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52°F, Few Clouds

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Is Día de los Muertos the Mexican Halloween?

October 30, 12:41 AM
by [Mona Molarsky](#), [New York City Life Examiner](#) 1 comment

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You may be planning your costume party for October 31. But in Mexico—and in many communities in the United States these days—the important holiday comes afterwards on November 2, *Día de los Muertos* or the [Day of the Dead](#).



Day of the Dead celebration in New York. Mano a Mano

Famous for sugar skulls and paper mâché skeletons dressed to the nines, the Day of the Dead is misunderstood by many Americans, who think it's a celebration of death and the macabre. In fact, it's a time for honoring loved ones who have died.

Like Halloween, the Day of the Dead is a combination of Christian traditions and pagan ones. Before the Europeans arrived in the Americas, the Aztecs celebrated a month-long festival, dedicated to the goddess *Mictecacihuatl*, or "Lady of the Dead." After the Spaniards conquered Mexico, they associated the festival with [All Souls Day](#) (November 1) and [All Saints Day](#) (November 2), giving a Christian explanation to native traditions.

Today many Mexicans build altars in their homes for the Day of the Dead to commemorate deceased family members. On the altar, they put flowers, candles and the favorite foods and drinks of the person they are honoring. If a child has died, they might also put toys and candy. Many also visit cemeteries to bring offerings to the graves of their loved ones. Some families organize parties to pass the whole night in the cemetery, eating, drinking, playing the guitar and singing to keep the dead ones company.

Veronica Hernández Shusman, a vice president at Teleprensa and a member of the benefit committee at [Mano a Mano](#), an organization dedicated to preserving Mexican culture in New York, says that the Day of the Dead was a fading tradition among middle-class Mexicans when she was a girl.

"In my family we didn't build a special altar for *Día de los Muertos*," she recalls, of her childhood in the city of [Guanajuato](#) in central Mexico. "But my mother did love to prepare the traditional foods and my father always made wreaths of flowers to put on his parents' graves."

She remembers hearing how other Mexicans, especially in the smaller towns, celebrated. "Every year they returned on that day to have dinner with their dead ones at the cemetery," she recalls. "Today these celebrations are becoming more popular again. Some Mexicans in New York also go to church on these days. The Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help on Fifth Avenue and 59th Street in Brooklyn attracts many in the Mexican community. So does Manhattan's Our Lady of Guadalupe on West 14th Street."

Margarita Larios, a former factory worker who came to New York thirty-five years ago from [Atlixco](#), a town south of Mexico City, sets up an altar in her apartment on the Lower East Side every year.

"Mexicans in the United States," she says, "usually celebrate *Día de Los Muertos* at home in private." However, she also builds public altars with Mano a Mano, an organization she helped to found. It is her way of helping to remind people that Mexican traditions live on in New York.

Mona Molarsky

[New York City Life Examiner](#)



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Mona Molarsky was born in New York and has lived on the Upper West Side for many years. She's written about city life—from potholes to poetry slams—for newspapers and national magazines.

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