King Cake rich in taste, tradition

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Ellen Lane has enjoyed King Cake almost every year of her life. She's brought them back from visits to her hometown New Orleans, had them shipped from Louisiana bakeries, bought them from her local Publix.

Just a couple of weeks ago, her in-laws visited from Covington, La., and had two King Cakes with them.

All three of her children have introduced King Cake to their classmates and Lane has celebrated with friends, co-workers, neighbors and strangers the "magnificence of a King Cake and all that it represents."

King Cake is eaten during Mardi Gras season and New Orleans, as we know, is Mardi Gras central.

"The flavor of King Cake has definitely improved over the years," Lane, 56, of Melbourne, said in an e-mail. "They used to be basically a coffee cake with purple, green and gold sugar topping. Now they have much more flavor and the addition of various fillings. Today I had a strawberry filling. Tomorrow I'm having cream cheese filling. My favorite has both fillings."

New Orleans may be home to the cinnamon dough brioche with the baby doll inside, but Brevard County could be considered the King Cake's Florida getaway.

While Mardi Gras isn't until March 8, Heavenly Bake Shoppe in Cocoa Village already has lots of King Cake orders coming in, according to baker Tom Wieckowski. Vanessa Correa of Just Cakes in Melbourne said she generally makes on request five to eight King Cakes during Mardi Gras season.

And Robin Ryan of A Chef's Touch Catering Service, always has a King Cake for the Mardi Gras parties she caters.

"You get a Christmas ham, pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving, it's King Cake for Mardi Gras," Wieckowski said. He added a pitch for the bakery's King Cake.

"You can get a King Cake from the local Publix grocery store. Here it's homemade, with all the love and care I can give," he said.
A King Cake is an oval cinnamon dough brioche that sometimes has fillings, such as cream cheese or strawberry. It is decorated with three sugar colors: green (faith), purple (justice) and gold (power), said Chef Charles Immondi of Keiser University-Melbourne. A plastic baby doll is inserted into the cake. (Some bakeries don’t put the baby inside because of potential choking hazards).

"The person who gets the piece containing this doll is said to have good luck for the coming year and must purchase the next King Cake," he said.

King Cake dates back to ancient times when tribes celebrated surviving winter by baking a crown-shaped cake using the preceding year’s wheat, according to "Mardi Gras in New Orleans: An Illustrated History" by Arthur Hardy. A seed, bean or nut was placed in the cake; "whoever found whatever was put in the cake would be declared king," Hardy said in an interview. He said later, the Romans chose a king for their festivals by lottery.

The Catholic Church linked the custom to the Feast of Epiphany in the 4th century, according to Hardy's book. Epiphany or Kings Day -- the day the wise men visited Jesus -- is Jan. 6, 12 days after Christmas.

Hardy writes in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Roi de la Fève, (King of the Bean) -- the name given to the person who found the bean in the cake -- was celebrated in art and literature in Europe; "Twelfth Cakes" were featured annually in England.

French settlers brought the gateau des rois (King Cake) custom with them and Twelfth Night rituals became commonplace in Creole homes in New Orleans, he wrote. The Twelfth Night Revelers sealed the Mardi Gras connection with a parade and ball in 1870, and had a large King Cake on display.

Over the years, the bean became a porcelain doll -- people were swallowing the bean -- and then porcelain became plastic. Plastic costs less than porcelain and people were chipping their teeth, Hardy said.

Some say the doll represents Jesus.

While much of the religious significance has been lost, in New Orleans, it's not uncommon to eat King Cake every day during Mardi Gras season, which, this year, runs from Jan. 6 until March 8, the day...
before Ash Wednesday.

LouisianaLiving.com, an online retailer of Louisiana specialty foods, took orders from three companies for a total of 1,000 King Cakes in one day recently, owner Jady Regard said. He said Louisiana companies send the treat to out-of-state clients as a way to touch base.

"There's a certain generation of people in Louisiana that are coming up that are really proud of our culture," Regard said, whose business is based in New Iberia, La. He started making King Cakes a couple of years ago to bring in first quarter revenue.

"Food is a part of our culture. It's a way for us to share with the rest of the country a time of year that has always been a festive time of year. We want people to kind of celebrate with us," Regard said.

Haydel's Bakery in Jefferson, La., estimates it will sell 60,000 King Cakes during the Mardi Gras season, and half of those will be shipped, according to manager Dave Haydel.

Last year, the bakery made the world's largest King Cake when it baked and assembled two rings of wide, braided king cake around the Superdome to raise money for breast cancer. It broke the world record for the largest King Cake.

"It's a New Orleans tradition, and I guess with the limelight that the city got after Katrina, everybody kind of has a new affinity for the city," Haydel said. "The other thing is a lot of people that were transplanted because of Katrina, they are kind of like little ambassadors for the city. Any good New Orleanian knows they have to have a good King Cake between Kings Day and Mardi Gras Day."

Jennifer Phelps, co-owner of Sue Ann's Bakery in Indialantic, said Brevardians are latching onto the trend. She's already had several customers call and ask if the bakery makes King Cakes. The bakery, which is under new ownership, is making them by special order.

"It is very popular," Phelps said. "I think there's a lot of people here who like the tradition of having a King Cake."

Francis Laurent, 72 of Cocoa Beach, who was born and raised in New Orleans, said it always was fun to see who got the piece with the hidden trinket. He confesses he's not a big fan of King Cake, but has fond memories of the King Cake parties he attended during grade school.
"If the unlucky participant didn't fess up, someone would always volunteer to throw the next party, so the fun would always continue," he said in an e-mail.

Linda Willett Parrish, 68, of Cocoa Beach, brought the King Cake tradition back to Brevard after living in Slidell, La., for seven years. She always has a mini Mardi Gras party for her granddaughter's class at Roosevelt Elementary. Whoever gets the baby doll is king or queen for a day and gets to wear the beads she brings, she said.

"You can eat it anytime you want," Parrish said about King Cake. "Just like in the morning, you might have a piece of it for breakfast. You might have it as a snack or as something after dinner. It's good for anytime."

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