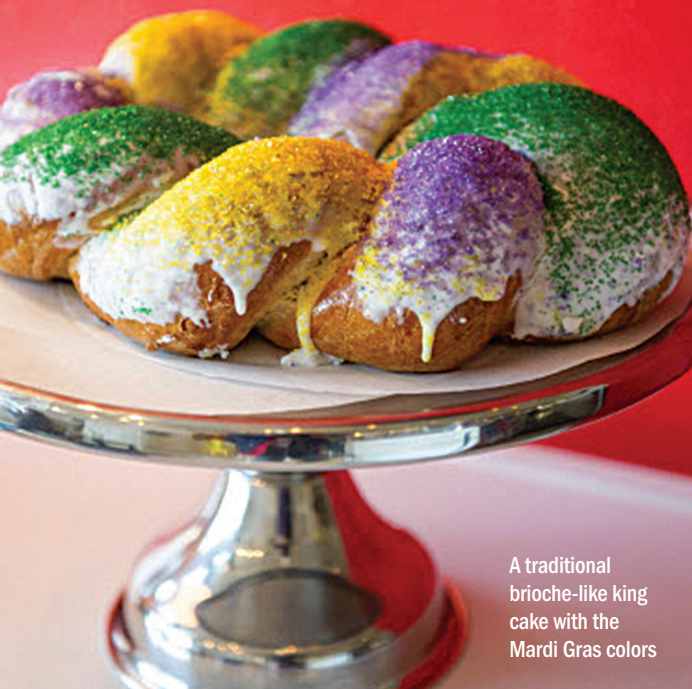


WHAT
HAPPENED

The first
Mardi Gras
queen was
selected
with a
king cake
in 1871.

The king cake isn't



A traditional
brioche-like king
cake with the
Mardi Gras colors

exclusively from New Orleans, but like so many other things, New Orleans has made the king cake its own.

Mentions of king cake are found as early as the 1300s as the Twelfth Night cake in England, the Rocca de Reyes in Spain and the Gâteau De Rois in France. Some scholars date the king cake to earlier pre-Christian origins during Saturnalia in Rome, a winter solstice celebration when a person who found a fava bean in a cake became king for the day.

The round cakes were made more acceptable to the Catholic Church when they were eaten around Epiphany, and the bean was replaced by a porcelain figurine representing a biblical king.

The cakes made their way to New Orleans in about 1870, where they were predominantly a brioche dough — the version of the cake popular in southern France. But the northern version, of puff pastry and almond filling, has also been made since the early days. The cakes were used by Carnival krewes to select their first queens in the late 19th century.

The cakes, though, were more of a novelty until the 1950s when the public started buying them en masse at McKenzie's, which popularized the sweet brioche with a porcelain and then a plastic baby inside. The cakes are available from Epiphany through Mardi Gras

Today, more than a half-million cakes are sold in New Orleans each year.

The 1774 painting 'Le gâteau des Rois', by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, shows a French family eating a puff pastry king cake.



The puff pastry king cake, filled with almond paste, came from northern France.



A Spanish and Spanish-American version of the king cake, the roscón de reyes, or kings' ring, is traditionally eaten to celebrate Epiphany.



Gambino's bakery has been making king cakes since 1949.



The Kupcake Factory bite-size king cakes