TASTE & REMEMBRANCE

Food traditions and cultural practice in end of life
This booklet is part of the Southwest Folklife Alliance’s Continuum Program – an ethnographic documentation of expressive practices in Southern Arizona communities as they relate to end of life.

Research was conducted by a cohort of citizen folklorists who looked into everyday life in local multicultural communities during 2014-2015. All the information shared here came from local narrators in the Tucson area. This booklet outlines the role of food traditions in ritual aspects of mourning and death.

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ABOUT SOUTHWEST FOLKLIFE ALLIANCE
The Southwest Folklife Alliance (SFA) is an affiliate non-profit organization of the University of Arizona’s College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The SFA is housed in the College’s Southwest Center, and the Public Folklorist at the Center serves as the SFA Executive Director. Our programs serve communities throughout the Border region corridor to maintain and preserve folklife practices in the southwest, support the economic development of heritage and folk artists and artisans, and build awareness of diverse folk and heritage practices.

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Over centuries, food has been a key identifier in end-of-life ceremony. Strong bonds between sweets and death are apparent in most cultures, beginning in ancient times with pots of honey left in tombs as assurance of good fortune in the afterlife. The dead were prepared for their journey, and the living, after traveling great distance to mourn a deceased relative, also were nourished.

Medieval times continued the connection of sugar to death ritual, with corpse and arvel cakes\(^1\) distributed throughout Europe. The Victorian era took symbolism a step further, creating funeral candy – hard sugar confection in ornate wrappers meant to imitate corpses in shrouds\(^2\). Although funeral candy practice disappeared after World War One sugar rationing, sweet remembrances continue in contemporary local customs – from the decorated Mexican sugar skulls\(^3\) to bone-shaped death cakes, including Italian fave dei morti cookies\(^4\).

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**DEATH’S DEEP DISHES**

**SWEET SYMBOLISM**

When does a meal become a spectrum of culture?
Perhaps no more so than in end of life.
In moments of transition, food acquires a contextual layering of both practical and cultural use.
Today, all senses become collaborators in the ritual experience of funeral food. For example, the symbolic *pan de muerto* bread becomes art with cultural meaning, allowing taste and decoration to trigger memories, while the preparation provides comfort for the bereaved.

Throughout Southern Arizona, the cultural heritage behind ceremonial dishes served during funerals and periods of mourning is reinforced, with diverse religious and ethnic traditions inspiring us to cook and nourish the soul with symbolic foods at the heart of local rituals:

> So the halvah for Iranians is constant, while for Romanians it is koliva and colaci; for Lutherans and Mormons-- funeral potatoes; for Ashkenazi Jews -- the dairy meal of lox and bagels or noodle kugel; for Mexicans-- the pan de muerto; and for Brazilians --the bolinhos de bacalhau (codfish balls).  

1 Notes: Funeral tradition of eating cakes symbolically mirrored the act of eating the deceased: historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews153.shtml. An 11th century custom of Arvel cakes, given to heirs and mourners with ale at funeral festivals is mentioned in Transactions, Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archeological Society, 1881, editor: Ferguson, Richard Saul


3 Medrano, Lourdes, Edible Baja Arizona: ediblebajaarizona.com/death-becomes-us

4 Notes: This traditional sugar cookie with crushed sweet almonds is shaped like a broad bean, which in superstition was said to house souls of the dead; it is still baked in some Tucson Italian kitchens. Southern Italians usually add brandy or grappa liqueur to the dough mixture.

5 Notes: Local bakeries include La Estrella, 5266 S. 12th Ave. 520.741.0656 and El Rio Bakery, 901 N. Grande Ave. 520.624.4996

These food narratives reveal the social character of local communities, where food offerings are gestures of respect and symbolically rich in life-after-death nourishment, for both the deceased and the mourners. In Jewish communities, the Shiva baskets provide gestures of condolence by the community to families in mourning. In African-American families, the potlucks held on the anniversary of a loved one’s passing reaffirm kinship and honor the deceased.

Other traditional food rituals practiced by members of the community include:

--- Romanian/Eastern Orthodox ---

From MS, who was born in Romania and moved to Tucson about 10 years ago:

*MS flew to Romania to be with her (mother) during her last days... Her mother let go on her own terms. She instructed MS before she died, “Don’t cry for me, have a glass of wine and remember the good times.”*

*The funeral was held ... in the funeral home and presided over by an Eastern Orthodox priest... A ceremonial round loaf called koliva is blessed by the priest and shared with everyone present... There are many versions of koliva in Greece, Bulgaria, the Balkan countries, Romania, Russia, and among Christians in the Middle East where it is used as an offering on ceremonial occasions including funerals. Recipes vary but the primary ingredients are wheat kernels, which are boiled until soft and then sweetened with honey or sugar. Koliva also contains some or all of the following: sesame seeds, almonds, ground walnuts, cinnamon, sugar, pomegranate seeds, raisins, anise and parsley. Romanians decorate the Koliva with crosses of cocoa, chocolate or candy.*

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10 Ibid., p. 13
11 Ibid., p. 19
Before the funeral, the family prepares a gift package of colaci (a sweet-bread shaped into a circle) as well as the deceased’s favorite foods. After the funeral these packages are distributed to all the mourners, the workers in the cemetery, gypsies and other needy people who come to the cemetery to receive the free food. The offering is made with a statement, “To be well received and to pave the way for the deceased.” MS packed a scoop of koliva, a piece of colaci, and an assortment of her mother’s favorite foods like chocolate, a packet of coffee, and a can of sardines into a paper sack for distribution after the funeral.

MH described the funeral for her mother-in-law, who had converted to Mormonism 10 years before her death... After the service the members of the church had organized a typical Mormon buffet table (very similar to the Lutheran version) for the mourners. It included ham, funeral potatoes, Jell-o fruit salads, crescent rolls, cake, pie and punch, but no coffee.

Funeral food figures prominently in Mormon culture, where baking simple foods with mainstay ingredients is part of the Mormon tradition of food and recipe sharing, ladies fellowship and charity. The hearty “funeral potato” recipe exemplifies popular Mormon cooking:
Bake and then dice six russet potatoes
Add potatoes to a creamy mixture of one-half cup of milk, one cup sour cream, two cups shredded cheddar cheese, half-stick butter, grated onions and one can of cream of mushroom soup
Place in a casserole dish topped with crushed corn flakes and dabs of butter. Bake at 375 degrees for at least 30 minutes, and until top is browned.

According to the Mormon cookbook writer and home economist “Sister” Winnifred C. Jardine, recipes like these emerged from pioneer women who made do with staples and meager provisions. They then were used as side dishes in traditional post-funeral fellowship dinners, often prepared by church groups such as the LDS auxiliary Relief Society. The Digital Public Library shows the image of funeral potatoes used as souvenir pin for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games held in Utah.

Fasting

Sometimes, the absence of food is the critical cultural tradition, as in the Christian observation of Good Friday fasting and the Jewish Yom Kippur day of fast. A local refugee family provides another example:
From CT, a Bhutanese and Nepali refugee now residing in Tucson:

Following the death of a loved one, an official mourning period begins, usually lasting 13 days. No one who is mourning will eat salt, onion, garlic, or meat, or consume alcohol. They will only eat one simple meal per day, consisting of rice, fruit, and other simple foods. For the 13 days, the priest will be present to conduct rituals including reciting important words and comforting the family. Traditionally, when one’s mother passes away, her adult children are not to consume milk for a period of 45 days to one year.

Similarly, when one’s father passes away, his adult children are not to consume yogurt for 45 days to one year. Recently, these time frames have been dramatically decreased. In some cases, when a parent dies, children will not consume meat for one year, but this is becoming less and less common, CT explains, as people become “more modern.”

CT explains that a puja is a religious celebration with fasting to remember gods and goddesses at certain times during the year. Similarly, on the anniversary of one’s parent’s death, a Memorial Day is honored, including a one-day fast, each year for the rest of the child’s life. This is a good thing, because it gathers the entire family together.

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12 Holbrook, Kate, “Religion in a Recipe,” Journal of Mormon History, Volume 38, No. 2, Spring 2012, digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1069&context=mormonhistory
13 Digital Public Library of America, dp.la/
Cemeteries remain the most timeless center of ancestral recollection and feasting. Roman families honored ancestors during an annual graveside Parentalia festival, sharing wine and cakes. The death rites of Pagan cults were the precursor to Christian All Souls feasting and graveyard processions, which occurred in Europe in the Middle Ages. Each country baked distinctive and braided All Souls spirit breads, including the German Seelen-brot. The breads then were distributed throughout the community and graveside in annual ceremonies.

In Japan, at midsummer Obon Buddhist festivals, eggplants and cucumbers are still shaped into horses and cows, and placed by graves, allowing deceased relatives to be transported to and from the afterlife. In Tucson, Obon festival traditions are honored by Odaiko Sonora and the All Souls Procession, as well as other local organizations.

Locally, the most iconic cemetery celebrations occur during Dia de los Muertos, when indigenous beliefs meld with Spanish and Christian All Souls practices in personalized graveside rituals. Participants clean and decorate graves, bringing favorite foods and drinks to best express the personality of the deceased. Although the festival is now broadly interpreted throughout popular culture, families of Mexico, Southern Arizona, and the Yaqui and Tohono O’odham nations, continue to travel back to ancestral gravesites in authentic tradition, with unique food offerings, including chocolate, that honors the dead while reinforcing heritage and community ties.

Dia de los Muertos rituals carry through into local homes, where families prepare memorial meals and centerpiece ofrendas. One local annual commemoration is documented in these words:
“...There were more than 100 people in attendance and the ofrenda altar decorated with fragrant marigolds, candles, mirrors, sugar skulls, with pan de muerto set in the entry way. There was space on the altar for guests to place their offering of food and objects that their departed relative or friend would have enjoyed in life. There were also photos of the departed next to the offering including a television, books, chocolates, a jar of coffee, donuts, bottles of wine, a pipe, a toy truck, etc. In the invitation, C explained, “it is believed that the spirits consume the essence and the aroma of the foods that are offered. When the spirits depart, the living consume the food and share it with their family, friends, and neighbors.” As you walked into the house, there was the fragrant smell of Mexican dishes. An extensive buffet of Mexican food including tacos, moles, arroz con pollo, refried beans, corn and tomatoes, varieties of squash with pieces of pork, chorizo...pan de muerto and stacks of tortillas were arranged on colorful cloths. ...”

16 Weiser, Francis X., “Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs” (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952)
17 Notes: Obon dance is a traditional part of Odaiko Sonora and its history with All Souls Procession. The Obon Restaurant, Downtown Tucson, was named in honor of the Festival’s celebration of ancestors and family.
Across so many cultures, we share food to fill voids caused by loss. We gather in fellowship – whether it is around kitchen tables or community halls – to help confront inevitable cycles of life and death. We bake traditional comfort foods, and then adorn them with symbolic decoration to help stir memories.

As we honor our departed, food unifies and soothes our grief. Most importantly, food sustains...with life and cultural tradition affirmed in every bite.

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EAT, REMEMBER, HEAL

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I pray that death may strike me
In the middle of a large meal.
I wish to be buried under the tablecloth
Between four large dishes…

- Marc-Antoine Désaugiers, French composer (1772-1827)
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Author Natalie Brown, Continuum Journal, memorial textile, page 7

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Author Thelmadatter, November 2, 2009, Woman by grave during the Alumbrada portion of Day of the Dead in San Andres Mixquic, Mexico City, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alumbrada
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Author Annabelle Orozco, October 20, 2013, flickr.com/photos/annabelleorozco/10514385566

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Author Deror avi, June 10, 2010, Halva in Mahne Yehuda market, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Halva_IMG_2410.JPG

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en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_service_(Orthodox)#/media/File:Koljivo_from_wheat.jpg

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Author Nicubunu, June 22, 2013, Romanian coliva used as part of a religious ceremony at a Christian Orthodox church, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coliva_in_biserica_02.jpg

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View of front portion of cemetery from roof of the San Andres Apostol Church in San Andres Mixquic during Day of the Dead, November 2, 2009, author Thelmadatter commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alumbrada9Mixquic.JPG

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Author Zohreh Saunders, Table of food, Continuum Journal, page 10

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Author Sveriges Asatrosamfund (The Swedish Asatru Society), April 4, 2010, Cult images and votive offerings at the Spring Blót held at Kungshögarna at Gamla Uppsala, Uppland, Sweden. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vårblot_2010_offergåvor.jpg