

Mardi Gras Diary

LIVING LARGE IN THE BIG EASY



Story and Photography by Margie Goldsmith

At Felix's Restaurant and Oyster Bar in NOLA's French Quarter I'm scarfing down oysters – lots of them – char-grilled, Buffalo oysters, raw oysters, and Oysters Bienville and a New Orleans favorite, Oysters Rockefeller. In New York City, there are over 2,500 restaurants, but nothing compares to the oysters and food in New Orleans; Po-Boys, Crawfish Etouffee, Muffalettas (a sandwich on Sicilian sesame bread), Gumbo, Jambalaya, and sweet pralines. But I haven't come to the Big Easy to eat, I've come for Mardi Gras, and thanks to a friend, I'll be spending tomorrow on one of Harry Connick Junior's Krewe of Orpheus floats.



Author Margie Goldsmith in her Orpheus Krewe costume.
Left: The Krewe of Orpheus floats roll in the Mardi Gras parade.



Left to Right: Raw Oysters at Felix's Restaurant and Bar, middle: The Krewe of Thoth rolls down Canal Street throwing out beads to huge throngs of people. Like members of all Krewes, the Krewe of Thoth members are required by law to wear masks.

I always imagined Mardi Gras was a one-day party of frat boys perched on balconies in the French Quarter calling for girls to pull up their T-shirts in exchange for beads. Wrong. This debauchery only happens on Bourbon Street. Mardi Gras in New Orleans is about entire generations of families enjoying the parades together with festivities beginning in January and ending on Mardi Gras Day, also known as Fat Tuesday (the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent). Mardi Gras is a marathon, not a sprint.

Parents set up tents and ladders for their children to sit on. Each night, they put the ladders on the ground to reserve their spot for the next day. For two weeks, 34 different parades with brightly-decorated floats roll through various NOLA neighborhoods and costumed, masked revelers toss beads, toy swords, plastic doubloons and other trinkets to the cheering crowds. Many of the locals wear the Mardi Gras green to symbolize

faith, gold for power, and purple for justice.

The entire ceremony goes back to 1781 when many social clubs and carnival organizations formed in New Orleans. "Krewes," private social clubs were organized, funded by their members. The first Krewe was the King of Rex. Now there are more than 70 Krewes including Harry Connick Junior's Krewe of Orpheus (Orpheus was the son of the god Apollo and the muse Calliope). Connick founded his music-based Krewe of Orpheus in 1993 as the first super krewe to include both men and women. Today, Orpheus puts on one of the biggest and most extravagant parades with over 1,400 riders on 38 double-decker floats. And I'll be riding on one of these floats tomorrow!

Right now, the Krewe of Thoth is rolling up Canal Street, and float after float passes by with members throwing beads, stuffed animals, and plastic medallions. Dozens of strands of

beads lie on the street, but no one is picking them up which I don't understand because people are screaming from the sidewalk, "Throw me some beads, Mistah!" I dart into the street and grab a handful of necklaces. "Be careful," someone says, "You don't want to get hit in the head." As I add each new necklace, my neck feels heavier and heavier and soon I am almost too weighted down to move. At the end of the parade, I duck into my hotel, the Ritz-Carlton, remove the necklaces, and head back out.

This year is the three-hundredth anniversary of New Orleans which makes everything even more exciting. I wander around Jackson Square past artists selling paintings, magicians, and an entire row of spiritual advisors, one, whose sign reads "Gypsy, in business ten years." I listen to a few bushers and think about the weekend I came to New Orleans for Jazz Festival two years ago, when I roamed from stage to stage listening to blues, R&B,

rock, jazz, Cajun, zydeco, Afro-Caribbean, folk, Latin, rap, country, bluegrass and everything in between. At one point, I was on my way to hear Robert Cray but was seduced by the horn section coming from a nearby Dixieland tent. I entered, so enraptured by the music that I stayed for two hours and joined a second-line parade of audience members who twirled parasols and handkerchiefs in the air as we danced round and round the tent.

Mardi Gras has the same infectious joy as Jazz Fest, especially with so many choices, and I want to be everywhere at once. But first, dinner at Superior Seafood on the corner of St. Charles Street and Napoleon Avenue, close to where the Bacchus Parade will shortly roll. I indulge in more oysters, fried green tomatoes with crab cake, blackened catfish, and traditional Mardi Gras King cake. Suddenly I can see the Bacchus parade out the window and I race out to watch the marching bands, cheer-

leaders, a children's band and float after magnificent float. The flambeaux (torch carriers) surround the paraders and dance and twirl their torches like flaming batons. Originally, the flambeaux carriers were slaves and free men of color who lit the way of the elaborate floats.

Every balcony lining the street is filled with parade watchers, arms outstretched for coveted throws. A woman next to me calls out, "Throw me some beads, Mistah," and I happen to grab the necklace meant for her. She tells me it's bad manners to take a throw intended for someone else. I apologize, explain I'm new to this, and hand her the beads. Like the rest of the locals, she vies for the best throws including bigger beads. To earn one of these prized possessions, you make eye contact with a Krewe member and keep calling out until they throw beads at you.

After the Bacchus parade, I'm too wired to head back to my hotel, so I turn towards Preservation Jazz Hall, but there's a two-block-long line waiting to get in. I continue to Tipitina's, one of NOLA's most famous clubs where Dr. John, one of my favorite performers, is playing. The show is sold out, but someone has an extra ticket to sell, and I'm in! Laissez Les bon temps rouler (let the good times roll)

The good times are certainly rolling the next day in the airplane hangar-sized Convention Hall dressing room. Costumes of all colors hang by the thousands, marked by the Krewe's name and float number. For anyone who needs a last-minute alteration, there's a seamstress. My Orpheus costume is turquoise satin pants, a bright yellow top with spartly turquoise sleeves, a glittery sash with huge silver letters, ORPHEUS, and a red mask. Once outfitted, we are led to the gigantic "holding space" where 20 to 30 of us are assigned to each float. I'm hoping to see Harry Connick Jr., but he's out of town working. Every inch of the Orpheus double-decker floats is decorated with huge colorful flowers, gold leafing, and enormous paper mache statues. The minute Mardi Gras is over, they'll strip down the floats and spend the entire year working on new float designs.

I climb the stairs to the top deck, but it's impossible to get to my assigned place because every inch of floor space is stacked high with high plastic-wrapped bags of throws. I finally crawl over the bags to my standing space. To make sure we don't fall out (as has happened in the past), we are required to hook

"Throw me some beads, Mistah!"



Mardi Gras floats take up to a year to build and are all hand-created such as the brightly-colored flowers and paper mache statue on this Krewe of Orpheus float.

ourselves in with safety belts. Each of us is expected to throw at least 30 cases of beads -- that's not thirty beads -- that's thirty cases of beads, each holding 50 to 500 strands, bagged by size and color. There are also some bags of small stuffed toys which I'll save for the children. We rip open the plastic bags, pull out handfuls of necklaces, separate them into individual strands and hang them from hooks on the side of the float. This sounds easy, but if you try to manage more than five strands at once, you're guaranteed to tangle them up.

Finally, we don masks (all participants on Mardi Gras floats are required by law to wear masks), a tradition which started years and years ago to allow wearers to escape society and class constraints. Personally, I find the mask annoying as I can see better without it, but I'm not complaining, especially when our Orpheus floats roll out of the Convention Center.

The moment we hit the street, hundreds of revelers raise their arms and scream, "Throw me some beads, Mistah!" I pull a strand off the hook and throw it towards a man with his hands extended. He catches it and grins. Everyone is calling for beads, and I can't fling them fast enough. Soon I've run out of all my necklaces on the hook and frantically rip open new cases, grab beads and toss them to the bead-hungry throngs. I try and throw two young kids little-stuffed bananas, but they're too light to travel far enough, and four adults scramble for them in a free-for-all. I shake my finger at the adults and throw more stuffed bananas until they reach the delighted children.

Block after block is jammed with people. As I continue to throw, my aim gets really good, and I'm beginning to feel like a Major League Baseball pitcher. I throw one towards a man and the necklace drops from his head right around his neck -- oh no -- did I hurt him? He gives me two thumbs up. Whew! After four hours, my arm is so tired I can barely lift it. I pull off my mask and plop down on top of the unopened bags. It's dark, and there are stars in the sky, beautiful. But soon, like a dazed fighter encouraged by the roaring crowds, I jump back up because I don't want to miss a second of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Another hour goes by, and there are many unopened bags, but we're rolling back to the Convention Center. Suddenly tuxedoed men and women in formal gowns run towards us

crying out for beads. I have no strength left to tear open a new bag, so I grab unopened bags the size of cantaloupes and heave them. The well-dressed crowd from the Convention Center races for the bags more determinedly than the swarms on the streets. Finally, our float comes to a final stop. I'm so tired I can barely climb down the stairs -- but it's not over yet. We join the 5,000 black-tie guests partying in the convention hall. At the buffet station, I devour crawfish pies, jambalaya, and gumbo. The food, wine, and non-stop live music revive me and soon I'm up, dancing into the wee hours of the morning. *Laissez les bons temps rouler*, indeed! ▼

IF YOU GO

Mardi Gras kicks 2019 hicks off with King's Day, Jan 6th, but the main parades and festivities of the two weeks before Mardi Gras will begin on Feb 22nd. Hotel rooms and B&B's are booked up far in advance, so make your reservations for 2019 now!



150 Krewe member put their own spin on their costumes, including this creative Orpheus Krewe cape. Opposite: Dr. John playing at New Orleans premiere music venue, Tipitina's

