

taste of tradition

Long Live the King

This purple, green, and gold pastry is the star of Mardi Gras parties around the South.

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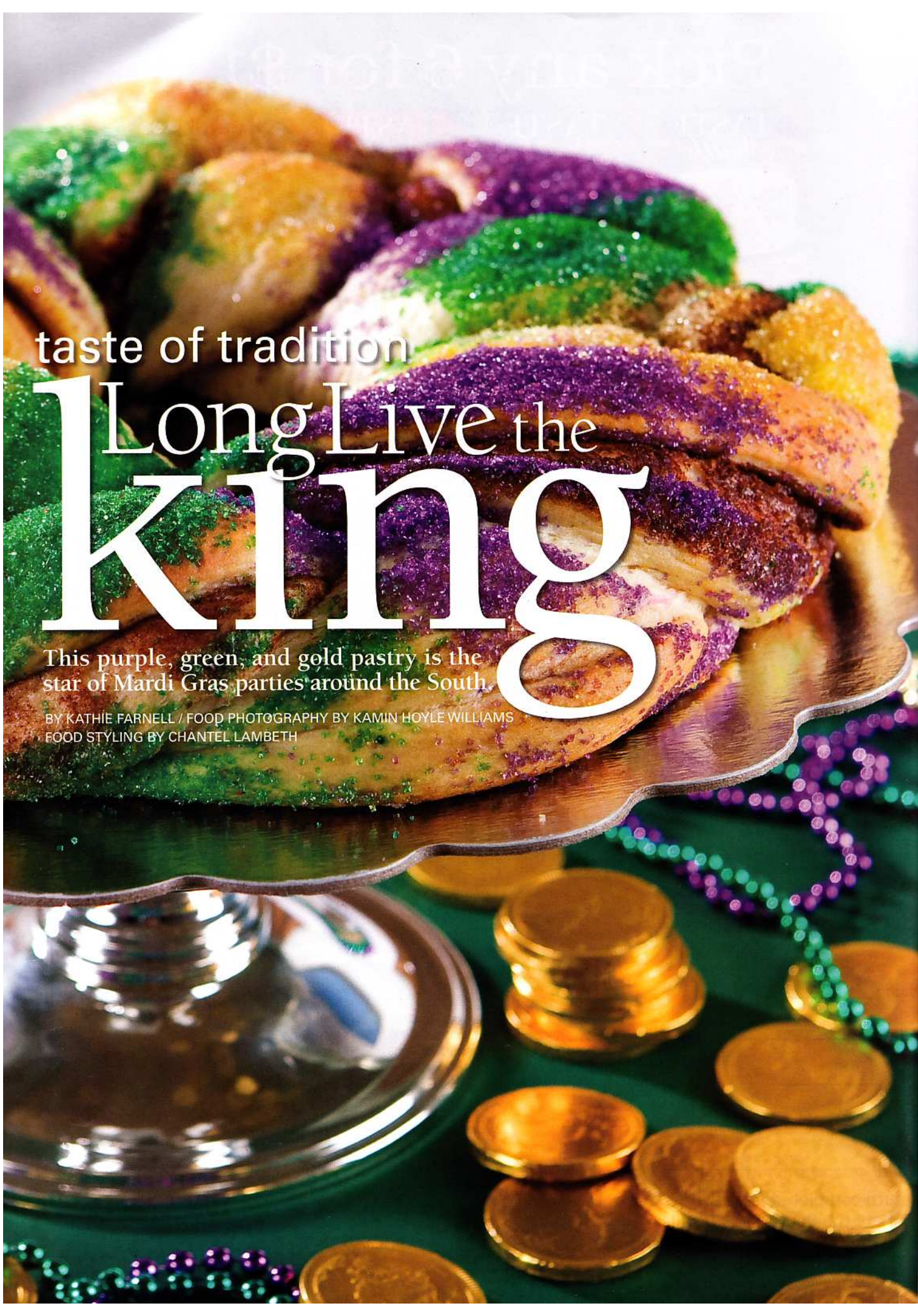


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COURTESY OF NEW ORLEANS CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU



FROM TWELFTH NIGHT TO MARDI GRAS, the king cake, shaped like a crown and frosted or sprinkled with colored sugar, is the traditional confection of Carnival.

It is believed that king cake came to New Orleans from France in the 1870s and evolved from a traditional pastry made to celebrate Epiphany, or Twelfth Night, the twelfth day after Christmas. The crown shape honored the Three Wise Men, and the colors came from a Mardi Gras flag designed for Russia's Grand Duke Alexis, who arrived in New Orleans just in time to celebrate Carnival in 1872. Throughout the Gulf States, king cake makes its yearly appearance as a tasty harbinger of Mardi Gras, and some bakeries will ship the cakes directly to your door.

My personal king cake epiphany happened years ago at a New Orleans brunch in the Garden District. My first glimpse of the purple, green, and gold pastry left me a little doubtful—it looked like a kindergartener's failed experiment with Play-Doh. But after one bite of the tender, not-too-sweet, cinnamon center, I was hooked.

The Big Easy remains the classic home of king cake. But bakeries around the South now take pride in preparing the sweetened yeast dough that's traditionally flavored with cinnamon and can be filled with sweetened cream cheese or fruit.

If you want to make your own king cake this year, try the following recipes. Long live the king!



that little plastic baby

Originally, a dried pea or bean was baked inside the king cake. Whoever found the pea was guaranteed good luck for the year and named king or queen for the day. The downside is that the winner was then obligated to pay for the next day's round of king cake. Beginning in the 1930s, a tiny figure of a baby—who may represent the Baby Jesus—was substituted for the pea. Today the little plastic infants are optional. King cakes bought from a bakery usually include the figure separately so that each host can decide whether to include it in the cake. One concern is that a guest may swallow the tiny plastic piece.

If you're baking your own king cake and wish to include the small figure, you can order one from mardigrasday.com.



ORDERING KING CAKES

Haydel's Bakery: haydelbakery.com

Rao's Bakery: raosbakery.com

Paul's Pastry Shop: paulspastry.com

taste of tradition king cake



traditional

haydel's king cake

Adapted from a recipe by Haydel's Bakery,
New Orleans

Yield: 10 servings

Preparation: 30 minutes

Rise: 2½ hours

Bake: 15 minutes

- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup all-vegetable shortening
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup whole milk, at room temperature
- 2 (.25-ounce) packages active yeast
- 1/4 teaspoon lemon extract
- 1/4 teaspoon orange extract
- 1/4 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/4 teaspoon butter flavor
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup canola oil
- 1/2 cup cinnamon sugar
- Colored sugar in purple, green, and yellow (See page 82.)

LINE a baking sheet with parchment paper; set aside.

IN A LARGE BOWL, combine sugar, salt, and shortening. Beat at low speed with an electric mixer until creamy. Add eggs, one at a time, and continue to beat until well blended.

DISSOLVE yeast in milk; let stand for 5 minutes. Stir in extracts and flavoring. Add milk mixture to egg mixture, mixing to combine. Add flour, mixing until well combined.

TURN dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead into a ball. Sprinkle dough with flour, cover with a kitchen towel, and let rise in a warm place (85°), free from drafts, for 1½ hours.

ROLL dough into a 16-x-12-inch oblong shape, and brush evenly with oil. Sprinkle liberally with cinnamon sugar. Fold dough in half lengthwise, cut into three lengthwise strips, and braid.

STARTING AT ONE END, pull braid gently to elongate it and shape into a circle. Place on prepared baking sheet. Let dough rise in a warm place (85°) until doubled in size, approximately 1 hour. Sprinkle dough with desired amount of colored sugar.

PREHEAT oven to 370°.

BAKE until golden, 12 to 15 minutes.

supereasy king cake

Adapted from *Froggy Bottom*, a cookbook
by Faye Brydels and Donna Jenkins

Yield: 10 servings

Preparation: 10 minutes

Bake: 15 minutes

1 (17.5-ounce) can refrigerated
cinnamon rolls with icing, such
as Pillsbury Grands!

Colored sugar in green, yellow,
and purple (See page 82.)

PREHEAT oven to 375°. Spray a 9-inch
round cake pan with nonstick cooking
spray; set aside.

UNROLL 3 cinnamon rolls into long
strips. Carefully fold each strip in half.
Twist each strip a couple of times.
Place twisted rolls in prepared cake
pan to form a circle.

REPEAT using 2 remaining rolls, placing
2nd circle of dough inside 1st circle of
dough and leaving a hole in the center.
BAKE until golden, approximately 15
minutes. Remove from pan, and let
cool completely on a wire rack. Spread
icing from cinnamon rolls over king
cake. Sprinkle with desired amount of
colored sugar.





sweetie pies' king cake

Adapted from a recipe by Sweetie Pies Bakery, Foley, Alabama

Yield: 12 Servings

Preparation: 1½ hours

Bake: 15 minutes

- 1 (16-ounce) package hot roll mix
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted, divided
- 1 cup cinnamon sugar
- 1 cup finely chopped pecans
- 1 recipe King Cake Icing (Recipe follows.)

Colored sugar in green, yellow, and purple (See recipe at right above.)

LIGHTLY SPRAY a baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray; set aside.

MIX hot roll dough according to package

directions. Shape dough into a ball. Cover, and let rise in a warm place (85°), free from drafts, for 15 minutes. Punch down dough, and divide in half. **ON A LIGHTLY FLOURED SURFACE**, roll each portion into a 12-x-8-inch rectangle. Brush 1 tablespoon melted butter evenly on each rectangle. Sprinkle ½ cup cinnamon sugar evenly on each rectangle. Top each with ½ cup pecans.

STARTING WITH LONG SIDE, roll each rectangle lengthwise into a jelly-roll shape. Place 1 roll on prepared baking sheet, forming it into a half circle. Repeat with remaining roll to form a complete circle or oval ring, pinching dough together at ends to seal. Let rise in a warm place (85°), free from drafts, until almost double in size, approximately 1 hour.

make your own colored sugar

Making your own colored sugar to decorate your king cake is easy, according to David Haydel Jr. of Haydel's Bakery in New Orleans. You'll need 3 cups of sugar and 1 teaspoon each of yellow, green, and purple food coloring.

Just combine 1 cup sugar and yellow food coloring in a metal bowl. Mix with a wire whisk until sugar turns yellow. Transfer sugar to a resealable plastic bag or a separate bowl, and set aside. Repeat process with green and purple food colorings.

David's Tip: If you mix the colors in this order (yellow, green, purple), you can reuse the mixing bowl and the whisk.

PREHEAT oven to 375°.

BAKE until golden, approximately 15 minutes. Let cake cool completely.

SPREAD King Cake Icing on cake, and sprinkle with desired amount of colored sugar.

king cake icing

Yield: approximately 2 cups

Preparation: 5 minutes

- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 1 tablespoon whole milk

IN A MEDIUM BOWL, combine cream cheese, confectioners' sugar, and milk, beating at medium speed with an electric mixer until smooth.