

## How Do Latinos Celebrate The Holidays?

Latinos hail from more than 20 countries, so there's no cookie-cutter, uniform answer as to how they observe the holiday season. But there are several commonalities centering around family, religion, food and the simple joy of living.

Christianity plays a big part in the holidays, as seen in the *Posadas*, which are most popular in Mexico, Guatemala and southwest U.S. The Posadas are the reenactment of Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem. During the nine days before Christmas Eve, children and adults dress up, forming processions throughout various neighborhoods, singing songs asking for "Posada" or shelter. The "innkeepers" respond in song as they welcome the Procession for delicious tamales, buñuelos (thinly rolled, fried dough with sweet toppings). The Posadas conclude with the rupturing of a star-shaped *Piñata*, which surprisingly, has a religious origin. The original piñatas had seven peaks, representing the seven capital sins; like today's customs, the idea is to destroy the sins by hitting the piñata (as hard and often as you can until a sibling knocks you out of the way... Or maybe that's just my family!) until it cracks open displaying the significant gifts inside, symbolizing God's forgiveness and blessings.

Since Latin American makes up the world's largest percentage of Catholics, it's not surprising that Christmas is celebrated with *Misas*, or masses. In Bolivia, Chile and Mexico, folks attend la Misa del Gallo or Midnight Mass. *Nacimientos*, Nativity Scenes, are very popular in Peru (there's huge and growing Peruvian population in Maryland!) Guatemala, Chile and Paraguay. Where elaborate scenes are set up inside homes, churches, city centers and parks. Some cultures display the Nativity scene under the Tree.

The major celebration for Dominicans, as for many other Hispanics, occurs on December 24<sup>th</sup>, or Nochebuena, where the families gather and enjoy the most delicious feast, as neighbors "carol" with merengue and traditional Christmas melodies along the neighborhood. As a child, I remember the excitement of hearing the lively music as relatives visited on the 24<sup>th</sup> bearing gifts!

The holidays culminate in the Feast of the Epiphany, or Three Kings Day, El Dia de los Reyes Magos on January 6. Let me blow your mind, the 12 days of Christmas, refers to the days between Christmas Day, December 25 and January 6, on which the three Wise Men or Magi discovered Baby Jesus and showered him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

These traditions are blending as Hispanics acculturate and incorporate American customs, like Christmas morning following midnight mass. And often, we are seeing various events locally depicting the influence and convergence of these cultures and traditions.

For instance, most churches with Hispanic congregations host a Misa de Gallo or posadas- visit Sacred Heart, or Sagrado Corazon de Jesus in Baltimore to truly experience the religious Latino holiday celebrations. Sacred Heart offers a robust schedule of masses and posadas to celebrate country-specific customs and traditions.

Creative Alliance, the heart of culture and arts in Baltimore, offers Piñata making classes hosted by the authentic and talented Artesanas Mejicanas (Mexican Artisans), along with several community events to celebrate the season.

Of course, food is at the center of every gathering! Here are some popular holiday dishes to sample:

*Tamales*, made from corn, are traditional to many countries, but due to the laborious preparation process- requiring a full army of family and friend to make-they typically are reserved for the holiday festivities.

*Pasteles*- popular in the Caribbean, these are made from plantains and wrapped in plantain leaves. And just like tamales, it takes the whole family to make- another great excuse to gather! Be forewarned, there's a strenuous debate as to whether pasteles should be enjoyed with hot sauce or ketchup! Right answer =hot sauce!

*Coquito* comes from Puerto Rico, like eggnog made with coconut and rum... 'cause these foods has to be accompanied by some special beverage, right?

*Lechon*- it's roasted pig, often cooked in an outdoor pit. Popular in in most Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Desserts include: *Arroz con leche*, rice pudding, can be found everywhere, though recipes do vary, from sweet to spicy and flavorful. *Buñuelos* – are enjoyed by Cubans, Mexicans, Colombians... who am I kidding? All of us! *Panettone* is like a Latin Fruitcake, typically with hot chocolate on Christmas eve.

Take the time to live fully, remembering that during the holidays we can get caught up in the busyness of life- but there's so much more to enjoy!

Felices Fiestas Amigos!

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