

Day of the Dead calls for pan de muerto. Watch how one bakery makes it.



Mini pan de muerto rolls, just baked, and large pan de muerto loaves rise on racks inside La Estrella Bakery in Tucson, Ariz. The bakery makes four sizes of the sweet bread, a popular offering for Día de los Muertos. (Photos by Cassidy Araiza for The Washington Post)

By [G. Daniela Galarza](#)

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TUCSON — Día de los Muertos, the festival that honors the dead, falls on Nov. 1 and 2 every year and is celebrated in Mexico and throughout Latin America. This year, it also marks the 35th anniversary of La Estrella Bakery, where the Franco family has been baking pan de muerto — sweet, round loaves full of symbolism — for Día de los Muertos since 1985.

“We actually opened on Oct. 31, 1985, just in time for Día de los Muertos,” says Erica Franco. Her parents, Marta and Antonio Franco, founded the bakery after immigrating to Tucson from central Mexico in the 1970s. Today, La Estrella operates three locations. Marta, Antonio and Jose Franco (Antonio’s brother) are on-site every day. Marta and Antonio’s children help manage the business, too: Jorge is the head baker, and Erica Franco, Sandra Franco and Isabel Montañó manage the books, special orders, wholesale deliveries and partnerships with local schools and universities.

When covid-19 hit, the bakery — which makes dozens of types of breads, pastries and cookies in addition to flour tortillas and tamales — turned into a makeshift community center. “We closed for one day, just to sort of figure out what we were going to do,” Erica Franco says, “but when we reopened the next day, we had a line out the door. People wanted to check on us, to check on their neighbors, and they just wanted their bread.” The lines can be especially long starting in mid-October through mid-November, when La Estrella starts selling its locally famous pan de muerto.

The bread’s base is soft and rich, with lots of eggs, butter, sugar, cinnamon and orange zest. “Traditionally, anise is used to flavor the bread, because it’s said to have a cleansing scent, to ward off evil spirits,” Erica Franco says, “but our customers prefer the orange and cinnamon flavors that we use.”

After the dough is mixed and kneaded, it gets a long rise. Then, it gets shaped into rounds. La Estrella makes four sizes of pan de muerto: mini, or about the size of a baseball; individual, or the size of the bakery’s beloved conchas — about twice the size of a mini; medium, or roughly the size of an acorn squash; and large, which is wider than a dinner plate. Each round is decorated with ropes of dough that have been stretched and indented to approximate the shape of bumpy bones.

“The breads usually have five ‘bones,’ which were meant to represent the five fingers of the hand of the dead,” Erica Franco explains, “but our big loaves have more, because people love how crunchy these pieces of dough get once they’re baked. They like to pick them off and dip them in their coffee in the mornings,” she says with a chuckle. After the dough bones are wrapped across the top of each round, the loaves are allowed to rise again.

Before they’re baked, some of the loaves get a dusting of sesame seeds, a request from customers who don’t want such sweet bread.

After they’re baked, the loaves without sesame seeds get a generous brushing of syrup made from local honey and cinnamon sticks, which slowly soaks into the center of each loaf, keeping it moist. The syrup also acts as a glue for colored sugars, which are mixed at the bakery and sprinkled on top in various patterns.

“We make at least 100 mini loaves each day during pan de muerto season, and dozens of the big ones,” Erica Franco says, recommending that people call to place special orders in advance. In addition to the round pan de muerto, La Estrella’s bakers also shape skulls and crosses out of the same dough, decorating them with faces or small dough shapes. When a figure is decorated with red or pink frosting or sugar, it symbolizes a dead adult relative; the color white, an emblem of innocence, symbolizes a deceased child.

Latin American communities across the country were hit especially hard by covid-19 this past year. “Late last year and early this year, almost every day, we had customers coming in to tell us, ‘Just so you know, my father, my aunt, my sister ... won’t be coming in anymore. They passed,’” Sandra Franco says.

Marta Franco lost her father, Luis Ramirez, to covid-19 this year. To honor him, the Francos will place his photo on the altar they built at their newest location, on Grand Avenue. It’s decorated with cempasúchil, or marigolds, to represent the fragility of life, and has an area for customers to pin photos of their loved ones. “It’s a bittersweet time,” Sandra Franco says, “because it seems like we’ve all lost someone. But our community is still here, stronger than ever.”

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