

A Mardi Gras Primer



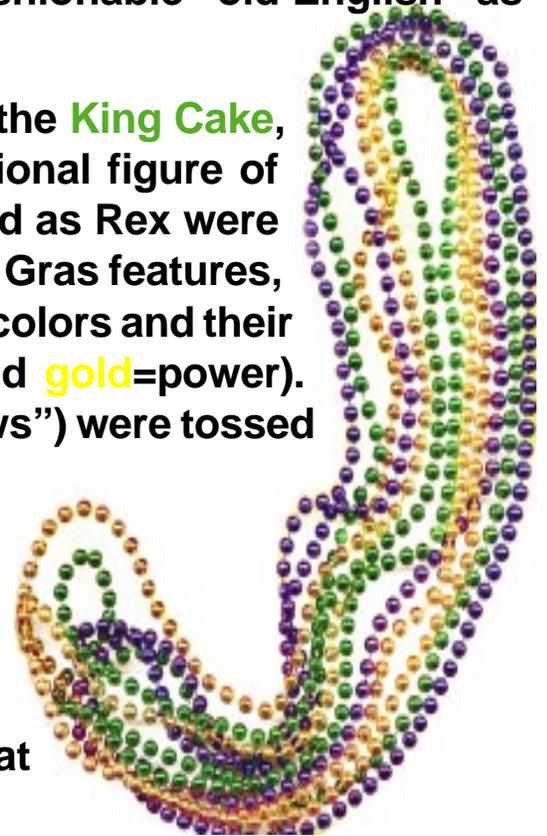
Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday has been celebrated since the Middle Ages in France, and in 1699 the French explorer Iberville even christened a site near modern New Orleans **Point du Mardi Gras** because it was reached on the date of that year's celebration. Commemoration of Mardi Gras was so ingrained by the late 1700s that even though the Spanish tried to suppress the observance, it resurfaced by the 1820s under American rule.

The Mardi Gras tradition as we know it today has its roots in antebellum New Orleans. The first documented parade occurred in 1837, and the **Mistick Krewe of Comus**, organized in 1857, served for many years as the arbiter of Mardi Gras tradition, introducing themed parades and much of the structure of the celebration. (Comus still exists, though they no longer stage a parade. They were the first “krewe”, a spelling coined to imitate the fashionable “old English” associations of the time.)

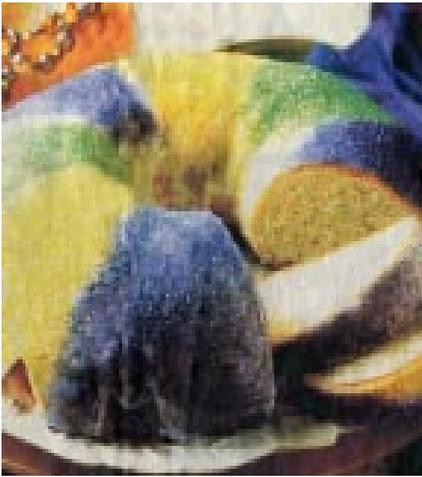


The 1870s saw the introduction of the **King Cake**, and of **Rex, King of Carnival** as the international figure of Mardi Gras. The various individuals appointed as Rex were responsible for introducing many other Mardi Gras features, including its flag, theme song, and traditional colors and their associations (**purple**=justice, **green**=faith, and **gold**=power). In 1871 the first trinkets (now known as “throws”) were tossed to crowds from a parade float.

Almost every aspect of Mardi Gras is ritualized and traditional, from the sublime—the official start of the season is on the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6)—to the ridiculous: the ritual call for trinkets from the crowd to the float riders is “Throw me something, mister!”



Over the years, the krewes have grown in number and function. While their big event is Mardi Gras—nearly 60 parades are held in the four-parish area around New Orleans during the 12 day official parade period—most of the krewes do charitable work throughout the year.



The King Cake

The celebration of Mardi Gras and **King Cake** parties are (until recently) unique to New Orleans. The Mardi Gras season officially begins on the Twelfth Night of Christmas, **January 6th**, also known to Christians as The **Epiphany**.

Since the third century the Epiphany has been observed as the day the Three Wise Men finally found the Infant Jesus. King Cakes were initiated to celebrate this holy day, a small baby doll is placed in each cake as a symbol of “finding the baby Jesus”.

King Cakes are oval shaped and decorated in the carnival colors of purple, green, and gold.

As the cake is cut, each person looks to see if their piece contains “the baby”. Many carnival clubs including the Twelfth Night Revelers choose the queen of their carnival by this tradition. Some believe that the person who gets the doll will have a year of good fortune.



Traditionally, to continue the festivities through carnival, the person who finds the baby brings the King Cake to the next celebration. In some circles, they are also responsible for throwing the next party.

Our King Cake does not contain a baby doll, since to those unfamiliar with the tradition it is a potential choking hazard, and watching someone administer the Heimlich manuever is a sure way to dampen the party atmosphere we're trying to create.