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CELEBRATING IN THE BIG EASY

Let the good times roll in New Orleans

By Beth D'Addono

» I am drawn to all things sparkly.

Good thing I live in New Orleans, where glitter is often seen on sidewalks and sequins are fine for day wear. That is especially true during the holidays.

As you might imagine, The Big Easy pulls out all the stops for the holiday season, with activities starting at Thanksgiving. The city wraps itself in lights and decorations. Hotels deck the halls in a big way, with the Roosevelt New Orleans, A Waldorf Astoria Hotel, boasting 50 decorated trees and more than 60,000 twinkling lights in its magnificent marbled lobby. The Windsor Court Hotel also puts on a grand show, with a 20-foot-tall tree, 25,000 lights and a veritable forest of blue spruce trees skirting the lobby.

Naturally, there's a parade, too, orga-

nized by a krewe—one of the social clubs that work all year on themes, floats and costumes. The holiday season shifts into high gear with the Krewe of Jingle parade on December 7, which features floats, dancing krewes and more. Also, bring the kids to NOLA ChristmasFest at the Convention Center, December 20–31, a festival that includes an ice rink, carousel, amusement rides and, of course, Santa. New Orleans' 1,300-acre City Park is the site of the 33rd-annual Celebration in the Oaks, an event that includes more than 1 million lights and breathtaking displays in a 25-acre area of the green space.

And since New Orleanians are always planning the next meal, reserve a table at one of the réveillon dinners around town, a tradition of holiday feasting that in New

Orleans dates back to the early French settlers. Restaurants around the French Quarter and beyond offer the special prix-fixe dinners, a fabulous way to enjoy the city's wonderful food scene.

As festive as New Orleans is during the holidays, it is all a precursor to Carnival season, January 6–February 25, 2020. The seven-week period includes festivals, parades, fancy balls, marching bands, and lots and lots of beads—an estimated 12.5 tons. In fact, some folks turn their holiday trees into Carnival trees, replacing Christmas decorations with Carnival decorations in purple, gold and green.

The events lead up to what I believe is the best day of the year—Mardi Gras, also known as Fat Tuesday, on February 25, 2020. This is the last day of feasting before Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, and it is the culmination of Carnival season.

The real Mardi Gras is a family affair full of cultural memories, rituals and histories. The parades welcome everyone to join in the fun and often include high

NEAR & FAR»



» Clockwise from facing page: The St. Louis Cathedral is an iconic symbol of the French Quarter. A band marches in a Mardi Gras parade. The French Quarter is known for its wrought-iron railings on many buildings. Bartender Chris Hannah serves a Tuxedo Tails cocktail. The Roosevelt New Orleans decks the halls during the holidays.

school marching bands, elaborate floats with LED lights and plenty of glitter, and dancing krewes with names such as the Amelia EarHawks & Cabin Krewe and the Disco Amigos.

Being a sequin lover, I take my place among the revelers, dressed in a wig, a costume and, of course, plenty of glitter.

That is the fun of New Orleans: It is a feel-good destination that is always ready for a festival. It is a city that elevates any occasion. Be it a romantic getaway, a milestone with friends or a family vacation, The Big Easy delivers an experience unlike any other place in the nation.

A city of feasts

As famous for its cuisine as its festivals and music, New Orleans is a center for traditional Creole French cuisine and creative chefs using Gulf seafood and local ingredients in innovative ways.

In these parts, we never skip the first (or any) meal of the day. Start your culinary tour with Stanley Restaurant, on

Jackson Square. The restaurant serves some of the finest breakfasts in town. Order the Eggs Stanley: two poached eggs over an English muffin, topped with fried cornmeal-crusted oysters and Canadian bacon.

Or head to Compère Lapin in the Old No. 77 Hotel & Chandlery, where James Beard Award-winning chef Nina Compton is creating amazing dishes. The restaurant's brunch includes the incredible coconut French toast. At restaurant Willa Jean, chef and owner Kelly Fields serves wonderful pastries and savory Southern-contemporary dishes, with favorites including fried chicken on a biscuit, as well as chocolate chip cookies with a side of cookie dough and vanilla-infused milk. Oh, my.

The po'boy is the king of sandwiches in New Orleans, and one of the best is served at the Parkway Bakery & Tavern in



» NEAR & FAR
NEW ORLEANS



Mid-City. Get the roast beef with gravy and pass the napkins. Killer PoBoys in the French Quarter offers a unique spin on the sandwich, such as seared Gulf shrimp with marinated radish, carrot and cucumber. Another lunch option is the fried chicken sandwich at the famous Sylvain restaurant.

New Orleans is also known for its excellent Gulf seafood, and the restaurant to visit is GW

Fins, where chef Michael Nelson works closely with local fishermen to deliver the freshest fish possible.

Other city favorites include beignets and cafe au lait at Cafe du Monde, Creole bread pudding souffle with whiskey cream at Commander's Palace Restaurant, barbecued shrimp at Emeril's New Orleans restaurant, and the incomparable gumbo at Gris-Gris New Orleans.

If you are looking for a creative cocktail, order the martini Tuxedo Tails at Jewel of the South, run by James Beard Award-winning owner and head barman Chris Hannah. The vegetable-forward menu is also divine. Another great place for a cocktail is The Elysian Bar at the chic Hotel Peter & Paul, a former Marigny neighborhood church and Catholic school

DID YOU KNOW?

Compère Lapin chef Nina Compton, above, is one of a new wave of chefs helping to keep New Orleans among the nation's best culinary cities. She won the 2018 James Beard Award for Best Chef: South region.



The iconic Commander's Palace Restaurant first opened in 1893.



Take a nostalgic ride on the St. Charles Streetcar in the Garden District.

AT A GLANCE

Hidden gems

• See past and present Mardi Gras floats and learn how they are made at the Mardi Gras World museum.



• Take a guided tour of one of the city's famous cemeteries, above, to see the resting places of former residents such as voodoo queen Marie Laveau and singer Mahalia Jackson.

City Park's Louisiana Children's Museum, a treasure trove of interactive fun.

... **Lover of literature or pop culture:** Be inspired at the Tennessee Williams New Orleans Literary Festival, March 25-29, 2020. Williams lived in New Orleans for 40 years.



Where to go first in town if you're a ...

... **Foodie:** Get a tasty overview with the Nola Foodie for a Day Cooking & Walking tour from Destination Kitchen Tours.

... **Romantic:** Take the St. Charles Streetcar into the Garden District for the jazz brunch at Commander's Palace Restaurant.

... **History buff:** Visit the Chalmette Battlefield, where Andrew Jackson and his forces won the last battle of the War of 1812.

... **Family:** The kids will love

Distinctive dish and where to get it:

At Brennan's restaurant, above, order bananas Foster, a flaming dish of sliced bananas, butter, brown sugar, cinnamon, rum and banana liqueur.

Classic drink and where to get it: Sip a French 75, with Courvoisier and Champagne, at Arnaud's French 75 Bar.

What to take home: Local art, sold at markets and neighborhood shops, such as Fleurty Girl and Home Malone. —B.D.