



MAKING MARDI GRAS

Mardi Gras is a time for celebration, filling the streets with frolicking, festive spirit and more than a few interesting outfits. Most local natives can easily regale an audience with facts about Fat Tuesday's inception, but for those who are less familiar, the start of "The Greatest Free Show on Earth" may surprise you.

"Fat Tuesday" is simply the translation of Mardi Gras from French, where much of the annual celebration's origins are rooted. During the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, specifically in Rome and Venice, before making its way to the French House of the Bourbons, "Boeuf Gras" (fatted calf) began the day before Ash Wednesday and represented the practice of eating far richer foods before the Lenten fast. On March 2nd, 1699, French-Canadian explorer Jean Baptiste Le Moyne Sieur de Bienville arrived some 60 miles south of New Orleans, and upon the epiphany that it was the night before the revelrous holiday, dubbed the plot "Pointe du Mardi Gras" as well as establishing "Fort Louis de la Louisiane" (now Mobile) in 1702. This tiny Louisiana settlement would soon become the scene of the first Mardi Gras celebration in 1703.

Mobile's institution of Masque de la Mobile, a secret society, formed the basis for how parades would be funded in the future—by their own members. From 1704 until 1709, this original society stayed in place, but was eventually replaced by the Boeuf Gras Society in 1711. This society would continue to operate uninterrupted for the next 150 years, cementing the practice of parades and growing ever more ornate with each annual celebration. New Orleans' establishment in 1718 by Bienville ushered in another

facet of the festivities, and by the 1730s, Mardi Gras was being celebrated openly—though some might say their idea of celebration compared to the present is as stark a contrast as night to day.

MASKS, BALLS, FLAMES & FLOATS

Louisiana's Governor in the 1740s began the tradition of elegant society balls, shrouded in romance and mystery with attendees donning masks and exquisite gowns. These formed the basis of modern society's New Orleans Mardi Gras balls, and the act of wearing masks has grown over time, making Mardi Gras the largest masked party in North America. Originally, mask wearing was intended to free revelers from society and class constraints. Now, everyone is free to wear masks on Fat Tuesday and float riders are in fact required by law to wear them.

Nearly 50 years later in the late 1830s, another tradition would be born: flambeau. This involved street processions of society mask-wearers in carriages and on horseback, their way lit by brilliant gaslight torches. Without these krewes (carnival parade societies and organizations), the revered pomp and circumstance of Mardi Gras might not be possible. The catch? Members remained anonymous, adding to the excitement of the holiday. Today, the King and Queen of each krewe still remain anonymous until the night of the ball.

Soon, the idea of floats would form, thanks to six young men from Mobile who created the Mistick Krewe of Comus. Next, Mardi Gras'

second official krewe, the Twelfth Night Revelers, would bring forth the first recorded instance of Mardi Gras "throws," also known as the items krewe members threw to parade attendees as the procession passed by. Doubloons, trinkets, toys, cups and of course, beads, were the most common items tossed, many of which can still be seen flying through the air today during the festivities.

AN ACCIDENTAL COLOR SCHEME

But where did the traditional Mardi Gras palette of purple, green and gold come from? Oddly enough, a Russian Grand Duke! In 1872, a group of savvy businessmen created a fictional King of Carnival dubbed "Rex" who would preside over the very first daytime parade. In a move to honor the visiting Russian Grand Duke Alexis Romanoff, the businessmen decided the Duke's family colors could serve as the official hues of Carnival, with purple symbolizing justice, gold for power and green for faith. Another Mardi Gras staple can also be credited to this same guest: "If I Ever Cease To Love," Mardi Gras' traditional anthem.

It wasn't until 1875 that Governor Henry Warmoth made Fat Tuesday an official holiday, which it remains, courtesy of the Mardi Gras Act. The annual celebration serves to create lasting memories for families and friends alike who come from near and far to observe an iconic holiday. Eating incredible food, socializing, dancing at elegant balls, parade gazing, collecting bagfuls of throws and wearing ornate masks shrouded in mystery...it's hard to imagine a more fitting way to commemorate the occasion, or a better city to do it in.

