

How to Celebrate Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)

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Co-authored by [Sophia Latorre](#) and **88 contributors**

Last Updated: October 29, 2021

Día de los Muertos, also known as the *Day of the Dead* is a holiday celebrated in Latin American countries and is especially popular in Mexico. This special holiday, celebrated on November 1st and 2nd each year, honors the lives of people who have died. It is believed that the souls of the dead come back to visit their loved ones at this time. Contrary to popular belief, Día de los Muertos is not a sad or depressing time, but a time of happiness and celebration of life!

Method 1

Method 1 of 2: Honoring Your Loved Ones



1 **Wear Day of the Dead makeup.** Many people like to wear makeup that is reminiscent of a sugar skull on the Day of the Dead. Paint your face white, then add large colored circles around your eyes. You can draw “stitches” on your lips and extending out from your mouth. Paint on a nose, and add decorations like flowers or spiderwebs to your face.^[1]



2 Dress in costume for the holiday. Nowadays, many people wear items of clothing decorated with sugar skulls or skeleton prints, such as shirts, dresses, or leggings on Día de los Muertos. You can also wear shells and dance so that the noisiness "wakes up" the dead, or even dress up as the deceased.^[2]

- Some women also dress as Calavera Catrina in long, flowing, brightly-colored lace dresses paired with flower crowns and sugar skull makeup.
- Sometimes, children dress in costume and ask people on the street for a *calaverita* (a small gift of money). Unlike Halloween, though, they don't knock on doors.



3 Visit the graves of your loved ones. Clean and decorate the grave with ofrendas (offerings) like "cempasúchitl" (orange marigolds) or "Flor de Muerto" ("Flower of the Dead"), which are thought to attract souls of the dead. You can even make a path from flower petals from the grave to your home to help your loved ones find their way. Lay down trinkets and the deceased's favorite candies.^[3]

- Usually, deceased children are honored on November 1, while deceased adults are honored on November 2.
- For children (*los angelitos* or little angels) bring toys and sugar skulls; for adults, bring bottles of their favorite alcoholic beverage (tequila, mezcal, pulque).
- You can visit the graves of your loved ones any time during the holiday, or even spend all night in the cemetery eating, drinking, talking, playing cards, and listening to music.



4 Set out pillows and blankets in your home. Traditionally, people celebrating Día de los Muertos arrange a pillow and blanket for each of their deceased loved ones in their home. This is so that the spirits of the dead can rest after their journey, as they are believed to visit their loved ones during this time.^[4]

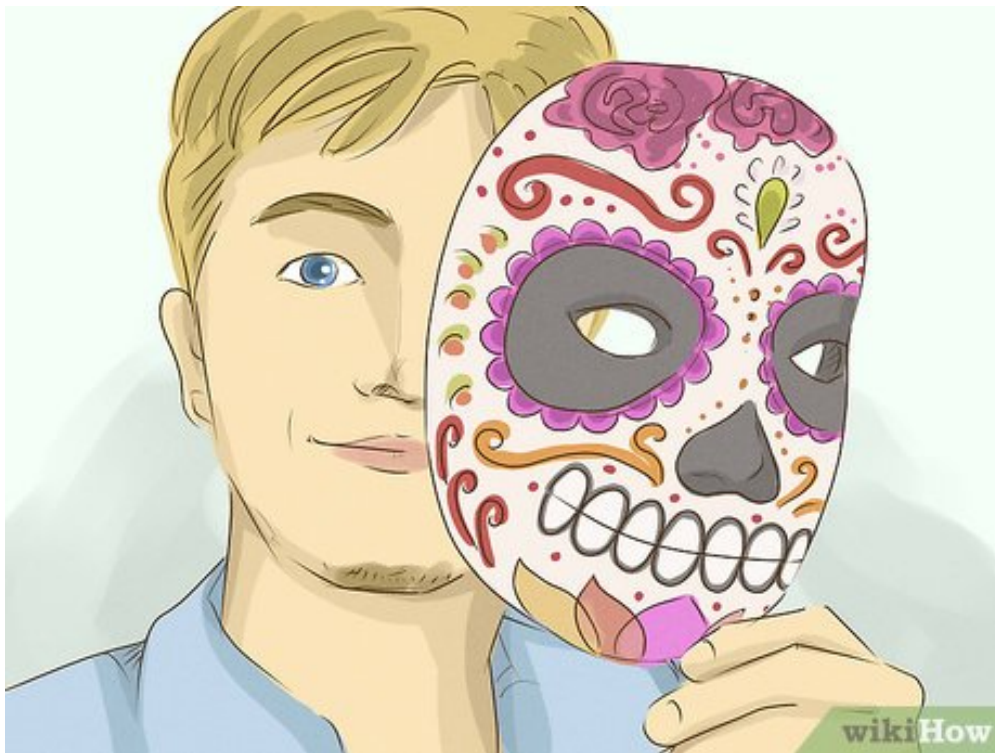


5 Play music. Listen to live mariachi music or play your loved one's favorite songs or recordings. Enjoy the music and celebrate the life of the deceased. Some people even have parades through the graveyard, and play music, dance, and celebrate while stopping at the gravestones of each of their loved ones.^[5]



6 Write calaveras literarias. Calaveras literarias ("literary skulls"), also known as panteones, are short poems written in the form of epitaphs. These poems are satirical or funny, and often poke fun at your loved ones' quirks or embarrassing moments. You can even illustrate your poem with pictures of your loved one or of Dapper Death and his Dame.^[6]

- Traditionally, calaveras literarias were written in four-line stanzas in which the second line rhymes with the last line, or five-line stanzas in which the third line rhymes with the last line. In modern times, many of these poems are written in blank verse and are no longer than one page.^[7]
- For instance, if your loved one was a poor bullfighter, you could write a short poem in which they struggle or fail during a bullfight. Humor often plays a large role in the calaveras literarias.



7 Make Day of the Dead masks. This is a great activity for children on Día de los Muertos. Draw a skull or trace a template you find online. Decorate the mask in a traditional style, or create your own designs. Cut out the mask, punch a hole on either side, and attach a string to each hole. Tie the mask around your head and head out to celebrate.

- Masks can be either half- or full-face. Traditional designs include skulls and flowers.
- You can use crayons, markers, puffy paint, glitter glue, etc., to decorate your mask as you wish.



8 Make an altar for the deceased. You can create an altar for just one person or an altar for many people. Fill the altar with favorite foods and trinkets that the people enjoyed in their lifetime. Decorate it with candles, flowers, and a framed photo of the person or people you are remembering. Spend time at the altar, telling fond and humorous stories about the deceased.^[8]

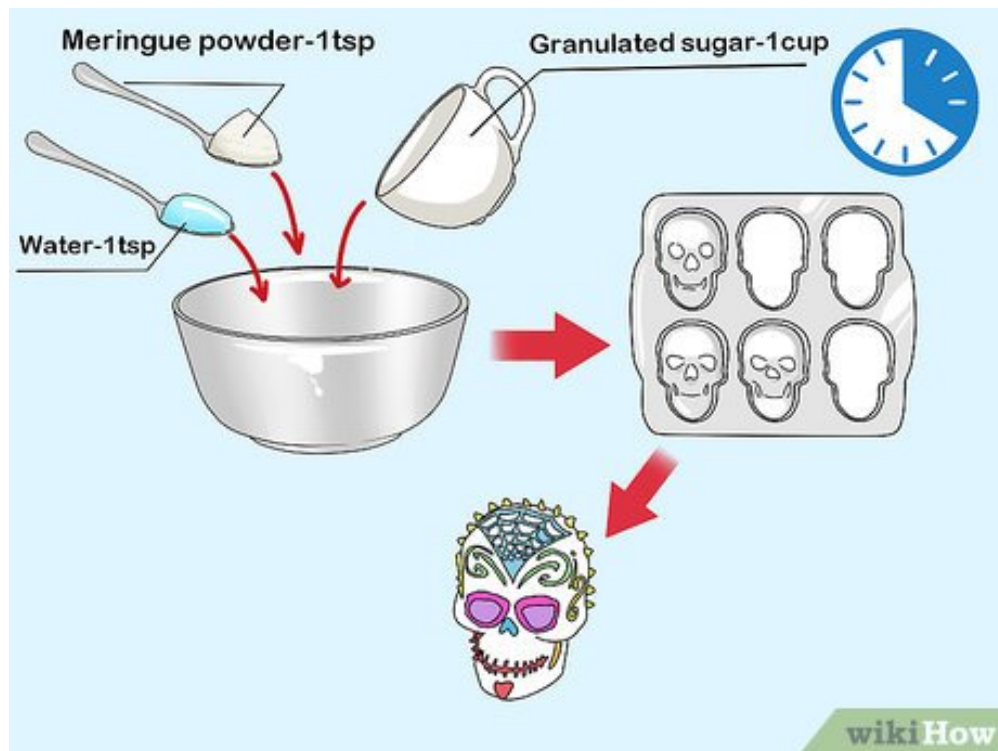
- Many people choose to pray, and add a Christian cross and statues or pictures of the Blessed Virgin Mary to the altar.
- Catrina figures (a costumed female with a skeleton face) are popular decorations for altars

Method 2 of 2: Making Ofrendas (Offerings)



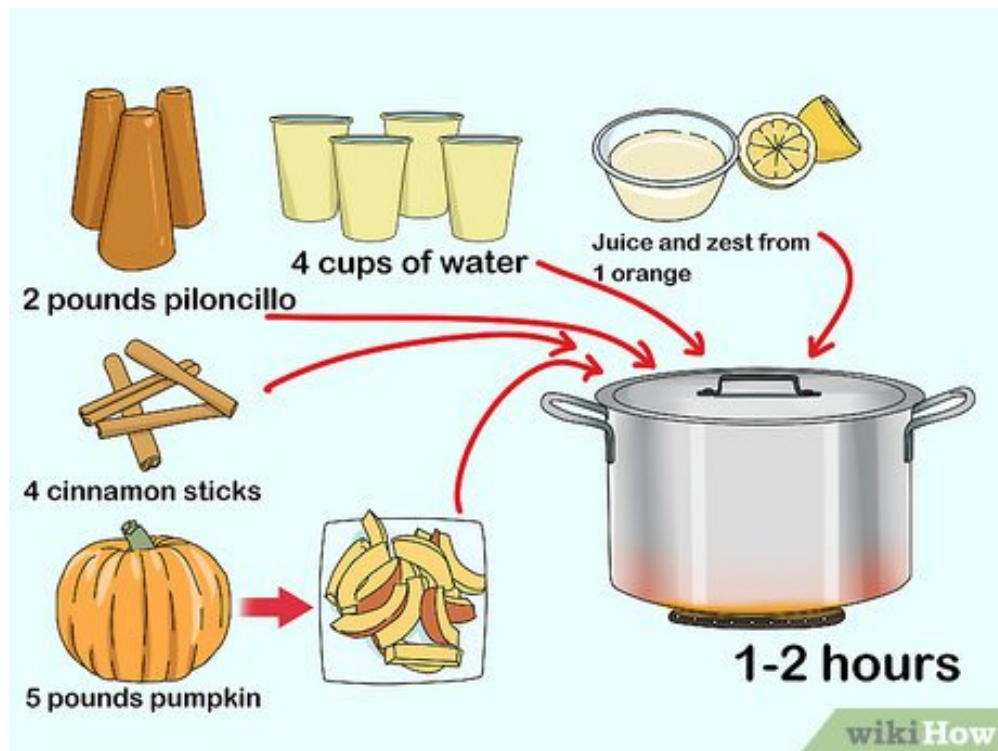
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- 1 Prepare a special dinner.** Include a plate setting for every person whose memory you wish to honor and include a favorite dish of theirs in your dinner. Invite your family to celebrate with you and tell stories about your deceased loved ones. Popular offerings include calaveras, calabaza en tacha, atole, and pan de muerto.^[9]



2 Create calaveras. Calaveras are Mexican sugar skulls. This is a fun activity for the whole family, and especially fun to eat, as calaveras are offered to both the living and the dead. To make your own, mix 1 teaspoon (4.93 mL) of meringue powder with 1 cup (237 mL) of granulated sugar, then add 1 teaspoon (4.93 mL) of water, and mix well. Pack the mixture into a mold and let dry overnight.^[10]

- Decorate the calaveras using colored icing, sequins, feathers, and more.
- You can also buy the sugar skulls "ready made" and then decorate them.



3 Make calabaza en tacha. Calabaza en tacha (candied pumpkin) is a popular and traditional dish for Día de los Muertos. In a large saucepan, bring 2 pounds (0.907 kg) piloncillo, 4 cinnamon sticks, 4 cups (1 liter) of water, and the juice and zest from 1 orange to a boil. Add the flesh of one 5-pound (2.25 kg) pumpkin, cut into strips. Simmer an hour or two until tender, then serve.^[1]

- Piloncillo is Mexican unrefined brown sugar; to substitute, you can mix 2 teaspoons (9.86 mL) molasses with every 1/4 cup (59 mL) of brown sugar.
- This recipe yields 6-8 servings of calabaza en tacha.



4 Serve atole. Atole is a warm porridge-like drink made from masa. To make it, blend 1/2 cup (118 mL) fresh masa with 1/4 cup (59 mL) hot water. Transfer it to saucepan, add a cinnamon stick and the seeds from one vanilla bean, and stir until it thickens. Mix in 3-4 tablespoons (44-59 mL) piloncillo until it dissolves, then remove from heat. Remove the cinnamon stick and vanilla bean seeds.[12]

- You can serve atole as is, or choose to add 1 cup (237 mL) of pureed fruit, such as pineapple or strawberries, to your dish before serving.
- This recipe yields 5-6 servings of atole.



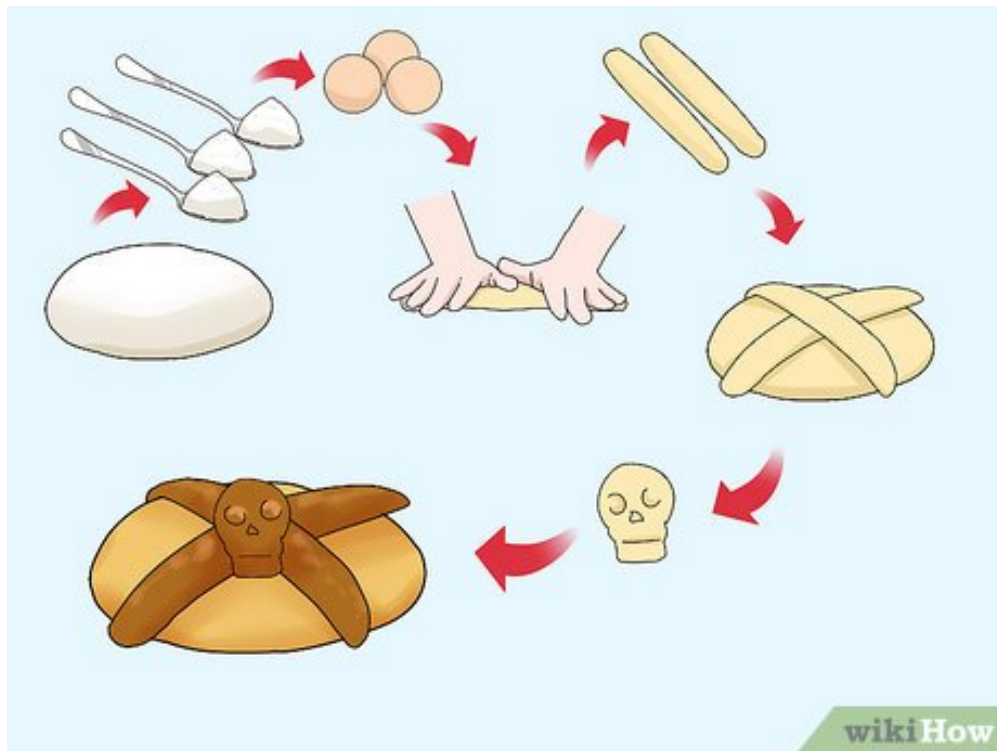
5 Mix the dough for pan de muerto. Pan de muerto ("bread of the dead") is a sweet egg bread made in various shapes. This is a traditional Día de Los Muertos dish and is a fun activity for the family to do together. To make it:^[13]

- Stir 1/2 packet (3.5 g) active-dry yeast and 1/4 cup (59 mL) warm water in a large bowl and allow it to rest for 10 minutes.
- Heat 1/4 cup (59 mL) La Lechera sweetened condensed milk and 1/4 cup (1/2 stick or 59 mL) unsalted butter over medium heat until the butter is melted.
- Add 1/2 teaspoon (2.46 mL) anise seeds, 1/4 teaspoon (1.23 mL) salt, and the La Lechera mixture to the yeast mixture and stir to combine.
- Add 2 large eggs and 1 cup (237 mL) flour and mix well with a wooden spoon.
- Add 1 1/4 cups (296 mL) flour, in small increments, stirring well until the dough comes together.



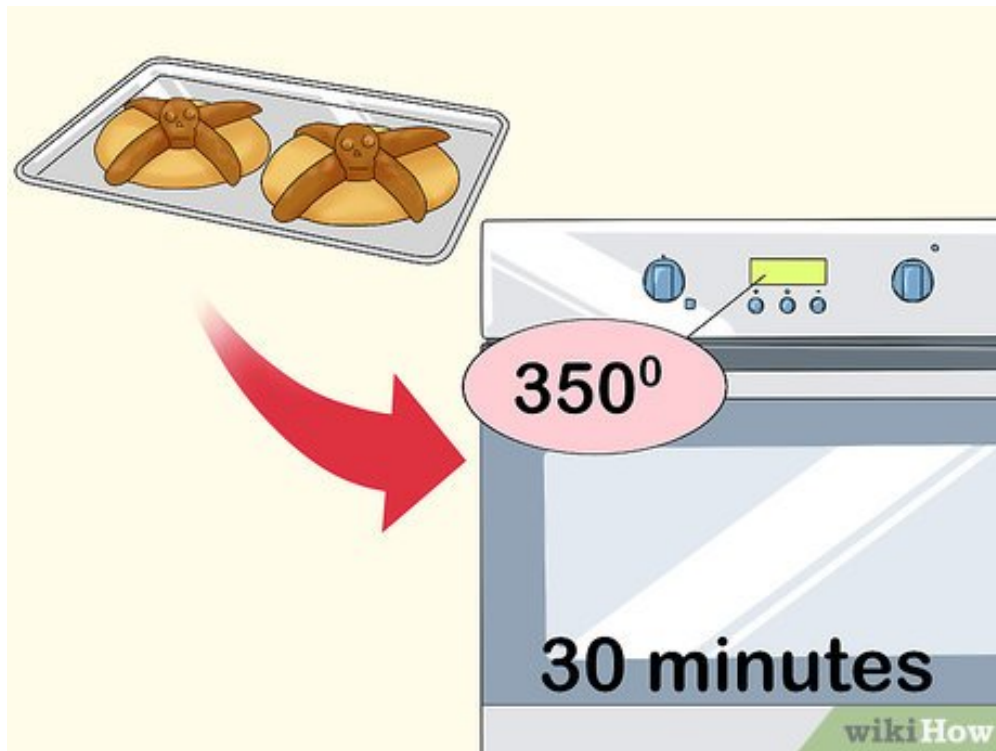
6 Knead the dough. Knead the dough gently for about 5 minutes or until the dough is smooth and elastic and no longer sticky.

- Place dough in a large greased bowl and cover it with greased plastic wrap.
- Let the dough rise in a warm place for 1 hour or until it has doubled in size.
- Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.



7 Shape the dough. Arrange the dough into a loaf or a shape such as a skull or an angel.^[14]

- To make a skull, remove 3 tablespoons (44.36 mL) of dough and form each into a ball. Shape the larger dough into a loaf.
- Roll 2 of the balls into long worm shapes to form the bones on top of the bread. Drape the 2 worms-shaped dough pieces on top of the loaf to form an "X."
- Form the remaining ball into a skeleton head and gently place it on top of the "X."



8 Bake your pan de muerto. Place the loaf on the prepared baking sheet and allow it to rise in warm place for about 30 minutes. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F (176.6 degrees C).

- Brush the top of the loaf with egg wash made from 1 egg yolk beaten with 2 teaspoons (9.86 mL) water.
- Bake for 20 minutes; then remove the loaf from the oven and brush again with egg wash. Sprinkle with 1 tablespoon (14.79 mL) granulated sugar.
- Return it to the oven and bake for about 20 minutes or until loaf is golden brown and sounds hollow when tapped. Serve warm or cool completely.



Community Q&A

Question

If a picture of your loved one is not available, is writing their name on a candle acceptable?



Community Answer

Yes, you can certainly write their name on a candle. You could also put one or more of their possessions on the altar or write them a note.

Helpful 39 Not Helpful 5

Question

What do I do while at my loved one's grave?



Community Answer

Sprinkle some sugar over the grave and pray. Your loved one should appear in your dreams.

Helpful 28 Not Helpful 6

Question

Who created the Day of the Dead?



Community Answer

It's not always possible to trace a holiday back to one creator. This tradition started in southern Mexico as a Pagan holiday/festival. It's been observed for centuries.

Helpful 47 Not Helpful 18

Question

Where can I place my altar?



Community Answer

It's easiest to just put it inside your house, preferably in the living room or where they used to sleep.

Helpful 25 Not Helpful 7

Question

What do they wear to celebrate?



Community Answer

Some people wear costumes, such as those of El Catrín or La Catrina (Dapper Death and his dame). This means a top hat, cane, and coattails for El Catrín, and a big floppy hat and Victorian-era dress for La Catrina. Others put on sugar skull makeup. It is also fine to wear your normal clothes.

Helpful 29 Not Helpful 6

Question

When making an altar for a deceased animal such as a dog, what kinds of things besides a picture should be put there?



Community Answer

You can put a favorite toy or their favorite kind of food. Or you could even put a blanket that the pet used to sleep with.

Helpful 27 Not Helpful 7

Question

What do people usually drink with pan de muerto?



Community Answer

Atole is a drink that is often made on Dia de los Muertos and served with pan de muerto. Alternatively, you can serve your favorite drink, or your loved ones' favorite drink.

Helpful 22 Not Helpful 7

Question

Do I have to be Mexican to celebrate the Day of the Dead?



Community Answer

Definitely not. The main purpose is to honor your ancestors, regardless of ethnicity.

Helpful 31 Not Helpful 8

Question

Can I celebrate without going to their grave?



Community Answer

Yes, there is not one particular way to celebrate this holiday. You can make an altar to celebrate their life at home or wherever you'd like.

Helpful 16 Not Helpful 3

Question

Can I pray for someone else, like my friend's grandma?



Community Answer

Of course. You can either pray with your friend or just make an altar at home. You can pray for anyone.

Helpful 21 Not Helpful 3

[See more answers](#)



Tips

- Watch Disney's *Coco* movie (2017), which provides an insight into this holiday.

References

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About This Article



Co-authored by:

Sophia Latorre

wikiHow Staff Writer

This article was co-authored by wikiHow staff writer, [Sophia Latorre](#). Sophia Latorre is a Content Manager on the wikiHow team. Before joining wikiHow, Sophia worked as a technical editor and was published in six International Energy Agency (IEA) Wind Annual Reports. Now, she writes, edits, and reviews articles for the wikiHow Content Team, working to make the content as helpful as possible for readers worldwide. Sophia holds a BA in English from Colorado State University. This article has been viewed 342,793 times.

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Co-authors: **88**

Updated: **October 29, 2021**

Views: **342,793**

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