

Dough me something, mister! King Cake varieties abound this Carnival season

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Crab-shaped king cake from Hi-Do

Bakery in Gretna

By Judy Walker
Food editor

It is the earliest Mardi Gras since 1983, and the earliest it will be again until the second half of the century. But ready or not, this year's Carnival is packed full of sweet new things to eat, strong beer and silly new twists on the usual digestible traditions.

The iconic king cake always is subject to experimentation, but this year's variation takes the, uh, cake: an amazing crab- and crawfish-shaped king cake at Hi-Do Bakery in Gretna.

"Originally, we were making the regular style," said Kim Do, daughter of owners Ha and Huyen Do. "My dad said everyone here loves the seafood. We ourselves eat that all the time. He said, 'I bet everyone here would love to have the shape.'"



See the raisin eyes on this 22-inch crawfish cake?

Ha's shaped cakes are big, about 22 inches long for the crawfish, priced at \$21.99 plain and \$25.99 filled. Usually, the bakery can fill orders within a few hours, Kim Do said.

Norma's Sweets Bakery, a four-year-old Hispanic bakery in Kenner, is now baking king cakes with guava, guava and cream cheese or pineapple filling.

"Spanish people eat a lot of pineapple and guava," said owner Norma Castillo, who is originally from Honduras. "And Caribbean people like the guava."

Steve Himelfarb has an unusual new filling at New Orleans Cake Cafe & Bakery on Chartres Street. Long known as "The Cake Man" for the cakes he delivered, including a king cake stuffed with raspberry filling, Himelfarb wanted something different for the new bakery.

He and chef/partner Allison Gorlin were having "fun with goat cheese," he said, and they hit upon the idea of pairing fresh green apples with goat cheese.

Voila! The chevre king cake was born.



This not-too-sweet cake is stuffed with goat cheese and green apples.

"It worked immediately," Himelfarb said. "My thought was maybe we'll sell a couple and it'll be fun. People are calling us now and asking for it. It's been by far our best-selling king cake, even this early on."

The not-too-sweet cake coils upon itself and is decorated with Jackson Pollock-like stripes of purple-green-and-gold glaze. It's \$25 and is designed to feed 15, "except that people are taking much bigger slices," Himelfarb said.

This is the first year for king cakes at Sucre, too, the Magazine Street dessert boutique. Co-owner and pastry chef Tariq Hanna said, "Since I'm 'not from here' I had to do some research."



Sucre offers a shimmery finish

The resulting "king of cakes" look like 8-inch (\$12) and 10-inch (\$16) doughnuts covered in a purple-green-and-gold iridescent luster, and Hanna warns that there is a "baby on board." He also says the cake should be heated before serving

Gerard Marchal at Croissant d'Or Patisserie on Ursulines Avenue is one of the French bakers who makes the alternative king cake, the traditional French puff pastry with frangipani inside. This year, for Mardi Gras, he is adding something different to the menu.

"I'm making some beignets just for Mardi Gras because they are traditional in France, filled with Bavarian cream," Marchal said. "I was in France some months ago, and a friend said he used to do that, and I said, 'Ooop! Let me do that, too!' "

Bavarian cream is new on the north shore, too. For the first time at Marguerite's Cakes in Slidell, king cakes are filled with it, giving the cake the taste of a cream doughnut.

And at Angelo's Bakery on West Metairie, an old favorite is newly drizzled atop the praline- and strawberry-filled king cakes.

"Everybody around here eats the king cake. Praline is always a favorite, and everybody likes chocolate, so we just combined it," owner Lisa Seaward said. "It's going over pretty well."

Another chocolate-topped king cake, the Zulu king cake with a coconut filling and coconut topping on the chocolate, seems to be in shorter supply this season (although a bakery in Beaumont, Texas, is selling them on the Internet). But the four locations of Coffee & (in Kenner, Gretna, Harvey and Marrero) will make them if you order 24 hours ahead.



The ice cream king cake from Creole Creamery features ice cream in their sweet Danish flavor.

Like the Zulu king cake, the concept of ice cream king cakes has spread around. Creole Creamery on Prytania Street has made them the past few Carnivals, and Baskin-Robbins stores in the New Orleans area sell them, too.

David Bergeron of Creole Creamery makes his with seven scoops of cinnamon-and-cream cheese flavored ice cream as the circular base. Then he dyes regular vanilla ice cream in Carnival colors, melts it and pours it on top, and decorates it with sprinkles and cherries. It costs \$20 and contains about 10 scoops of ice cream.

"And of course there's a baby in it," Bergeron said.

The Baskin-Robbins versions have ovals of vanilla or chocolate cake as the base, with ice cream frozen on top of that. Those who order ahead can specify any flavor ice cream, but the ones in the freezer cases are usually the most popular flavors (vanilla, pralines and cream, or Creole cream cheese), said Carrollton Avenue franchisee Kim Guardiola.

"We've been doing the king cakes for about 20 years," Guardiola said. "There's no local advertising. It's new to a lot of people; they still don't know we do them."

Although Baskin-Robbins is a global chain, only franchises in the New Orleans area make ice cream king cakes. According to their Web site, Baskin-Robbins has 13 locations in the area (including Mandeville and LaPlace). Ice cream king cakes come in three sizes for around \$9, \$16 and \$20.



Jeweled almonds

That's not all the ice cream news. King cakes could potentially be topped with Blue Bell's King Cake ice cream, which is cinnamon flavor with pastry pieces, Carnival-color candy sprinkles and vanilla icing swirls.

One under-reported Carnival treat is the truffle or other sweet goodie in a pretty little box, given to guests as

ball favors and party favors at private events.

Hundreds of favors are sold every year at Blue Frog Chocolates on Magazine Street. New this year in favor boxes are almonds covered in semisweet chocolate in jeweled metallic colors, \$14 a pound. And kids can lick Blue Frog's new purple-green-and-gold whirlie and swirlie lollipops while waiting for parades



Whirlie and swirlie lollies in purple, green and gold, from Blue Frog Chocolate

Of course, beer is more common on parade routes than lollipops. The newest Abita brews, Mardi Gras Bock and Jockamo IPA, are 6.5 percent alcohol, compared to about 4.5 percent for their amber beer.

Abita has made a winter bock beer for a while, but a couple of years ago everybody on the street was calling it Mardi Gras Bock, so they started putting that on the label, Abita Beer president David Blossman said.

Introduced in mid-November, the company's new Indian Pale Ale-style brew pays tribute to Mardi Gras Indians.

"A long time ago we made a Jockamo stout that was a specialty beer," Blossman said. "We love the Mardi Gras Indian culture, and we're trying to do our part to raise awareness for it."

Support of a different type is being provided to some of the patrons of the Ritz-Carlton New Orleans, which has had, in the recent past, an oyster butler, a crawfish concierge and a snowball sommelier.



Abita Beer's Mardi Gras Bock and Jockamo IPA, which pays tribute to Mardi Gras Indians

This Lundi Gras and Mardi Gras, patrons staying on the club level can use the services of a "Recovery Concierge," also known as a hangover helper.

At the recovery station, Russell Sutherland will offer "Cure royale" (instead of Kir royale), mimosas and Bite

the Hair of the Dog Bloody Marys, as well as sparkling waters, Alka Seltzer and other pain relievers.

And go-cups.

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