexico," explained Arturo Becerril of Pembroke Pines. "There are all kinds of parades in different locations and around the main plazas. There are also a lot of parties."

"Here, it's sad to say, the Cinco de Mayo holiday is more important," Becerril said. "That celebrates a battle between the French and Mexican armies, but it's not that important."

Becerril said that he plans on celebrating Independence Day with plenty of typical food, including Pozole, a type of stew that is a staple of the Mexican table. "It includes corn that is boiled and mixed with meat such as beef or pork or shrimp," he said. "Then we add vegetables like lettuce plus lemon as well as hot chili," he explained.

In the southern Palm Beach area, one group of Central American immigrants is working hard to preserve their Latin culture and pass it on to their children. "Through our association we try to help immigrants and to relate the larger community by telling them about Nicaragua and its culture," explained Juan Vasquez of West Palm Beach who is President of the Nicaraguan Association there. "We also have a small dancing group for 5-16 year olds to teach them folkloric dance."

Vasquez said that the dance group presents several shows a year in area schools and for other organizations. "We also make handcrafts from Nicaraguan artisans available," he said.

"We want to help relations between young people from Nicaragua and kids who are born here," said Sylvia Baez of West Palm Beach who founded the Nicaraguan Association. "We want other groups to learn about our culture and our dancing."

Baez said that her group works with city officials and local arts organizations to support an annual Hispanic Month and to celebrate Columbus Day in October.

Others also celebrate their heritage through music and dance. "My father has a marimba band," said Carlos Lopez, a Guatemalan who lives in Hialeah. "It's called Marimba Chapinlandia and they play concerts at parties, in schools and at other events."

Lopez said that the band is made up of nine members, and represents a tradition that is especially popular among people of his father's generation.

Many Central Americans participated in a dance last evening in West Palm Beach. Today, the public is invited to a daylong party and soccer tournament at South Olive Park in West Palm Beach. In addition to soccer, there will be folkloric music, traditional food and other games and activities.

Events:

Independence Fiesta and Soccer tournament, 9:30 a.m. until 6 p.m., Sunday, September 14 at South Olive Park, 345 E. Saunna Street, West Palm Beach. Activities include games, folkloric dance, food, dances and a soccer tournament. Sponsored by the Nicaraguan Association of Palm Beach and the Honduran Community Center. For information, call 561-968-8232.

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