Latin American Culture and Foods Toolkit

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Stereotyping

This is basic-level information about the culture described; it is intended to provide an opportunity to learn in general terms. It cannot account for the diversity within each society or culture and is not meant, in any way, to imply to all people.

Background

Latin American people come from a regionally diverse background. Latin America stretches from the southern border of the United States to the southernmost tip of South America and encompasses the Caribbean. Latin American countries include:

North America

Belize	Dominican Republic	Haiti	Panama
Costa Rica	El Salvador	Honduras	Puerto Rico (a U.S. territory)
Cuba	Guatemala	Mexico	
		Nicaragua	

South America

Argentina	Chile	Paraguay	Venezuela
Bolivia	Colombia	Peru	
Brazil	Ecuador	Uruguay	

Migration to Minnesota

Although we cannot undo past injustices or correct human errors throughout history, understanding and recognizing the legacy of migration and displacement helps bridge gaps between communities to build an inclusive society—one that addresses past wrongs while embracing shared heritage as a unifying force.

Latinos in the U.S. have deep and diverse roots. Some are Indigenous and have always lived here, while others trace their ancestry back to before the Pilgrims arrived. Many have come more recently, through both official immigration channels and risky border crossings.

Migration is often described as a journey of hope, but it is also a journey of resilience driven by necessity, sacrifice, and sometimes desperation. Families leave their homelands because of political unrest, violence, poverty, or discrimination that makes home feel unsafe or unlivable.

They seek healthcare, education, economic opportunity, or simply the chance to live with dignity. For many, migration also involves painful separations from loved ones, whether temporary or indefinite.

People cross multiple borders—often on foot—enduring hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and dangers from organized crime groups that prey on migrants. Some parents travel alone, planning to reunite with their children later, while others flee together as a family, hoping to give their children a future free from gangs and fear. Women face risks of exploitation and gender-based violence, while many migrants take on crushing debts to coyotes, leaving them vulnerable to labor exploitation once in the U.S.

For those who reach Minnesota, arrival marks both an end and a beginning. Some arrive with little more than the clothes on their backs, carrying the trauma of their journey alongside hope for a new start. But challenges persist, including language barriers, cultural differences, systemic inequities, and the constant fear of deportation, making it hard to rebuild lives. Through sacrifice, determination, and community, Latin American immigrants have made Minnesota their home.

Population breakdown

Minnesota's Latino community is one of the most vibrant and fastest-growing groups in the state. As of 2021, Latinos make up about 6% of Minnesota's population, totaling over 345,000 people. They come from diverse regions such as Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Each subgroup brings unique traditions, foods, and cultural practices that influence their daily lives.

Demographics in Minnesota

- **Mexican origin:** Comprising 60% of Minnesota's Latino population. Many Mexican-origin residents are concentrated in urban and suburban areas.
- **South American origin**: Making up 12%, primarily from Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela, South American Latinos often bring a fusion of Indigenous, Spanish, and African influences in their culture. These communities are known for their diverse cuisine.
- **Central American origin**: At 11%, most originate from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Central Americans in Minnesota bring unique Indigenous traditions and may face additional linguistic barriers, as speakers of Indigenous languages such as K'iche' and Mam are common. These indigenous languages were spoken before the Spanish arrived and are not dialects of Spanish but their own unique languages.
- **Caribbean origin**: Representing 5%, mainly from Cuba and the Dominican Republic, these communities often blend Caribbean flavors and traditions with other Hispanic cultural elements. Caribbean Latino families are usually bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English. This also includes Americans from Puerto Rico.

Latino communities in Minnesota are primarily concentrated in the Twin Cities metro area, Rochester, and Worthington. These urban hubs offer greater access to jobs and education.

However, many Latino families also live in rural areas, where they contribute significantly to the agricultural sector. The geographic spread of these communities highlights the importance of tailoring services and programs to both urban and rural settings.

Acceptable terminology

Most people from Latin American countries prefer to identify by their country of origin or heritage before being categorized as Hispanic or Latino.

Hispanic: Refers to individuals from Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain. While commonly used in the United States, this term may not resonate with all Latino individuals (National Latino Network, 2024).

Latino/Latina: Refers to individuals from Latin America, encompassing non-Spanish-speaking countries such as Brazil.

Latine: A gender-neutral term gaining popularity, especially among younger generations and academic circles, to promote inclusivity. It is commonly pronounced either as lah-TEE-neh (reflecting Spanish pronunciation) or Latin (with the "e" not pronounced), which tends to be more common among second-generation individuals. Second generations, children of first-generation immigrants, tend to be more receptive to these terms.

Note: *Choosing between Latino, Latine, or Latino/a/e is not a simple decision. Preferences vary across communities, generations, and personal experiences. Some community organizations prefer Latino/a/e, while others are comfortable with Latine. Many individuals still favor terms like Latino or Latino/a, especially older adults or those less familiar with gender-neutral language. At the same time, some people do not have strong feelings about any specific term. Given this diversity, it's important to stay flexible, respect individual choices, and understand that no single term will capture everyone's identity or experience. Latinx, although used in some institutions and academic settings, is generally the least preferred among community members.*

Language

Language is a critical aspect of cultural identity within Latino communities, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of Latin American countries. Spanish is the predominant language. Indigenous languages such as Quechua, Mam, and Q'eqchi' are also widely spoken, particularly among Central and South American immigrants. Many Latino individuals who speak Indigenous languages may use Spanish as a second language; some from rural areas may not speak Spanish, particularly the women. Other languages spoken include Portuguese and French.

Health disparities

Latino communities face significant disparities in health outcomes due to an intersection of socioeconomic factors, language barriers, systemic inequities, and the challenges of acculturation. These disparities manifest in both physical and mental health, often exacerbated

by limited access to affordable healthcare, a lack of culturally competent providers, and insufficient health education.

- **Mental health:** Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, are prevalent within Latino communities but frequently go underdiagnosed. Cultural stigmas surrounding mental health and a scarcity of bilingual mental health services and culturally representative staff contribute to this underdiagnosis. The lack of culturally sensitive care discourages individuals from seeking help, perpetuating a cycle of unmet mental health needs.
- **Physical health:** Latinos experience higher rates of chronic diseases, including diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. These conditions are linked to dietary acculturation, where traditional, nutrient-dense diets are replaced with processed, calorie-dense foods common in the U.S.
    - **Diabetes and obesity:** The prevalence of diabetes and obesity among Latino populations is significantly higher compared to non-Hispanic whites. The dietary shift from traditional foods, such as fresh produce, whole grains, and lean proteins, to processed and calorie-dense foods can contribute to these health issues. Lack of time, affordability, and access to healthier food options, as well as access to safe or affordable spaces for exercise during colder months, exacerbate the problem. Educational programs promoting traditional diets and meal preparation can play a critical role in prevention.
    - **Hypertension:** Often referred to as the "silent killer," hypertension is common in Latino communities and frequently goes undiagnosed. Contributing factors include high sodium intake, stress from socioeconomic challenges, and limited routine medical checkups. Community health initiatives emphasizing regular screenings and low-sodium diet options can help reduce risks.
    - **Lactose intolerance:** Many Latinos are lactose intolerant due to genetic predispositions, leading to discomfort or avoidance of dairy products. Providing lactose-free milk alternatives, such as lactose-free milk and fortified soy beverage, helps ensure participants meet their calcium and vitamin D needs. Also, orange juice fortified with calcium and vitamin D may offer a culturally relevant choice.
    - **Cultural and structural barriers:** The stigma surrounding chronic diseases within some Latino communities can delay seeking medical help. Additionally, structural barriers such as transportation challenges, language limitations, and lack of health insurance further hinder access to preventative care and treatment.
- **Occupational health:** Many Latinos are employed in sectors such as agriculture and construction, which pose significant occupational hazards. These industries often involve physically demanding labor, leading to long-term health issues, including musculoskeletal injuries and respiratory conditions. Additionally, workers in these sectors may face exposure to harmful chemicals and unsafe working conditions, further compromising their health.
- **Access to healthcare:** Access to healthcare remains a critical issue for Latino communities. In 2021, 15.3% of Minnesota's Hispanic population lacked public or private health

insurance, compared to only 3.4% of non-Hispanic whites. This disparity in insurance coverage limits access to necessary medical care and preventive services, contributing to poorer health outcomes.

- **Cancer:** Cancer statistics reveal stark disparities among Hispanic and Latino populations. For instance, Hispanic individuals are 85% more likely to be diagnosed with stomach cancer and more than twice as likely to die from it compared to non-Hispanic whites. Similarly, they are twice as likely to be diagnosed with liver cancer and 56% more likely to die from it.
- **Impact of socioeconomic factors:** Socioeconomic factors, such as income, education, and neighborhood environments, significantly influence health outcomes. Individuals living in neighborhoods with persistent poverty are more likely to have aggressive forms of diseases, receive more invasive treatments, and have higher mortality rates. These areas often lack access to quality healthcare, nutritious food, and safe environments, further exacerbating health disparities.
- **Data disaggregation and health equity:** Understanding the varying lived experiences of Hispanic and Latino Minnesotans requires data disaggregation. Grouping people solely based on language or ancestry can obscure nuances in health outcomes. Disaggregated data reveal that nearly a third of Hispanic and Latino Minnesotans live in greater Minnesota, contributing to the workforce and economies outside the metro area. Tailoring health interventions to these unique contexts is essential for promoting health equity.

Culture and foods

Staple ingredients

Latino cuisines are built around staple ingredients that vary by region. These staples are not just food but a connection to ancestry, community, and celebration. Whether used in everyday meals or special occasions, they reinforce the importance of food in preserving cultural identity and traditions.

- **Corn** is not only a staple crop but also a symbol of life and sustenance in many Latino cultures. Corn is used to make tortillas, tamales, pupusas, and arepas, with each variation reflecting regional and familial traditions.
- **Beans and rice** are a universal combination across Latino cuisines, providing both a complete protein source and a comforting, familiar dish for families.
- **Plantains** are a cornerstone in Caribbean and Central American diets, and are prepared in multiple ways, such as fried (tostones), boiled (maduros), or baked with spices.
- **Root vegetables** like potatoes and yuca are integral to meals in South America, often featured in hearty stews and soups that serve as a focal point for family gatherings.

Regional Variations

For Latin Americans, food is central to their experiences and their history. Each region has distinct culinary traditions influenced by geography, history, and Indigenous cultures.

Indigenous practices have significantly shaped the use of specific ingredients and cooking methods across Latin America. For example, in Mexico, Indigenous peoples like the Aztecs and Maya cultivated corn as a staple crop and developed methods for making masa (corn dough), which remains foundational in dishes such as tortillas, tamales, and atole. The introduction of nixtamalization—a process of soaking corn in alkaline water—is an Indigenous innovation that enhances the nutritional value of corn and is still widely used today.

Each region may have unique foods, but many share common foundational foods, including beans, corn, rice, peppers, squash, and tomatoes. Meat is often the primary component of the meal and may include chorizo, beef, pork, or chicken. Vegetables, commonly used to flavor foods and sauces, are an important part of meals. Fruits and vegetables are also popular snacks, and intake may come in the form of juices or smoothies.

Meals, which are typically very colorful with bold flavors, are commonly prepared by the women of the household and are eaten together as a family. Lunch is typically the largest meal eaten during the day, yet in Minnesota, work and school schedules have an impact on mealtimes.

The emotional and social role of food

To understand Latino food practices, one must first understand the way food connects people.

Food as a Language of Love

- Cooking is an act of care and a way to show affection, protection, and familial responsibility. When parents work long hours, a homemade meal waiting on the table is a tangible expression of love and sacrifice.
    - Elders pass down recipes not just as instructions, but as stories, memories, and lessons in resilience. A dish like tamales or pupusas is not simply food—it is a direct connection to ancestry and land.

Cooking Together: A Tradition of Bonding

- Children are often brought into the kitchen early—not just to learn cooking techniques, but to learn family values. Preparing food together is a time for storytelling, teaching, and reinforcing cultural identity.
- This intergenerational practice is particularly evident during religious and national celebrations. Dishes like bacalao during Lent, pan de muerto for Día de los Muertos, or hallacas at Christmas are tied to both spiritual and familial traditions, reinforcing the deep connection between food, faith, and community.

Food as a Communal Experience

- Latino families prioritize eating together. Even when schedules do not align, it is common for families to wait for one another or gather for a late meal—a reflection of the belief that mealtime is about connection, not just nutrition.
- Even in households where work schedules are demanding, families find ways to sit at the same table, even if just for a brief moment, to share a meal and reconnect. Children may

eat earlier if they are hungry, but they often return to the table later, because in Latino culture, food is meant to be experienced together.

Generosity

- Food plays a central role in hospitality. In many Latino cultures, offering food or a drink to guests, even if they are unexpected, is a sign of warmth and generosity. Being a good host often means making sure others are fed, and refusing food can sometimes be seen as impolite, especially in more traditional households.

Barriers to maintaining traditional food practices

While traditional food is central to Latino identity, access to it is not always guaranteed. Acculturation, economic hardship, and food accessibility issues have reshaped eating habits in many Latino households, sometimes leading to undesired changes in diet and nutrition.

1. **Limited access to fresh and culturally familiar ingredients**
    - Some Latino families **live in food deserts**, areas with limited access to fresh, affordable produce and culturally specific ingredients.
    - Specialty items like fresh epazote, annatto, or specific varieties of beans and corn may be unavailable in local grocery stores. This issue can be especially challenging for South American families, as most ethnic stores in Minnesota tend to have products from Mexico or Central America.
2. **Time constraints and work demands**
    - Working multiple jobs or long shifts makes it difficult for families to prepare meals from scratch, leading to an increased reliance on prepackaged or fast-food options that may be lower in nutritional value. Many staple Latino dishes—such as slow-simmered stews, hand-made tortillas, and fermented beverages—are time-intensive.
3. **Economic barriers: The cost of fresh food vs. processed alternatives**
    - Fresh produce and high-protein traditional staples are expensive. Processed and fast foods are often cheaper and more accessible.
    - Government food assistance programs do not always cover or prioritize culturally relevant food options. This makes it harder for families to maintain traditional diets while staying within financial constraints.
4. **Generational shifts and changing eating habits**
    - Younger generations of Latinos raised in the U.S. may not adhere as strongly to traditional eating patterns. Exposure to American food culture, school cafeteria meals, and mainstream dietary trends has led some to incorporate more fast food and processed options into their diets.
5. **Stigma around traditional foods due to chronic disease**

- Some Latino families report feeling stigma around traditional carbohydrate-rich foods as diabetes becomes more common. Labeling these foods as unhealthy can create guilt and pressure to abandon culturally significant meals, leading to confusion and a loss of connection to tradition.

Adapting traditions

Despite these barriers, Latino families find ways to keep their food traditions alive, adapting recipes and habits to their new realities.

Blending tradition with convenience:

- Families may modify time-intensive recipes to fit modern lifestyles, using pressure cookers, pre-cut vegetables, or store-bought masa to reduce prep time while maintaining authenticity.
- Others incorporate batch cooking techniques, preparing meals in bulk to have ready-to-eat traditional foods throughout the week.

Community-based food solutions:

- In areas where access to Latino ingredients is limited, local bodegas, community gardens, and farmers' markets have become essential sources of traditional foods.
- Some families grow herbs and produce in small backyard gardens, ensuring access to ingredients like culantro, epazote, and ají peppers.

Teaching the next generation:

- Recognizing the risk of losing food traditions, many Latino families make active efforts to teach younger generations how to cook traditional meals. Cooking classes, online recipe-sharing, and family cooking nights help bridge generational gaps while ensuring the continuation of cultural food practices.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is highly valued in Latin America, but women face challenges such as a lack of access to maternity care and limited support from healthcare staff.

Additional barriers include:

- **Workplace constraints**: Some Latino mothers work in industries with limited maternity leave policies or workplace accommodations for breastfeeding.
- **Formula marketing**: Aggressive promotion of formula feeding can undermine confidence in breastfeeding and create confusion about what is best to offer the baby.
- **Cultural barriers**: The practice of "las dos cosas" (the two things), where mothers feed both breastmilk and formula, believing that the baby will get benefits from both, including both nutritional value and weight gain.

- **Breastfeeding in public**: While public breastfeeding is more normalized in many Latin American countries, Latina mothers in the U.S. may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable due to stigma and people's reactions.

Infant feeding

Feeding practices in Latino communities are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and are influenced by familial and community beliefs. Some common practices include:

- **Prelacteal feedings:** It is common in many Latino cultures to give liquids like teas, water, or herbal remedies to newborns before starting breastfeeding. This practice comes from traditional beliefs about hydration, digestion, and soothing newborns.
- **Colostrum avoidance:** In some communities, colostrum—the nutrient-rich first milk produced by mothers—is misunderstood as harmful or "dirty." This misunderstanding may cause mothers to discard it.
- **Early introduction of solids**: Foods such as mashed beans, rice, or plantains are sometimes introduced to infants as early as two or three months. This practice is often driven by family traditions and the belief that solid foods will help babies grow stronger.
- **Prolonged bottle feeding:** Bottles are often used past the recommended age, frequently for comfort or convenience. This habit can lead to dental health problems.

Parenting

Parenting in Latino communities is more than a responsibility—it is an act of devotion rooted in culture, tradition, and the collective experience of family. It is marked by sacrifice, protection, and an unwavering commitment to children's well-being, often shared by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings. Despite long hours and economic demands, parents—especially mothers—prioritize raising children who are safe, well-fed, and connected to their roots.

In Latino households, parenting is protective, hands-on, and defined by both high expectations and deep love. It is parents staying up late after work to help with homework, mothers ensuring children eat first, and fathers teaching resilience through stories of hard work. Discipline is paired with respect, meals are shared, and family always comes first.

Mealtime is more than nourishment—it is a teaching moment, a way to pass down traditions, and a space for children to feel loved. Communal meals strengthen family bonds, while extended relatives often guide feeding practices with advice rooted in tradition. Understanding these dynamics is essential to building trust and supporting healthy family habits.

Conversation around food and health

In Latino households, conversations about food and health are often direct and practical, with parents giving clear guidance on what is "good" or "bad" to eat. Ideas of health, however, are closely tied to cultural traditions, making it essential to honor familiar flavors, ingredients, and cooking methods. Health advice that dismisses traditional foods can feel disrespectful, while

suggestions that adapt dishes—such as using brown rice instead of white or adjusting portion sizes—are more effective. Latino parents want the best for their children, and recommendations that respect cultural traditions are more likely to be embraced.

Protection and high expectations

Latino parents are deeply protective of their children—a protection rooted in love and shaped by concerns about safety, economic stability, and discrimination. This often leads to strict household rules, close oversight of friendships, and high academic expectations. Parents may juggle multiple jobs and rely on extended family or older siblings for support, yet they remain actively involved, maintaining strong connections despite demanding schedules. Their hands-on parenting goes beyond discipline—it is about preparing children for a challenging world, instilling resilience, teaching respect, and ensuring that family remains an unbreakable foundation.

Religious and cultural celebrations

Religious celebrations hold immense cultural and familial importance in Latino communities, serving as occasions to honor heritage, strengthen family bonds, and maintain cultural identity. These events are often marked by traditional foods, music, and rituals that reflect the values and beliefs of each community. For example, Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), widely observed in Mexican communities, involves creating altars (ofrendas) to honor deceased loved ones, adorned with symbolic foods such as pan de muerto, tamales, and sugar skulls, alongside marigolds and photographs of loved ones who have passed.

Most Latin American countries are Catholic. Semana Santa (Holy Week) is an important observance in many Latin communities, characterized by processions, prayers, and meals focused on fish, lentils, and other Lenten dishes. During Lent, many do not eat meat on Fridays. Christmas is especially important not only for its religious meaning but also because it often provides a rare opportunity for extended families to gather.

Mother's Day also stands out as one of the most valued celebrations in Latin American countries, reflecting the very strong role that mothers hold in the family structure.

Independence Day holds cultural significance across Latino communities:

- Mexican Independence Day (Sept. 16) is celebrated with parades, music, and traditional foods like chiles en nogada.
- Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans celebrate Independence Day (Sept. 15) with community gatherings featuring iconic dishes such as pupusas, tamales, and atol.
- Colombian Independence Day (July 20) is celebrated with vibrant events that often include bandeja paisa and ajiaco.
- Puerto Ricans highlight Three Kings' Day (Día de los Reyes) (Jan. 6), where Rosca de Reyes, a sweet bread, is shared among families.

In Minnesota, Latino families may adapt these traditions to their new environment, blending them with U.S. holidays like Thanksgiving and Halloween. Cinco De Mayo is a significant cultural event for many Mexican Americans; it provides a chance to celebrate their heritage and traditions. These hybrid celebrations often incorporate elements from both cultures, such as serving tamales alongside turkey or decorating with sugar skull motifs for Halloween. These practices reflect the resilience and adaptability of Latino families, preserving their heritage while embracing new traditions.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about Latin American cultures and ways that you may offer support and encouragement to all our public health programs' families.

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