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CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Mexico and America

Mexico is a country south of the United States. [Last month](#), I talked a bit about *piñatas* and *quinceañeras*, which are Mexican customs that have spread across America. You can find Mexican culture everywhere in the US, so this month, I am going to explain a little more about it.



About Mexico

The official name of Mexico is *Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, meaning the United Mexican States. It is made up of 31 states and the capital, Mexico City. The population is about 129 million people, which is slightly more than Japan. However, unlike Japan, the population of Mexico is growing. It is the most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world.

Mexico has a very long history. People started cultivating *maize* (corn) in the region in about 8000 BCE, and civilizations such as the Olmec, Maya, and

Aztec flourished. There are many ruins, and 35 are World Heritage Sites. In fact, Mexico has the most World Heritage Sites in the Americas. (By the way, Japan has 25 World Heritage Sites.) Mexico City was founded by the Aztecs in 1325, and was originally called *Tenochtitlan*. It is the oldest city in the Americas.



The Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, a World Heritage Site

The common language is Spanish, but the government recognizes 68 different languages. Of those, 65 are indigenous languages such as the Nahuatl and Mayan languages. It is estimated that over 8.3 million people speak indigenous languages in Mexico. Despite sharing a border with the US, English is not widely spoken outside of tourist attractions and resorts.

Cinco de Mayo

Cinco de Mayo means "the fifth of May" in Spanish, and many Americans celebrate it every year.



This day commemorates the Mexican victory over French invaders in the central Mexican state of Puebla on May 5, 1862. Nowadays in Puebla, people celebrate with battle reenactments and parades, but it's actually not a national holiday in Mexico.



A Cinco de Mayo event in Washington D.C.

So why do Americans celebrate Cinco de Mayo? In the mid-20th century, during the same period as the African American Civil Rights Movement, Mexican Americans were fighting for their civil rights as well. The Battle of Puebla inspired Mexican Americans, because the Mexican army was able to beat the odds and push back the stronger and more numerous French army. Therefore, Mexican Americans began to celebrate the Mexican spirit of “never giving up” that was demonstrated during this battle. In other words, American Cinco de Mayo became more of a celebration of Mexican unity, pride, and culture than simply a commemoration of the battle itself.

There are Cinco de Mayo celebrations held all over America, with parades, traditional dress, folk music, and dancing. Many people eat Mexican food such as tacos and burritos, and drink Mexican beer and tequila. In fact, Cinco de Mayo is one of the biggest days for beer consumption in America, and beer sales rival other major beer-drinking events such as the Super Bowl and Saint Patrick's Day.

I'll share one of my Cinco de Mayo experiences. It was May 5, I was in middle school, and I was in French class like any other day. Suddenly, I heard voices shouting in Spanish behind me, and *things*

started flying through the classroom. When these *things* hit the walls, floors, and even students, they exploded like bombs into showers of confetti. I picked one of the “detonated shells” up off the floor, and it was literally a shell – *an eggshell*. When I looked at the classroom door, I saw the entire Spanish class fleeing the scene. We asked our French teacher what had just happened, and she laughed and explained, “The Spanish teacher wanted to reenact the French army losing to the Mexican army on Cinco de Mayo, so we planned the ambush together.” By the way, those confetti-stuffed eggshells are called *cascarones* in Spanish, and they are a fun part of not only Cinco de Mayo, but also Easter, Carnival, and the Day of the Dead.



Cascarones

Family

For Mexican people, family is everything. In America and Japan, nuclear families are the norm, but in Mexico, the extended family is the foundation of society. In addition to one's own parents and siblings, there are grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins living nearby, or even in the same house. Mexican Americans also tend to have large families. The benefit of large families is that the oldest members of the family can pass down knowledge and traditions to the younger generation. By prioritizing the family above all else, Mexican families form extremely tight bonds, and support each other in both good times and bad times.

It might be hard to imagine just how important family is to Mexican people through this article alone, so I will give a real-life example. I asked Roland, my Mexican-American friend from Texas, “What do you want Japanese people to know about Mexican culture?” His answer was, “I want Japanese people to know how elaborate family functions are for Mexicans.” He explained that for birthdays, holidays, and even backyard barbeques, you invite *everyone*.



Last month, I introduced *quinceañeras*, which are lavish birthday parties for 15-year-old girls. Roland also reminisced about them. “They are a really big deal in Mexico. I remember going to my cousins’ *quinces* and it was a whole day deal. From the morning breakfast with the whole family, to going to church in the afternoon, then heading to the reception and partying all night!”

Roland has lived in Japan for about 14 years, and he said, “What I always miss being here in Japan is my family. The one main thing is family.”



A Mexican-American host family

There are many Mexican Americans living in Gresham, Oregon, Ebetsu’s sister city. Last winter, two high school students from Ebetsu participated in a one-month homestay

program in Gresham, and both of their host families were Mexican-American. You can read about the students’ experiences on the [city website](#).

Food

Food is another big part of Mexican culture. Mexicans express love for their family through food.

As for Mexican food, there is authentic cuisine from Mexico, and there is *Tex-Mex*. There are some similarities, but also key differences. In authentic Mexican cooking, corn is used to make various dishes, such as *tortillas*. The most common meats are pork and chicken, but seafood is eaten on the coasts. However, Tex-Mex cuisine was created by Mexicans living in Texas. Ground beef, cheese, and tortillas made from flour are widely used. Most of the Mexican restaurants in America actually serve Tex-Mex cuisine.

For example, most people are familiar with hard-shelled tacos containing seasoned ground beef and topped with lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, sour cream, salsa, and guacamole. These are actually Tex-Mex tacos, and are not common in Mexico. Authentic Mexican tacos are made with soft corn

tortillas (not flour), and are filled with meats such as slow-cooked pork or slices of steak. The usual toppings are chopped onions, cilantro, and salsa, and the finishing touch is a squeeze of fresh lime juice. They have a simple and fresh taste compared to Tex-Mex tacos.



Left: Tex-Mex tacos



Right: Mexican tacos

I asked my friend Roland what he thinks of Okinawan *taco rice*. “It’s ok,” he said. “You gotta make do with what you got so it’s fine for Japan.” I agree. Taco rice isn’t authentic Mexican food, but by adapting Mexican food to local ingredients, people can enjoy a little taste of Mexico in Japan.★

Roland’s Spanish Rice

Spanish rice is a Mexican dish that can easily be made in Japan. Try making it for Cinco de Mayo!

Ingredients

- 2 tbsp. oil
- 240 cc rice
- 1 can tomatoes
- 300 ml water
- 1/2 tbsp. garlic powder
- 1/2 tbsp. cumin powder
- 1/2 onion, chopped
- 1 cube chicken bouillon



Directions

1. Heat oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Add rice and stir constantly until it darkens slightly.
2. Add the tomatoes, water, garlic powder, cumin powder, onions, and chicken bouillon. Stir until it boils.
3. Cover, lower heat, and bring to a simmer for 20 minutes. Do not open the lid during this time. After 20 minutes, it’s ready!

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