

## Creating a Día De Los Muertos Altar at Home

Here are some suggestions on creating an altar at home for Día De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead). In researching the components that make up an altar we found an abundance of different traditions not just across Mexico but even within different villages. If you would like more detailed information we encourage you to check out the website of author Mary J. Andrade, <http://www.dayofthedeath.com>



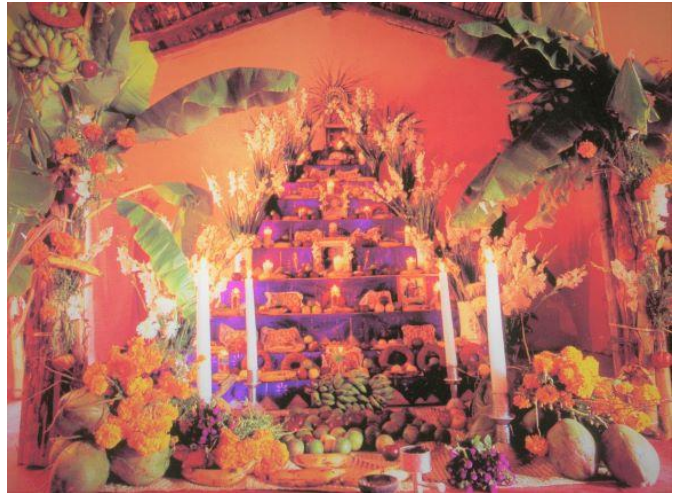
Mary started researching the traditions of Day of the Dead in Mexico in 1987. She has travelled through the different states of Mexico and has documented and photographed many unique regional traditions, including some that originated in the pre-Hispanic era. Her work in 2003, *Day of the Dead in Mexico* was declared a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO.

For our purposes and to help you create a home altar for Day of the Dead (Día De Los Muertos), we present you with a sampling of information from several different sources. You can pick and choose what works for you.

Altars can vary in the number of levels depending on the region. For our purposes we will use a three level altar, which depicts Heaven, Earth and the Underworld.

Keep in mind that the purpose of the altar is to welcome and entice the departed to return and visit the living. Favorite culinary dishes and treasured items are placed at the altar or around its foot for the soul to enjoy when they return. Photos or pictures of the departed, call to mind their earthly image.

The four main elements of nature – earth, wind, water, and fire – are key components to the altar.



- **Earth** is represented by crops – Natives believe the souls are fed by the aroma from special dishes prepared using food from a new harvest. The Bread of the Dead called **Pan de Muerto** – also represents Earth and the harvest. You can bake your own using the recipe below.
- **Wind** is represented by a moving object – **Papel Picado** or tissue paper is commonly used. The holes in the paper create travel pathways and the thin tissue signifies the fragility of life.
- **Water** is placed in a container in order for the soul to quench its thirst after the long journey to reach the altar. Water also represents purity and a source of life.
- **Fire** is represented by the candle, showing the soul the way to the altar and symbolizing light, hope and faith. The number of candles varies by regional tradition. At least one candle is lit for each soul.

In addition, these elements are often used.

- **Cempasuchitl** (sun marigolds), are spread to make a path to the altar. They represent love and the sun.
- **Salt** (salt) is included on the altar for purification. Salt is also a symbol of wisdom and can act as an invitation to the altar.
- **Calaveras de azucar** (sugar skulls) are found in some regions. The sugar in connection with the salt expresses the sweet and bitter aspects of life.

- **Copal** (incense) are burned, using the aroma to guide the soul to the altar.
- A Petate (mat) is placed at the foot of the altar for the soul to rest after his or her journey.

The souls of the departed only take the essence out of the food and drink, so at the end of the celebration you can share the offered treats with relatives and friends that have attended the gathering.

Look for DIY sites online that offer patterns and directions for such things as cutting Papel Picado (tissue paper banners) or for making sugar skulls.

## Recipe for Pan de Muerto

Here is a recipe for Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead), a traditional Mexican sweet bread recipe shared with us by Author Mary J. Andrade from her book, *Day of the Dead: A Passion for Life*. Enjoy!

### Ingredients:

1 teaspoon dry yeast  
 ¼ cup warm water  
 4 cups all-purpose flour  
 6 eggs  
 1 teaspoon salt  
 ½ cup melted butter  
 Orange-flower water (optional)  
 egg wash (1 egg white plus ½ egg yolk)  
 powdered or granulated sugar for sprinkling  
 ¼ teaspoon of aniseed  
 ¼ teaspoon nutmeg



*Pan de Muerto – Photo: Yucatan Times*

### Preparation:

- \*Combine yeast and water and 1/3 cup of flour. Let mixture stand until it doubles in volume.
- \*Place remaining flour in a large bowl and dig a hole in the center. Place eggs, salt, sugar, aniseed, nutmeg, butter and orange-flower water inside hole.
- \*Beat together, then add yeast mixture, combining it with the dough. Knead on a floured board for 15 minutes or until the dough no longer sticks to the surface. Add flour as needed.
- \*Place the dough in a greased bowl. Cover with a cloth and let rise in a warm, draft free area for three hours or until the mixture doubles in volume.
- \*Preheat the oven to 450 degrees F. Pinch off one third of the dough and form two-inch balls. Roll each ball into a long rope. Mold pieces of the rope to resemble little bones and set aside.
- \*Shape the remaining dough into a round loaf and lightly brush it with egg wash. Place the loaf on a cookie sheet and arrange dough “bones” in a pattern on the loaf. Brush with the remaining egg wash.
- \*Bake for 10 minutes. Reduce oven to 350° F. Continue baking for 30 minutes.
- \*Sprinkle with sugar and serve at room temperature.