HOW THE GOOD TIMES GOT ROLLING
The History and Traditions of Celebrating Mardi Gras

While many may only associate Mardi Gras with parties, beads and revelry, Mardi Gras is traditionally a family-based celebration, dating back to the 1700s in Louisiana.

The history of Mardi Gras – translated from French as “Tuesday” (Mardi) and “fat” (Gras) – began thousands of years ago. Early Christians borrowed the ancient Roman celebration of Lupercalia, a circus-like carnival, to celebrate the end of winter and the beginning of spring. Feasting and merriment helped prepare followers for Ash Wednesday and Lent. What once started with the Pope in Rome continues today with festivities each February or March, depending on the year.

The traditional celebratory season – known as Carnival – starts 12 days after Christmas (January 6) and ends on Fat Tuesday, exactly 46 days before Easter. Mardi Gras celebrations take place throughout Carnival and have historically consisted of parades and masquerade balls. The events extend beyond the French Quarter parties into neighborhoods across New Orleans, where friends, families and children participate in the festivities.

Following is a timeline of key events in the history of Mardi Gras and the symbolism behind the many traditions of this revered festival. Take a page from this book for hosting the ultimate Mardi Gras party:

IT'S OFFICIAL!
In 1582, Pope Gregory XII officially adds Mardi Gras to the Catholic Church calendar.

THE START OF STATESIDE CELEBRATIONS.
In 1699, on a French exploration to Louisiana, Pierra LaMoyne holds an impromptu Mardi Gras party. This is the first recorded Mardi Gras celebration in the United States.

WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN?
The tradition of masking dates back to Roman carnivals when assuming false identities was a common practice. In 1827, New Orleans lifts the ban for public masking in the streets during Mardi Gras from dusk till dawn. In fact, current law states parade float riders must be masked at all times. Masks have now become an integral part of Mardi Gras celebrations and an iconic symbol of the revelry worldwide.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS.
As Mardi Gras celebrations evolve and grow in New Orleans and the deep South, the first official Mardi Gras-themed parade – complete with large floats and costumed maskers – is held in 1857. Today, nearly 60 parades take place in the Crescent City annually.
ESTABLISHMENT OF REGAL COLORS.
The King of Mardi Gras, Rex, stages a daytime parade in 1872 and introduces a trio of colors that become a long standing tradition. Jewel-toned purple, green and gold symbolize justice, faith and power, respectively.

CAKE FIT FOR A KING.
The King Cake, which was brought to New Orleans by the Spanish and French in the 18th century, commemorates the coming of the three wise men. Baked inside is a tiny trinket and, as tradition states, the person who gets the piece of cake with the trinket is considered the king or queen of the party. This centuries-old dessert may be the most universally recognizable symbol of Mardi Gras today.

THROW ME SOMETHING, MISTER!
Each parade float represents a specific Carnival organization, known as a Krewe. In 1921, the famous Krewe of Rex initiates a new custom of throwing strands of beads, coins (doubloons) and toys to parade crowds.

KIDS MAKE THEIR MARK ON MARDI GRAS.
In 1934, the Krewe of NOR started the first children’s club which allowed kids to participate in the Mardi Gras festivities. Today, the Krewe of Little Rascals, founded in 1983 and made up of boys and girls ages five to 16, stages a parade and hosts a ball open to the public.

EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY.
Great food is a focal point of New Orleans culture and an integral component of Mardi Gras festivities at home. Large gatherings with family and friends and visits to the parade routes are common ways families ring in Mardi Gras and spend time together. Zatarain’s offers authentic New Orleans-Style foods, like jambalaya, gumbo, dirty rice and red beans and rice to make Mardi Gras menu planning fun and easy. Zatarain’s is also heating up the frozen aisles with a variety of New Orleans-inspired convenient dinner options for any night of the week.

CELEBRATE ALL DAY.
Celebrate like a true New Orleanian by jazzing up an entire day’s menu with popular and authentic dishes. Start the day with a savory brunch, a true Southern tradition. Snack on a creamy dip in the afternoon as you decorate and welcome guests. Then, dish out a traditional New Orleans-Style Jambalaya Maque Choux or new Mardi Gras Dirty Rice, perfect for a Mardi Gras gathering. Finish the meal with a sweet King Cake, the official dessert of the Carnival season. Or, try a modern twist with King Cake Cupcakes!

ADDITIONAL MARDI GRAS RESOURCES
Looking to find out more about this festive celebration? Use the resources below to help you incorporate everything you’d find at a traditional Mardi Gras party in The Big Easy:

Like Zatarain's on Facebook at www.facebook.com/zatarains for additional recipes, a Pandora station with Mardi Gras music, live parade footage and a unique social media app to get you and your friends into the Mardi Gras spirit. And, be sure to follow us on Twitter at: www.twitter.com/myzatarains