



Helen Orta Saenz Johnson

September 25, 1934 - July 1, 2025

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Helen Orta Saenz Johnson was born in San Antonio, Texas on September 25, 1934.

From the very beginning, Helen lived her life on her own terms. As a single mother, Helen worked many jobs to keep a roof over her and her son's head. Her favorite role, besides that of being a mother, was that of a cook and caretaker, and she was not just good at it, she was great.

She could cook for 2 or 100. Mole, enchiladas, dressing, King Ranch chicken and homemade flour tortillas were among her specialties. She could cook up an entire meal in a heartbeat and she often did just that if anyone was hungry. But her baking skills stood out among the best. Her lemon bundt cake was legendary and you knew you were okay in her book if you got one for your birthday. Her melt in your mouth lady finger cookies were also famous, and she often tried to teach others how to make them, sans recipe, by just 'feeling' the texture of the dough. Many failed and very few succeeded. Same with teaching how to make Thanksgiving dressing by the smell of the spices during cooking.

Helen was also a long-time member of the Brown Scapular Society and Altar Society at Little Flower Church. Where she made cakes and sold punch with her Tia Mary Orta, at the church festivals to raise money for those organizations and the church.

Helen was a true Orta woman. She was opinionated and strong like the Orta women before her. She put up with no nonsense and had no tolerance for laziness, inadequacy or bad food. She told you what she thought when she thought it. She knew many of the rich and famous and the not so rich and famous. She was kind and generous to all of them and would give you the shirt off her back if you needed it.

She cared for many children and families during her lifetime, including relatives, all of whom were grateful for the wonderful care as well as the great food. They also received the benefit of Helenisms such as “Hay is for horses”, “I’ve forgotten more than you will ever know”, “Let’s make horsey dervies for the party”, “They’re funny, not funny ha-ha, just funny”, “Mejor sola que mal acompanada” which means you are better off alone than in bad company.

Helen was a collector and collected bells, cookware, and crystal. If you ask her son, she collected way too much but she knew what she liked. She also loved yard Knick Knacks and plants, and her yard was full of them.

In her later years, Helen enjoyed going to good restaurants, keeping up with the family gossip and watching her favorite novelas. She loved her neighbors and they looked out for her. At 90, she was on no medication except for eye drops and if not for that pesky tumor she would still be with us. The world lost not only a great cook but a great woman who will not be forgotten.

Mass Service will be held at Little Flower Church on August 12, 2025, beginning at 9:30 am.

In Lieu of flowers please donate to Little Flower Church Renovation Fund.

Previous Events

Memorial Mass

AUG 12. 9:30 AM (CT)

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Little Flower
1715 N Zarzamora St
San Antonio, TX 78201
(210) 735-9126

Tribute Wall

MJ

“ *Michael & Jill Jimenez purchased the Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum for the family of Helen Orta Saenz Johnson.*



Michael & Jill Jimenez - August 11, 2025 at 10:03 AM

MP

“ *Tia Helen always called to wish a happy birthday or happy anniversary. She was very thoughtful and kind. She tried to teach me to make flour tortillas by the feeling of the flour with the ingredients. I was a terrible student and just couldn't get it. She didn't chastise me for not grasping the concept. My wedding anniversary was the day after she passed away and yes I did hope for a call. We love you Tia Helen. Rest in peace.*

Maria Przybylski - July 29, 2025 at 04:50 PM

VR

Mario and Rose, my sincere condolences. The last time I saw Mary Helen was in Mother's day 2025, we ate cake with her and had a nice evening. When leaving, I complimented her on her beautiful face...she said "all I use is an estropajo". I think I'm going to buy me one because she looked great. Rest in peace and see you soon!

Vicky Rangel

Vicky Rangel - July 29, 2025 at 08:00 PM

RC

Mario

Please accept our deepest condolences on the passing of your mother. We were so sorry to hear the news.

We were touched to read her obituary and learn more about her life. It's clear she was an incredible woman—strong, generous, and a fantastic cook. Her dedication to you and her community is a beautiful testament to the person she was.

While we are unable to attend the service, Estella and I have made a donation to the Little Flower Church Renovation Fund in her honor. We're keeping you and your family in our thoughts during this difficult time.

With deepest sympathy,

Estella & Rudy

Rudy Colmenero - August 10, 2025 at 05:07 PM