



Meet the Brewer Making Beer with Corpse Flowers

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If you found yourself in ancient Aztec or Mayan times with a corpse on your hands, the locals might direct you towards a flower commonly used to spice chocolate drinks and occasionally used to cover the stench of rotting flesh. Rosita de cacao has appeared throughout Mexican history, when dried the flowers can be snacked on like popcorn or smoked with tobacco. They also retain their potent fragrance for decades, which is why some have been found—smelling fresh as a daisy—in crypts.

The flower can also be found in Rosita Schwarzbier, the brew you'll want on hand if you need to bury a body. Brewed in collaboration with Mexico City's Cerveceria Itañefe and Denver's Cerveceria Colorado, this dark, German-style lager infused with dried rosita de cacao flowers is perfect for Oktoberfest and Día de los Muertos.

Lucía Carrillo is the co-owner and head brewer of two-year-old Cerveceria Itañefe. She's been a professional brewer for six years and considers herself a creative collaborator at heart—working at two other breweries and judging beer competitions in her spare time. In 2016 she invited Jason Buehler, head brewer at Denver Beer Company, to judge a beer competition in Puebla, Mexico. Buehler was struck by the Mexican beers he tasted. "I was blown away by the unique ingredients I tried there, and amazed by the brewers I met," he says.

Buehler began experimenting with Mexican-inspired beers in 2017, and decided to open a completely new concept—Cerveceria Colorado—in April of 2018. As its website states, "We believe in inclusivity, collaboration, and celebrating those around us who are working to build bridges, not walls, in our communities."

Cerveceria Colorado builds those bridges by collaborating with brewers across the southern border. Not surprisingly, Carrillo was among Buehler's early comrades. Their first brew, Nopalito Wheat, is made using the pads of the Opuntia cactus and is a constant on the tap list.

Carrillo is drawn toward unusual ingredients for her beers, brewing potent potions that reflect her curiosity. As a joke, Carrillo calls herself a witch—a linguistic parallel between the word brewer and the Spanish word brujá. "The word brujá is related with 'brewer' or making potions," Carrillo explains. Some historical accounts suggest that women in the middle ages were in fact the first homebrewers, sometimes even setting foot outside the kitchen to sell their brew in street markets. Black, pointy hats were a thing in those days, too, helping to distinguish these "alewives" in a sea of noisy vendors.



Today, Carrillo finds power in that parallel and brings a bit of that historic sorcery to her modern mash. Case in point: this year, Buehler and Carrillo came together once again to collaborate on Rosita Schwarzbier. "It is a very potent flower, and so fragrant," Buehler says.

These flowers are native to Mexico, but not many people know about them. "For me, a Mexican, I didn't know [about] rosita de cacao," Carrillo says. Carrillo discovered them after tasting tejate, a non-alcoholic beverage made with maize, cacao, and rosita flowers, traditionally consumed in Oaxaca, Mexico. In her research, she found that ancient Aztec and Maya communities would sprinkle these flowers over their dead before sealing them in tombs, where the scent of the flowers would linger for years. The rosita have a powerful chocolatey aroma, but are botanically unrelated to cacao.

"I realized that I needed to make a beer with that flower," Carrillo says.

Carrillo and Buehler decided to brew a batch for Cerveceria Colorado, which involved shipping the flowers within Mexico then driving the stash over the border. "You can't just find them at any market in Mexico City," Buehler says. Per Carrillo's recipe, Buehler toasted the flowers to bring out the aromas, using just over two pounds for a seven-barrel (200-gallon) batch. "The entire place smelled like rosita," he says.

So, what's the best perfume for the perished? Buehler describes the aroma as a blend of vanilla and sweet, mushroomy earthiness, along with a whiff of chocolate. Carrillo picks up notes of nuts and orange as well. Carrillo chose a Schwarzbier for her base recipe, saying "I knew the flavor, with toasty, roasty notes and cacao [would] match very well [with the rosita]," suggesting it would be more drinkable than a stout or a porter. The resulting Rosita Schwarzbier is a black and balanced brew with a vanilla bouquet, toasty chocolate notes, and a hint of citrus.

Carrillo has found that few Americans or Mexicans seem to know about rosita de cacao's creepy customs, while Mexican people continue to honor and celebrate their dead—especially during Día de Muertos. "It's a way we connect with them," she says. "We don't have the feeling of fear for the dead. We know that in another life we can connect with our people again."

For Carrillo, putting these flowers into a beer is more than lighthearted witchcraft. It's a way for her to share her rich culture, and to honor the dead with a beer for the living.



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