

Introduction

Seattle, the Emerald City, forms a cutting-edge, agile market for the tech sector, which is evolving rapidly and is abruptly impulsive. However, the adjacent cities are home to various singular and vibrant cultures that shape this inclusive city. I am a first-generation American from an immigrant family. I am proud of my heritage, though this identity sometimes makes surviving harder in Seattle as a full-fledged first-generation American. For my cultural exploration assignment, I was planning to meet and spend time with someone who has a different culture from mine, though it would be fun to search out the similarities from various differences. Then I connected with Grace, my friend, who is a Hispanic woman whose family entered Seattle as Mexican immigrants. I invited Grace to connect with me over dinner at her place, which later on unexpectedly led to a lovely evening filled with food and conversation. Our roots were definitely different, just like my family is an immigrant one, while Grace belongs to a Mexican immigrant family, while Grace belongs to a Mexican immigrant family; we found our common ground of conversation over the Mexican-style refried beans and shared stories of our immigration experiences. We talked about the triumphs and conquests we both experience every day while trying to connect with the absolute countrymen. The conversation with Grace was fabulous; instead of having different spices and languages, we share similar key needs for our heritage, community, and belonging.

1. The Activity

For the Cultural Exploration project I have, I decided to take a share of their family dinner table with dishes her mother cooked. The vast part of that evening we spent in their kitchen and the dining area. All of Grace's family members seemed so empathetic and broad-minded. The sound of sizzling pans from their kitchen and the process of making fresh

tortillas have given me an enchanting experience, which I must admire. To be honest, I have chosen this activity because I believe mundane experiences are a much more authentic indicator of culture than any festivals or a day at a museum.

In my culture, we believe “The people who give you their food, give you their heart”. Apart from the biological need for food, to fill the stomach, we can connect with people by sharing food. I know many Mexican immigrants with whom we share our neighbourhood. Thus, I knew, this theory is not a mere storyline at all. Mexicans also have the same beliefs and opinions. I planned to explore the Mexican identity and how they are treated in Seattle. I expected this experience would be more proficient than some random-day experience from taco trucks and commercials about Mexican festivals.

While Grace’s family allowed me to share the dinner table with them for a day, they let me feel the warmth and comfort of their home. We had some down-to-earth, yet strong enough fun time with stories from their life, Grace’s childhood. Also, they shared their lineage, ancestry, heritage, and deep familial past stories. I could easily dive deep into their hospitality, rituals, and customs, which must have influenced Grace. I wanted to undergo what they consider to be the best of the values, not only from an observer’s angle, but as an adherent.

2. Experience with Differences

When I arrived at Grace’s house, I barged in with radically different sensory input from my own. In my own home, we normally fill the space with the fragrance of a spice blend of cloves, cumin, and cardamom. Grace’s culture from that perspective was different. They greeted me with perfumes from fresh lime zest, dried chiles, and the mild smells of corn masa. I found

the salient variations within the two cultures in Sobremesa. Sobremesa is a winding-down time at the table post-meal.

Mostly whenever I share food with people from my own culture, we organise our meal so that we can eat, and drink tea after that, and socialise somewhere other than our dinner table. For the Mexicans, the dinner table is a stamping ground where they meet people, chit-chat, and enjoy some quality time. I have been to Grace's place, where after each meal our plates were cleared, though we spent hours talking and sharing stories. The conversations were deep and joyful.

Another remark-worthy difference I have observed was their table manners and how they behave at the dinner table. My own culture focuses on showing deference to older people. Though in Grace's place, I have never experienced any of these expectations. People, irrespective of their age, seem enthusiastic to take part in active conversations.

3. Discovering the Similarities

From many aspects, I have seen two cultures, one I have and the other of Grace, that differed. Still, I was awestruck by the similarities we shared, about which I did not have much expectation. Both of our family nexuses showed a grand dame, where mother figures are known as the all-in-all of the family. As I have seen Grace's mother preparing food for us, I have seen a similarity with my own mother. In both cultures, mothers are considered to be the guardians of the family. I have seen Grace's mother cooking, and she is also teaching her children how to cook. She nurtures them all through education and worthwhile shared meals.

Our culture believes in radical hospitality, which I have found in their culture. In my culture, we consider our guests to be honored, almost as if they were sent to us from above. I have seen similar duty-boundedness in Grace's family while entering her home. They refilled my

glass and plate always before I could ask for more. In both my culture and the Mexican culture, prioritising guests is of utmost importance, which forms close ties.

Another link I have set up is our hive minds. We chuckled about elucidating to our individualistic friends why we turn to our multigenerational family before strategic decision-making. Both cultures focus on "We" before "I". Both of our insistence delved into family meet-ups, admiring elders, and simply communicating our origins through narrative showed our shared joint bequest over personal feats.

4. New Knowledge

At one time in my life, I did not have much knowledge about Mexican culture, but I gained much knowledge at dinner. We had Corn that day, though corn was not just a menu item for me that day; it depicted resilience. Grace discussed “nixtamalization” and how native Mexicans learned to make corn ready to thrive in their culture. I have seen Grace make tortillas on her own, which seems like a struggle against erasing indigenous history. I have seen that food for them can be served as a manifestation of survival. I realised the effort was essential for maintaining traditions while living in the Pacific Northwest. Grace’s family shared stories on their “treasure hunts” for veritable peppers and cheese to connect with their Mexican roots. Somehow, I could remember how my own family struggled in Seattle to find the right meat and spices to make our traditional dishes feel like home. I ran down that looking after a cultural identity takes hard work and love daily. For many immigrant children, cultural continuity is a labour of love.

5. Emotional Reflection

This experience was enchanting and lent a hand from anxiety to comfort and gratitude. I proudly practice my faith, and I always stay aware of how visible that makes me. I mostly appeared in an all-new space, pondering if my religion would induce rejection or impede connections. Entering Grace's house for the first time, the one thing I had set up in my mind was that I was a student and entering Grace's house as a friend of Grace who should collect data to complete the assignment. I was anxious about my behaviour and chalked out how I should connect with them. Since I entered their house, my insight about visiting Grace's place changed massively. The way Grace's mom took my hand and patted with her palm, welcoming me into her family with a mixed language of English and Spanish, was spellbinding. At that moment, my respect and humility increased significantly.

What I felt was that all the families around the world establish and share a remarkable cultural identity. It is really a part of the shared human trajectory. With the successive evenings, I got relaxed and felt comfort. Though my cultural background was very different from that of Grace's, we shared a similar human flow. I appreciate Grace's receptivity. She does not just feed me, but also presents me with a souvenir of her culture. At the end, I did not feel like a mere student, running behind her assignment, yet more like someone who had stretched the fringes of my heart.

6. Curiosities and Questions

As I met new people and witnessed an all-new family tradition, which is much more diverse than my own, I became curious about different cultural features. First, I am fascinated by the role of faith or religion in the kitchen. I observed spiritual motifs near where Grace's family prepared food, equivalent to how we might offer a blessing before every meal. In Mexico, people

practice the fusion of Catholicism and Indigenous cultures that establishes a distinctive connection between spirituality and cooking.

Secondly, I have a keen interest in the evolving nature of language. I was interested in Grace's skills to switch so quickly between the languages. Did her culture and language feel fathomless in Spanish? Hereditarily, do traditions lose some meaning in translation to English? I also acquired a growing respect for orthodox healing practices. I observed various similarities with the folk herbs used by my own grandmother. Are there any phylogenetic relationships between the cultures? This assembly signified learning about other cultures, which showed a journey of discovery at its best, expressing a wealth of choices in the beauty and gamut of humanity.

Final Reflection

To wrap it all up, cultural learning this way, by sharing dinner at the table with Grace and her family, intensified my perception of the cultural identity. Not only about the Mexican culture, but also my own culture has been expanded and made my vision of human resemblance. Often, we witness cultural conflicts here and there in the US. While sharing the table with Grace and her family, I have come to understand a personal-level strong connection immigrants have with the conflict. One universal takeaway I found to be most remarkable was what makes a life meaningful. Not only Grace or the Mexican people, but also everyone from every single culture might consider family, memory, faith, life trajectory, and hospitality to be the ultimate instructors of life. As we shared experiences and listened to minute details that add inclusion in their life, I learned to respect everyone more and be more empathetic towards people. As I spent an awesome time with Grace and her family, I also showed pride about my own heritage, and carried off wisdom into the rich history of Mexico. Now I believe we all have a close interlink.

Moreover, if we assemble to enjoy a Sobremesa, we can identify the substance of respecting each other's stories. I will remember this experience because it is more lively than just an assignment for a term requirement.