

Latinas Make Sweet 16-ish Their Own

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ

CATHY ZULUAGA rearranged her strapless pink froufrou gown, lightly touched her updo and, to the recorded strains of a waltz, strode into the ballroom at Riccardo's catering hall in Astoria, Queens.

As the applause from the crowd of Colombians, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans swelled, Cathy, 16, released her father's arm, twirled, curtsied and smiled. She glided past her court of honor, eight girls in long silver dresses and eight boys in Nehru tuxes, and positioned herself on the white swing festooned with tulle, ribbons and flowers. Then, in keeping with tradition, her father knelt and slid off Cathy's demure ballerina slippers, trading them for a pair of womanly high-heeled cha-cha sandals. Her mother gently placed a tiara on her head.

"She's putting the crown on her beautiful princess," announced the evening's M.C. In a flash, Cathy, her boyfriend and the rest of the court, some with braces on their teeth, tentatively began the traditional waltz that is one mainstay of many Latin quinceañera parties: step-step-close, step-step-close. At that moment, Cathy crossed the threshold from girlhood to womanhood.

"It was a special moment," Cathy recalled a week later, referring to her party. "It all looked

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Donna Alberico for The New York Times

COMING OF AGE Jennifer Vega and Jorge Zuluaga, members of Cathy Zuluaga's honor court.

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dead cute." Plus, she added, "I got gifts, money and a Lexus."

Some say it is the boom in the Hispanic population, while others point to today's party-mad, status-driven culture and the success of the MTV show "My Super Sweet 16." But there is no doubt that the Hispanic coming-of-age quinceañera is more popular, more lavish and, in subtle ways, more American than ever. Picture a souped-up debutante ball without the high-society trappings or a bat mitzvah with an extra dose of razzle-dazzle, and a portrait emerges of many modern-day quinceañeras, a term that derives from the word quince (pronounced KEEN-say), which means 15 in Spanish.

"Quinceañeras have really taken off," said Will Cain, publisher of the new glossy, ad-filled magazine Quince Girl, a takeoff on bridal magazines. "Quinceañeras are something unique, something that ties Hispanics together."

Today a number of girls are shaking off a few time-honored quinceañera traditions, like the Catholic Mass that typically precedes the party, and adding new ones, like arriving as Belle from "Beauty and the Beast" or choreographing dance moves to hip-hop. Some teenagers, like Cathy, a 10th-grader at Sewanhaka High School on Long Island, are choosing to wait an extra year so they can ditch the old-fashioned "quinceañera" label for the hipper, more acculturated "Sweet 16" tag.

The quince-style coming-of-age parties have even managed to influence the coming-of-age celebrations of other groups, including West Indians, African-Americans and Asians, who have grown infatuated with the party's choreographed nature and family tributes. This trend is particularly evident in multicultural New York, where the tradition of trading slippers for heels, lighting 16 candles and surrounding the birthday girl with a weddinglike "court" of friends is winning over non-Hispanic girls.

"I am amazed at how many nationalities come in and want these Sweet 16's — Indians, Filipinas, Chinese," said Angela Baker-Brown, who runs Tatiana's Bridal in Queens, which sells quinceañera dresses and props, like the scepter the birthday girl carries. "It is a Hispanic tradition, but these other groups are going to these parties and wanting one as well."

The quinceañera party, long venerated for its wallet-busting tendencies, even among families with modest incomes, is pricier and more flamboyant than ever, according to dress manufacturers and event planners. The trend has also spread to states like Georgia and North Carolina, where Hispanics now make up a larger percentage of the population.

Business owners have noticed the emerging market. In addition to Quince Girl magazine, which is in Spanish and English, a number of bridal gown manufacturers like David's Bridal and the House of Wu now offer quinceañera lines. Event planners and choreographers are proliferating, carving out specialties in the quince party. And teenagers can frequent quinceañera expos, giant showcases for dresses, props and ideas, in Miami, Houston, Dallas and Los Angeles.

Girls celebrate their quinces at Disneyland, where Prince Charming will greet them as they step out of Cinderella's coach. They go on cruises with friends and hold their parties aboard the ship, or book quince trips to Europe. If they choose to stay at home, many girls are sure to step out of a Humvee stretch limo, change their dresses midparty, present videos of their journey from infancy to womanhood and indulge in multilayered cakes.

Traditions vary depending on the culture. Cubans in Miami may not necessarily do the slipper-to-shoe exchange, while Mexicans in Texas emphasize the Catholic Mass, during



Photographs by Dena Albeiro for The New York Times

which the girls sometimes carry a doll (to be given up that night) and receive their tiara.

Other traditions, though, are being tweaked, a nod to today's teenage consumerism and to teenage girls' sometimes exacting demands. The waltz, a holdover from European colonialism, is still popular at many parties, but some girls are choosing to dance it alone, with their partner or father, rather than with their entire court of friends, a project that requires a lot of re-

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hearsal and coordination. Persuading today's teenagers to waltz to "The Blue Danube," or something close to it, is not easy, so Latin music is creeping into the ritual.

The most dramatic departure has been in places like Miami, where the parties have turned into extravaganzas. With price tags of \$10,000 to \$80,000, quinceañeras now rival weddings in cost and, in some respects, outpace them.

"We have seen a lot more of the bigger productions," said Isabel Albuérne, who goes by the name Event Lady and whose company, Florida Weddings and Special Events, is based in Naples, Fla. "The Hispanic community treats it this way: I have one or two daughters. She may get married several times but a '15' happens only once. It's once in a lifetime. And there is no other half giving an opinion. It is the mom, the dad and the girl. You spend \$40,000 on a wedding and in a year you are divorced."

Many families who can't really afford the party have them anyway. Traditionally, quinceañera parties have cut across class lines. "They save for this for years," Ms. Albuérne said. Mexican-Americans often share the cost with the extended family, naming several godparents specifically to



PRINCESA FOR A DAY Cathy Zuluaga and friends, left, waiting to enter her quinceañera party in Astoria, Queens. Above, attendants with some of the centerpieces of the ceremony, including high-heeled shoes and a tiara.

LIVE THE FANTASY Natasha Poupriña of Miami chose "The Phantom of the Opera" as the theme for her quinceañera. Below, she makes her grand entrance from a balcony.



Peter Grant

participate in the process. Cuban families open special savings accounts. "I know some Hispanics who have placed second mortgages on their home for this," she said. "It's important."

In Miami, home to moneyed Latin Americans and wealthy Cuban-Americans, quinces are fancier than ever, with some parties now veering into Broadwayesque stagecraft. It is not uncommon for a young girl in belly-dancing attire to be carried aloft on a jeweled "Arabian Nights" bed by four young men or to step out of a custom-built Cinderella castle. Birthday girls saunter across sandy floors as mermaids, à la "Under the Sea," or dance in Victorian regalia, or put on hip-hop routines. Masquerade parties are popular, and costume changes, as in stage productions, are au courant. Even when the party involves just the traditional waltz, a choreographer

is a must.

"Some wear short dresses underneath their big dresses and during the disco, they rip off the big dress," said Ana Ricolt, owner of Fantastic Fiestas in Miami, whose clientele is 80 percent Cuban-American. In September, Ms. Ricolt is putting together a Cinderella party and the girl "is coming in a Cinderella carriage mounted on the stage," she said. "It's a production. It can take us from 8 to 12 weeks to get everything done."

By Miami standards, Natasha Poupriña's celebration last October was notable. Hewing to the "Phantom of the Opera" theme, Natasha arrived on stage astride a white horse. Her escort was the Phantom. Natasha and her partner, a young man dressed like a prince, danced with their court, in masks and long ball gowns, to the "Phantom" theme song. All the details of the party, down to the cake's décor, revolved

around the theme.

Some parents do still hold their parties in a church hall, cook their own food and make their daughters' dresses. But that has quickly become a rare occurrence, particularly among girls who have grown up in America. At Tatiana's Bridal, the average cost of a dress is about \$400. Choreographers charge at least \$2,000 and photographers more than \$3,000.

Milady Chaverra, Cathy's mother, who was born in New York and is half-Puerto Rican, half-Colombian, said Cathy's party took more than a year of preparation, including finding dance halls for the waltz rehearsals.

"It's a lot of planning and a lot of money," said Mrs. Chaverra, who owns Flushing Express Car Service with her husband, Adolfo. "It's a tradition. I didn't have one and Cathy really wanted one. It's worth it. I get the memories."