



A Touch Of Rosemary

by *Rosemary Black*



OCTOBER 22, 2007 12:06 PM

3 COMMENTS

Sugar skulls and skeleton bread »

BY ROSEMARY BLACK

If you prefer Halloween's scary side to its sweet one, plan to celebrate the Mexican Day of the Dead (Dia de Los Muertos) next week. Think sugar skulls, pan de muerto (bread of the dead) and homemade altars that pay tribute to deceased relatives. Celebrants believe that the souls of the departed return on this holiday, formally observed on November 1 and 2.



In Mexico, a lot of the celebrating occurs in cemeteries at night. Here, the observances take place in private homes and some restaurants. Those who want to get a head start on the holiday can participate in a free workshop given by Mano a Mano: Mexican Culture Without Borders [see the blog](#). Building an altar, creating sugar skulls and baking Bread of the Dead will be covered, along with the creation of other foods and crafts. There will also be music and folk dancing.

"It's a very important holiday for us, and we believe that it is important for families here to continue the traditions and pass them down from generation to generation," says Margarita Larios, board member at Mano a Mano and one of its founders. Originally from the state of Puebla in Mexico, the former seamstress and mother of six grown children coordinates cultural programs for the organization. The Day of the Dead is one of her favorites because it's got a little something for everyone – from sweets for kids to the chance to honor ancestors for the family elders.

Perhaps the most important symbol on this day is the calavera, the skull or skeleton. It's on display in the holiday's most highly visible food, a sweet bread molded into the shape of a skull and sometimes baked with a little plastic skeleton inside. Colorful sugar skull confections that resemble folk art are on display at the altars, or ofrendas, that family members build for their deceased relatives.

"The altar is a table that commemorates the people who have passed away," Larios explains. "On it we put the favorite foods of the person who has passed away, and some of their clothing, and pictures of them."

Though the holiday is basically aimed at memorializing the dead, the mood is anything but funereal, she says. And the events planned by Mano a Mano from Oct. 28 through Nov. 2 (all free and open to the public) are upbeat, fun and family-oriented. There will be a workshop to learn how to build an altar on Sunday, Oct. 28 from 2 to 5pm. From Monday, Oct. 29 through Wednesday, Oct. 31, from 6 to 8pm, sugar skull making and bread baking will be taught, along with paper crafts and poetry writing. All events will be at St. Mark's Church (10th Street and Second Avenue) For a complete schedule of activities, visit the web site.

If you'd like to sample more Mexican fare, all Mercadito locations are hosting a "Semana de los Muertos" tasting menu from Tuesday, Oct. 30 to Monday, Nov. 5, at which such dishes as pumpkin seed guacamole, pumpkin-butternut squash soup, and banana leaf steamed pork will be served. For more information, [see the blog](#).

And here's a recipe for Pan de Muerto from my cookbook, "The Kids' Holiday Baking Book" (St. Martin's Press).

Pan de Muerto
Makes 1 big loaf

Pan de Muerto, or "bread of the dead," is shaped like bones or a skull. With a slight orange flavor, this sweet bread is good for breakfast when toasted. It's fun for kids to make because the dough is easy to handle.

- ½ cup (1 stick) butter
- 1 orange
- 2 packages active dry yeast
- 1 cup warm water
- ½ cup sugar
- 3 eggs, at room temperature
- ½ teaspoon grated orange zest
- ¼ teaspoon ground aniseed
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 4 ½ to 5 cups all-purpose flour
- Vegetable shortening for the baking sheet

For the top:

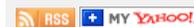
ABOUT THIS BLOG

Daily News Online food writer Rosemary Black covers dining trends, local chefs and cool new products. Her favorite pastime, after eating, is inventing recipes for really fast, really easy dishes. She doesn't have to look very far for tasters, as her seven children serve as critics.

Rosemary is the author of four cookbooks: "Cookies Year-Round" (Stewart, Tabori and Chang), "The Kids' Holiday Baking Book" (St. Martin's Press) and "Cooking with Joy" (St. Martin's Press.) Rosemary Black's most recent book is "Bubby's Brunch," which she co-authored with Ron Silver. She would love to hear from anyone who lives to eat – recipes, comments and criticism are all welcome.

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ball, using your hands. Place it on the baking sheet, smooth side up. Flatten with your hands until it is about 2 inches thick. It should be about 10 inches in diameter.

Pinch the reserved 1/3 cup of dough into 3 equal pieces. Roll 2 of the pieces into 2 8-inch long ropes. Flatten the ends. In a small bowl, beat the egg with the tablespoon of water for a few seconds. Brush this egg glaze over the top of the loaf with a little brush. (A thick, clean paintbrush works well.) Carefully place the ropes over the loaf, and cross them in the center so they form an X.

Shape the third little piece of dough into a ball. Cut the ball into 2 parts. Shape 1 part into a ball. Paint the bottom of the ball with the egg glaze and press it into the center of the crossed ropes. Cut the remainder of the dough into 4 pieces and roll into teardrop shapes. Place these on the loaf, near the top, and press in firmly. Brush the top of the loaf with more of the glaze. Cover the loaf with a damp clean towel. Set it in a warm place (like the top of the stove) for about 45 minutes to rise. When the bread is ready to be baked, it will be puffy.

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. With a paintbrush, brush the loaf again with the glaze. Sprinkle the top with 1 tablespoon sugar. Bake the loaf for 30 minutes. Check for doneness by inserting a metal skewer into the center of the loaf. If it comes out clean, and the loaf is nice and brown, the bread is done. If it is still sticky, return it to the oven for another 5 minutes and test it again. Remove the bread from the oven and remove it from the pan to a wire rack to cool.

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big shoulders

October 23, 2007 12:48 PM hey Rosemary,

I know most of your readers are in NYC, but if anyone in the midwest is looking for a similar experience the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago. Excellent Oaxaca-style mole can be found around the corner at Nuevo Leone.

CookieMonster

October 24, 2007 5:59 PM

I have made that recipe from your cookbook and it's really good. For that matter so is the cookbook. I rely on it all the time. The blondies are great.

EMejia

October 24, 2007 6:00 PM

Great blog Rosemary! Day of the dead celebrations are always so festive! I urge everyone to visit the Mano a Mano workshop - it's a guaranteed good time!

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