

Publications & News

OK Voices

The Smell of Sofrito and the Sound of Home: A Hispanic Heritage Month Reflection by Jennifer D'Agostino

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Given what I know about my family's medical history, and seeing my Abuela Eloina suffering with dementia now, I've made my peace with the fact that I, too, will likely have to rely on smell, taste, and music to relive the fondest moments of my life. In the same way that I play her favorite songs (and pretend like I'm listening to her three same stories for the first time again), I hope my family indulges me in playing "Y Volveré" by Los Angeles Negros, so my childhood can flash through my mind like an old rerun. I hope you consider giving it a listen as you read on.

Only four notes in and I'm six years old again, sliding into the back of Abuela Eloina & Abuelo Pepe's white '00 Saturn SL2. It smells like home.

And what does home smell like, you ask? Well, for a six-year-old girl with a Cuban-refugee dad and a Chicana mom who both worked around the clock, it smells like the afternoon sun baking the Snuggle-brand fabric softener out of a faded pink towel atop her grandparents' backseat; like a group hug from the rear window and the dryer machine after a long day of learning.

The abuelitos have just picked me up from school, but their street comes and goes, and we turn down a major road lined with telephone poles, chain-link fences, and potholes. That means two things:

- 1) Abuela Eloina's about to kick some serious a** in the kitchen,
- 2) I'm **for sure** getting a quarter for the paint-chipped pony ride in front of the market we're headed to.

I get my fifteen seconds pretending to be a vaquera and Abuela Eloina gets the

ingredients she's missing. Bonus: Abuelito hooks it up with another quarter for a bouncy ball from the toy vending machine. We get *two* so he can play with me while Abuela gets a moment to herself in the kitchen back at home.



The food processor whirs, a pan clangs onto the stove, loud sizzling drowns out an episode of *Caso Cerrado* playing on the small TV on the counter. The credits don't even have a chance to roll before the smell of sofrito creeps into the den where Abuelo and I are bouncing the little rubber balls off each other's foreheads. Then, like a dinner bell, Abuela's Keds sneakers shuffle down the hall. She's holding a perfect plate of plátanos maduros, picadillo, black beans, and a serving of rice the size of a small anthill. It probably smells so much like *her* home, and maybe she imagines her mother's hands instead of her own as she sets the plate down on a metal TV tray. But, to me, it smells like everything she's ever had to give up, and the labor of love she's put into building a life with her family *here*.

All that vivid simplicity, just from hearing a song.

That's how I see my culture showing up in my life and work, and in the work of my Hispanic colleagues: through our care, intention, and reverence. We do even ordinary things with extraordinary spirit. And ultimately, *that's* what I hope people take away from Hispanic Heritage Month. Enjoying our music and our food is part of it, sure, but so is seeing beyond; to the way so much of what we do is a labor of love rooted in our connections to what came before us, and how it's baked into even the most innocuous moments of our lives.