

Mardi Gras 2026

It's time for parades, beads, masks and revelry.

It's time to fill up on the sweets and party all night. It's Mardi Gras time!

Before the big day – or week for our New Orleans friends – here's everything you need to know about Mardi Gras, including dates, the meaning of the holiday, traditions and more.

What is Mardi Gras?

Mardi Gras is the climax of Carnival season and is celebrated the day before the Christian season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. In French, Mardi Gras means "Fat Tuesday," another name for the holiday.

Carnival begins with Three Kings Day, also known as Epiphany and Little Christmas, and is a pre-Lent festival honoring the beginning of the new year and the rebirth of nature, according to [Britannica](#).



While the dates and exact celebrations of Carnival vary by location, the United States celebrates Mardi Gras beginning 10 days before Shrove Tuesday, also called "Pancake Tuesday" or "Pancake Day," when it is customary to eat all the fats in the house before Lent.

Shrove Tuesday comes from the practice of "shriving," purifying oneself through confession, before Lent, and is another element of the holiday, according to [Almanac](#).

When is Mardi Gras?

Because Mardi Gras is always observed on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, the date of observance changes each year but is typically held in either February or March.

This year, Mardi Gras will be celebrated on Feb. 17.

History of Mardi Gras

Fort Louis de la Mobile, located about 60 miles south of New Orleans, was named "Pointe du Mardi Gras" on March 2, 1699, by French-Canadian explorer Jean Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, also known as Sieur de Bienville, when his men and Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville came across the plot of land and realized it was the eve of Mardi Gras, according to [Mardi Gras New Orleans](#).

The first Mardi Gras celebration in America was celebrated in 1703 in the settlement of Fort Louis de la Mobile.

Mardi Gras was celebrated soon after the city of New Orleans was founded in 1718, but was briefly banned when the Spanish took control of New Orleans until Louisiana became a U.S. state in 1812, according to [History](#).



In 1827, a group of students wearing colorful costumes danced through the streets of New Orleans, copying the festivities they saw while visiting Paris. A decade later in 1837, the first Mardi Gras street parade was recorded and remains a yearly occurrence to this day.

Now, Louisiana is the only state that recognizes Mardi Gras as a legal holiday, although other states like Alabama and Mississippi have their own elaborate Carnival festivities.

How is Mardi Gras celebrated?

For those observing Shrove Tuesday and Pancake Day for religious reasons, the holiday is marked by attending church services and using up household ingredients by feasting with friends and family in preparation for fasting, according to [Christianity](#).

You might even see people enjoying pancake races, where participants run while flipping pancakes in a pan. The tradition dates back to 1445 in Olney, Buckinghamshire, where, upon hearing church

bells, a local woman ran out the door flipping pancakes in a skillet because she couldn't be late for the shriving service at church, according to Almanac.

Mardi Gras, known for more elaborate celebrations, is typically celebrated with jubilant music, street celebrations and parades, often occurring for the days leading up to Fat Tuesday, too. Carnival season is also marked by ornate costumes, street processions and masquerade balls in some countries.

Around the world, similar pre-Lenten festivals take place.

Brazil hosts weeklong Carnival festivities; Canada's Quebec City hosts the Quebec Winter Carnival; Germany celebrates Karneval (also known as Fastnacht or Fasching) with costume balls and the tradition of women cutting off men's ties; and Denmark celebrates Fasteval, a holiday similar to Halloween where children dress up and collect candy.

Mardi Gras traditions

Krewes

Krewes are an element of Mardi Gras dating back to 1857.

During that year, holiday celebrations in New Orleans became inundated with drunken debauchery and violence so city officials considered getting rid of the festivities. To avoid this, members of a group known as the Cowbellion de Rakin Society (which held an annual parade on New Year's Eve) stepped up to restore order.

The society formed a new organization, called the "Mystick Krewe of Comus," to stage their own Mardi Gras parades annually and ensure less chaotic gatherings. Today, more than 70 krewes operate in New Orleans, with elite balls, parades and supper dances for Carnival and Mardi Gras, according to [History](#).

Krewe of Rex, founded in 1872, is among the most famous Krewes. Officially called the "School of Design," a prominent person is chosen to be Rex, that year's King of Carnival and leader of the organization's group of esteemed citizens, and is given a symbolic key to the city by the mayor. The first Rex was the Grand Duke Alexei Romanov Alexandrovich, brother of the heir apparent to the Russian throne at the time.

Beads

Alexandrovich of the Krewe of Rex is credited with establishing purple, gold and green as the official colors of Mardi Gras, stemming from the colors of the duke's royal house. The colors translate to the beads thrown from parade floats into crowds, another holiday tradition, and each have a different meaning; purple represents justice, green for faith and gold for power, according to Almanac.

The beads were originally made from glass and tossed to crowd members who exhibited the traits of the beads, with those who caught them receiving good luck for the coming year. Beads are typically plastic but remain popular during Mardi Gras.

King cake



A king cake is a pastry with a tiny figurine of a baby baked into the dough to be revealed in a slice or bite of the bread, similar to how Jesus was revealed as the Son of God to the three wise men, according to [TimeandDate.com](#).

Catholics in New Orleans have a tradition of eating elaborate king cakes throughout the entire Epiphany season, like a "roscon de reyes" or "rosca de reyes," enjoyed in Latino countries, but king cakes are enjoyed by all Mardi Gras observers whether religious or not.

King cakes can also be made from a Danish pastry with cinnamon and icing in Mardi Gras colors. Whoever finds the baby within the cake is responsible for hosting the next party and getting the next king cake, according to Almanac.

Shriving bell

A Shrove Tuesday tradition is to repent sins in preparation for the start of Lent, marked by the ritual of

ringing church bells, known as the Shriving Bell, to call everyone to confession and let people know it's time to fry their pancakes, according to Christianity.

Some churches burn the palms distributed during the previous year's Palm Sunday liturgies to make ashes for Ash Wednesday the day after Shrove Tuesday.



Zulu coconuts



Parades are a major part of Mardi Gras celebrations, and if you find yourself in the crowd celebrating, chances are you'll encounter a Zulu coconut.

Zulu coconuts are one of the more eye-catching items to be thrown from holiday parade floats and are painted coconuts or balls thrown or handed to people by members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. Zulu is one of the oldest African American krewes, with its first parade dating back to 1909,

and began the tradition of throwing coconuts to members of the crowd in 1910, according to History.

Flambeaux



In all the revelry, you might be wondering how people keep their wits about themselves and don't get lost in all the fanfare. That's where flambeaux, the flame torches lighting the way for parade-goers during nighttime Mardi Gras celebrations, come in.

Flambeaux is French for "torch" and dates back to a custom established by the Comus krewe.

Mid-19th century towns didn't have the same sufficient street lighting available today, so torches were needed to make up for it. The original flambeaux carriers during

Mardi Gras were enslaved individuals and free men of color, who would receive coins tossed to them by crowds lining the parade route, according to History.

Today, the coin-tossing tradition continues, but flambeaux has transitioned into a performance art of its own, with carriers wearing robes and dancing and performing tricks with their torches.

Masks



Along with the trademark colors of Mardi Gras parade floats, elaborate masks are a signature part of the holiday fun.

The usage of masks dates back to early celebrations when masks allowed celebrants to hide their true selves, escaping societal and class expectations to let loose however they wished, according to Almanac.

Fried foods and rich treats

Given the fasting that follows Shrove Tuesday, there are plenty of tasty eats to go around during Mardi Gras.

Aside from a king cake, Mardi Gras is a time for beignets, pillow bits of fried dough dusted with powdered sugar.



In Poland, the Tuesday before Lent is called “Paczki Day” for the traditional Polish doughnuts that are puffy and jelly-filled, according to [Britannica](#).

Other delicacies you can find during Mardi Gras, according to Almanac, include:

- Faasenacht (also spelled “fastnacht”) among the Pennsylvania Dutch, a traditional rectangular doughnut with a slit in the middle.
- A sweet cream bun called “semla” in Sweden, where the holiday is known as “semmeldagen,” “semlans dag” or “fettisdagen.”

[When is Mardi Gras 2026? Origins, date and how to celebrate](#)