

A Day to Remember Family

By Lisa Avila



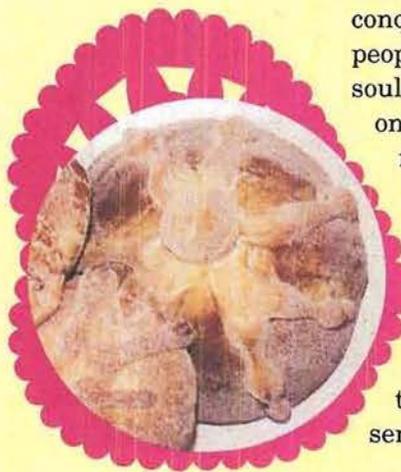
On a sunny afternoon in Mexico, the smell of fresh warm souls' bread fills our kitchen. My four children snatch the brown bread bag from my hand and tear it open. Soon they're biting into the soft loaves and munching on the sugary "bones," which are the crunchiest parts. Mexican bakeries only offer this special bread from the beginning of October until November 2, so my family eats as much as they can.

"Let's set up the *ofrenda!*" cries Maribel, and out come purple, orange, and pink cut-out tissue paper (*papel picado*), votive candles, and *catrinas*—clay skeletons dressed in colorful party clothes. All these things go on

the *ofrenda*, or offering table.

Six-year-old Phillip gets out framed pictures of loved ones who have died, including one of Grandfather Felipe and Uncle Eric, and places them on the table. Our offering table is a way for us to honor our dead family members and to tell their spirits that we remember them.

On the Day of the Dead we honor family and eat bread with bones on it!



While I make the list of things we still need—sugared skulls, marigolds, and Mexican candies—I can't help but think of all the fun we'll have on the Day of the Dead.

Traveling Spirits

The Day of the Dead, which Mexicans celebrate on November 2, is actually an ancient tradition that began long before Spain conquered Mexico. The native people of Mexico believed that the souls of people who died return once a year to visit their families.

To help the souls find their way back home, living relatives set up a table with favorite foods, games, and toys. They believed that the spirits of the dead would use their supernatural sight and sense of smell to follow the path

out of the world of the dead to the table. The families then celebrated the spirits' return with a big banquet.

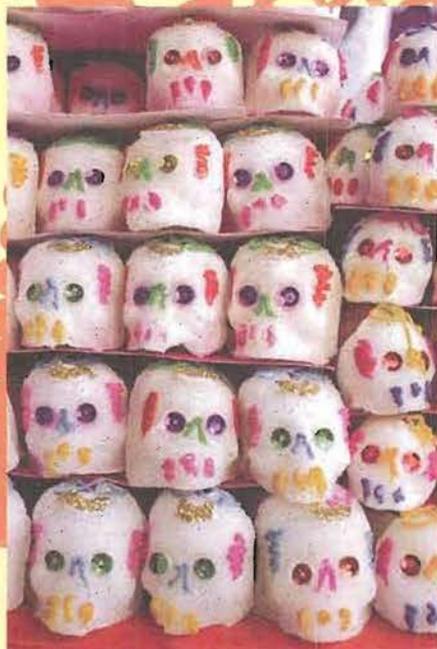
The Ofrenda

The offering table is the most important part of the Day of the Dead. Everything on it serves as a symbol for something else. I like to decorate with purple papel picado (tissue-paper cutouts) for the sadness of death. I also use pink and orange, which represent the happy return of the spirits to our world. The marigold's bright color and strong smell are said to help lead the spirits to the offering table. Even the *pan de muerto*, or souls' bread, has special meaning. The round loaf has a crusty ball of dough on top and lines of sugary dough running down the sides. These are the symbols for the "skull" and "bones" of the dead and for the tears of the living.

Some Mexicans burn a powerful-smelling pine resin on their offering table to ward off "evil" spirits who might sidetrack the spirits' return to their family's table. I use votive candles that represent faith and hope. These candles are said to protect the souls of the dead and help light their way back home.

Celebrating Life

Since the Day of the Dead celebrates our own lives and the lives of those who lived



Sugar skulls represent ancestors who have passed away.

before us, Mexicans make a party of it. Some people take their party to the graveyard, but I like to have ours at home. We cook up a feast of rice, *mole* (a spicy sauce served over chicken), and *chicharrón* (fried pigskin in green salsa), and we leave spaces at the table for the clay skeletons dressed in party clothes. They sit at the table in place of our missing family members. The meal is full

of laughter as we share stories of the living and the dead.

Afterward, we sit in a circle in front of a fire and share *calaveritas*, poems that make fun of ourselves and of death.

Some of the *calaveritas* make us laugh until our sides hurt. The time passes quickly. By midnight, the fire has turned into slow-burning embers. The two smallest children are asleep on the rug, and the rest of us

yawn. The chimes of the clock tell the spirits it's time to leave. We blow out the candles on the offering table. Diego, my oldest son, leans in close to the pictures and whispers, "Come back next year, Grandfather and Uncle Eric. We miss you." Then he looks at me and smiles.

We believe they will come back because they miss us, too. And they love to eat bread with bones on it! 



Each item on an offering table holds special meaning for families remembering their loved ones.

Calaverita

*Le pedí a un artista mi faz pintar,
"Colgará en mi casa, jen un honorable
lugar!"*

*Me morí al instante cuando percibí
¡La horrible pintura que hizo de mí!*

*I asked an artist to paint my beautiful face,
"It will hang in my house, in a most
honored place!"*

*But I died in an instant, when I happened
to see*

The horrible picture he painted of me!

—Lisa and Phillip Avila