

Crowning glory of king cake

By Elizabeth Rahe

I read "Mardi Gras King Cake," but the box that arrived on my front porch this Three Kings Day held much more. It was crowded with my five brothers and sisters and our little tract home in Metairie, La., my mom slicing into McKenzie's ring-shaped, sugar-crusted cake and each of us hoping to get the piece that swaddled the tiny baby Jesus figurine.

I never did get the baby. Seems to me my older brother, Teddy, usually got it — just because he figured out a way to get most everything he wanted. I have no clear memory of anyone in particular finding the plastic doll, however. Just that I didn't.

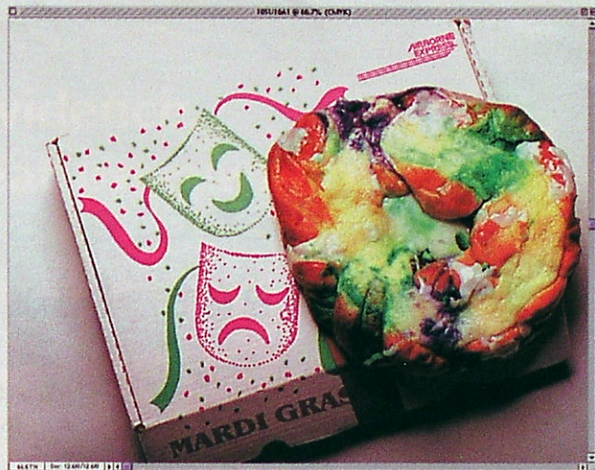
I do remember one time when no one found the prize — it was one of those childhood mysteries. I wanted to have a king cake party for my Brownie troop, so I asked Mom if we could bake cupcakes and put a baby Jesus inside one of them. We didn't have a plastic Jesus handy, so I dropped a peanut into one of the batter-filled cups instead.

I was so proud presenting those cupcakes to the troop on that Jan. 6, the first day of king-cake season. I told them that, according to New Orleans tradition, the person who got the baby in his or her cake was the king and had to give the next party (in our case, bring the cupcakes for the next meeting). This continued until the party of all parties, Mardi Gras, when adults in silly costumes and masks paraded through the streets on floats throwing necklaces, doubloons and candy at us children as we screamed, "Throw me something, mister."

If you were lucky, your dad built you a viewing box and mounted it on top of a ladder so you could see above the crowds. That is, as long as you didn't bicker with your brothers and sisters. If there was discord, you were evicted, the ladder-stand went back on the rooftop carrier, and you all went home disappointed.

My preamble at the Brownie meeting was not as detailed as this, I'm sure.

I'm just as sure that I gave one, not wanting to miss an opportunity for a bit of drama. Then we all tore into our cupcakes. Alas, no one came up with the nut. Did I forget to put it in? Did it disintegrate in the baking? Did Jesus resurrect Himself from the cupcake because it was too humiliating to be replaced by a legume? There were no answers.



Looking back, though, there is only one plausible reason: Teddy got it.

ON THREE KINGS DAY 2000, when I brought the Airborne Express box into the kitchen, I couldn't wait to share it, and those memories, with the kids. Our Ted, who is 13, asked if he could open it. I said let's wait. Then the phone rang — one of 10-year-old Nick's teachers. Soon I was deep in conversation, and Ted was quietly begging to open the box. I relented, and he ripped into it. Amid the white foam peanuts was a 12-inch ring in a plastic bag that read: "McKenzie's King Cake — Small." And it did look small. It was supposed to make 10 servings, but not at my house. At the bottom it said, "Note: Plastic Baby in Cake," I suppose for liability reasons. A bright orange sticker showed the price: \$3.29. I had paid \$16.95 more for packing, overnight delivery and decades-old memories.

I should have ordered the large traditional cake (\$5.59 plus) or at least the medium (\$4.29 plus). But Mom, who was always watching money, probably bought the small one. It just looked smaller now. I could have chosen from 17 sizes and styles of cakes, including iced or cheese- or fruit-filled. Then again, I

wanted the cake I remembered, and in the mid-'60s, the basic colored sugar-sprinkled one was king.

That's what McKenzie's president, Donald Entringer, told me when I called to ask about his cakes. He began running McKenzie's 64 years ago — long before my freckled nose was pressed against his bakery display case. At 84, he's still there, overseeing bakeries all over New Orleans and surrounding parishes. "When we had one bakery on Prytania Street, we would make 12 or 13 kings a day, and we thought that was great," he says. "Now we make 20,000 to 30,000 a week during season, and they are shipped all over the country."

The cake that ended up at my house in

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- Regular health and wellness assessments.
- Licensed nurse on staff.
- All utilities included, except telephone. Basic cable TV included.

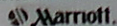
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Nothing is more annoying than finding the perfect recipe and then spending days or weeks tracking down that one exotic herb or spice. Well, then, be frustrated no more. Thanks to The Spice House (thespicehouse.com), virtually every herb, spice, and seasoning is only a mouse click away.

Whether it's everyday favorites (basil, thyme) or the truly bizarre (epazote, pomegranate molasses), you'll be hard-pressed to find a more bountiful selection. Each spice comes with recipes and a description of its uses, and you can order the spice in small amounts or in bulk. The cost is frequently less than what you would pay in a store — that is, if you could find it there in the first place.

If you're looking for exotic ingredients, you may also be interested in ethnic foods. EthnicGrocer.com (ethnicgrocer.com) is the one-stop shop for ingredients in foods from five regions of the world: Asia, the Mediterranean, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East.

Looking to explore some unfamiliar or exotic cuisine? Just choose a country, and the site will give you a brief introduction to the land, its people and the local cuisine. There are even recipes for typical meals.

If you find one you'd like to prepare, click on the "Buy Ingredients For This Recipe" button, and the ethnic items will automatically be added to your shopping cart. Now all you have to do is convince your kids to eat what you cook.

Gina Imperato is an associate editor for *Fast Times* magazine, where this story first appeared.

MARDI GRAS CAKES

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January looked a little worse for the trip. Moisture inside the bag had made the purple, green and gold sugars into an impressionist's Mardi Gras, the morning after. That didn't seem to bother the kids. By the time I got off the phone, Ted had already selected his piece.

"Did you feel the baby inside that piece?" I asked, accusingly. "No, I didn't," he said indignantly. "I just want that piece."

Nicholas, who is more into aesthetics, wanted one with green sugar. I sliced three pieces and took a bite of mine. It tasted

fresh and sweet and yeasty — like a bakery sweet roll but with the kid-pleasing grit of colored sugar. For a split second, I was 8 again. I was just about to start my spiel about the king cake legend and Mardi Gras and growing up in Metairie, when Ted announced, "I got the baby," and held up the peachy-pink figure like a trophy.

Darn. Missed it again.

We never should have named him Ted.

Elizabeth Rahn is a freelance writer.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

You can't order McKenzie's king cakes on the Web, but you can read about them online (the address is www.nola.com/mardigras/food/king-cake.html; the link is "king cake contest"). Company president Donald Entringer says it's too impersonal. "We bake them in the morning and ship them out, and if something happens and people don't get them, they get mad. We

need to talk to them on the phone."

The bakery offers 17 cakes, in various sizes, fruit- or cheese-filled, iced or sugared. Prices range from \$3.29 to \$18.50, plus \$16.95 for next business day delivery.

McKenzie's Pastry Shoppes
2847 Desire Parkway
New Orleans, LA 70126
Phone: 504-944-8771