

A Personal Note from Mia

My Day of the Dead Altar & Celebration

November 1st and 2nd are known as the Day of the Dead or All Souls' Day—traditionally called *Día de Muertos* in Spanish. I think this is a truly beautiful holiday and make a point to celebrate it every year. According to tradition, the boundaries between life and death begin to blur. Men, women and children of all ages honor and celebrate their loved ones who have passed away, participating joyously in a festival that has roots nearly 4000 years old. The holiday has spread in recent years from Mexico to America and beyond.

One of My Altars

Hispanics across the Southwest transform grave sites, offices, and corners of their homes into vibrant memorials for their deceased loved ones by assembling *ofrendas*, or altars. The day is devoted to the departed, and an altar pays special tribute. Altars are also meant to welcome returning spirits,



so they include both personalized and traditional elements—including several dating to the Aztecs—to guide an honoree on their journey from the land of the dead. Here's how to offer a proper reception:

- Photographs of the loved one(s) you want to welcome home.
- Water or fruit punch is served to refresh a spirit after his journey.
- *Pan de muerto*, or "bread of the dead," is a sweet treat—the round loaf is topped with a skull and crossbones. Visit your local Hispanic market to find this a few days before as you might have to order it ahead of time.
- Salt, a symbol of purification, is for the dead to season the food you've offered. Below I talk about their place at my table.

A Personal Note from Mia

My Day of the Dead Altar & Celebration

- The deceased's favorite knickknacks, food, or tools will create a familiar setting for their return. For example, my altar this year will certainly have my father's pipe, his bbq sauce, the American flag and a good bottle of scotch!
- Traditionally marigolds are used as they grow and wilt quickly, reflecting the fleeting nature of life. Their aroma helps lure a spirit back.
- Four candles represent the cardinal directions and provide a lighted path to this world.
- Sugar skulls, or *calaveras*, add a lighthearted touch—for both the dead and the living.
- Burning copal is a holdover tradition from the Aztecs, who used the incense as an offering to the gods. It is still used in Catholic funeral masses. I simply used my favorite "flavor" of incense.

Sometimes I invite friends to celebrate the holiday with me and it's always a fun party. It's heart warming to see and hear people talk about their loved ones—they often tell a funny story or speak to what that person loved about life. At some point during the day when I sit down for a meal, I set a place at the table for the those I'm honoring and even serve them a plate of food.

Many years ago, I learned about this holiday from a very wise woman who was tuned into the spiritual side of life. I've celebrated it ever since. I love the tradition and tribute to those we have loved and are gone. This holiday has become more and more popular so you will find a lot on the internet about how to celebrate. I hope if you choose to do so, you enjoy it as much as I do!

Love, Mia

