

Mexican restaurants cash in on Cinco de Mayo

Cinco de Mayo: Local restaurants pull out all the stops to draw customers for holiday celebrations

Olivia Just, Correspondent | Thursday, May 5, 2011



Jessica Vanacoro puts a sombrero on 14 month old Parker at Desert Moon Cafe in Danbury. Facebook Friends and folks that are a member of the Desert Moon Cafe email Loyalty Club received a coupon for a free sombrero at the cafe to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. Thursday, May 5, 2011
Photo: Scott Mullin / The News-Times Freelance

In the United States, Cinco de Mayo is generally celebrated with tequila, margaritas and a hearty craving for Mexican cuisine -- a far cry from a battle waged by Mexican troops against the French on May 5, 1862, the historical event the holiday commemorates.

For local Mexican and Southwestern restaurants, however, Cinco de Mayo is the single day each year assured to attract customers seeking a slice of Mexican culture.

"It's our Christmas in the Mexican business," said Michelle Cullen, who manages one of two locations of Desert Moon, a Mexican and Southwestern restaurant in Danbury. "It's a big holiday."

Customer attendance doubles each year on Cinco de Mayo, when Desert Moon offers live music, drink specials and, for this year's event, a raffle for a beach kit stocked with restaurant merchandise.

"Cinco de Mayo is a great excuse to have a party and to have new drinks and food specials to attract customers,"

added Nicole Griffin, executive director of the Connecticut Restaurant Association. "The Mexican restaurants really cash in a little bit more on Cinco de Mayo and it's a great day to emphasize what you have."

At Boxcar Cantina in Greenwich, where patrons are offered a menu of locally and organically grown food, the restaurant balances the festive atmosphere with a bit of history. Displayed on the wall is a bespectacled photograph and brief biography of General Ignacio Zaragoza, the young former seminarian who led an outnumbered Mexican militia into battle on May 5 and won an unexpected victory. For the occasion, Boxcar also offers a bright pink margarita special with a dash of sangria, named in honor of General Zaragoza.

"It's kind of funny because people think it's Independence Day and it's totally not," manager Kelly Walsh said. "It [the restaurant] has a vibe to it, so we can give that full Mexican feel on the day that people look for it."

A week before the holiday, Boxcar had already gotten advance take-out orders for office parties, where menu choices generally center on what's easy to eat, such as mini burritos, Boxcar cupcakes or flautas, rolled corn tortillas filled with chicken and refried beans.

"It's actually the biggest day of the year for us, by far," Walsh said. Inside the restaurant, "Of course, it's just a big party. Everybody loves margaritas."

Restaurant owners take advantage of the increased business to offer creative incentives to entice customers into the establishments and catch their interest.

Desert Moon is handing out free sombreros to patrons who support the restaurant on Facebook, and MaryAnn's Mexican Restaurant in Stamford will offer a slew of free giveaways, from maracas to shots of tequila.

"It's a way of saying thanks for spending time with us," said MaryAnn's manager Juan Cortorreal said.

The restaurant's back room, which seats around 60 people, easily fills up on Cinco de Mayo, Cortorreal said. Because of the holiday rush, delivery service is cancelled for the day, notwithstanding large orders for corporate office parties.

At Taco Loco in Bridgeport, it's estimated that hundreds will pass through the restaurant on May 5, taking advantage of the \$5 margaritas, \$3 Corona beers and live acoustic guitar music played on the patio and in the parking lot.

This year, the restaurant has even hired four new staffers to contend with the event that kicks off their busy season.

"It's more kind of an American-Mexican holiday than a Mexican holiday. It's a celebration of Mexican culture," Joe McGee from the Business Council of Fairfield County said. "I'm sure it's well received; we have a growing Mexican population in Fairfield County. It's a great day."

After-work revelers packed MaryAnn's on Thursday night as Latin music blared and paper flags hung throughout the restaurant.

"I love the decorations and the music. I'm a Latina so I can appreciate it," said Delilah Torres, of Stamford. "The food is good, the service is great and the margaritas are the best. Very authentic."