

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

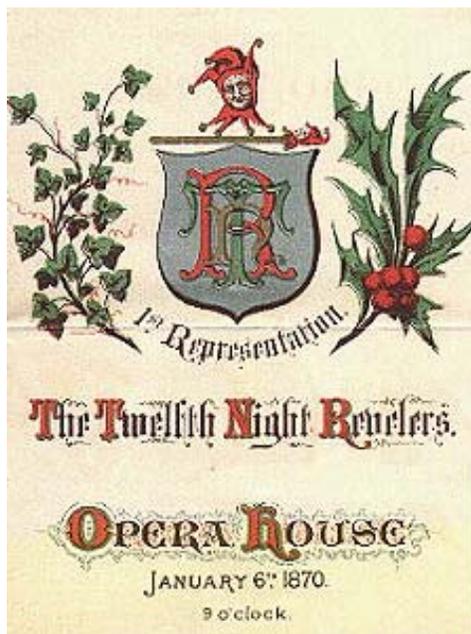
*By Ned Hémard*

### King Cakes and Twelfth Night,

### Or What You Will

"If music be the food of love, play on." These are the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and there probably couldn't be any four better words to describe the life and culture of New Orleans: "Music," "food," "love" and "play". They're all here, and they begin in New Orleans with Twelfth Night, or the Feast of the Epiphany.

At the end of the "twelve days of Christmas" comes January 6, when New Orleanians send their Christmas trees off for wetlands restoration and when king cakes begin production (although many bakeries have jumped the gun in recent years due to the overwhelming demand). The Mardi Gras season is also officially underway, and an old established carnival krewe, Twelfth Night Revelers, holds its annual ball. How did this come to be?



*Very first invitation,  
Twelfth Night Revelers, 1870*

It all has to do with that Twelfth Night long ago when the three wise gift-bearing kings, or Magi, visited the Christ child. This manifestation of Christ's divinity is commemorated each year. That is the reason that when we say we have "had an epiphany," it means we've experienced a sort of divine revelation. These kings are remembered on Twelfth Night, which in New Orleans is also called Kings' Day.

In France, King's Day is called *Petit Noël*, or Little Christmas. There, balls were held where a cake made of *brioche* dough was served. It is said that Louis XIV participated in at least one of these festivities where a bean, or perhaps a jeweled token, was hidden in the cake. Some opine that this is the reason it is called *Galette des Rois* or *Gâteau des Rois* (Kings' Cake), but the custom goes back much earlier. Medieval monarchs would have lively entertainments with jugglers, acrobats, conjurers, jesters and other comical characters.



Artwork by Lauren Hémard

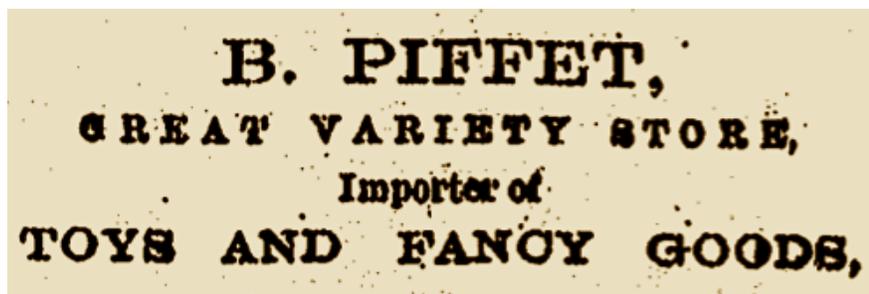
Such a motley crew of characters was organized by the Lord of Misrule, whose task it was to orchestrate these performers. A lot of these revelries pre-date Christianity itself, for one of the ways the King of Saturnalia was chosen was by discovering a fava bean in a piece of cake. Early bean kings were chosen sacred kings of the tribe for a year, then sacrificed so their blood would go back into the soil for a successful harvest.

Twelfth Night Revelers continued the medieval traditions in New Orleans at its first *bal masque* in 1870. A huge cake was cut and its

slices served to the ladies by the Revelers. The lady who received the golden bean would become queen. But the jesters and court fools made a mess of serving the cake, and the finder of the bean remained bashfully silent. It was not until the following year, 1871, when their monarch, also called the Lord of Misrule, knew the pre-ordained recipient, Emma Butler, and crowned her Queen before all present. There was no Queen for the carnival season before then. Comus had not yet crowned one, and Rex would not roll for another year.

In 1871, the second fantastic parade (of six the krewe would stage) rolled out. "It was a gorgeous sight," reported the *Picayune*, "when the Revelers, as if by magic, appeared on the south side of the market hall, and a splendid array of grotesque masques, on foot and on fantastically decorated wagons, moved slowly onward." People "thronged" to view the Revelers along "Canal, Camp, Carondelet, Poydras and the other streets, whither they were attracted by the anticipated fairy spectacle." The theme was "Mother Goose's Tea Party," and it was at this parade that the first recorded New Orleans Mardi Gras throws were introduced.

"To the rear of the gaudy pageant," reported the *Picayune*, "in an old fashioned barouche, the universally beloved Santa Claus" gave out the trinkets. He delivered them "alternately out of a panier\* with which his back was encumbered, and out of a box marked 'From Piffet's, Canal street,' standing at his feet."



*1870 Picayune ad, B. Piffet, purveyor of the first Mardi Gras throws*

B. Piffet, located at 127 Canal Street, advertised "Toys! Toys!! Toys!!! – Largest stock in the country" and "Rich, Fancy and Useful Artifacts From all parts of the Known World". The Twelfth Night Revelers inaugurated the tradition in 1871 of bestowing baubles to the crowds, and "Throw Me Somethin', Mister" has been a familiar cry at Mardi Gras ever since.

The Twelfth Night Revelers in 1872 (with the theme, "English Humour") introduced the tradition of gold bean *and* silver beans. Today, a young woman dressed in a white ball gown (usually a debutante of the season) opens a tiny cake box to discover the lone golden bean. Moments later, she is transformed to monarchical

status. Maids of the court receive a silver bean. Right before that, adult Revelers (dressed as pastry chefs wearing billowing toques) roll out an elaborate oversized mock cake. Similarly attired junior chefs are on hand to assist in the festivities.

But at one time McKenzie's Bakery baked king cakes for the "Twelfth Night" organization. Henry McKenzie owned a bakery on Prytania Street that was sold to the Entringer family in 1935. Donald Entringer would place trinkets supplied by a jeweler in the cakes for the Revelers. At first, about a dozen cakes were baked, with about half going to the ball with the remainder placed in the store. These numbers would grow exponentially as king cake purchases increased.



*Rouses revs up early for Carnival with king cakes stacked high*

King cake parties have always been popular New Orleans events. Whoever got the bean (or later the baby) would be king or queen and have to host the next party. Some swallowed the evidence in order to avoid the expense of hosting the next *fête*. Eventually, that was no longer a possibility.

Around 1940, a friend of Entringer's began supplying him with porcelain dolls from China to put in the cakes. They couldn't be swallowed easily like a bean, but they could break a tooth. Years later the much safer plastic baby (representing the Christ child) would begin inhabiting the king cakes of New Orleans. McKenzie's is no longer in operation, but countless other Greater New Orleans bakeries produce a

wide variety of king cakes which are shipped around the world. There are even gold babies, black babies and those that glow in the dark. Some are even packed outside the cake so the purchaser can perform the insertion.



*Toque-centric Twelfth Night Revelers 1967 Invitation*

The traditional New Orleans king cake is oval-shaped (but also round) and decorated with colored sugars of purple, green and gold, the Mardi Gras colors. Back in France (and now in some Louisiana bakeries), there is a difference between the *Gâteau des Rois* of *brioche* popular in the south of France and the *Galette* more common in the north. The *Galette* features layers of delicate puff pastry surrounding an almond-paste *frangipane*. These cakes have a more glossy sugary finish than New Orleans' granular one. *Galettes* may contain porcelain figures known as *fèves* and are often sold with a paper crown. *Fève* is French for bean.

In France today the king cake is called the *couronne*, or crown. It is a round cake of sweetened *brioche* dough, with coarse sugar, red and green glazed cherries and an apricot glaze coating. The trinkets inside each year are new and different, just as Mardi Gras is unique each year for New Orleanians.



*Colorful fèves, porcelain figurine charms, which are baked inside French King Cakes (from the author's collection)*

"Our ancestors made it the most agreeable of the holidays," is how the *Picayune* described Twelfth Night in 1871. "The Twelfth Night revels is a connecting link with the past. It is memorable in history as it is joyous in romance."

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"King Cakes and Twelfth Night"  
Ned Hémard  
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\* Definition of panier: If you ask "Is it bigger than a breadbasket?" - the answer would be "No". A panier *is* a breadbasket, *panis* being Latin for bread. It can also be a large basket for carrying goods or provisions, sometimes slung on either side of a pack animal. Similarly, although I hate to make the comparison, paniers (or panniers) are side-hooped undergarments worn by ladies in the 17th and 18th centuries. Think Velázquez.