

¡La Fiesta Grande!

Hispanic Heritage Festival celebrates Latino traditions

BY BRET SCHULTE
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If your idea of celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month is leaving the line at Burger King to get a taco, get ethnic this weekend at the Hispanic Heritage Festival.

Taking place in Agricultural Hall at the state fairgrounds, the 11th annual event will honor Latino traditions, food, music and dance Saturday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For a \$3 admittance fee, attendees will receive a "Latino Spirit Button," which allows access to the festival for both days. Children ages 12 and under can attend for free.

Amateur and professional cooks will prepare authentic food, offering attendees tastes of distinct flavors from a host of Latino countries and cultures. And you can dance away those calories to a variety of ethnic and folk music that will be featured both days.

Professional dancers will be swinging amidst other light-footed participants to Lexington mariachi band Los Cazadores Saturday night. The dance will run from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. and has a \$10 cover charge. No alcohol will be served during the festival.

Sunday the music continues with brass bands and folk musicians playing a smattering of Latin tunes throughout the day.

Children's activities will play a prominent role in this year's event, including painting, crafts and skills from varying Latino cultures, piñatas, puppets and celebrity readers.

Expressing pride in culture as well as language, the theme of this year's festival is Hispanic literature and will emphasize the importance of being bilingual in a predominantly English-speaking country. Works by such renowned and respected Latino authors as Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez will be featured, as well as writings for children.

Joel Gajardo, director of the event's sponsor, the Hispanic

Community Center, said it is difficult but important to maintain distinctive cultures in an ever-shifting and evolving society.

"We are going to help people recognize the importance of language and try to counteract the English-only movement in the United States," said Gajardo, also the festival's organizer. "English is important, no doubt, but there is no reason for anybody to forget his or her own tongue."

Historically known as "the great melting pot," the United States recently has been called "the great salad bowl." It may be a comment on the resurgence of ethnic identity in America, compared to the former standard of "Americanization" that so many immigrants have endured.

Gajardo believes that celebrating ethnicity is not anti-American, but rather promoting understanding between people of different backgrounds and beliefs. He said the festival was part of the process of helping people accept and gain awareness of others' cultures.

"I think that it is important to remind us that we belong to a very important tradition," Gajardo said. "The United States has other streams than European — people from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Their roles should not be overlooked."

Gajardo said that while the primary purpose of the festival is to celebrate the rich diverseness within the Latino community and its place in America, it may accomplish another equally important task. That is, the on-going pursuit of multicultural acceptance and understanding between the majority European cultures and those of the Hispanic minority.

"We need to reinforce more and more of what is positive," Gajardo said. "Our differences shouldn't keep us from learning about each other. People from the majority need to learn to respect people from different backgrounds."

