IN CELEBRATION OF HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

BY JIM MERRITT

food & spirits


LATIN FIESTA

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Such are the delights of dining out on Mexican Independence Day – and we do mean the authentic holiday on Sept. 16, not the famously touristy Cinco de Mayo in May.

Mexican Independence Day commemorates the real deal – the nation’s proclamation of independence from Spain in 1810. It’s just the beginning of National Hispanic Heritage Month, the annual celebration of Latino tradition, culture and food held from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15.

Margarita Espada, founder and executive-artistic director of Teatro Yerbabruja, a 10-year-old not-for-profit arts organization in Central Islip, says that food is an essential part of the history and traditions celebrated during Hispanic Heritage Month. Espada is developing the neighborhood’s first arts center as a way to share Latino culture with non-Hispanics, and plans to present a gallery show and a community garden festival during heritage month.

Sharing food customs is also part of her mission. “It’s through food that we pass along our culture,” she explains. The fiery chili and chocolate-based sauces of Mexico, the fried plantains of the Caribbean and the sumptuous paellas of Spain illustrate that “every Latin-American country has its own distinct flavors and spices,” Espada says.

Those flavors are on display at the NYC Hispanic Day Parade, the culmination of Hispanic Heritage Month, which draws up to a million spectators to Fifth Avenue on Columbus Day, known as el Dia de La Raza in Latin-America.

Not fond of crowds? You can also enjoy those intense flavors in a more intimate setting, with an authentic meal at one of the fine-dining restaurants we’ve discovered for you in communities from the city to the East End.
Restaurateur John Tunney III spent months traveling in Mexico, researching the nation’s food and people, before opening Besito restaurants in Huntington and Roslyn. No rainbow-colored blankets or sombreros on the walls, but you do dine under an authentic Mexican eucalyptus beamed ceiling, amid vibrant colored banquette and wrought iron wall scones. At Besito (the name means “little kiss” in Spanish), everyday specialties include a hearty Pescado Veracruzana—fresh fish cooked in a Veracruz sauce of tomatoes, sweet peppers, olives and capers. On Independence Day, you can go native with a plate of rolled soft corn tortillas with chicken in salsa verde (green sauce), crab in tomatillo cream salsa and beef in salsa roja (red sauce) or upscale with an appetizer of lobster guacamole. Besito offers over 40 tequilas in its Agave Lounge, some of which can be sampled at a complimentary tequila tasting from 5 – 8 p.m. on Mexican Independence Day.