

## *Mardi Gras / Fat Tuesday*

## *Shrove Tuesday*



Mardi Gras is a Christian holiday and popular cultural phenomenon that dates back thousands of years. Also known as Carnival or Carnaval, it's celebrated in many countries around the world, mainly those with large Roman Catholic populations. It is celebrated on the day before the religious season of Lent begins, also known as "Fat Tuesday". It is the big hurrah before Christians start Lent, a season of prayer, penance and the 40-day fasting in preparation for the Easter season. Brazil, Venice and New Orleans play host to some of the holiday's most famous public festivities, drawing thousands of tourists and revelers every year.

### King Cake

The story behind one of Mardi Gras' most popular foods dates back to the Middle Ages. That's when people began celebrating the tradition of the Three Kings, who brought gifts to the baby Jesus on Twelfth Night (the end of Christmas and the beginning of Epiphany).

The custom arose to eat a special kind of cake for the occasion. King cakes are now consumed throughout the season, beginning on Twelfth Night (January 6) and ending on Mardi Gras. Originally just a simple ring of dough, the king cake took different forms over the years; today, the most popular form is a braided Danish pastry laced with cinnamon and iced in the Mardi Gras colors of purple, green and gold.

According to a tradition a tiny baby figurine (meant to represent Jesus) was baked into each king cake. The baby is usually made of plastic, but in past years was sometimes porcelain or even gold. According to custom, whoever gets the baby in his or her slice must buy the next cake or host the next party.

- In 1703, the tiny settlement of Fort Louis de la Louisiane (Mobile, AL) celebrated America's very first Mardi Gras.
- New Orleans was established in 1718 and by the 1730s Mardi Gras was celebrated openly in New Orleans. When the Spanish took control of New Orleans, they abolished the rowdy rituals, and the bans remained in force until Louisiana became a U.S. state in 1812.
- The first Mardi Gras parade was held on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1857.
- The colors of Mardi Gras are Purple (Justice), Green (Faith) and Gold (Power). The colors came to play in 1892.
- By law, all float riders must always have a mask on. The tradition of throwing trinkets started in the 1870s and continues today. Typically throws include beads, cups and stuffed animals.

### Shrove Tuesday is also known as Pancake Day

It was started when Christians needed to use up their supply of eggs, milk and butter in preparation for Lent. Pope St. Gregory had prohibited Christians from eating all forms of meat and animal products during Lent. Pancakes were the easiest thing to use the products up.....and so Pancake Day was born.



With COVID-19, in Lieu of Mardi Gras Parades, Artists Are Turning New Orleans Homes Into Wildly Creative 'House Floats'.



## Flambeaux

Flambeaux is a Mardi Gras tradition that has become revered as an art form today, having blossomed well beyond the practical purpose it first served. In the beginning, the flambeaux were needed for revelers to see the Carnival parades at night. Flambeaux was a tradition that arose out of necessity but also illustrated elements of emerging American culture and social classes. The flambeaux were originally carried by slaves and free men of color, namely Creoles. Carrying these “flambeaux” soon became a performance art, with bearers prancing and twirling their torches alongside the floats. Parade-watchers would throw tips to the torch carriers more in response to the elaborate performances than the light itself. Flambeaux may no longer be needed for the crowd to see the parade, but they are still vital to the Mardi Gras tradition and likely won’t see their flame burn out anytime soon.

## The Skull and Bone Gangs

The Skull and Bone Gangs serve to bless Carnival by stirring the spirits, thus warding off sickness and injury and ensuring a safe celebration. In the early hours of Mardi Gras day, the Skull and Bone gangs roam the streets, walking with stilts, wearing handcrafted skulls, skeleton suits, and carrying animal bones. With harmless mischief—knocking on doors, beating drums, shouting and singing—they alert the community that Mardi Gras has arrived.



## Mardi Gras Indians

A unique and historic subculture of New Orleans, Mardi Gras Indians and their traditions date back to the 1800s when Native Americans helped shield runaway slaves. Mardi Gras Indian culture is influenced by both ancestral enslaved Africans and the friendship forged with Native Americans. The Mardi Gras Indian tradition is rooted in a legacy of resistance. The Mardi Gras Indian tribes are noted for their exquisite costumes, public performances at Carnival, and their musical contributions. The Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans endure as the preservers of a distinctive cultural legacy.

The Mardi Gras Indians are one of New Orleans’ greatest cultural treasures. Every year, the tribes take to the streets, bringing generations of history right along with them.

When African Americans were banned from mainstream Mardi Gras Krewes, they created their own celebration known as Carnival in their own neighborhoods. Eager paraders took to their respective neighborhoods and began celebrating on their own. These various communities would continue on to make up their own tribes of Mardi Gras Indians. There are over 40 Mardi Gras Indian tribes.

Stretching from Uptown to downtown, each tribe has its own customs, traditions, history and of course, style. Their hand-sewn creations feature intricate beadwork and dramatic images and rank among the nation's best folk art. Worn just once, the suits take an entire year to create and can cost thousands of dollars depending on the member’s position in the tribe and craftsmanship. With hundreds of thousands of beads, brightly dyed ostrich plumes, sequins, velvet and rhinestones sewn on by hand, some end up weighing as much as 150 pounds. Mardi Gras Indian suits are truly a labor of love and tradition.

Music, typically call-and-response chanting with tambourines and other handheld percussion plays a central role in the Mardi Gras Indian parading. With their formal hierarchy, the Indians grace the streets of New Orleans’ neighborhoods in friendly competition over which tribe is the “prettiest.”

## The Baby Dolls

The Baby Dolls are a New Orleans’ African American Carnival tradition that dates back to 1912. The Baby Dolls are made up of women wearing fancy dresses who parade through Tremé and other largely African American neighborhoods. After decades of being inactive, the Baby Dolls tradition was revived in 2004 and is growing stronger each year.

**It is a beautiful sight to encounter Indians, Skeletons, and Baby Dolls gathering on Mardi Gras Day.**

