

King Cake

A King Cake is a gift to be shared by family and friends at mealtime or during a party on or after “little Christmas,” an expression used for the feast of the Epiphany, observed for centuries on January 6.

The tradition of the King Cake goes back to the 1st century, or even before--to the celebration of the winter solstice (the shortest day and the longest night of the year) turning human hopes towards the spring to come, with a bean baked in bread to symbolize the new life coming after the winter.

In the Middle Ages, popular devotions during Christmastide turned to the Magi or Wise Men or Kings who had followed a star to where it stopped over a manger and had fallen down with exceeding great joy to worship the baby, the King.

In time, Epiphany (from a Greek word meaning “manifestation”), in many countries, became the feast of the Three Holy Kings.

The Gospel writers do not mention the number of the Magi. In the western church, a slowly spreading legend put their number at three. Some think this may be based on the three gifts mentioned in the Gospels: gold (for royalty), frankincense (spirit, holy especially) and myrrh (an herb, wrapped in the deads' shrouds before burial, hence representing “transformation,” “resurrection”). Another reason may have been the early concept that the Magi represented all humanity in its (what was once said to be) three races: African, Eurasian and far eastern or Asian.

In Hispanic, Italian and other Mediterranean countries, January 6 is the day for giving presents to children. In Rome the “Lady Berjana” (derived from the word ‘Epiphany’) distributes gifts among the children. In the swamps of Cajun Louisiana, Kris Kringle places presents in children’s shoes (set by their beds at night) on behalf of the Magi.

A feature of the King Cake is placing a coin in the dough before baking. The person who has the piece with the coin is declared “King.” It is now common for bakers to put a plastic baby Jesus in the dough instead of a coin. In medieval France, the coin finder was expected to make a donation to a worthy cause, usually for education of a youngster who otherwise might have been deprived of schooling.

Since 1872, New Orleans has used purple green and gold as the official colors of Mardi Gras —the festive season from January 6 (Epiphany or 12th Night) through “Fat Tuesday” (the day before Lent begins). King Cakes are thus decorated with these colors. Purple represents justice; green represents faith; gold represents power.