

# *Roots in Ripon*

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*Chuck Roots*

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## Walk into my Parlor

When traveling, a person is usually exposed to the many cultures, mores and traditions being practiced in the region of the world they happen to be in. The word "mores" (pronounced: mor'az) is taken from the Latin word meaning "customs". Every people group and culture has its own peculiarities when it comes to these beliefs, and traditions.

Having had the privilege of moving frequently (an education in itself!) as a child, I soon learned that not everybody thought the same way as we Americans tend to do, nor did they understand our national peculiarities. For instance, my step father, joined with other American businessmen whom he had worked with in the grocery industry, formed a new company called International Supermarkets, Inc. This grand experiment was launched in 1960 in Paris, France. The plan was to convince the French (and hopefully all of Europe) of the wonderful convenience of shopping for their daily/weekly food supplies in one location. At that time France was still suffering the aftereffects of World War Two. Charles de Gaulle was president of France, and no friend to America. As a twelve-year-old kid from New England, I found it amusing watching and listening to this man pontificate on French television. I suspect he was not enamored with a group of American businessmen attempting to change French shopping habits.

At that time the French still shopped the way they had been shopping for generations. The women would grab their mesh bags and begin shopping at the meat market which was barely a hole-in-the-wall. In fact, all the various stands were similar in size and construction. After visiting the meat market, would be the vegetable stand, followed by the bakery, etc. Sanitation had to be a problem for these merchants. I remember only too well the skinned rabbits hanging from butcher hooks in the open air in Paris! Other meats were equally exposed to the elements which really didn't bother me because I didn't know any better. But I'm guessing my mother was very cautious. Since I was learning to speak French in school, I often did the shopping for my mother. There are some funny stories about that, but that's for another article. Today, grocery stores abound.

After my time in Vietnam, I returned to college where I met my wife, Isaura. She initially introduced herself as Hazel. After we began a courtship, I learned that she and her family emigrated from Portugal (The Azores) in 1966. So I said to her one day, "What's your real first name, since Hazel is not Portuguese?" When she told me her actual name was Isaura, I told her I liked that better. Over the next months and years I was immersed into the Portuguese culture. I discovered one of those Portuguese idiosyncrasies while on our visit to her home island of San Miguel when I was stationed in Rota, Spain. We took some leave and flew on a Navy plane to Lajes Air Force Base on the island of Terceira. We then flew to her home island

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where we stayed with one of her cousins, and visited numerous other family members for the five days we were there. In each of the homes I kept seeing the same strange arrangement of rooms and furniture. Depending on the financial status of the family they would create a part of the home actually they lived in, and a home they didn't live in but wanted others to be impressed with. It was like part of the home was lived in, and the other part of the home was a showcase.

One night after retiring to our bedroom, I asked about this strange arrangement. Isaura explained that a living room, or dining room, or a kitchen might be set up with everything perfectly appointed, with the best of silverware and dishes, towels, napkins, candle sticks, rugs, and other furnishings depending on taste. The place where food was actually prepared, or where the family hung out or ate their meals was often more plebeian, lacking in everything the rooms-for-show had in spades.

The whole five days we were there we never once ate in the "formal" dining area of any of the homes.

As bemused as I was with this strange tradition, I well remember Isaura's aunt, known to all as Tia Maria. Along with her uncle, Tio Manuel, this is where Isaura lived while attending San Jose State. Tia Maria was my favorite family member! Every time I was there to see Isaura, Tia would want to feed me! When I graduated from SJSU Tia Maria prepared a celebratory dinner in my honor, even inviting my parents to drive down from their home in Alameda for the occasion. I knew it was a very special moment because Tia Maria hosted the dinner in the "formal" dining room. Isaura commented that she had never seen her aunt serve a dinner in that room before or after.

If you've never been in our home, let me put you at ease. All the rooms in our home are used for their intended purpose. I love my wife's family and their Portuguese history and traditions. But "showrooms" is not on the list for us!