

[Joe Pompeo](#)

- [Home](#)
- [Resume](#)
- [Clips](#)
- [Photos](#)

Giving life to the dead

New York's Mexican community preserves a centuries-old tradition

By Joe Pompeo

Every year in late October, Margarita Larios creates an altar to honor loved ones who have died.

She adorns it with flowers, candles, fake skulls and photographs of the departed: her parents, her sister and various friends. The altar, which is purified with incense derived from the sap of a Mexican tree, also includes offerings of treats that the dead enjoyed in life, like candy, tamales, fresh fruit and “pan de muertos,” Spanish for bread of the dead. A bowl of water is placed on the altar in case any souls are thirsty.

“It gives life to the dead when they come,” said Larios, 59, who spoke in Spanish but used her daughter as an interpreter. She believes her late friends and relatives visit her in spirit every Oct. 31 through Nov. 2, when Mexicans around the world celebrate “El Dia de LLos Muertos,” or The Day of the Dead, a lively, though macabre religious holiday with origins in pre-Hispanic cultures like the Aztecs and Mayans.

The ritual of building an altar is central to Day of the Dead, a historically pagan celebration that eventually melded with the Catholic holidays of All Saints Day and All Souls Day, and Larios is but one member of New York's expanding Mexican population who has observed this centuries-old tradition since childhood.

As Day of the Dead gains more mainstream popularity during each new Halloween season – it's been a part of the city's annual Halloween parade since 2003 – Mexican immigrants like Larios gather around their altars with friends and relatives as a way of reinforcing their belief in the afterlife and preserving a custom that survived the 16th Ccentury colonization of Mexico.

“The most important thing is to make people aware that death is natural,” Larios explained. “It is with us at every moment.”

Larios emigrated to the U.S. in 1974 from Atlixco Puebla, a small town roughly two hours south of Mexico City, eventually settling in the Lower East Side where she worked long hours in a factory to support her six children. She didn't have time to build an altar each October as she had done with her grandmother as a young girl.

But as her children grew up, Larios started working less, and in 1993 she decided to re-adopt the altar tradition in her home.

Now, Larios works on various altar collaborations throughout the city, which this year include a major installation at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, and the annual Day of the Dead altar auction at Chelsea's Rocking Horse Café.

“In the last five years, Day of the Dead has exploded not only within the Mexican community [in New York], but also outside of it,” said Emily Socolov, executive director of Mano a Mano, a Mexican cultural organization based in Lower Manhattan. “We’re surrounded by this rich aesthetic tradition and a lot of non-Mexicans have tapped into that.”

However, despite Day of the Dead’s prominence in New York, Larios worries that the altar tradition will fade as the city’s elderly Mexican immigrants die off.

Currently, the younger generations rely on their parents and grandparents to build the altars and host celebrations, she said. But down the line, that onus will fall on people like Larios’ 40-year-old daughter, Aurora Guzman, who started building her own altars four years ago.

Guzman initially worried that her two children might be embarrassed of by the mysticism associated with Day of the Dead, but she said that she and her siblings have come to recognize the importance of preserving the tradition in their family.

“It’s something you should consider yourself fortunate to have in your culture,” she said.

-

Type and Press Enter to Search

Theme: Day Dream by [Jim Whimpey](#). [Blog at WordPress.com](#).

☺