

Food and Fiestas: Exploring Latin American Popular Culture via Family Celebrations recreated in the Spanish Classroom

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Overview

The two things that my high school Spanish students crave most are food and fiestas. At all levels, from middle school “Adventures: classes through PSP (Pittsburgh Scholars Program) Spanish 5, the questions continually asked include: “Can we make/eat/learn about food?” and “Can we have a Spanish/Mexican/Cinco de Mayo party?” Although many times the students use questions like these to distract from other, less interesting topics or activities, it seems like missed opportunities to completely refuse to honor their requests, particularly when so much functional grammar, interpersonal skills, and cultural information can be interwoven within the context of food and family celebrations. The purpose of this curriculum is to provide a framework in which rigorous objectives can be designed and met while still giving students the chance to enjoy learning about the target culture. I will explore and offer activities related to three popular Latin American celebrations and a Latin American Food Festival. Researching, preparing, and participating in activities developed around the themes of the Day of the Dead, *Quinceanera*, Weddings and the *Feria de Comida Latinoamericana* offer a perfect chance for students to experience the “5C’s” which comprise language learning: Communication, Connections, Comparisons, Communities, and Cultures.

Rationale

Some teachers, administrators, and even parents may feel that having a party is not a valuable learning experience, particularly for upper level high school language students. I disagree, and have orchestrated mock weddings, Day of the Dead celebrations, and food festivals that included quite a bit of work for students to complete both in and out of class. But because they are motivated by the culminating activity (the *fiesta*), the end result is of even higher quality than might be expected.

For example, as Spanish 5 PSP students prepared for the wedding, one assignment was to write and memorize a toast (*brindis*) that they would give during the reception. Everyone had a part in the wedding (maid of honor, father of the bride, etc.), and the toast was to reflect their relationship with the bride and groom. Of course, when “I hope” or “I wish” is the beginning of the toast, as it usually is, the subjunctive form of the verb must be used. This provided an excellent, creative example of using higher-level vocabulary and grammar structure in context. Students were graded using a rubric for appropriate content, verb forms and other grammar, and oral delivery of the toast. This is just one small example that illustrates the fallacy of automatically equating food or parties with time wasted. I find it to be just the opposite—students will do even more than is required when they can see a valid reason for making the effort.

Textbooks do not typically teach food and family celebrations together, although in reality they are always linked, and provide an important insight into the culture being studied. Whether students research birthday cakes for a wedding or *quinceanera* or how to make *pan de muertos* for the Day of the Dead, they are opening a window into the very heart of another culture. In Latin America, as in so many countries around the world, no gathering is complete without a drink and a bite to eat. The type of food that is representative of various celebrations reflects the geographic area, socio-economic status, and sometimes the religious beliefs of the people who eat it. Learning about these aspects of a culture is absolutely necessary for our students, many of whom truly believe that everyone does things that way Americans do.

I have taught in the Pittsburgh Public Schools since the mid-1980's, and at Taylor Alderdice, a national Blue Ribbon School, since the Fall of 1992. The student body is diverse both racially and socio-economically. All students are required to take two years of Spanish, French, German or Latin in the World Language Department. Spanish is the most popular choice with 5 full-time teachers each with 5 sections per day. Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools may start learning Spanish as early as first grade in some elementary schools, and most begin by at least middle school. Students in the PSP program take Spanish 1 in eighth grade, which allows them to reach Spanish 5 as Seniors.

At most levels there are 3 tracks: Mainstream, PSP (Pittsburgh Scholars Program) and CAS (Center for Advanced Studies—gifted.) I generally teach PSP levels 4 and 5 in a non-AP program. The material presented in this curriculum could be adapted to other levels, but it was designed with my students in mind. Class sizes are approximately 15-20 students. Next year I may have 3 classes of Spanish 4 PSP and 2 sections of Spanish 5 PSP. Most of the students in these classes are urban, middle-class, college-bound 16to18-year-olds.

The textbook used in the Mainstream and PSP levels is Ya Veras by Heinle and Heinle for levels 1-4 and Heinle and Heinle's Enlaces for level 5. All of the texts address food and family celebrations at various times throughout the years, though not usually together. Art, music, and literature are addressed in two units toward the end of Spanish 4, and some literature is integrated into the Spanish 5 curriculum. I tend to teach these in tandem with other culture being studied, and have found that it makes more sense and is more comprehensible for the students as well. For example, when students study Latin American food in Chapter 3, it is logical to teach the excerpt of Laura Esquivel's Like Water for Chocolate and also, perhaps, Frida Kahlo's paintings of fruit and other food. At level 5 the students read Federico Garcia Lorca's Bodas de Sangre when studying weddings and family relationships. Adding even one or two of the activities included in this curriculum takes some extra time and effort on the part of teacher and students, but the benefits outweigh any disadvantages.

WEDDINGS

Mock Weddings may be one of the most comprehensive celebrations that teachers can plan for students to organize. Many have attended at least one wedding and are familiar with the food, clothing and customs surrounding the occasion, at least in some religious and socio-economic context. The ceremonial language, invitations, cake and clothing offer students rich opportunities for research, cooperative learning activities and grammar practice with functional

objectives. They will need to find out what is said during the actual ceremony itself (hint: it's not "I do"), create authentic, customized invitations, assign character roles to include all students as family members or part of the wedding party, research which food and/or drink is typical for a wedding reception, decide on appropriate dress and decorations, and propose a toast. This can be as simple or as elaborate as time, level of student interest and proficiency, and circumstances allow.

I have coordinated mock weddings three times in level-4 Spanish classes, one in 1996, 1998, and 2000. I recorded them on videotape and can see the progression from simple to much more elaborate. The first year I was fortunate to have a student from El Salvador in the class, who was very helpful in developing authentic dialogue during the actual "ceremony". A Spanish and English script of this is included in the appendix. It is also possible to find this information on-line at some of the sites listed in the bibliography. I feel that it is important that the exchange of "vows", at least, be as close as possible to authentic.

Depending upon the size, maturity, proficiency, and time allotted to this activity, the teacher can determine whether to have students work alone, in pairs, or in groups to divide the work involved. This can include invitations, decorations and flowers, costumes, music, photographs/video, food, drinks and cake. Each student will have a role in the wedding as bride, groom, priest, family member or member of the wedding party. Based on the role the student has, a toast should be written and given at the reception. Some useful vocabulary relating to weddings is attached in the appendix.

Invitations can be made based on examples of real wedding invitations from Spanish countries. It may be possible to get sample invitations from students or other Latin Americans in the community. Otherwise, most textbooks or workbooks have sample invitations; for example Spanish for Mastery I workbook page 78, Amistades chapter 16, and Enlaces chapters 4 and 6 all include comprehension activities based on reading a wedding invitation. These can be used as a template on which to base the class's customized invitation. Students can also create newspaper announcements or columns describing the nuptials as a writing activity. The language used in these situations is different from everyday spoken Spanish, which can be the basis for a compare/contrast activity.

Decorations, flowers, costumes and music are areas in which students can do some research to find what is realistic, popular, and reproducible in a classroom. Internet research, Spanish magazines such as People, Latina, and Vanidades, as well as bride magazines in Spanish have articles and advertising that will help students plan. This can be much simpler than it sounds. For the first two weddings the brides in my classes wore a silk robe and a mantilla of mine, with a bouquet of paper flowers. The priest/minister wore his white T-shirt pulled up so that the neck showed under his black sweatshirt. This has evolved over the years to more elaborate and authentic outfits, but so far no one has actually worn a wedding gown (yet). If students keep a journal or otherwise record what they are doing this can be graded and used to develop a grade from the project. Students can use their imaginations based on the information that they have found and may well do even more than is expected.

Students can be encouraged to find customs that compare/contrast with those that are familiar to them. For example, at www.world-weddings.net I found that in Colombia, wedding dresses sometimes have touches of gold and that "the wedding cake will be placed in the center of the dance floor, and it is traditionally the first thing to be eaten at a Colombian wedding reception. Colombia also has a wedding drink—*aguardiente*." (1) In the June 1998 issue of Latina magazine, an article entitled "*Ceremonias del Casamiento*" listed various customs from Cuba, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and more. For example, in Mexico the *zapatilla*, or bride's shoe (either real or made from spun sugar) is passed around and filled with money. An effective teaching strategy is to have students create or complete a graphic organizer with the information they find, which can be part of testing or grading at the completion of the activity.

Another potential activity is an Internet “vocabulary hunt” in which students will use various web sites to find the definition of words related to Latin American weddings. The *zapatilla* could be one, *aguardiente* another. At www.askginka.com I found others: *mandelon*, *arras*, *padrinos*, and others that are questions that can be answered from information at the site, including: what do the 13 coins that the groom gives to the bride symbolize?, what is put around the necks of the bride and groom during the ceremony?, when does the wedding party form a heart around the wedding couple?, and what is given to the guests before they leave? This activity can be done in English or Spanish. Answers to these will be found in the wedding portion of the appendix.

The music included in the wedding ceremony and reception should be somewhat authentic, given the availability of Latin American music today. Once again, the area of music can be part of the students’ research and be as elaborate or as simple as desired. At the first wedding we did in 1996 I just hummed “Here Comes the Bride” for a few minutes. The second time, a student brought a keyboard from the band room and played. Another time the groom learned and sang the song “*Eres tu*” to his bride. Mariachi music, salsa and other dancing, as well as traditional love songs can all be part of the celebration as desired.

The cake, food, drinks and toasts are the final elements in recreating a wedding in the Spanish classroom. While this is not meant to be a Latin American feast, students should find examples of wedding cakes from other countries and have something to fill glasses with for the *brindis*, or toasts. If it is not feasible to get an actual wedding cake, a sheet cake with Spanish lettering could substitute. However, once again this can be an opportunity for students with hidden talents to shine. In 1998 a less-than-stellar student (who is now a chef) brought in a multi-tiered wedding cake decorated with Spanish writing that he had baked himself. More recently a student made a poster with pictures of wedding cakes she had found on the Internet and in magazines, labeled with the country they were from. The toasts can be 3-5 sentences based on the imaginary relationship (mother of the bride, best man, etc.) between the students. At upper levels subjunctive will be used, and toasts can be memorized or read from small index cards as desired. The toast can form another part of the grade for the activity. A listing of possible tasks and sample grading sheet/rubric can be found in the appendix.

The only potential problems I have encountered deal with religious and social aspects of this activity. Since most of Latin America is Roman Catholic, the majority of weddings take place in a church, and the authentic language of the ceremony does contain references to God and even Jesus. This can be a difficulty in a multi-cultural classroom such as mine. In fact, many of my upper-level students (Spanish 4 and 5) are Jewish, so I have had to develop some alternatives to address this issue. One year, the students asked to do two weddings, one Christian and one Jewish. They researched the similarities and differences, found the language to be used during the ceremony, and even included some typical Jewish customs such as breaking the glass (we used plastic.) It is important to allow students to explore the religious implications of this celebration and to feel comfortable with their role: I had a Hindu boy beg to play the part of the priest one year, and he did an excellent job of learning and delivering his lines in Spanish.

The other consideration is the intimate relationships we are asking these students to role-play. I have had a real-life couple pretend to get married, the class clowns volunteer to be bride and groom, or just picked names at random. I never force students to play a particular role, and mostly they work out for themselves who will be maid of honor, father of the bride, etc., but at times this has taken some finesse, depending on the size, interest, and cohesion among the members of the class.

Many students have taken part in or at least attended weddings, but some have not. I try to give explanations and directions for the roles in Spanish as much as possible.

Although some students will have larger roles than others, all students are responsible for learning their part and delivering it fluently, writing and giving their original toast, contributing something to the food or

decorations, and doing other activities as assigned, including a test and written journal reflection which can be graded for completeness and correctness.

It can be helpful to assign a Director to take on some of the responsibility. This student can develop and distribute lists of roles, menus, dates, and otherwise take some of the burden from the teacher. Groups of students can produce the invitation, research and make or buy a cake, decorate, provide music, photograph or videotape, and coordinate the food, drinks and paper products. This activity should not take more than a week or two at most as much of the work can be done outside of class. A schedule of checkpoints and assignments developed early can keep students on task and using Spanish as much as possible. This activity can be an excellent way for students to learn about the language in a culturally rich context that is universal.

QUINCEANERA

The *Quinceanera* has some of the same elements as a wedding, but celebrates a different milestone: a Latin American girl's passage into womanhood on her fifteenth birthday. This activity is useful in classrooms where there might be a girl who is actually turning fifteen during the school year and who would then be the *quinceanera*. This reception is generally very elaborate, similar to a Jewish Bat-Mitzvah, although the ceremony itself takes place during a special Mass, and relates more closely to a Christian Confirmation. While Christian girls in the United States may not have any celebrations that compare with this, Jewish students will recognize similarities with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah that takes place when a boy or girl turns 13. The main difference, other than the religious ceremony, is that the *quinceanera* applies only to girls. Confirmations are not nearly as elaborate and debutante or coming-out parties are usually for a group rather than an individual. I would not recommend doing both a Wedding and a *Quinceanera* in the same year, but perhaps they could be developed during level 3 and level 4, for example, so students could compare and contrast these two celebrations.

I have taught three sisters whose father is Peruvian and who each celebrated her "quince" on summer vacations in Peru, complete with lovely invitations and favors. I was fortunate that they have given me samples to use with my classes, but companies abound on the Internet that plan, design and distribute *Quinceanera* realia. One website, www.quinceanera-boutique.com, offers a huge (and expensive) array of *Quince* memorabilia and gifts. Champagne glasses, personalized with name and dated for the *Quince* and her escort, or *chambelan*, are available for the traditional toast by the *Quince's* father. Other products include cake decorations, cake knife and server, crowns, tiara and a scepter that is given to the *Quinceanera* during the crowning ceremony. Silk flower arrangements to be carried by the *Quince* and her court in the hundred-dollar range match equally expensive headpieces. A white satin *Quince* Kneeling Pillow decorated with Cinderella, horse and coach and personalized with name and date for use during the Mass, offers an interesting juxtaposition of sacred and secular.

Recommended gifts for the *Quinceanera* normally reflect the religious aspect of the celebration, including a Bible or prayer book with a cover designed to hold a picture of the quince, a rosary, cross or other necklace, earrings, bracelets, or specially engraved rings. Porcelain dolls dressed in white satin decorated with rhinestones, hearts, sequins, with "Mis *Quince* Anos" written on pink trailing ribbons are traditionally given to the *Quince*. As a possible classroom Internet activity students could find examples of these gifts and list or describe them in Spanish. The girls could perhaps decide what they would choose and all students could use the prices for numbers, or even budgeting practice as an example of an interdisciplinary lesson.

Invitations to a *Quinceanera* are included in many textbooks as reading comprehension activities, including [Enlaces](#), [Ya Veras level 2](#) and [Amistades level 3](#). Students may adapt invitations and make favors using votive candles, artificial flowers, netting, and ribbons with the Spanish phrase "Mis *Quince* Anos" written on it. Those in the court can learn a typical dance, either a waltz or something else that is

appropriate. The food and desserts will depend on which country the *Quinceanera* is taking place in, and will allow students to research and perhaps prepare some of the things they have found.

The *quinceanera*, like a wedding, begins with a church service. In this case, the young woman is presented as a “senorita” a stage between child and woman. Prayers are offered asking that God allow her to enjoy health, prosperity, and a life free of temptation. Some girls light a candle and with this candle light the candles of their parents who, in turn, light their own parents’ candles. The court for the *Quinceanera*, seven girls or *damas* and seven boys or *chambelanes* are seated with her near the altar. At the end of the Mass, the *Quince* offers her flowers to the Blessed Mother statue. The young woman is dressed in a long, white formal gown, sometimes decorated with pink. She often changes from flat-heeled to high-heeled shoes representing her passage to womanhood. Many times she wears a crown or tiara, and a Virgin Mary necklace given to her by her godparents. The godparents may also help pay for her elaborate, wedding gown-like dress and cake, which typically has 15 layers and a statue on the top layer to represent the young woman.

Quinceaneras are rarely simple affairs, but rather grand parties with special effects, her name in lights, live bands for dancing and many guests. Students can get a good overview of a typical quinceanera from the movie [Sweet Fifteen](#). The movie deals with the dual themes of a girl turning fifteen and her father’s illegal immigration. The movie, originally shown as an After-School Special on public television stations, opens with a typical, Mexican-American *Quinceanera* and closes with a more simplified version of the celebration. One line early in the movie, delivered enviously by one of the *Quince*’s younger friends, is “she’s a real woman now, she’s had her *Quince*.” Her father makes the traditional toast, or *brindis*: “To Gabrielle on her fifteenth birthday—This is a day that a father can be proud of his daughter, and my daughter can be proud of herself!” Another character gives a different view: “in El Salvador, the *Quinceanera* is for the rich—no *las tenemos*.” The main character’s parents warn their daughter at one point that while everybody has a Mass, the party is extra. The film is somewhat dated, but always seems to hold student interest, and is not very long.

The party includes friends as well as extended family. As the guest of honor enters, the court joins hands to form a tunnel or bridge for her to pass through with her escort. She and her father dance a special waltz and the party begins.

Sample activities for students in a class which celebrates a *Quinceanera* could include creating the invitations, favors and cards, researching the appropriate food, music, decorations and gifts, and an essay or journal assignment about what the ceremony means, or what maturity means in general. This could be a guided writing activity, a peer-editing entry for a writing portfolio, or part of a test grade. Some sample invitations, and greeting card vocabulary are included in the appendix.

Whether the decision is made to actually attempt to recreate a *Quinceanera* in the classroom, or to simply lead student research via the Internet, books and video, the information and vocabulary learned about this important celebration will enhance the curriculum at any level. Students will use higher-level and critical thinking skills as they analyze the meaning behind the customs of the *Quinceanera*, and as they compare and contrast it to whatever rite of passage celebrations that might be familiar to them because of religious or family background, or study of other cultures in other classes. For this reason, if for no other, students should learn as much as possible about the *Quinceanera*.

The custom of celebrating the *Quinceanera*, while not totally universal in Latin American culture, has migrated North, so many first- and second-generation Hispanics living in the United States continue the celebration as a continuation of their culture of origin. One such young woman, Maria Isabel Ordaz, summarizes this at <http://cnet.ucr.edu/research/folklore/quinceaneras/isabel.htm>,

“Growing up in a traditional Mexican family, *Quinceaneras* are a great bond with family, but living in the United States, the Chicano experience is trying to hold on to cultural traditions for strength and guidance. At the same time, these bicultural girls are also taking the best of both worlds, the

American culture and the Mexican culture, to enrich themselves. Cultural celebrations, such as Quinceaneras, are excellent means of preserving the family bond of traditional Mexican families in the United States. These cultural traditions are seen by Latinos in the United States as a source of strength and guidance while at the same time trying to adopt the best of the American culture.”

DAY OF THE DEAD

Dia de los Muertos is an event celebrated by families in Mexico to remember deceased ancestors, whose spirits are believed to return and visit the earth once a year. Death is viewed as a part of the cycle of life, in marked contrast to the standard American hatred toward and fear of dying. A description of the traditions which represent *Dia de los Muertos* is found in many of the textbooks I reviewed, including Enlaces, Spanish for Mastery Level One, Ya Veras, and Ven Conmigo Level 2. Students who have participated in some of the activities described here were interested and amazed by the very different attitude held by Mexicans toward death. As we completed the unit, they had a deeper comprehension of the variety of attitudes people have toward death.

Linda McAllister, Tempe AZ cultural anthropologist, is quoted in the web site www.azcentral.com as calling *Dia de los Muertos* customs flexible that “vary from town to town because Mexico is not culturally monolithic.” She looks at food as an extension of folk traditions and considers food to be “ritual and ephemeral art.” These two concepts, the variation in customs and the importance of food as part of the celebrations are key to the value of developing a *Dia de los Muertos* celebration in the classroom.

Because *Dia de los Muertos* falls right after Halloween and includes decorative skeletons, candies, references to the dead, and processions to local cemeteries, it is important that students learn that, in the words of a sign I display every year, “*Dia de los Muertos* is NOT Halloween.” There are similarities and differences, which can be explored via a Venn Diagram or other compare/contrast activity. This can be teacher-led or students can research, discuss, list, or explain the customs, either in Spanish or English depending on their level.

The main difference between the Mexican *Dia de los Muertos* and the American Halloween customs taken from the Druids is in attitude toward death. Halloween treats the concept as scary and horrible, while the Mexicans celebrate life while honoring death. The ofrendas remember and pay tribute to deceased family and friends, albeit in a sometimes light-hearted way. To make an ofrenda: Bring photos or symbols of the dead and build an altar. Create different levels on a table by stacking books or boxes and cover with a cloth. The different levels represent the stages spirits go through to reach Paradise. Add flower petals (cempazuchil/marigolds) and garlands, a glass of water, candles and incense to represent the elements: earth, water, fire and air. Place photos of the dead on the altar, along with any food or drinks they enjoyed while alive, to welcome their spirits to the party. The aromas from the fragrant flowers and copal incense are consumed by the spirits, which like the scents, can’t be seen. The foods that are displayed on the altar are eaten by the living (or given away) later, after their essence has been consumed, Heard Museum Educational Services Manager Gina Laczko explains.

Graves are cleaned and decorated in a somber, yet celebratory gathering, and even the dancing skeletons made famous by Jose Posada serve to make fun of death rather than frightening us or making us sad. Children buy, make and eat candy skulls called calaveras, which is also something that can be studied as part of the unit. The calaveras are made of sugar, egg whites, lemon juice and buttermilk. Exact recipes can be found on many websites from the bibliography, including the site referenced above. Papel picado, multi-colored cutout tissue paper, is another student-friendly decorative activity, or it can be purchased through Teacher’s Discovery and other catalogs. At the high school level students can do more in-depth research into at least one aspect of the celebration, perhaps being in charge of teaching the rest of the class about one particular area in a jigsaw activity.

The background behind the food associated with *Día de los Muertos* is one area in which research can be done, to have a “taste-test” of various loaves of *Pan de Muertos* and compare the designs made from dough, which decorate the tops of the loaves. Making *Pan de Muertos* can be assigned for extra credit for interested students, or it can be a class activity assigned to some or all students as their part in recreating the celebration in the class. If it is possible to work with the Home Economics teacher and make it in the Cooking classroom, even better. Some teachers consider this interdisciplinary experience valuable for all students and will team-teach their classes to make the recipes as well. In some parts of the country the bread is available in bakeries, or as a last resort, the teacher can bake some for students to taste.

The candy skulls reflect various occupations, ages, and facial features. Students could draw, paint or sculpt a *calavera* and describe it in Spanish, explaining why it does or does not express something about them personally. If students make *ofrendas* they can again describe the items associated with the deceased in detail, why the items were placed there, and something about the person for whom the *ofrenda* was made. This does not have to be a family member, but could someone from the music, film, or political world, or someone entirely imaginary.

The celebration of *Día de los Muertos* offers a number of cross-cultural interdisciplinary opportunities for the students to explore, and is also a meaningful way for students to express themselves in Spanish regarding customs that most students find fascinating, particularly around Halloween. There is a wealth of information available about *Día de los Muertos* in hundreds of websites, Teacher’s Discovery and other catalogs, and books ranging from children’s level to scholarly texts, in English and Spanish. One page of Spanish *Día de los Muertos* vocabulary that I have found useful and comprehensive is found at <http://csumb.edu/events/dead/vocabulario.html>, but there are many others as well. From completing word searches and crossword puzzles to writing original poetry using Posada art as prompts, students can use Spanish in conjunction with hands-on projects to explore *Día de los Muertos*.

LATIN AMERICAN FOOD FESTIVAL

Some Spanish students, even as far along as level 4, don’t know the difference between a tortilla in Mexico and a tortilla in Spain, nor do many of their parents. The textbook series *Ya Veras* does address food at every level, but in *Ya Veras, Nivel 3*, there is an entire unit devoted to food and it is divided into food from Spain and Latin American food (mostly Mexican.) Many expressions for ordering or reacting to food are presented, as well as information about a variety of typical foods that may be unfamiliar to North Americans, such as *llapingachos*, *yucca*, and *arepas*. Unfortunately, students will still have a negative first impression toward such dishes, no matter how appetizing they sound.

I feel that it is imperative that people taste food in order to understand it and be able to form an opinion about it. It is not even fair to expect students to use Spanish to order, describe, or discuss food that they have never tasted, even in the artificial environment of the classroom. To this end, I have developed an activity to correspond with and supplement the information in the textbook. It is called “*Feria de la Comida Latinoamericana*”--- and the students do all of the work! This year it was particularly successful with over 30 different dishes for all to try, and a lovely, illustrated cookbook that the students organized, designed, and created for each of them to keep. It is very gratifying to see that students are so invested in a topic that they ask to do more. I will describe how to develop a *Feria de Comida* after first presenting some background information about food and how integral food is to a particular culture.

In the book *Latin American Popular Culture*, the introduction to Jeffrey M. Pilcher’s chapter entitled “Many Chefs in the National Kitchen: Cookbooks and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Mexico” offers great insight into the subject of food.

“Festive meals celebrate family occasions, holy days, and civic holidays.

Special dishes represent these celebrations, family identity, and the occupational and ethnic groups in society. Meals serve as ephemeral art expressions of popular history and powerful social symbols. . Food expresses the culture and history of the nation.” (123)

Pilcher first refers to Laura Esquivel’s best-selling novel, Like Water for Chocolate, remarking that it “uncovered an affinity between two usually distinct genres, the romance and the cookbook.” (123) Excerpts from the novel are presented in both Ya Veras Nivel 3 (used in Spanish 4) and in Enlaces, used in Spanish 5. I always teach them when students are learning about food, rather than in isolation or with other literature. The recipes, along with the story of forbidden love told in the style of the magical realism of Latin American literature, are irresistible to high school students. Pilcher comments that the manuscript cookbook written into the novel by the main character resembles the real narrative that Mexican women wrote into their recipes, and that it helped form a national community based in part on national cuisine.

We associate Mexico with corn tortillas, but they were always linked “with poor Indians and mestizos, while wheat bread was reserved for elite Spaniards and criollos.” (124) Native Americans considered themselves to be “the people of corn” and maize remains an everyday staple, but wheat bread carries religious significance, as seen in the elaborate loaves of bread made for *Dia de los Muertos*. *Mole poblano*, as well, has been identified as a national dish, served at baptisms, birthdays and wedding receptions. In the early 1900’s, French cooking almost overtook Mexican dishes in popularity, particularly in the upper classes. Pilcher states, “Another characteristic of Mexican elite cuisine was the profusion of meat, eaten at virtually every meal, more than any other country in the world.” (131) Other references to food as an integral part of a family, religious, or national celebration include “gorditas”, small corn griddlecakes dedicated to the Virgin Mary and sold in Guadalupe Hidalgo Plaza to pilgrims, barbecued goat with salsa borracha eaten on December 12, Virgen de Guadalupe Day, and Holy Week, when huge throngs of people from villages and ranches converged on the capital guzzling fruit drinks made by street vendors, and sampling various flavors of ice cream.

Pilcher concludes his chapter by going back to Like Water for Chocolate, calling it an apt metaphor for Mexican cuisine and society. He remarks, “Tita declines respectable marriage with an American doctor so she can continue an illicit affair with her Mexican lover. In the same way, Mexicans have begun to give up the slavish imitation of foreign models and show pride in their Indian heritage.” (136) The newest threat to Mexican/Indian cuisine is fast food, mostly from the United States. It remains to be seen what long-range effect McDonalds and other fast food outlets will have on the integrity of Mexican national cuisine.

I developed the idea of a *Feria de Comida* to give students the opportunity to find a recipe that interested them, and to allow them to taste a variety of foods they might not think they would like. It was extremely successful, particularly because everything actually tasted good! Students were very proud of their own recipes and also enjoyed finding out “who made what.” Part of their grade was based on a sign they made to label their dish, including the name of the food, country of origin, and cook’s name. The students who assembled in the Food Technology classroom during lunch for this event were from three different Spanish 4 classes, which gave them a chance to mingle and speak Spanish outside of the classroom, and to comment on the various foods in Spanish using the vocabulary from the chapter in context. Various administrators and other teachers also attended and were very complimentary about the quality and variety of the food. Students decorated the area with posters and flags representing the countries in Latin America.

Students completed this activity in one week. The project was worth 50 points divided as follows with a timeline they received the first day:

10 points: research a recipe, write it in Spanish, and document the book or website where it was found. We spent one class period in the computer lab finding possible recipes together, and the rest

they did outside of class. One excellent website (from Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh) that many students used as a starting point was <http://trfn.clpgh.org/lifestyle/cooking/latin.html>

10 points: cook the food following the recipe documenting date and time

10 points: present the food on the day of the Feria with a sign as described above

10 points: taste the food (with a smile)—I set a minimum of at least 10 tastes for the really picky eaters, but most students tried almost everything with little hesitation. I felt I should at least taste everything (over 30 dishes) and could not even look at food for nearly 24 hours!

10 points: write reflections in their weekend Spanish journal. I encouraged them to be frank in their comments so I could get feedback and learn for next year. Students' only negatives were that they felt rushed, so perhaps a week was not enough. They also did not have a lot of time at the Feria, but this is always a scheduling problem at our school.

Most students got at least 45-50 points, with few exceptions, and the grading turned out to be the least important aspect of the project. They were very conscientious about keeping track of everything and meeting deadlines. I did allow a few students to work in pairs if the recipe they chose was very complicated or expensive and it did not seem to cause any problems. I discouraged students from using familiar Mexican recipes and tried to have a representative sampling of Caribbean, Central American and South American from each class; it was interesting to taste various versions of *arroz con pollo*, *flan*, and *arepas*, which multiple students chose to cook.

About a week after the Feria, several students came to me and asked if we could compile the recipes into a cookbook. I agreed on the condition that each of the three classes have one representative who would coordinate their recipes and divide up the work of creating the cookbook itself. The classes spent another day in the computer lab reworking the recipes in English and Spanish following a predetermined template for typeface, point size and margins. When the recipes were ready, one student designed the cover with color digital photos of each class, one student divided the recipes into appetizers, main dishes and desserts and made divider pages for the cookbook, and another student laid out the pages and added clip art. The result after copying, collating and putting in plastic covers, is a lovely memento of the activity as well as a useful cookbook full of tasty dishes! We considered selling extra copies as a fundraiser for a charity, but had concerns about copyrighted material. Students were able to transfer the cookbook and journal reflections to their English writing portfolios.

Students have a much better grasp of Latin American food, and its relationship with Spanish, African, French, and indigenous ingredients. They mentioned many times throughout the year that they had made something from the cookbook or eaten something in a restaurant that they remembered from the *Feria de Comida*. I also think it is good public relations with school administration and parents, who could be invited to help or simply attend the event. I added a thank-you letter to the cookbook acknowledging the participation of parents (who undoubtedly helped in varying degrees), other teachers and the administration. The activity can be simplified or done on a larger scale, depending on student involvement and time allotted.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Beezley, William H. and Curcio-Nagy, Linda A. Latin American Popular Culture. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2000. This is a collection of 13 essays that highlight various aspects of the history and people of Latin America and the Caribbean. The essay that I found most useful was written by Jeffrey M. Pilcher about Mexican food and cookbooks in the nineteenth century. The essay also had a wonderful introduction by the authors.

Esquivel, Laura. Like Water for Chocolate. New York: Doubleday, 1989. This is a beautifully written combination cookbook/love story set in the early 1900's in Northern Mexico. It was an international bestseller and was made into an Academy Award winning movie as well.

Kennedy, Diana. Mexican Regional Cooking. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1978. This book offered much more than recipes: before the actual ingredients and procedure there is usually a story or other background information about the dish and area that it is from. The tone of the cookbook is conversational and enjoyable to read. I have used it as a reference for years.

Student Bibliography

Glisan, Eileen and Schrum, Judith. Enlaces. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2000. This is an introduction-level college textbook that is used in Spanish 5 PSP. It is divided into 10 chapters, thematically based, with some literature selections used for reading comprehension.

Gutierrez, John R. and Rossner, Harry. Ya Veras Gold Nivel 3. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2000. This is the textbook used in Spanish 4 PSP. Latin American food is the subject of Chapter 2.

Valette, Jean-Paul and Valette, Rebecca M. Spanish for Mastery. Lexington, MA, 1989. This textbook is used for the CAS level but the workbook contains various reading comprehension activities about Day of the Dead and *Quinceanera*.

Web Sites and Internet Resources for Teachers and Students

The following sites provide information on Weddings:

www.askginka.com/nationality/latinamerica.htm

www.theknot.com

www.azcentral.com

www.world-weddings.net

The following sites provide information on *Quinceaneras*:

<http://cnet.ucr.edu/research/folklore/quinceaneras/isabel.htm>

www.quinceanera-boutique.com

[http://www.hpl.lib.tx.us/youth/cinco quince.html](http://www.hpl.lib.tx.us/youth/cinco_quince.html)

The following sites provide information on Day of the Dead:

<http://csumb.edu/events/dead/vocabulario.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/foodancestors/>

<http://www.mexonline.com/datdead.htm>

www.nacnet.org/assunta/dead.htm

The following sites provide information on recipes and other information:

<http://trfn.clpgh.org/lifestyle/cooking/latin.html>

<http://jeffconet.jeffco.k12.co.us/isu/language/spanish.html>

<http://www.pitt.edu/~flsites/pps>

<http://www.pde.state.pa.us/lanfuages/>

www.teachersdiscovery.com

Appendix A: Standards

Communications

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by; reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.

4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform, and persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify the purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that is designed to persuade, inform, or describe.
9. All students communicate appropriately in business, work, and other applied situations.

This curriculum addresses all of the nine Communications standards at one time or another. By the end of level 3, all students are expected to speak in Spanish at or above the PPS Proficient level, which corresponds to the ACTFL Intermediate Low level. This can be achieved in conjunction with Communications #3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9. As students read various texts, articles, Internet websites, recipes, invitations and other sources of information, they will address #1, 2 and 5. When they act out role-plays or otherwise participate in oral presentations, they will be addressing #6, 7 and 8. When they reflect on the activities in their journals, they will address #4 and 5. The most important goal of the standards in Foreign Language is to enable students to create in the target language. That is the mark of a proficient speaker and that is what this curriculum strives to accomplish.

Appendix B: Rubrics, Grading Scales and Checklists

A rubric is a scoring guide that contains specific criteria for distinguishing among levels of student proficiency on a particular task. Students can then know the teachers' expectations and grading scale prior to the beginning of a project or unit of study and lets them know the difference between substandard, basic, and advanced work, and allows them to self-evaluate their work. A checklist identifies critical traits that must be present for the work to merit a particular grade, and allows students and teachers to mark the criteria as completed or not, contributing to the clarity of expectations set by the teacher.

I normally rate students on oral and written performance separately. I also tend to divide the grade between content and correctness (grammar.) Each unit, or sometimes a particular activity within a unit, may be graded using either a rubric or checklist. The CAS Program Standards and Criteria for Oral Presentations can be adapted for larger projects, while a simpler, more holistic rubric works well for individual activities within the unit. Although English department rubrics can be adapted as well, I almost always write the rubrics or other grading scales in Spanish, both to teach students the vocabulary and to provide one more opportunity for meaningful communication in the language.

The checklist I developed for use during the *Feria de Comida Latinoamericana* is the most simple. It appears in the body of this curriculum. I was not grading on quality of the food, and the recipes were

mostly available in Spanish and English so translation was not a primary focus of the activity. I did insist that students find a recipe by a deadline and make sure that the name of the food and country of origin were legible and spelled correctly on the sign they made in order to be given the full 10 points in each area. I read and corrected their reflections in their weekend journal according to criteria that they received at the beginning of the year. Vocabulary quiz on cooking terms, food items and reactions to food (*Que rico!* etc.) were also graded separately.

For the mock wedding activity, I divided the grade into thirds:

1/3 for vocabulary level and verb correctness/use of subjunctive for the wedding toast each student was required to create based on their fictional relationship with the bride and groom

1/3 for pronunciation and fluency in delivery of the toast during the reception

1/3 for completion of other responsibility (invitation, cake, music etc.)

Within this grade, each area was worth a possible 10 points and I divided the points into various levels of proficiency: Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Below Basic and kept notes on positive and negative aspects in each area.

I also encourage students to self-evaluate and sometimes incorporate their grade into the grade I have determined. The two key points to making rubrics or other rating scales fair and acceptable to students are (1) to decide ahead of time exactly what the students are expected to learn based on the objectives set for the overall unit and the activities that contribute to it; and (2) to communicate these expectations clearly ahead of time so that students know exactly what they need to do in order to achieve a certain grade. There should be no surprises and few arguments about grading at the end of the unit.

Appendix C: Wedding Dialog in Spanish and Vocabulary

Sacerdote: Estamos reunidos aqui para unir a este hombre y esta mujer en matrimonio santo. En este momento vamos a unir a _____ y _____ con el collar matrimonial. El collar es el simbolo de la union de esta pareja y simboliza que siempre estaran unidos. El anillo, por favor.

Tu, _____, aceptas a _____ para ser tu esposa por bien y por malo, durante buena o de mala salud, por rico o por pobre, por el resto de la vida de Uds.?

Novio: Si, acepto.

Sacerdote: Tu, _____, aceptas a _____ para ser tu esposo por bien y por malo, durante buena o de mala salud, por rico o por pobre, por el resto de la vida de Uds.?

Novia: Si, acepto.

Sacerdote: Puedes besar a tu esposa. Todos vayan en paz. Esta ceremonia se acabo.

Note: The collar matrimonial is a long length of lace or cloth that is loosely wrapped around the necks of the bride and groom, forming a circle or a figure eight to symbolize unity. I have used a braided white scarf and also the belt from a white satin bathrobe. This is a custom in El Salvador. In Guatemala the couple binds themselves together with a silver rope. In Mexico a white rope or special rosary is used and the term is ate el nudo or tie the knot. In Cuba this is a mantilla of heirloom lace usually brought from Spain and in the family for generations. The padrinos pin the lace from the shoulder of the groom to the shoulder of the bride.

Vocabulary List

Las arras: 13 gold coins given to the bride from the groom to represent his ability to support the bride. The coins are blessed by the priest and passed through the hands of the newlyweds several times, ending up with the bride.

Los anillos de Boda: the rings, which are worn on the right hand until switching them to the left hand after the wedding in Chile. In some other countries they are always worn on the right hand. In Argentina couples exchange rings when they get engaged.

El compromiso: the engagement; usually a sortija de compromiso or engagement ring is given; many times the father of the bride is asked permission.

Las damas de honor y los pajes de honor: bridesmaids and groomsmen

Las madrinas y los padrinos: godparents who may serve as wedding sponsors, supporting the couple both spiritually and financially. In Mexico, Bolivia and Ecuador compadres are chosen either at birth or marriage. They traditionally play a large role in the wedding and continue to support the couple throughout their lives.

El mandelon: In Mexico the guests form a heart-shaped ring around the couple (la pareja) on the dance floor before they do their first dance. Cuban weddings often include a money dance, in which each man attaches money to the bride's gown before dancing with her.

Los postres: desserts, which may include little Mexican wedding cakes wrapped in netting. In Puerto Rico small favors are called capias and are presented to guests in the receiving line. They are made of feathers tied

with ribbon and printed with the couple's names and wedding date. El pastel, or wedding cake, is placed in the center of the dance floor in Colombia and is the first thing eaten at a Colombian wedding reception.

El viaje de novios or luna de miel: Honeymoon trip; In Venezuela and many other countries the couple leaves the reception early to begin their trip.

La zapatilla: The bride's shoe or a spun-sugar replica to look like a crocheted high heel that is passed around the reception in Mexico. Guests stuff money into it so the couple can start off on the right foot.

Students may be held responsible for some or all vocabulary with definitions in English or Spanish. The customs do vary; it might be interesting for students to match or find others in magazines or on the Internet. It would be most authentic to choose a country in which to place the wedding and use customs from that country. Other vocabulary could be used as an Internet search activity or for oral or written reports about wedding customs.