

Afterlife Savers

Just because a loved one has passed on doesn't mean they're not hungry—and other lessons learned while foraging for Day of the Dead mementoes in Tucson, Arizona

WHATEVER YOUR VIEWS on the great beyond, it's difficult to miss *El Día de Los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead), the annual Latin American celebration of loved ones who have passed. Friends and families congregate at gravesites and home altars at the beginning of November to pay homage with colourful decorations and traditional offerings, many of them aromatic—the idea being smells resonate in the spirit world because they're also invisible. Beyond the marigolds, candles and copal incense, *El Día* is like most communal gatherings: all about the food. And offerings are as varied as the culinary favourites of the deceased. It's more harvest than Halloween, and few places celebrate it with more fervour than Tucson.

ALCOHOL

A glass of water is usually part of the offering, but any journey from the netherworld to the real deal deserves a stiff drink. While tequila or mezcal are natural choices, a rarity like Hacienda De Chihuahua Sotol Añejo is worth seeking out. Sotol comes from a particular species of low-yielding agave plant that grows in the Chihuahuan desert. The straw-coloured añejo is aged in French white oak for two years and fermented in champagne yeast, producing a mellow flavour with vanilla, citrus and herbal notes. Find it at **The RumRunner** (3131 E. 1st St.; 520-326-0121; rumrunner-tucson.com), an upscale, well-curated emporium for craft beer, fine wine and a kaleidoscope of exotic spirits, with an artisanal market and dining room.



PAN DE MUERTO

Since the ritual is a native Mexican riff on All Saints' Day, bread is a staple. Traditionally, *pan de muerto* is heavy on the egg, slightly sweet and often flavoured with anise seed. Occasionally, there's a hint of lemon, orange, cinnamon or vanilla, but regional nods usually manifest in the lively shape of the loaves: skeletons, skulls, animals or embellished circles. **La Estrella Bakery Inc.** (5266 S. 12th Ave.; 520-741-0656; laestrellabakeryinc.com) handcrafts gorgeous versions in three sizes (US\$5, \$9, \$13), and also adds skull-shaped sugar cookies to its daily output of fresh pastries and flour tortillas.

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EAT HERE

MOLE

Given the pageantry of the Day of the Dead, elaborate recipes from other special occasions are often whipped up. For anyone with Mexican roots, that means a dish involving mole—the complex, slow-cooked sauce made with dried chilies, spices, herbs and nuts (for starters). Around Tucson, and perhaps the entire American Southwest, the buck stops with Suzana Davila, an understated culinary hero with more than two dozen mole recipes in her repertoire. The black-board menu at her acclaimed **Cafe Poca Cosa** (110 E. Pennington St.; 520-622-6400; cafepocacosatucson.com) changes twice a day, every day, but includes offbeat takes on gourmet Mexican food like tamales, grilled meats and stuffed chilies.





SUGAR SKULLS

To be fair, sugar skulls aren't really edible in the same way as, say, Easter bunnies. But you *could* eat one. Made with granulated or powdered sugar and water, they're hardened one of two ways: either using meringue powder (dried egg whites, starch and vanilla), or via expert boiling methods that are guarded like family heirlooms. Cast in clay moulds and adorned with coloured icing, glitter and tinfoil, the sugar skull gives a warm, jovial welcome to returning spirits. Find them life-sized (\$18) to thimble-small (\$4) at **iAqui Está!** (204 S. Park Ave.; 520-798-3605), along with other imported Mexican treasures, plus local art and furniture.

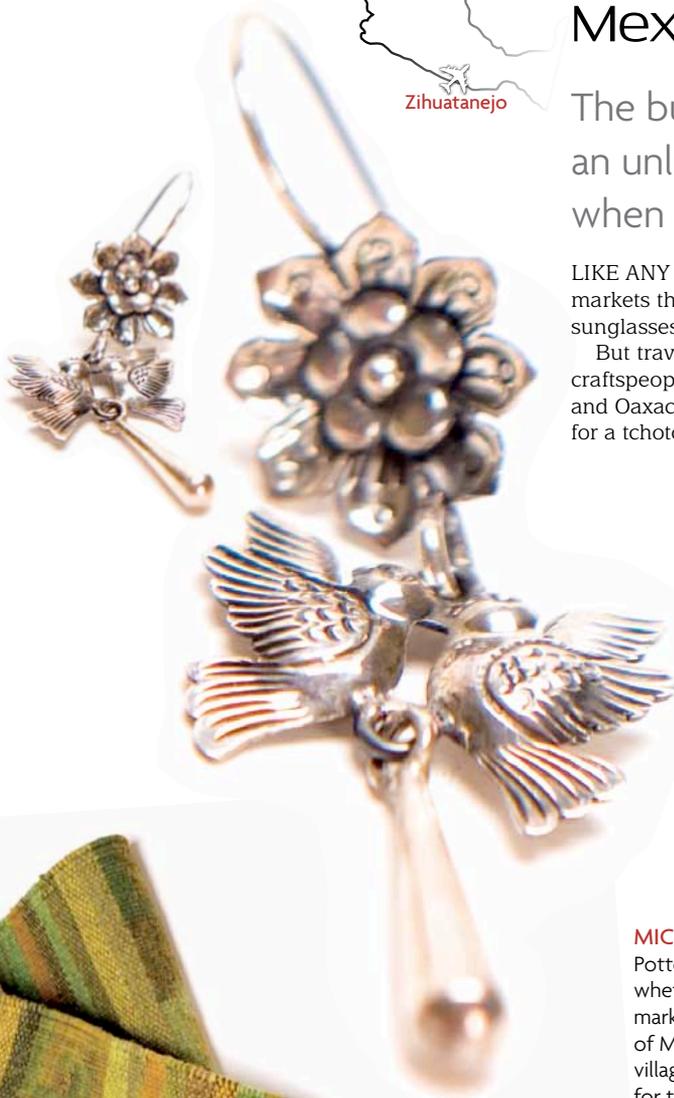


Mexico's Beating Art

The bucolic beach town of Zihuatanejo is also an unlikely art market. Here's what to pick up when you need some culture (and shade)

LIKE ANY MEXICAN TOURIST TOWN worth its sea salt, Zihuatanejo has markets that overflow with decorative trinkets and tableware, knock-off sunglasses, booze-worshipping T-shirts and plastic toys.

But travelling this far south also means proximity to a wealth of ancestral craftspeople from the remote mountainous regions of Michoacán, Guerrero and Oaxaca, as well as to the artistic spur of Mexico City. So, instead of bartering for a tchotchke, scoop up one-of-a-kind art that you'll still like after you get home.



STERLING SILVER EARRINGS

Given Zihuatanejo's proximity to the silver mining hub of Taxco, sterling jewellery is abundant. Some of the most gorgeous pieces, however, are found inside a small boutique filled with exquisite and exclusive hand-made creations. Many regional earring styles use half-moon shapes or the fine wires and elaborate flourishes of the *filigrana* technique, but the simple designs are just as beautiful. (675 pesos; Fruity Keiko Gallery; 5A Calle Vicente Guerrero, Centro; 755-112-1011; zihuatanejo.net/fruitykeiko)

MICHOACÁN POTTERY

Pottery is plentiful in Mexico, whether you're trawling artisan markets or museums. The state of Michoacán has at least 20 villages whose locals are lauded for their unique clay creations. This elegant vase was made by Nicolas Espicio from Huancito, and bought at El Embarcadero, Zihuatanejo's original craft retailer. Here, you'll find a slew of pottery items along with handwoven cotton clothings, bags, jewellery and freaky wooden animals from Oaxaca called *alebrijes*. (250 pesos; El Embarcadero; 21 Juan N. Alvarez, Centro; 755-554-2373)



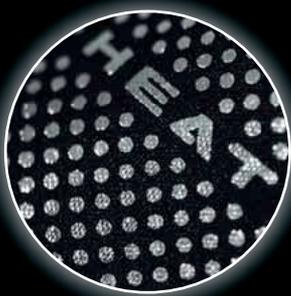
ZAPOTEC RUG

Even before the Spanish conquest of 1519, Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca state was famous for its weaving. After the locals began using sheep's wool and European frame looms, the craftsmanship of Zapotec weavers became even more renowned and prolific. Spun by hand from naturally dyed wool, it takes an experienced weaver 30 to 35 hours of concentrated labour to complete a mid-sized rug. For 30-plus years, La Zapoteca has been selling wares of these humble artists—rugs, runners, placemats, bags and coasters—at its beach-front shop. (1,250 pesos; La Zapoteca; 9 Paseo del Pescador, Centro; 755-544-6308)





MAKE YOUR OWN HEAT

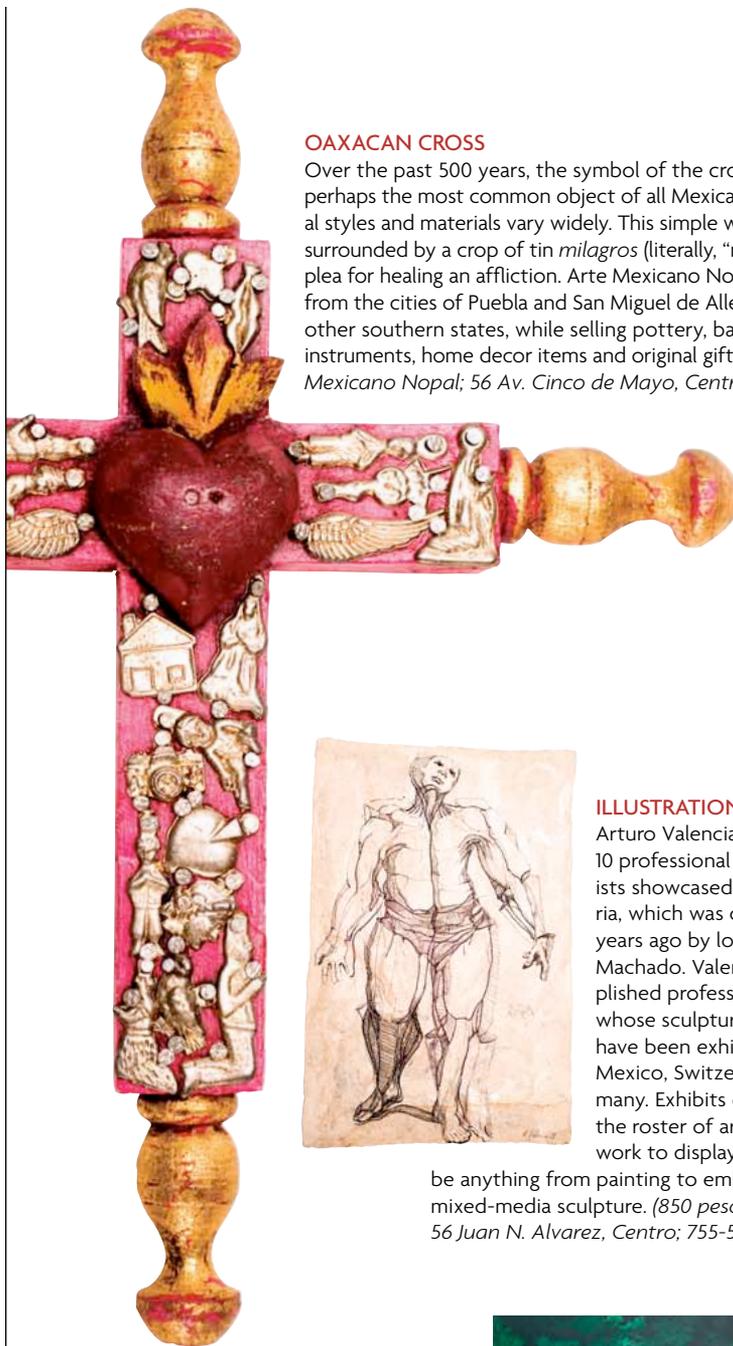


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OAXACAN CROSS

Over the past 500 years, the symbol of the cross has become perhaps the most common object of all Mexican folk art. Regional styles and materials vary widely. This simple wooden cross is surrounded by a crop of tin *milagros* (literally, "miracles"), each a plea for healing an affliction. Arte Mexicano Nopal carries crosses from the cities of Puebla and San Miguel de Allende, as well as other southern states, while selling pottery, baskets, musical instruments, home decor items and original gifts. (315 pesos; Arte Mexicano Nopal; 56 Av. Cinco de Mayo, Centro; 755-554-7530)



ILLUSTRATION ON CANVAS

Arturo Valencia Ruiz is one of 10 professional Mexican artists showcased by ZIH Galeria, which was opened nine years ago by local painter Luz Machado. Valencia is an accomplished professor of visual arts, whose sculpture and paintings have been exhibited throughout Mexico, Switzerland and Germany. Exhibits change whenever the roster of artists have new work to display, which could

be anything from painting to embroidery to mixed-media sculpture. (850 pesos; ZIH Galeria; 56 Juan N. Alvarez, Centro; 755-554-8054)



SHOP HERE

If you're inclined to spend a bit more cash to support local artists directly, head for the modest working studio of **Arte Nativo**. Led by Alfredo Tapia, this collective of about a dozen painters has a mission to "integrate the visual arts into the cultural life of our region." In the past, it held exhibits in galleries and businesses around Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa, but now focused on showcasing works in its own space. The collective also



manufactures its own stretchers, easels and partitions, and offers sporadic workshops. (Calle Antonia Nava, behind La Sirena Gorda restaurant, Centro; galeriartenativo.com)

✈ GETTING THERE Westjet flies to Zihuatanejo twice weekly from Calgary.