¡*Buen provecho*! Cultural Representations of Food for the Day of the Dead

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Tourists who visit Mexico are struck by a different attitude regarding death as conversations openly include this topic, often considered taboo in the United States, and one finds an abundance of literary and artistic representations of death that culminate in the celebration of the dead known popularly as *El Día de los Muertos*. A striking example of these cultural differences is found in Guanajuato, home of the famous Pantheon of Santa Paula, where some bodies are mummified through a natural process and have been put on display in the city's Mummy Museum. In fact, the typical souvenir to buy in Guanajuato is a *charamusca*, or twisted candy, which is often formed into the shapes of the mummies from the cemetery. We are reminded of the words of Octavio Paz from *El laberinto de la soledad*, "Para el habitante de Nueva York, París o Londres, la muerte es la palabra que jamás se pronuncia porque quema los labios. El mexicano, en cambio, la frecuenta, la burla, la acaricia, duerme con ella, la festeja, es uno de sus juguetes favoritos y su amor más permanente" (52).

The celebration in Mexico begins with preparations even before All Saints Day on November 1 and extends through November 2–All Soul's Day in the Catholic church calendar, also known as the Day of the Dead. It is a time for remembering and honoring the lives of deceased friends and family members, but it is done with elements of humor and fun. At this time of year, according to tradition, the spirits are invited to dine as they enjoy food, drink, and other worldly pleasures missed since their departure. It is believed that the souls of children arrive first so the food prepared for them on Oct 30 and 31 is "…simpler and less highly seasoned than for adults. Breads and water are always included, sweets of various kinds, fruits

and perhaps milk or soft drinks . . . and miniature breads and sugar animals" (Carmichael, Sayer 20). The food prepared for the adult deceased includes various breads and cookies as well as:

> . . . sugar figures, fresh and candied fruits, especially *dulce de calabaza* (candied pumpkin) and fruit pastes. Cooked dishes might include chicken or turkey in *mole*, and certainly various forms of *tamales*, the maize dough "cakes", with various fillings both savoury and sweet, which are wrapped in maize husks and steamed. These and other dishes such as *enchiladas* . . . and *chalupas* . . . The beverages offered in addition to water, range from coffee, chocolate and *atole*, (a drink of maize meal with various flavorings) to whatever form of alcohol the deceased favoured when alive: beer, tequila, mescal, or *aguardiente* (cane spirit). (Carmichael, Sayer 20-21)

To understand the cultural importance of these dishes and their role during the Day of the Dead, we need to examine the ways in which food is reflected in a variety of artistic works related to the celebration. In Mexican culture we find representations of the food and drink associated with the celebration of *El Día de los Muertos* in essays, murals, film, short-versed poems called *Calaveras*, ethnographies, and cookbooks. In these works there are specific references to *tamales*, *mole*, *pan de muerto* (the famous "Dead Bread"), and *calaveras de azucar* or "sugar skulls" that honor the dead and delight the living. Analysis of the traditional dishes and their cultural representations shows the continuation of practices and beliefs tracing back to pre-colonial civilizations and reveals contemporary social criticism of the realities of poverty, hunger, and deprivation.

Hugo Nutini, in his article published in the journal *Ethnology*, analyzes the facets of the cult of the dead that existed even before the arrival of the Spaniards and the Catholic All Saints'

and All Souls' Days that resulted in the syncretic celebration of *El Día de los Muertos*. These pre-Hispanic practices included offerings of food and *pulque*, which is fermented agave juice (64). Nutini explores records from the sixteenth century that detail dough made from amaranth called *tzoalli*, which was formed into effigies in the shapes of snakes and hills and used as offerings, and sweet *tamales* that were left on graves (62). Amaranth, ". . . a tall, leafy, red-flowered, small-grained plant that is still cultivated in some parts of Mexico . . . ", was called *bledos* in Spanish and *huauhtli* in the Aztec language of Nahuatl and had ". . . significant magical and symbolic meaning for pre-Hispanic peoples . . ." according to Nutini (74).

Ana M. de Benítez in her cookbook, *Pre-Hispanic Cooking*, cites the *Codex Florentino* with its descriptions of the turkeys, birds, corn, and *tortillas* that were prepared and offered to the gods by the indigenous cultures in Mexico (11). She then details the food prepared for the Day of the Dead in twentieth-century Mexico, principally in the central areas of Mexico such as Puebla, Oaxaca, and Michoacán (24), making it possible to see a connection from Pre-Hispanic practices to the present, "The glazed dishes are filled with turkey *mole*, pork or chicken, a dessert made of pumpkin, choke-cherries and guavas; toasted sesame seed is sprinkled over the dishes; a dessert called *punche*, which is a kind of pudding of ground maize of different colors, blue, purple and red; fruits of the season . . ." (25).

With the arrival of the Spaniards we see the destruction of the indigenous civilizations and the imposition of the Catholic religion as well as the Spanish language and customs. We remember that Europeans also incorporated food into their religious celebrations, indeed, Catholic holy days are often known as "feasts". As Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer point out in *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*, "The European customs of

making food-offerings and feasting with the dead found fertile ground in Mexico where superficially similar ceremonies were an important aspect of pre-Hispanic religious ritual" (15).

As Mexico begins its war of independence from Spain we begin to find references to the celebration of the Day of the Dead in cultural works and specific references to the traditional festival foods. Mexican writer and political journalist José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi was well known for his satirical literary attacks on educators, administrators, and the clergy. A fierce defender of the freedom of the press and founder of *El pensador mexicano* in 1812 (Yáñez xxxi), Lizardi used the newspaper to publish his criticisms of contemporary social and political problems (Yáñez xiii). In an article from November 1, 1814 titled "Breve sumario y causa formada a la muerte y al diablo, por la verdad y ante escribano público," Lizardi uses allegory to expose the moral frailties of human nature. On this particular Day of the Dead, the narrator describes a series of apparitions, beginning with Truth, who reveal to him their professions, their intentions, and frustrations with the contradictory and hypocritical nature of human beings.

Lizardi begins the story, "En una de estas divertidas (aunque debían ser tristes) noches de finados . . . " (45) so we know that the author has very intentionally chosen the celebration of the Day of the Dead as the backdrop for his story. It is interesting that he editorializes about Mexican society by commenting on the nature of the festival day that is fun but should be sad. In this short parenthetical observation, Lizardi has summarized the seemingly contradictory nature of *El Día de los Muertos*: the death of a loved one is sad, but the celebration of the memory of their life is intended to be happily enjoyed.

Later on in Lizardi's work, the narrator will depict an accident in which the table of a vendor is accidentally knocked over and the typical candies sold on the Day of the Dead fall to the ground:

> Muertos, calaveras, carneros, muñecos y toda gente de alfeñique fue a tierra mal de su grado y del de la pobre dulcera que se daba a Barrabás, maldiciendo su destino y sin conocer entre la turbamulta al autor de semejante fechoría. Recogía la infeliz las reliquias de su malhadada hacienda a toda prisa porque ya venía una tropa de muchachos para ahorrarla del trabajo, y entre sus lágrimas y quejas decía: –Mal haya el demonio: sólo el diablo es capaz de haberme hecho semejante perjuicio . . . . (Lizardi 51-52)

The *alfeñique*, or sugar paste, mentioned by Lizardi is used to make sugar skulls or *calaveras* that are typical for the Day of the Dead often with the buyer or receiver's name on a piece of foil attached to the forehead. We note the candy seller's frustration after having her goods knocked to the ground but also her immediate realization that she needs to quickly pick up the sweets or a group of children will beat her to the task! The mention by Lizardi of the typical sugar paste figures shows the continuation of some food items from the early 1800s that are still part of the Day of the Dead celebration today. At the same time, they play a key role in reflecting the universally human tendency to blame misfortune on others–in this case, the Devil.

During the celebration of *El Día de los Muertos*, besides the *calavera de azúcar*, there is another form of "calavera" typical in Mexico– a literary one. As explained by Stanley Brandes in his article "Calaveras: Literary Humor in Mexico's Day of the Dead", "The literary *calavera* is always written in rhymed verse and often organized into quatrains. Though *calaveras* nowadays are generally short–four to twelve lines at most–they can vary from simple couplets to epics stretching several pages in length" (223-224).

According to Edward Larocque Tinker, the literary *calaveras* serve, ". . . to remind us in a good-humored way that we are all mortal, and to poke fun at friends and attack public

officials" (20). They are usually published in newspapers in Mexico at the time of preparations and celebrations of *El Día de los Muertos* and tend to be anonymous, giving ". . . the impression that the authors of these mocking verses express generally held opinions. The verses come to be perceived as the voice of the people" (Brandes 224). This voice is often critical of politicians and ruling elite for abusing power as is the case of an archbishop in a *calavera* who became food for worms after a life of hypocrisy. Brandes' comments on the paradoxical nature of a celebration are rooted in religious beliefs that have created a literary genre which allows for criticism of clergy: "The Day of the Dead awakens contradictory emotions and allows them to flourish simultaneously" (232).

A lengthy *calavera* published by Antonio Vanegas Arroyo in 1906 (rpt. Tinker) called "Gran baile de calaveras" gives us a good example of this literary genre and includes references to food.

Llegó la gran ocasión
De divertirse de veras,
Van a hacer las calaveras
Su fiesta en el Panteón . . .

Y en ella tomarán parte
Los más encumbrados muertos,
La mesa, de mil cubiertos,
Será servida con arte.

En ella se ofrecerán
Manjares extraordinarios,
Gusanos en guisos varios . . . . (rpt. Tinker)

In this *calavera*, the skeletons are going to have a great celebration in the Pantheon that will be attended by the most exhalted dead. The table with its settings for 1000 will be served "con arte" –an expression that could have a double meaning as the act of serving the food will be done elegantly, and, at the same, the food that is served itself is a work of art. The splendor of the plans for the great party where extraordinary delicacies will be served makes for a humorous contrast with the actual dinner that includes worms served in various kinds of stews. The theme of this *calavera* is that death is the great equalizer, and so we find that the "Grand Dance of the Skulls" is attended by all professions and all facets of society: "Será una gran igualdad / Que nivele grande y chico, / No habrá ni pobre [ni] rico / En aquella sociedad" (rpt. Tinker)

The humor, irony, criticism and social commentary found in the literary *calaveras* is represented visually in the works by José Guadalupe Posada. Also in his work we will see the incorporation of food and traditions related to the Day of the Dead. For example, the custom of carrying the food to the graves is mimicked by Posada in "The Grand Banquet of the Skeletons" (Carmichael, Sayer 44). In this work we see the skeletons gathered in the cemetery enjoying the food and drink that has been left for them. Interestingly, we note that concerns for social class seem to continue even into death as the upper-class skeletons wear tuxedos and top hats while drinking from dainty wine classes, and the lower class dead wear simple peasant clothes and drink from large classes poured from a rudimentary jug. According to Stanley Brandes in *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead*:

> The Day of the Dead, by Posada's time, was a well-entrenched Mexican tradition. Artistically, as well, the sugar candies in the form of dead people and caskets and related mortuary imagery–had been a part of the popular celebration of the Day of the Dead for generations. It is not surprising, then, that Posada's satirical imagery,

> itself the immediate product of crucial developments in Mexico's political history and in the evolution of printing, should have been enthusiastically received in its day. (63)

Possibly the most famous image by José Guadalupe Posada that is connected to *El Día de los Muertos* is of "La Catrina,"

> . . . the servant girl in the fashionable dress favoured by her mistresses, the grand ladies of the "Porfiriato". The broad-brimmed and befeathered hat atop the skull head of "La Catrina" is enough to evoke this whole tradition of satire and the wry vision of the world and its follies so brilliantly expressed by Posada. (Carmichael, Sayer 59)

Diego Rivera will later incorporate "La Catrina" in his 1947 mural *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*, painting her as a female skeleton with a feathered snake around her neck and standing next to José Guadalupe Posada. Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo, also took inspiration from the food prepared for the celebration of *El Día de los Muertos*. In a photo by Juan Guzmán, we see Frida Kahlo in a hospital bed holding a sugar skull with her name written on it (Herrera illus. 76). According to Herrera in *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, she also was inspired by the art of Posada. Discussing a work by Kahlo, Hayden writes:

> . . . the principal source for *A Few Small Nips* is certainly the satiric graphics of José Guadalupe Posada (1851-1913), whose chapbook and song illustrations, penny broadsides showing sensational horror scenes . . . and *calavera* (skeleton) prints, in which skeletons act out the foibles of human life, Frida adored . . . Even at their most violent, Posada's prints contain an element of humor that undoubtedly appealed to Frida. (188)

In *Frida's Fiestas: Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo*, Guadalupe Rivera, daughter of Diego Rivera, recalls how *El Día de los Muertos* was celebrated in the *Casa Azul*. The author's stepmother, Frida Kahlo, went to great lengths to make sure all the details were carried out appropriately in accordance with regional Mexican traditions and that the individual preferences of the living and deceased members of her family being honored. Rivera describes the table that was decorated first on November 1 for the dead children of the family. A sweet cornmeal beverage called *atole* was served in mugs and there were, ". . . plates of beans and mildly seasoned food, fruit and sweets. Frida provided dessert: sugar paste candies, pumpkin smothered in traditional brown sugar syrup, and sugar skulls with the names of the family dead written on their heads in sugar letters" (80). Rivera also describes the traditional foods that were served in their home:

> Breakfast consisted of *atole* and chocolate, Dead Man's bread, cookies in the shape of little bones, beans, *tortillas* and *pasilla* chile sauce, along with the brown corn *tlacoyos* that Matilde Kahlo [Frida Kahlo's mother] had so enjoyed. The midday meal consisted of yellow and red moles, Oaxacan beef jerky, red rice with dried shrimp, chicken sautéed in *chile pipián*, pumpkin in syrup, sweet potatoes in *sancocho*, *tamales* in plantain leaves, white *atole* and fresh fruit. (81)

Transitioning from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, we find a collection of short stories written by contemporary authors in an anthology called *Día de muertos* published in 2001 that includes several works that incorporate the food from the celebration with interesting results. In the first story, "Los santos inocentes" by Eduardo Antonio Parra, the main character Carmen Guerrero finds herself in a cemetery on the Day of the Dead watching from a distance as the widow and the children of her deceased lover, Gabriel Talavera, prepare his tomb and then sit

down to eat there. The celebration is interrupted and eventually abandoned by everyone except Carmen due to a torrential downpour that eventually ruins all the food:

> Los platos de carne asada, barbacoa, riñonadas de cabrito y mole pronto se llenaron de un caldo grasoso. El pan de muerto y las tortillas se reblandecieron hasta quedar hechos una sopa. Nada más las botellas seguían en su sitio, inalterables, en espera de la presencia de aquellos a quienes habían sido ofrendadas. (17)

The description of a day in the cemetery that was like a picnic in the park turns into criticism and despair as the author imagines the voices of the souls lamenting the change in the weather on their one day to enjoy worldly pleasures:

> Dios está enojado con nosotros, no nos ama, le parece poco el infierno al que nos condenó para ser semejantes a los topos y a las lagartijas, nos obliga a soportar la soledad, el abandono, la negrura reseca de un sepulcro estrecho durante todo el año entero esperando esta noche: el banquete preparado con devoción, el vino que alivia la ansiedad del olvido, la fiesta capaz de devolvernos la alegría . . . ya se marchan, la tormenta acalló la música, los cantos, los rezos, se acabaron los consuelos, queda sólo la esperanza de salir a llenarnos de placer, mas con el aguacero es difícil no pensar que nos disolveremos en la lluvia como calaveras de azúcar . . . . (17-18)

Like the short story by Parra, “Novia de azúcar” by Ana García Bergua in the same *Día de muertos* anthology contains important references to food but with an interesting twist–the *ofrenda* consists of candles, large roses, something resembling a wedding cake, and a bottle of champagne “. . . en vez del clásico tequila” (123). The neighbors remark that it all looks like the

preparations for a wedding instead of an altar. Nonetheless, the deceased Rosenda returns from the dead to devour the wedding cake that was left for her and spends the night in conversation with the central character before being locked away in the closet, where she turns into a sugar skull with the name Rosenda written on it (124). The story leaves us with more questions than answers: Who was Rosenda? Why did the main character prepare a wedding reception for her on *El Día de los Muertos* instead of the typical *ofrenda*? And, why did she lock Rosenda up at the end of the story thus forcing her to turn into a sugar skull? Perhaps the author wishes to suggest that any attempts to subvert the traditional elements of the Day of the Dead are useless and that tradition, in the end, will prevail.

The 1960 movie *Macario* by Mexican director Roberto Gavaldón was based on the short story by European-born Bruno Traven. It provides a fascinating revelation of human nature in the context of the Mexican celebration of *El Día de los Muertos*. Macario, the poor and perpetually-starving woodcutter, had but one dream–to eat a whole turkey by himself without being seen by his children (1). The story takes place on the Day of the Dead when the price of wood goes up to three *reales* as the candle makers and bakers need to fire up their ovens to make ". . . toda clase de panes de muerto y calaveras de azúcar…" (3). After his wife steals a turkey for him, he sets out for the forest to enjoy it for himself where he is visited by the Devil, God, and Death. Interestingly, he refuses to share with everyone except Death–a decision that will bring him short-term rewards but eventual misfortune.

In the film version, we see Macario's wife preparing a very simple altar for their home with just the meager scraps she can find there without adding any additional expense. When the children see an *ofrenda* prepared for the deceased of a wealthy family in town, she explains to them that it is strictly off-limits because that banquet is only for the dead. In a sad but humorous

comment on hunger and poverty, one of her sons quips that he cannot wait to die so that he can eat as splendidly as the dead do.

Another Mexican movie that takes place on the Day of the Dead is *Maclovia*. In this film from 1948 written and directed by Emilio Fernández and set in 1914 on the island of Janitzio, we see the struggle between the indigenous practices and laws and the encroaching influence of the federal government of Mexico. The film depicts the effects of poverty and lack of education that inhibit the love affair between a beautiful young woman and a poor fisher. The movie culminates as a parade of indigenous women marches ceremoniously toward the cemetery carrying flower-covered decorations in their right hands and plates of food in their left. The parade, the flowers, and the food help the film to further emphasize the central themes of the continuity of old ways in contrast with new ideas.

The artistic depictions analyzed in this paper show how food reflects underlying concerns of hunger, poverty, corruption, and human frailty in Mexico. We have seen how the candy and sweets appealing to children give adults a way to introduce them to the concepts of death in a way that is not threatening or scary like the pranks, costumes, and haunted houses of Halloween. Furthermore, the food prepared for *El Día de los Muertos* helps to connect us with the deceased as we remember the dishes that they enjoyed and the care in which they were prepared. Roland Barthes in "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" states that food allows people ". . . to partake each day of the national past . . . food frequently carries notions of representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society…" (Counihan and Van Esterik 32)

In the busy lives we all lead, the celebration of *El Día de los Muertos* gives us a chance to put some time aside to reflect on the past lives of those we loved and respected in a positive way-to remember the things they liked to do, the food and drink they liked most, and the importance

our loved ones had and whose memory continues to have in our everyday lives. Perhaps this explains the appeal that celebrating the Day of the Dead has had recently in the United States. This weekend we celebrated our 12th annual Day of the Dead in Nashville, Tennessee at Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art. Our event is a celebration of Hispanic culture that includes folkloric dancing, salsa music, a variety of arts and crafts related to the Day of the Dead and food. A local baker makes *pan de muerto* that is sold in the street fair and is also a big part of the event. Even as the Day of the Dead festivities have evolved over the years and made their way to Tennessee, the traditional food has remained an integral part of the celebration to nourish the living and pay tribute to the deceased friends and loved ones whose memories are celebrated on this day.

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