



# KING CAKE HISTORY

In order to understand where the custom of King Cakes, Mardi Gras and the Carnival Season all came from, we must go back to ancient Rome and the early pagan religions to understand all the meanings.

Pagan religions were practiced by people who lived off the land, so the flow of the seasons and the growth, harvest and then death of the crop was the central theme of pagan society ritual. Saturn was the god of agriculture and civilization. Saturnalia was the primary pagan holiday and was held on the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year... the day which has the least amount of light and the most night. Saturnalia commemorated the death and rebirth of nature: the death of darkness and the return of light.

The early Christian church, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., adopted the date of Saturnalia to commemorate the birth of Christ. By setting Christ's birthday on this holiday, the Church made an important statement that Christ was the new light to the world and was the rebirth of god's kingdom.

With Christmas now set on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the importance of January 6<sup>th</sup>, the 12<sup>th</sup> day following Christ's birth is clear. In the new testament, the story is told of "three wise men from the east" visiting the baby Jesus in Bethlehem on the twelfth day following his birth. This day is called Epiphany by the modern church: it is the day that we celebrate the revelation of Christ's divinity to mankind. Metaphorically, it is the day that the light of Christ was exposed to the world.

In the 4th century, the western world's most influential preacher, St. Augustine, romanticized and embellished the story of the Epiphany. The gift-bearing wise men became "kings," and Feast of the Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas, evolved into a major holiday imbued with royal associations.

Fast forward to medieval times and we start to see some of the trappings of carnival season so prevalent today:

- Royalty dressed in their finest regalia
- Extravagant balls thrown with elaborate entertainers such as acrobats, jugglers, harlequins and other humorous characters
- The selection of a temporary King and Queen to rule over the festivities

One practice to select the King and Queen was to place a bean or a coin in a special cake and then cut it into slices. The person who found a bean, or a coin, in his piece was the lucky king for the festivities.

Additional customs that developed over time include masks to hide one's identity, parades through town by groups of trade guilds and social clubs, and a general air of frivolity, foolishness and heavy drinking. While the Church did not condone these hedonistic practices, Carnival season came to be more or less accepted by Church fathers as a necessary period of foolishness and folly before the fasting and abstinence of Lent.

Because the day before Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent, was one of feasting, it came to be known as Fat Tuesday or, as the French would say, Mardi Gras.

This brings us to the King Cake itself and what it symbolizes.

- It is round like a crown, representing Christ's role as ultimate king, representing the three wise men who revealed Christ's divinity, and representing the crowning of a temporary king for the carnival festivities
- The colors of the sugar on the cake represent purple for justice, green for faith, and gold for power.
- While early cakes used a bean, symbolizing fertility and the return of the crops, today's cakes have a small baby as the prize, reminding us again of the baby Jesus.

While the old tradition of whoever getting the prize becoming king for the festival, now in offices and homes around the world, the person who gets the baby is supposed to buy the next king cake for the next get together.