

The sound of the TV in the kitchen echoed throughout the house, along with the sound of adult chatter, child laughter, and an intense game of Mario Party 3. These sounds were the indicators of a get together at my great grandmother's house.

My cousins and I usually stayed in my great aunt's bedroom and played games on the Nintendo 64. It was the unofficial "kids room" while the adults watched TV in the living room or in the kitchen. However, if you weren't helping cook, then chances are you weren't allowed to stay in the kitchen.

My aunts would yell at anyone hanging around. The kitchen was their domain. They were often the ones preparing and cooking a meal for 20. They had a great time doing it as they watched the latest movies or game shows on TV. There was tons of chatting too, but most of the time it was *chisme* (gossip). They were and always have been major gossipers, even I would stick around in the kitchen just to hear the drama.

At the front and center of the table was always Grandma Chuca, a nickname for my great grandmother since it was short for her last name Machuca. It's what my family always said so it stuck with me.

It was routine to always go up and greet Grandma Chuca. If she wasn't in her designated rocking chair in the living room, chances are she was seated at the kitchen table. You couldn't just shout hello or bye, you had to go directly to Grandma Chuca to greet her face to face and give her a hug or kiss on the cheek.

All the major holidays were held at Grandma Chuca's. It was the one place everyone made time to go to. It was also the place where I'd see all my relatives at once. Some of the larger events were New Years Eve, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Also, I'd say *tamale* season was an event since everyone went to her house to help make them from scratch.

New Years Eve was personally my favorite. My family and I dropped by every year, no matter what our plans were. Although I love my extended family, all of them gathered in one place at once can be loud and overwhelming. So New Years Eve was a favorite since it'd usually just be my grandparents, parents, siblings, and I.

A majority of the time was spent making *buñuelos* from scratch. They are fried dough covered in cinnamon sugar and the perfect way to start out the year. My job was always mixing and sprinkling the cinnamon sugar, mainly because I was terrible at rolling or stretching the dough.

We always kept the TV on so we could watch the countdown and ball drop in New York. When the time came, we would all start counting down.

3...2..1.

“Happy New Years!” We would shout.

Immediately everyone went to tell each other happy new year’s individually and gave a hug also. Sometimes I’d give a longer hug or chat more to avoid what my mom made us do next.

“Come eat your 12 grapes!” She would yell.

Every year, the tradition is to eat 12 grapes once it hits midnight on New Year’s Eve. It’s also a superstition, so my mom is not pleased whenever we refuse to eat all 12.

Eventually, everyone finishes their 12 grapes, even those like me who stubbornly try to avoid the grapes.

During all this, fireworks could be heard going off one after the other outside. Everyone rushes out the front door and I stand on the porch steps staring up at the fireworks. This moment is my favorite. Colors explode and light up the sky. When they begin to slow down and stop, everything feels quiet and still. I look around and see my family smiling up at the sky and enjoying this same moment.

Ever since Grandma Chuca’s passing, large gatherings at the house slowed down and eventually stopped altogether. The kids, including me, have grown up, gone off to college, or have children of their own now. I haven’t seen many of my distant cousins or other relatives in years. Grandma Chuca’s house was the place everyone reconnected and caught up.

I have only positive memories at that house. It’s also where I felt most connected to my culture and identity. A lot of my childhood occurred in that house and I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Grandma Chuca’s house was a place where I discovered and developed my identity and the connection to my heritage. It led me to become who I am.