



OFF MENU

# Food and art for the soul

BY STEPH RODRIGUEZ / [stephr@newsreview.com](mailto:stephr@newsreview.com)

**The end of October isn't just for** Halloween and trick-or-treaters. It's the beginning of Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), a Mexican-born holiday that celebrates ancestry, heritage and remembrances of deceased loved ones.

On Nov. 1-2, graveyards are brought to life by families who visit, clean and decorate headstones. Many erect altars in their homes dedicated to grandmothers, children and uncles who've passed. They present ofrendas (offerings) such as loved ones' favorite meals, sweets, cigars or warm beverages to help guide them home.

At La Esperanza Bakery on Franklin Boulevard, George Placencia Jr. says his family's business, started in 1969 by his grandfather Salvador Placencia, is busy filling hundreds of orders of pan de muerto, a traditional sweet bread made in preparation for Dia de los Muertos. He stands in front of a colorful altar made by his sister inside the small bakery. It's decorated with candles, sugar skulls, flowers and photographs in remembrance of late Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla-Pérez.

"What she likes to do is to show the customers how pan de muerto is meant to be an offering," he says. "Some pan de muerto is also for parties. It's a unique bread and flavor and that's why people come seek it out."

The small, round sweet bread (\$1.30) is dusted in sugar and is decorated with crossbones made from the same dough. The pastry is soft and flaky, studded with anise seeds and a fragrant orange aroma. There's also a medium size with sesame seeds that resembles pretzel bread (\$10) and the larger pan that is shaped like a skull (\$30).

"It's just real neat to feel that people are attached to something," Placencia says. "It's also nice to feel a sense of community in a city like Sacramento in terms of Hispanic culture."

Across town at the Brickhouse Gallery & Art Complex in Oak Park, director and curator Barbara Range is finalizing the plans for this year's Dia de los Muertos festivities, which invite people from various backgrounds to participate in traditional dance, enjoy

an array of food and art vendors and learn more about Mexican culture.

"This is a celebration of being able to really know and understand that across cultures there's a lot more similarity than we really give credit to in our cultures, in our ancestors," Range says. "When you come, you're actually participating in a celebration of culture and rich heritage and rich history. It's here for you to learn from that."

Photographer Roberta Alvarado—whose exhibit, *Layers of Life in Death: Yucatan, Mexico*, hangs on the gallery's walls—captures the moments of men, women and children celebrating in cemeteries during her travels to the more rural villages of Mexico. It also reveals more about her past.

"I'm on a journey to discovering my ancestry as well, being Mexican American," she says. "I really wanted to capture the essence of the vibration of what was going on because it definitely had an intensity and then it did get lighter and festive later on. This is just a taste of the culture too, but maybe it will inspire curiosity." □

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