

# DAY OF THE DEAD

By JULIE CATALANO



Move over, Halloween. Thanks to popular films like *The Book of Life* and a growing fascination with ancient cultures and traditions, the Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) has gone mainstream in a lively holiday that uniquely blends remembrance and revelry. In Central Texas, here are some people, places and things to help you get in the spirit.



## HISTORY

Photography by Rebeca Barrera

It all began in Mexico with a confluence of cultures and the influence of Christianity in what's known as syncretism, according to Rebeca Barrera, owner of Tres Rebecas, a San Antonio cultural design company and studio (3rebecas.com). "Mexico's indigenous peoples celebrated their dead at the beginning of summer. They would decorate their homes and line the road with petals from the leaves of the marigold flower so that the dead could find their way back



to their earthly homes for a visit." The Catholic influence merged that feast day with their own All Souls Day and All Saints Day on November 1 and 2, where it is still celebrated in Mexico and elsewhere to this day.

Barrera, director of Latino Initiatives for Scholastic, has visited Pátzcuaro in the Mexican state of Michoacán, renowned for its dramatically elaborate Day of the Dead festivities. She describes winding processions of children and adults carrying baskets of bread, flowers, toys, candles and food to the mountain cemetery. All-night graveside



## MEXICO CITY ALTAR

by Kateri Aragón and Deidre Kateri Aragón (Sponsored by Live The Language), 2015, Mexic-Arte Museum. Photo by Sixto-Juan Zavala.

Skeletons during Day of the Dead are seen doing everyday tasks and participating in work and fun activities. José Guadalupe Posada, a famed graphic artist, pioneered the image of La Catrina, the elegant, aristocratic skeleton, which is still seen today.

Here we see a banquet of skeleton figures that honors Agustín Aragón Leiva's *El Banquete de Las Flores*. Leiva, the founder of the Mexican Academy of Gastronomy (1939) (chef, historian, composer, writer and film scholar) and his wife, The Mayan Princess Nicté-há (promoter of Mexican culture, a performance artist who specialized in reciting indigenous poetry in Mayan, Nahuatl, Zapotec, Mixtec and Spanish) offered over 306 banquets honoring the cuisines of Mexico. Close friends (including María Asúnsolo, Alma Reed, Dolores del Río, Jaime Torres Bodet), artists, politicians, clerics, Mexico City socialites and everyday people were invited to the Aragón-Leiva's feasts. Nicté-há and Agustín did not make distinctions amongst social classes, political preferences or creeds. At their banquets, everyone harmoniously rejoiced in the food and the original music that Agustín composed and played for his wife's poetry recitals after the meals.

picnics, music, storytelling and decorating "are a very different way of honoring the dead and hoping they come to visit us."

While some may find the rituals irreverent or macabre, Barrera believes that viewing death as a part of life is healthy and oddly comforting. "People talk to their lost loved ones as if they were still here. It's not at all spooky. It's a spiritual thing."

## THERE'S A PARTY GOING ON DOWN HERE

Austin | Photography by Chris Caselli

In Texas, the Mexic-Arte museum in Austin (mexic-arte.org, 512.480.9373) hosts the longest running and oldest Day of the Dead celebration. The 32nd annual "Viva la Vida" exhibition runs from September 12-November 22, and includes elaborate altars in the style of each state in Mexico. The mile-long parade on October 31 starts from Sixth Street and features a giant sugar skull float. "In the heart of Austin we see folks from all over the place," says Adrian Orozco, membership associate. The gift shop is a must-see. "We have a new line of items for the home," says Orozco.



## PUEBLA ALTAR

by Emily Arrenas, 2015, Mexic-Arte Museum. Photo by Sixto-Juan Zavala.

In Puebla, the ofrendas are dominated by the color white and bedecked with angels, saints and the Virgin Mary. The fabric used is a decadent white satin that both reflects light and conjures up holiness as if the viewer was in an ornately decorated church. White is a universal symbol of purity and the divine. The mirror is used to present the image of the deceased person so she knows the altar is for her. Sometimes in Puebla the altars include lloroncitos: a kind of ceramic figurine (lloroncito roughly translates as "crybaby"). Marigold flowers decorate altars, often in the shape of a cross on the floor in front of the altar.





San Antonio | Photography courtesy of Say Sí

In San Antonio, Say Sí's Ninth Annual Muertitos Fest (saysi.org, 210.212.8666) takes place in Southtown on November 5-7. "Of all the Day of the Dead events in San Antonio, we put a little educational spin on our festivities," says Stephen Guzman, communications manager. This year's theme is "Tree of Life: Storytelling and Rituals," featuring artwork, performances, food booths, artisan stalls, community altar projects, live music, family art workshops and more.



### SHOP TIL YOU...YOU KNOW

At Cosas (cosasonline.com, 830.249.1500), Día de los Muertos is a year-round affair. The 3000-square-foot shop in Boerne is filled with "one of the largest collections of museum quality folk art in the country," says Amy Niederhauser, co-owner with husband Bob of the 17-year-old store. "We buy from more than 150 artists throughout Mexico representing pretty much every state." Items include handcrafted ceramics, wood carvings, tin, textiles for the home, wearable art and much more, including the popular catrinas (the satirical "Dapper Skeleton" of a fancy lady wearing a huge hat) that are a familiar staple of Day of the Dead. "We have a good variety," says Amy, "that are wonderful and made of super fragile clay." They build an altar in the store every year, this year's dedicated to their dog Chula, who recently passed. "They are members of the family, too."

### ALTARS: IF YOU BUILD THEM, THEY WILL COME

Colorful altars, or ofrendas, are the focal point of any Day of the Dead celebration, designed to commemorate the lives of loved ones and encourage the spirits to pay a visit. San Antonio artist/writer/playwright Enedina Vasquez (enart.com)

has designed and built elaborate altars for institutions like the Witte museum, San Fernando Cathedral and the Smithsonian Chicano Now! exhibition that toured the U.S. for seven years. "Altars are constructed because we are not afraid of death. We embrace it," says Vasquez. On a table representing earth and its four corners, Vasquez suggests using tiers made of boxes (she drapes hers with serapes) to show off the essential elements:

**Air:** Delicate cutout banners called papel picado signify the fragility of life.

**Water:** To nourish the Monarch butterflies said to be manifestations of spirits.

**Fire:** Candles, to light the way of the spirits.

**Flowers:** Traditionally marigolds, the flower of the dead, said to lure spirits back home with their fragrance.

**Bowl of salt:** To purify and cleanse.

Photographs of departed family and friends, surrounded by examples of their favorite interests, hobbies, food and drink.

### FOOD OF THE DEAD

Who doesn't love a good spread, here and in the hereafter? Rich and flavorful moles, tamales, pan dulce, chocolate, fruits, candies and sugar skulls reign, along with tequila and other libations. In Austin, Fonda San Miguel restaurant (fondasanmiguel.com, 512.459.4121) celebrates with a lavish altar prepared by the staff, featuring photos of the Fonda family and friends. Here is their Pan de Muerto, a must for any Day of the Dead menu.

### FONDA SAN MIGUEL'S PAN DE MUERTO (DAY OF THE DEAD BREAD)

- ½ cup milk
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup butter
- 1 ½ oz package dry yeast
- 1 egg and 1 yolk, beaten together
- 2¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 egg, beaten with 2 tablespoons water

In a small saucepan over medium heat, bring the milk to a boil, remove from heat and add sugar, salt and butter. Whisk together until the butter is melted. Turn the mixture into the bowl of a standing mixer with a paddle attachment and allow to cool for five minutes. Add yeast and eggs and mix until the yeast is dissolved. Gradually add the flour to make a stiff dough. Transfer to a lightly greased bowl, turning to coat all sides. Cover with a damp dishtowel and allow to rest for 30 minutes. Grease a baking sheet or line with parchment paper and set aside.

Divide the dough into three equal parts and roll each portion into a 12-inch rope. Braid the three ropes together and pinch the ends together. Place the braided loaf on the prepared baking sheet, cover with a damp towel, and set aside to rise in a warm, draft-free spot until doubled in bulk, about 1 ½ hours.

Preheat oven to 350. Brush loaf with the egg wash and bake 25-30 minutes, or until golden brown. Cool on a wire rack before slicing. Makes 1 loaf. ❖

For further reading, *The Skeleton at the Feast*, Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).