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## Día de los Muertos: Altars, Obrendas, and Food!

### BRIEF HISTORY

*Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead, is rooted in Mesoamerican culture and was likely first observed by the Aztecs in festivals that celebrated the ruler of the underworld, Mictecacihuatl. Nowadays on November 1 and 2 the living honor the dead by visiting gravesites, building altars, and preparing their favorite foods in order to encourage a visit to the terrestrial world.

Creating an altar is one of the most significant traditions during *Día de los Muertos* festivities both in Mexico and in my home. Each and every element of an altar has special significance and is meant to remember and celebrate our loved ones who have left the mortal world. The real beauty behind a Day of the Dead altar is that it can be simple or elaborate, and can also be built communally or individually. Below I have outlined the different items that can be included on a Day of the Dead altar, along with their symbolism and significance in the hopes that you are inspired to remember and honor someone special this year!

### FOOD & DRINKS

There are several dishes that are commonly associated with Day of the Dead such as rice, mole, chocolate, fall fruits, pumpkin desserts, and pan dulce (Mexican sweet bread). Festive plates are left out and are also meant to satisfy hunger after a long journey to the living world.

**Pan de Muerto (Day of the Dead Bread):** This semisweet bread, which is baked in the shape of bones, is left as a gift for the spirits and is a welcoming item that represents the host's generosity.

**Calaveras or Sugar Skulls:** These friendly faces symbolize the spirits being honored and their individual personalities. They can be made out of sugar, chocolate, paper mâché, wood, or any other material. In pre-Columbian times, Aztecs used amaranth seeds instead of sugar to make the skulls. Edible skulls are often consumed by kids after the celebration and are an example of a Mexican's ability to celebrate, mock and play with death.

**Salt:** Salt represents purification of the soul.

**Water:** Water is left out to quench the spirits' thirst after a long journey. It also represents the element of water.





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### ALTAR DÉCOR AND OFRENDAS (OFFERINGS)

The most basic elements of an altar include photos, flowers, and candles.

**Photos:** Photos are meant to honor your deceased loved ones. I like to use prints that include only the people being honored on my altar (no living people are in my altar photos – there’s no rule about this, it just seems like a goocher!).

**Flowers:** The most popular flower on Day of the Dead altars is the *cempazúchitl* or marigold, which represents the earth. Their bright orange color and fragrance are believed to help guide souls back to the living world for one evening. Elaborate altars include a walkway made of marigolds that begins at the entrance of a home and ends at the altar. If marigolds are not available, any fresh or artificial flowers are great substitutes. White flowers represent heaven, while purple flowers are the traditional color of mourning in Mexico.

**Candles:** Candles represent the soul’s ascension into heaven and our “burning” love for our deceased relatives. They also help light the way toward the land of the living and represent the element of fire.

**Incense:** Incense is sometimes included on an altar to ward off bad spirits and purify the soul of our dearly departed.

**Arch:** Above the altar is usually an arch made of flowers or other offerings. It represents the entry into the world of the dead.

**Papel Picado:** Colorful *papel picado* represents the union between life and death. This delicate tissue paper also signifies the fragility of life and the element of wind.

**Monarch Butterflies:** These butterflies, which migrate to Mexico each fall, are believed to be the spirits of ancestors coming to visit.

**Dogs:** Dogs are believed to guide the ancestral spirits to their final resting place in the afterlife.

**Personal Objects and Mementos:** These can include items that serve as a reminder of the person being honored. It can be a favorite toy, tool or kitchen utensil, clothing item, snack, or drink – anything, really!

