

How to Plan a Filipino Cotillion

By Ann Mazzaferro

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A cotillion for a Filipina debutante marks her transition to adulthood.

A Filipino cotillion, also called a debut, is held for a young Filipina woman on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday. Not only does this celebration mark the passage of the debutante into womanhood, but it also demonstrates the wealth and prestige of the family. This tradition has surged in popularity over recent years, and has taken place along the Spanish Quinceanera, the Jewish Bat Mitzvah and the American Sweet Sixteen dance as a coming-of-age-ritual for young women.

Instructions

- 1
Decide whether or not you wish to host your cotillion by yourself or with a group of friends. In the past Filipino cotillion societies helped organize large cotillion balls that would present multiple debutantes at one grand event. While these societies have faded away over time, you can partner with other Filipino girlfriends who are getting ready for their own debuts. You will have to share the spotlight, but you can also share the cost by splitting the fees for a DJ, band, hall rental and catering.
- 2
Assemble your guest list and choose your cotillion court. The most traditional of Filipino cotillion dances is the Grand Cotillion Dance, an elaborate waltz that is danced by the debutante, nine female friends and nine male friends. To be part of the cotillion court is an honor and may be extended to siblings and friends. Consider signifying their presence in the cotillion court with a special boutonniere for the gentlemen and a necklace or pin for the ladies.
- 3
Book the event location of your choice, and decide the color palate for your event. There is no traditional location for a Filipino cotillion; it simply needs to be large enough to accommodate the number of guests you have chosen for both dinner and dancing. Similarly, color schemes are left entirely up to the debutante, though many Filipina debutantes borrow from the American debutante

tradition by wearing a white ball gown to their cotillion. Let your cotillion court know as quickly as possible what color scheme will dominate your party so they can find suitable dresses in time for the occasion.

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Hire a choreographer that specializes in traditional Filipino cotillion dances. The dances of a traditional Filipino Cotillion Ball include the Grand Cotillion Dance and the Eighteen Roses Dance, a waltz shared by the debutante with eighteen men, typically close friends and family members. Each dance partner gives the debutante a red rose as they waltz across the floor. Traditionally the debutante chooses eighteen different songs and dances with each man for the entirety of the dance, but you may wish to dance with multiple partners over the course of two or three songs in order to speed up the proceedings. These traditional dances are complicated and can take up to six months to perfect. Contact a local Filipino society in your area for leads on traditional Filipino choreographers, or ask former debutantes to find out which choreographers they have used.

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Set a schedule and make sure all members of the cotillion have a copy in advance. Along with the traditional dances, the other defining moment of a Filipino cotillion is the Presentation of the Eighteen Candles. Eighteen women who play a prominent role in the debutante's life take turns lighting candles that symbolize their commitment to guide and support the young woman through her life. Making sure that each member of the party has a schedule of events prevents last-minute searches for guests when the proper moments arrive.

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Filipino Cotillion Traditions

By Lori Lapidario



Birthdays are special, especially when they signify the celebrant's entrance into adulthood.

A Cotillion in the Philippines is celebrated when a young girl turns 18 years of age and she officially becomes a young woman, called a "debutante." Cotillions are celebrated in the Philippines mostly by those in high society, and much time and money are spent on their planning. Families of Filipino descent have brought the tradition with them to the United States.

History

- The Filipino Cotillion tradition is a throwback to the Spanish colonization era (between 1521 and 1898) and is popular among the upper class of Philippine society. Historically, the Cotillion was used by the girl's family particularly to introduce her to young men of marrying age who belonged to the same upper-class society. In the U.S. between the mid-1960s through the early 1990s, group cotillions became popular. Group cotillions allowed families who would otherwise not be able to afford the expenses associated with this celebration to host them.

Preparation

- Cotillions and wedding preparations are similar in the time and money spent. For some, it could take months to prepare for this celebration. Also, the amount of money may become exorbitant, considering the girl's family has to pay for everything, including the debutante's court's (consisting of nine couples) outfits, the place where the celebration will take place, food, photographer/videographer, a band or DJ, decorations and guest presents.

The Big Day

- During the celebration, friends and family of the debutante present her with 18 candles. Eighteen male friends and family members also each give her a rose while she dances with him. The highlight of the night is a presentation by the debutante and her court of the "Cotillion de Honor," which is a choreographed dance that they have practiced to perfection, usually either a waltz or the Filipino traditional dance known as "Rigodon."

Variations

- Variations to the Cotillion have been added or have replaced some of its traditional aspects. For example, instead of receiving 18 roses, some debutantes receive 18 symbolic gifts or another type of flower, such as calla lilies or tulips. The traditional dances may also be replaced with a hip-hop dance routine, which is very popular among young Filipinos.

Significance in the U.S.

- Most immigrants go through hardships before they become established in the U.S. Cotillions are celebrated by many Filipinos not only for their daughters' birthdays but as celebrations of their lives in their adopted country. It is popular in areas of the U.S. where Filipinos flourish, such as California, Arizona and New Jersey.

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