

BUSINESSES CASHING IN BIG ON QUINCE CRAZE

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

It has been described in many ways: an elaborate birthday party; a transition, a life-altering event, a rite of passage.

Whatever it is called, a quince (pronounced keen-say) celebration for a Latin American 15 year old girl is culturally significant and a highly anticipated event.

It can also be very expensive. "If it is an elaborately produced affair, it can run anywhere from \$15,000 to \$45,000," said Mayra Etayo, a Miramar resident who operates Not Just Calligraphy, an event-planning organization that is developing a regional specialty in producing quinces.

A quince is a celebration, most common in South Florida among Cuban teen-age girls but celebrated by other Latin Americans, marking the young woman's 15th birthday.

But for many, it's much more than just a big birthday bash. "It's the Latin tradition of a debutant, an introduction and coming out into society," said Jeff Greene of Pembroke Pines who operates Party Time DJ's in Davie, a business that provides disc jockey and photography services to quince celebrations. "It's more than a party, it's a milestone where a girl is in transition from being a little girl to a young lady."

That transition is symbolized throughout the event by dramatic entrances, speeches and toasts and activities that emphasize the 15th birthday and the role of the family in the young woman's life.

"The theme might be Cinderella or a butterfly and garden," said Etayo. "Last year we had a lot of girls used a Moroccan theme, an idea from a Spanish soap opera with gorgeous settings and scenery."

The day of the big event often begins with a mass in the morning or afternoon and ends with the gala party in the evening.

The girl being honored will be escorted by a court of 14 boys and 14 girls, many of whom are sisters, cousins or schoolmates, according to Etayo.

"It begins with a choreographed grand entrance and will involve a formal dance with the girl's father," Etayo explained. That is followed by other formal dances with uncles, brothers and other close relatives.

Some parties will involve a candle ceremony in which 15 members of her family will share a description or poem outlining why the girl is important, or 15 people who have been chosen by the parents will make a similar presentation.

Other ceremonies involve a shoe service in which a girl's child-like shoes are exchanged by her father for some high heel shoes. "This represents the transition from a girl to a woman as she wears lady-like shoes," Greene said.

"The girls also participate in a ceremony where they pass a doll to a younger girl who will later be celebrating her quince," Greene said. "In this way, she is sharing her youth with another youth and she is passing on her virtue and innocence to another young lady."

Other events of the four or five hour party will be the presentation of a video montage of the girl's life, along with dancing and a lot of food.

Such an elaborately planned event can be very costly—often mounting up to more than the cost of a formal wedding, which costs in the range of \$25,000.

"Families are moving to spending more for a quince than for a wedding because it's for 'my daughter', while a wedding is a shared event between two families," Green explained. "If a marriage doesn't work out, the family doesn't lose as much."

Etayo agreed. "Parents say, this is my baby and I'm going to give her her dream."

"Weddings are changing," Etayo said. "Many couples are getting married later and paying for it themselves, so they are sometimes more simple."

"A few years ago, I prepared flowers for a lot of weddings," said Ana Cappelossa of Fort Lauderdale who operates Fiori Events Designs in Pompano Beach. "Now, people are putting more emphasis on quinces and bar mitzvahs."

Costs for a typical gala quince include the rental of a hall, caterers, formal dresses, flowers, photography and videography, jewelry, keepsakes, a DJ or band, decorations, hair styling, make up, invitations and a choreographer to plan the entrance and dancing.

"You might be surprised, but some families even take a second mortgage on their home to finance their daughter's quince," Etayo said. "It's culturally important, so they find the money."

Some 15 year olds and their families are opting for alternative celebrations that are less costly and offer what they feel is a more substantial, memorable event.

"We have been offering quince cruises for 20 years," said Beatriz Mompont of Happy Holidays Travel in Miami. "We take 24 teens and their families and friends on a seven day cruise."

Describing the quince cruise as more of a family get-together, Mompont said that in lieu of a \$25,000-\$50,000 dollar event, a girl gets an extended trip with her family and friends at a cost of only \$4,000 per person.

“Some times up to 50 or 60 family members will accompany the girl on the cruise,” Mompoin explained. “They are combining a party with a vacation.” Mompoin’s agency sponsors a quince cruise every week during the summer months.

(The regular quince “season” is during the school year when a girl has closer contact with friends and families are more likely to be in town for the occasion).

Others choose a European tour to celebrate their coming out. “We offer 17 day packages for 24 girls at \$3,000 each,” aid Maria Machin of Miramar who works at Viajes Principal in Hialeah. “Just the girls go and they have 17 days to celebrate their birthday.”

Each day focuses on a different girl who is the celebrity of the day and receives a cake and presents.

Planning for such a large event, whether a party or a cruise, begins a long time before the occasion.

“Some people start planning two or three years in advance,” said Etayo who serves as a quince event planner, negotiating contracts with banquet halls, designers, choreographers, caterers, photographers and others on behalf of the family. “They are rarely planned in less than a year.”

“Many are choosing to go with a package deal and use the vendors available in the package,” Etayo said, describing the work that goes into planning a quince as similar to what would happen with a wedding. “As a planner, I can help the family save money and help pull the details together.

Etayo said she plans on launching a web site (www.notjustcalligraphy.com) in late August to help young girls and their families plan their own celebration. Other already-established web sites in south Florida include: www.memoriesofalifetimeinc.com and www.quinces.com.

Using an outside planner helps a family to relax and enjoy the girl’s special moment. “We take care of the details,” said Kristie Lorette of Coconut Grove who operates the Memories of a Lifetime event-planning agency in Miami. Lorette’s slogan is “Be a guest at your own party.”

Even quince cruises take time to plan. “In October we show the girls the ship,” Mompoin said. “Then in February, we choose what they are going to do during the cruise’s talent show. Later we give them make up cases, and six months before the cruise we provide them with the schedule so they will know what time the parties will be.”

Mompoin also sponsors at least five rehearsals before the cruise to help prepare the girls for their grand entrance and the choreography for the on-board parties.

Quinces are most extravagant in the Cuban community, primarily because most Cuban families in south Florida involve grandparents, uncles and aunts and cousins who live here. “The other Latin American nationalities also celebrate Quinces,” Mompoint said. “But, for many of them, their extended families are back home in another country, so only their parents are here.”

Many of the Quince service organizations and business are in Miami-Dade County because of the higher Cuban population there and a longer tradition of quinces than in Broward County. But, according to Green, there is a growing interest and participation among Broward County girls, even though the majority of the parties are held in banquet halls and other similar facilities in Hialeah.

“I already have 27 girls signed up for next year’s cruises,” Mompoint said. “And all of them are from Miramar.”

For those who can’t afford the more expensive quinces, or choose to celebrate in an alternative way, an option is to hold a quince at home or in a church hall with family members and friends pitching in to provide the services.

“Many of my cousins in Puerto Rico had a quince party,” said Cathy Rodd of Miami. “In those days, their mother or grandmother made the dresses and other people brought in the food.”

Rodd’s 15 year old daughter, Danielle, chose not to have a quince, but, her mother said, will have a “sweet sixteen” party at her next birthday.

“Families who have it at home will bring in food and make their own dresses,” Rodd explained. “It’s basically a big birthday party, but they only spend \$500 to maybe \$1,000 for it.”

Rodd said that home-based quinces usually involve family members and the girl’s close friends from school or church. The event involves a small ceremony and then dancing and a meal.

Those who help to plan these events say that not only is the work profitable, but it is rewarding as well. “I like working with the kids,” Lorette said. “It keeps us young.”

Etayo said that helping plan contributes to the happiness of others. “We don’t celebrate enough things in this life,” she reflected.

“A quince is one of only a few life milestones,” Green said. “I’m in the memory business.”

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