



HISTORY.COM

The History of Mardi Gras

Also known as "fat Tuesday," this pre-Lenten festival is celebrated in Roman Catholic countries and communities. In a strict sense, Mardi Gras, or Shrove Tuesday, is celebrated by the French as the last of the three days of Shrovetide and is a time of preparation immediately before Ash Wednesday and the start of the fast of Lent. Mardi Gras is thus the last opportunity for merrymaking and indulgence in food and drink. In practice, the festival is generally celebrated for one full week before Lent. Mardi Gras is marked by spectacular parades featuring floats, pageants, elaborate costumes, masked balls, and people dancing in the streets.

Mardi Gras originated as one of the series of carnival days held in all Roman Catholic countries between Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, and Ash Wednesday; these carnivals had their origin in pre-Christian spring fertility rites. The most famous modern Mardi Gras festivities are those held in New Orleans, La.; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Nice, France; and Cologne, Germany.

The first American Mardi Gras was celebrated near modern-day New Orleans on March 3, 1699. It wasn't until the mid-1800s did official parade organizations start to form with the Mystick Krewe of Comus in 1856 and the Krewe of Rex in 1872. The tradition is still carried on in New Orleans with many other krewes represented on floats in a myriad of parades. The official colors of Mardi Gras are purple, green and gold (representing justice, faith and power).

Mardi Gras celebrations can start as early as January 6, on the feast of Epiphany. The festivities end at midnight on Tuesday--the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Mardi Gras day falls on any Tuesday between February 3 and March 9. Like Ash Wednesday, the date Mardi Gras falls on depends on the date of Easter--always occurring 46 days before Easter.

Serving a King's Cake during Mardi Gras celebrations is a tradition that honors the Magi who visited the Christ child on the twelfth night or Epiphany (January 6). The cake is shaped in a ring with a pecan, bean or plastic baby placed inside the dough, before baking, to represent the baby Jesus. The cake is then decorated with the purple, green and gold colors of Mardi Gras, and divided among guests. Whoever finds the baby doll will host the next King's Cake celebration.

The tradition of Mardi Gras is celebrated annually around the world. Its origins can be traced back more than 5000 years ago to the ancient Greeks. Find out more about this ritual, and uncover the recent history. behind how carnival is celebrated in America.

