

Sugar Skull Making Instructions

Celebrate Day of the Dead with your own sugar skulls!



Sugar Skulls are a traditional folk art from Southern Mexico used to celebrate Day of the Dead. Mounds of colorful sugar skulls are sold by Indian vendors in open air village markets during the week preceding the holiday. Spirits of the dead are welcomed back to their homes with beautifully decorated altars made by their loved ones and sugar skulls with the names of the recently deceased are part of these colorful displays.

Sugar skulls, marigolds, candles, incense and special foods adorn home altars. Families take the flowers and sugar skulls to the cemetery to decorate the tombs on November 2. Sugar skulls are colorfully decorated with icing, pieces of bright foil, colored sugars and usually bear the name of the deceased loved one being honored. It is traditional in Mexico to eat the Sugar skulls.

Sugar Skulls are easy to make by children and adults, and if kept dry, they can last a year, however they are meant to be impermanent and not last (make a new one each year!). While edible, we generally don't recommend you consume your sugar skull – unless you've been very careful to keep your hands very clean and you don't display your skull but make it with the intention of being eaten.

Make sugar skulls as part of your family tradition to remember your dear, departed loved ones.

MAKING SUGAR SKULLS:

This is a shortened version of the instructions (there are a lot of hints and suggestions on the website that are not found on these pages) of our ONLINE INSTRUCTIONS. You can find them at our website at: www.ZanzibarTrading.com (click on sugar skulls)

CAUTION: Do not make sugar skulls on a rainy or high humidity day. They will not turn out.

Mix together well in large bowl: 1 teaspoon Meringue Powder for every cup of granulated sugar used.

Step 1: Mix dry ingredients well. **Step 2:** Sprinkle sugar mixture with 1 teaspoon water per cup of sugar used. Variation: Colored Skulls; most people prefer white skulls the first time they make them, but if you'd like colored sugar skulls, add paste food coloring TO THE WATER.

For a 5 pound bag of sugar, use 1/4 cup meringue powder and 10 teaspoons of water. Yield 5 large skulls or 20 medium skulls or 100 mini skulls or any combination. For a 10 pound bag of sugar, use 1/2 cup meringue powder and 7 Tablespoons water. Yield 10 large skulls or 40 medium skulls or 200 mini skulls or any combination.

5 pounds of sugar = approx. 10 cups 10 pounds of sugar = 21 cups

Meringue Powder is a "Must" and cannot be omitted. It is difficult to find (Zanzibar carries it and we LOVE our brand – it smells so nice and is easy to work with and has great results), but may be purchased in 4 oz, 8 oz or 1 pound packages in our shop. You can also find it at specialty cake stores (such as Cake Castle in Sacramento as well as at Michael's Crafts and some WalMarts. Honestly, though, the brand that Michael's and Walmart sells smells funny (like old gym socks) to us – so we don't like using it!!! You usually won't find it at the grocery store.

Meringue powder is what makes the sugar and the icing hard. Its main ingredient is powdered dry egg whites and starch, but it also includes vegetable gum, cream of tartar, calcium lactate, malic acid and sodium aluminum sulfate. It's completely edible. Don't try and substitute egg whites – you'll make a mess and there's always the risk of consuming uncooked eggs because of Salmonella!

Sugar Skull making is not an exact science...and Meringue powder does vary by volume and we like easy measurements! Especially when measuring with kids.)

Mix well with hands until every bit of sugar is moistened. If your fingerprints remain when you squeeze the sugar in your hand, it is ready to mold. (see pictures below). It should feel like cool "beach sand." If it doesn't hold together, mixture is too dry. (Left)

Remember, water sinks, so keep the sugar mixture mixed up frequently as you make your sugar skulls.

To Mold: Pack sugar mixture FIRMLY into mold with special attention to chins & edges. Use a straight edge to scrape the back of the mold flat. Pack down some more until perfectly tight. Place a stiff cardboard square (approx. 5" x 6") over mold and invert immediately. Lift mold off carefully. Throw any "mistakes" back into your bowl, stir up and try again. If mix is too dry, spritz with a water bottle.



Tips: If all the sugar mixture does not fall out of mold easily, it is too wet. Re-mix with a bit more sugar. Hand wash and dry your mold after every 5 skulls to avoid sticking. Most Sugar Skull makers will have a collection of molds to make the molding process more enjoyable. To get finer details when using small molds, dust the inside of the mold with powdered sugar before pressing in the wet sugar mixture.

To Dry: All sizes of the molded sugar skulls need to air-dry on their card boards from 8 hours to overnight. Medium and Mini skulls may be decorated after they are completely dry.

Large skulls require a few more steps. They are a 2-piece mold, and must be "scooped out" after they dry for 8 hours. When the skulls feel dry enough to handle, hold skulls carefully and hollow both the back and the front out with a spoon, leaving the skull wall 1/2" thick. Do not scoop out the neck area.

Set the hollowed skulls upside down to continue drying until totally dry. (Approx. 12 hours.) When completely dry, dust off and assemble the front and back of the skull with a 1/4" bead of thick royal icing, either applied with a knife or squeezed from an icing bag (one side only). Align points on the back of the skull with the sides of the neck, and press the two sides together until they are firmly connected. The icing will ooze out a little. Drag your finger over the seam to remove excess icing. Try to do this with just one pass--touching the skull too much will make the icing look bad. Drag your finger across the base of the neck crack to remove excess icing. Lay skull aside to dry. When seam is dry, about 2 hours minimum, it is ready to decorate. If your skull sides or seams don't line up properly, you can easily use a piece of sandpaper or one of the sanding sponges available at any hardware store to sand the edges smooth (once the skull is dry) (or you can just cover the ill-fitting edge with royal icing, too!)

Tips: Mix the dry ingredients first, then slowly sprinkle in the water. When it feels the consistency of moist beach sand, you're there. Put the sugar into the mold and press down hard, then flip over onto a small hard surface. I covered cardboard squares with tin foil. If the sugar sticks to the inside of the mold, you've used too much water, dump it back into the bowl, add more sugar and a pinch of the meringue powder. If it crumbles or breaks, it's too dry, also dump it back in the bowl, this time try a bit more water. You'll want to wash out the molds every five or six skulls, they get a bit sticky and the sugar tends to pull, make sure to dry the insides well before starting the next round.

Tip: When assembling the Large skull, if the two pieces of the skull are sliding around, your royal icing is too wet. Add a Tablespoon of powdered sugar to your icing, to stiffen it up a bit.

Tip: The sugar "scoopings" from Large Skulls will net about 50%. Sugar will be soft and moist and may be made into smaller skulls. This moist sugar may be stored in plastic tightly-topped box for a day or two. When you're ready to use sugar, give it the hand-squeeze test. If too dry, spritz with the water bottle until it holds together again.



ROYAL ICING RECIPE

MIX: 2/3 cup water, 1/2 cup meringue powder and 2 pounds powdered sugar with an electric/stand mixer until icing peaks (about 9 minutes). Don't mix up more than two pounds at a time. Keep in a tightly covered container. **DO NOT REFRIGERATE.** Royal icing is a cement type icing used for gingerbread house construction. It isn't very tasty, but it is strong, dries pretty and lasts. Use **ONLY** concentrated paste food colorings (NOT liquid food coloring from the grocery store!) Mix icing & paste colors in disposable cups. Use pastry bags and metal decorating tips if you are a pro or into cake decorating. Yes, we have great disposable pastry bags on the Order Page! Or, substitute a Ziploc freezer bag for a pastry bag and make a very small snip in the corner of the bag. Add 2-3 ounces of Royal Icing (no more than 1/4 full). Squeeze to decorate. Calculate each 5 pounds of sugar skulls will need 2 pounds of powdered sugar Royal Icing. Most skull makers prefer 5-6 paste colors to decorate with, and at least one pack of colored.

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ALL SKULL SIZES: Have fun decorating your skulls with colored Royal Icing, sequins, feathers, beads, even earrings made from soda pop tops. Colored foil and icing are how Mexican sugar skulls are decorated. Foil is pasted down with icing, and is great for making crowns, crosses, hearts, shiny eyes or even pipes. Labels, wrappers, trinkets and shells can personalize a skull in memory of your dear, departed loved one. Be creative. Have fun. Kids down to kindergarten have fun decorating sugar skulls. If youngsters don't have the coordination to use a pastry bag, let them "Finger-paint" with the colorful icing.

Can you eat the Sugar Skulls? There is nothing that will make you sick in Sugar Skulls except for the tin foil and other decorations. However, after all the handling that is done to make them, they aren't very clean! So, **NO**, you shouldn't eat a sugar skull. They are for decorative purposes only.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Sugar Skull Molds
- Granulated Sugar
- Powdered Sugar
- Meringue Powder
- Decorations, Colored Tin Foils, Paper Flowers, Sequins, etc.
- Corrugated Cardboard squares, (one for each piece made)
- Some 6"x6" for large skulls, some 3"x4" for medium / mini skulls
- Large Metal Bowl
- Measuring Spoons
- 1 C. liquid Measuring Cup
- 1/4 c. Dry Measuring Cup

Plastic Spray Bottle for Water
Electric / Stand Mixer
16 oz. Solo Plastic Cups
Butter Knives or Tongue Depressors for mixing color into icing
Pastry Bags
Paper Towels
Hose to wash down sugar encrusted children!

DECORATING THE SKULLS

Tradition: The traditional Mexican sugar skull is being placed on the home altar or the tomb to honor a deceased loved one. It decorates the altar and make it a happy place for the spirit to visit. Names of the loved one is usually written on the skull with icing in the market by the sugar skull maker. You can customize your skulls with characteristics that you remember--like a tin foil pipe for Grandpa Joe who smoked a pipe on the porch after dinner.

Sugar Skull Decorating Party - If you're having a party, make up your skulls ahead of time. Prepare your icing and have it ready in bags. Cover your tables, lay out all the icings and decoration supplies, play Mexican music, and have some treats to snack on like chips and salsa!

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