

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

Today is All Saints Day, a day to honor all of the saints and martyrs. It falls between All Hallows Eve, or Halloween, and All Souls Day, where Christians pray for all souls in purgatory and all souls of their ancestors. In Mexico, it is celebrated as Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead. It is a three day holiday to honor the souls of those who have gone before.

Like many modern rituals, it is a mixture of old and new. When the Spaniards arrived in the New World, they found that the indigenous people had a celebration that seemed to mock death. For years the Spanish tried, unsuccessfully, to quash the celebration, but eventually it simply merged with the traditional Christian holy days of All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls day to become a mixture of Roman Catholic theology and Aztec ritual, called Dia de los Muertos.

Carved wooden skulls and skeletons are created, and people don skull masks and dance in honor of their ancestors. These carved wooden skulls are also placed on altars that are dedicated to the dead, and symbolize both death and rebirth. Today families build little altars in their homes to honor the family's dead, and surround the altars with candles, flowers, (traditionally marigolds), food, and pictures of the dead. Often people spend all night in the cemeteries where their loved ones are buried, cleaning the graves, putting fresh flowers and other decorations around the graves, and even holding an all-night picnic at the gravesite of their loved ones.

For children, not-so-spicy foods and candies are put on the graves, including pan de muerto, a sweet egg-bread flavored with cinnamon and anise. These breads are often baked in different shapes, such as human beings or rabbits. And skulls made of sugar are often placed on the altar or on the grave.

Pumpkin candy is also popular, made from huge green Mexican pumpkins grown expressly for the purpose. To make pumpkin candy here, cut a 4-5 pound pumpkin into 3-inch squares. Remove and discard the seeds and stringy bits. With a sharp knife, make a diamond pattern over the pieces.

In a large frying pan, put 4 cups of water, the juice of one orange, 8 cinnamon sticks, and two pounds of brown sugar. Bring this to a boil, stirring often, until the sugar is melted. Then add the first layer of pumpkin pieces into the pan, skin side up. Add the second layer, pulp side up. Repeat until all the pumpkin is used. Return to the boil, cover and simmer until the pumpkin pulp is soft and the pieces look golden brown. Let the pieces cool and serve with any leftover syrup poured over them.

For the adults, there are tamales, filled with things like red chiles and pork, or chicken, or shrimp, or sweetened beans. There is also pozole, which is a pork and hominy and green chile soup. And there are moles of different kinds, including mole verde, which is made with pumpkin seeds, cilantro, jalapeno peppers and tomatillos, and mole poblano, which is the traditional mole made with different kinds of dried peppers, raisins, cinnamon and unsweetened chocolate.

There is tinga poblana de pollo, which is a rich chicken stew with chipotle chiles and chorizo, garnished with avocado and crumbled fresh cheese. And there is usually some chalupa, which is a pork stew. To make chalupa, in a large pot combine 3 pounds of boneless pork shoulder or pork loin roast, plus 1 pound of pinto beans, 2 cloves of peeled and chopped garlic, 2 tablespoons of chili powder, 1 tablespoon of ground cumin, 1 teaspoon of dried oregano, 2 tablespoons of salt, and a 27-ounce can of chopped green chiles. Cover with water and cook over low heat for about 6 hours, until the beans are tender.

Remove the pork, remove any bone and fat, and shred the meat. Return the shredded meat to the pot and cook, uncovered, for about another hour, until thickened. Serve over tortilla chips, topped with grated cheese, tomatoes, avocados and salsa to taste. Leftovers go great in burritos. This is the perfect antidote to too much Halloween candy. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.