

Day of the Dead sweets and treats

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Día de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, is a time to remember loved ones. In Mexico, it is also a time for a number of special sweets and treats. Photo by: Nicole Danielson/Flickr

It may seem a little odd at first: On November 1 and 2, candies shaped like skulls can be seen throughout Mexico. Made of pure sugar, they're decorated with bright reds, blues, greens and yellows sure to tempt kiddos.

Why are skulls, a symbol of death, decked out in such bright colors? It's actually a fitting contradiction. They are traditionally made for a holiday known as Day of the Dead, or Día de los Muertos, where people both quietly reflect on the lives of the departed — and like to party.

Día de los Muertos started with the centuries-old traditions of the ancient cultures that once dominated present-day Mexico, including the Aztecs, Mayans and Toltecs. The Aztecs held a monthlong celebration of deceased loved ones each year. It was overseen by the goddess Mictecacihuatl, or "Lady of the Dead."

Soon, the Spanish arrived in Mexico and spread the Roman Catholic religious customs there. The ancient traditions soon merged with the Christian holidays All Saints' Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2), which have similar themes. In Mexico and among Mexican-Americans,

though, November 1 is usually reserved for honoring the memories of children who died ("angelitos"). November 2, meanwhile, is for remembering those who were adults when they died.

A graveside picnic for loved ones

In his 2006 book "Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in



Mexico and Beyond," expert Stanley Brandes writes that "the origin of [Day of the Dead] folk practices is a source of scholarly and popular debate."

What we do know, however, is that food plays a major role in Día de los Muertos celebrations. It almost certainly always has.

Families build altars ("ofrendas"), or holy tables, to honor the dead in their homes, which include offerings to represent earth, water, fire and wind. The favorite foods of the deceased represent earth. When a spirit returns, it is believed that they are very thirsty. To fix that, water is traditionally placed in a clay pitcher or glass. Also at the altar — though inedible — there are candles and decoratively punched paper, representing fire and wind, respectively.

A family may choose to celebrate the holiday next to the graveside of a loved one who has passed. If so, they may lay out the deceased's favorite foods and drinks. The hope is that the spirit of the beloved one can be convinced to come back for a short reunion. They figure a little temptation — in the form of someone's favorite foods — can't hurt.

Both home- and cemetery-based events are not complete without egg-based pan de muerto, or Day of the Dead bread. The bread is almost always sweet and sometimes made with anise, a sort of licorice-flavored spice. It gets baked in dozens of shapes representing humans and animals. Some loaves are round and decorated with extra pieces of dough that resemble skulls and bones.

Skeletons are an important symbol

Other foods linked to the holiday (although consumed throughout the rest of the year as well): atole, a corn-based liquor, chocolate and complexly spiced mole sauce.



As Day of the Dead candy skulls suggest, skeletons are an important symbol of the holiday — as they are for Halloween, which has its roots in the Celtic festival known as Samhain. In the case of Día de los Muertos, the role of the skeleton has both ancient and more recent roots. In pre-Columbian times, images of skulls and skeletons appeared regularly in artwork ranging from wall paintings to pottery. They were intended to represent rebirth into the next stage of life.



Then, in the early 20th century, Mexican political cartoonist Jose Guadalupe Posada earned fame by creatively drawing the wealthy as skeletons ("calaveras") who wear fancy attire. One of them was nicknamed Katarina and wore a feathery hat and long dress. She took on a life of her own as a symbol of the Day of the Dead, which she remains today.

Day of the Dead skeletons are made in inedible toy forms — from durable materials like wood and papier-mâché — as well as in sugar-paste varieties. The skulls can be molded with hardened sugar syrup, chocolate or amaranth seeds. The amaranth varieties sometimes include walnuts in the eye sockets and peanuts for teeth.



Though the skulls and skeletons may look silly and cartoonish, Day of the Dead celebrations don't laugh at death or take it lightly. Instead, they serve to acknowledge that death is a part of life. And what better way to accept this reality than with the sweet comforts that traditional and favorite foods can bring?

