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ADVENTURES IN  
TRAVEL AND CULTURE

# The South

Les Bons Temps  
Downtown Mobile hosts more  
than 40 parades in the weeks  
preceding the holiday.

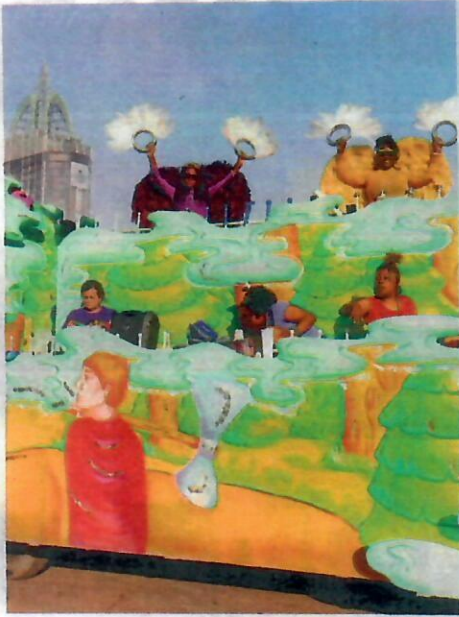
LONG WEEKEND

## The Mother of Mardi Gras

Fat Tuesday takes on a life of its own in  
Mobile, Alabama—the birthplace of the  
modern-day Carnival celebration

BY TARA MASSOULEH MCCAY





**I**'M STARING UP at a giant silver goblet bookended by two crescent moons when my view is obscured by a sudden flash of gold. Instinctively, I put out my hands, and a millisecond later, I'm grasping a tangle of plastic beads. To my left and right, people of all ages are hanging off metal barricades, arms outstretched, calling to the masked revelers riding colorful floats and the costumed walkers filing through the confetti-littered streets. A marching band beats by with its jubilant horns and rattling snare drum. I then unwrap a banana-flavored MoonPie from my nearly full bag of loot and take a bite of the marsh-mallow goodness.

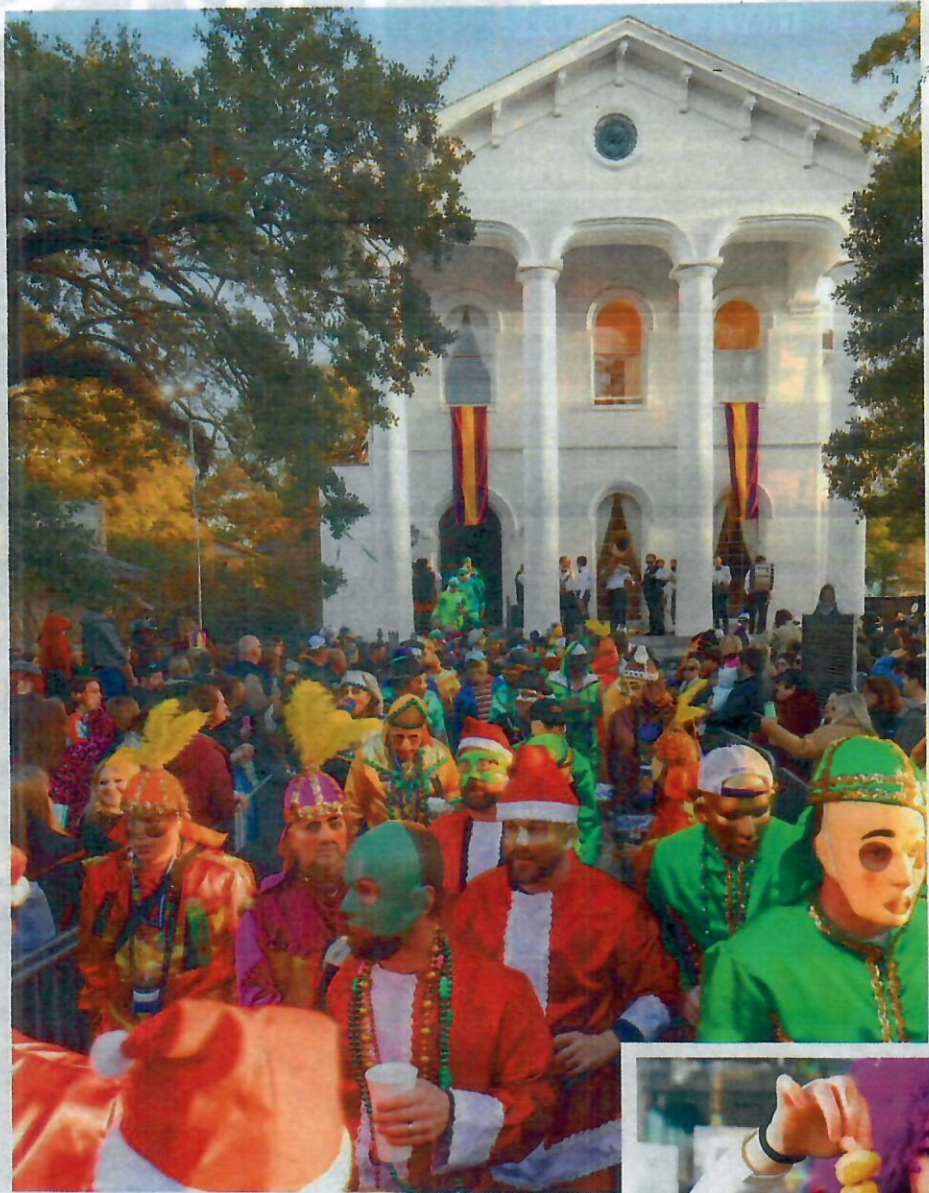
For the uninitiated, attending Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama, can be a little like drinking from a fire hose—and in this case, that hose is pumped with 300 years of history and more eccentric

traditions than you can count. Even talking about Mardi Gras here requires a new vocabulary. For example, “boom boom” means parade and “cow bladder” isn’t code for anything—for over 100 years, the Knights of Revelry krewe have actually used inflated, hardened, and spray-painted bladders as part of their costumes.

In Mobile, this event isn’t just a celebration—it’s a way of life and one of the leading drivers of the local economy.

A study commissioned by the Mobile Bay Convention & Visitors Bureau found that the holiday has a \$408 million economic impact on the city each year, and more than 12,800 jobs in Mobile County as well as neighboring Baldwin County are linked to Carnival season.

It all kicks off with the Camellia Ball on the day before Thanksgiving each year. However, the bulk of the local events happen during the month leading up



#### Festive Flair

(From left) Revelers throw treats to the enthusiastic crowds. The Mystics of Time parade passes by the historic Kennedy House. Sip (and nibble) on The Hail Marys at LoDa Bier Garten.





#### Mobile Royalty

(From left) Alan Wilson Green and Richlyn Sydney Pugh were crowned king and queen of the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association in 2023. Excelsior's Theodore Arthur plays a variety of saxophones.



to Fat Tuesday (February 13 this year). During that time, nearly 70 balls take place across town, and in the last two weeks or so, over 40 parades roll through the downtown streets. Schools let out, colleges pause classes, and most businesses give employees time off as this place with under 200,000 residents welcomes around a million visitors to join in for one unforgettable party.

#### COLORFUL HISTORY

Mardi Gras in the Port City dates back to 1703 (New Orleans' version became popular in the 1730s), when New World French explorers had a celebration at Twenty-Seven Mile Bluff, the first settlement

in what is now Mobile. The original "parade" took place on Dauphin Street (a major thoroughfare where the festivities still happen today) in 1711 with a papier-mâché bull. More than 100 years later, the country's premier masked parading society—Cowbellion de Rakins—was founded by a vivacious cotton broker who marched through town shaking a homemade noisemaker that was fashioned out of a rake and cowbells.

Local history is full of fascinating tales like that of the Cowbellions. To get a crash course in every unbelievable tidbit, make your way to the Mobile Carnival Museum and request a tour with curator Cartledge Blackwell. He'll walk you through the historic

Bernstein-Bush House, where 14 gallery rooms plus a gift shop, theater, and den tell the story of Mardi Gras in Mobile. "Carnival is our greatest living tradition," says Blackwell. "Most Southern cities have three seasons: summer, hunting, and football. But in Mobile and New Orleans, we've got Carnival season. It's on the calendar here from November to Ash Wednesday morning, but it never really stops."

Much of the museum is dedicated to showing off the world's largest collection of sparkling trains that have

been worn by Mardi Gras monarchs. These intricately adorned feats of fashion engineering often measure up to 18 feet and can weigh between 30 and 80 pounds. They're covered in fox pelts and leopard fur and bedazzled with Swarovski crystals and gold filigree. Each of the city's roughly 80 parading groups as well as the two official organizations, the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association (MAMGA) and the Mobile Carnival Association, has a king and queen. For the royalty presented at coronations every year, their trains are



both a form of self-expression and a way to pay homage to family lines.

While most of the members of MAMGA's Mardi Gras court are legacies, their 2023 queen, Richlyn Sydney Pugh, was a first-generation royal. She designed her train in all white to represent a breath of fresh air and adorned it with pearls, gold, silver, and faux diamonds to symbolize

timelessness. "I'm excited to build my own legacy," says Pugh. "I can't wait for another 85 years to see it grow. It's cliché to say you want to be part of something bigger than yourself, but this really is exactly that."

### TODAY'S TRADITIONS

Mardi Gras doesn't happen overnight, and it certainly

doesn't come together without the effort of dedicated community members. The Excelsior Band is a decorated Black walking jazz ensemble and is the oldest of its kind in the country. Generations of musicians have been putting in the work for over 140 years. Founded by a group of Creole firefighters in 1883 and recently named a National Endowment for the Arts

### A Feast for the Senses

(Clockwise from top left) Locals spend months preparing costumes. Gourmet Goodies offers mini cakes, aka bombs. See horn players marching in the Excelsior Band. Expect beautifully plated dishes at Squid Ink. Past floats are repurposed each year. Admire ornate trains at the Mobile Carnival Museum.

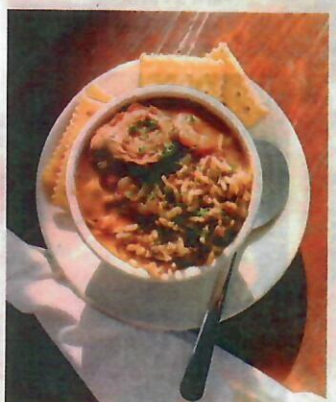






#### Joyful Noise

(From top) High school bands from all over the Mobile area perform in the many Mardi Gras parades. Gumbo is a delicious starter at Bluegill Restaurant. Be on the lookout for the Knights of Revelry krewe, dressed in blue and silver.



Heritage Fellow. Excelsior is synonymous with Mardi Gras to locals.

You'll find the troop at the front of parades, rocking their signature black suits and newsie caps, and if band leader Hosea London has anything to say about it, that's how it always will be. A regular fixture of the group since 1975, London has made it his mission to promote big band music among the city's youth through a program called The Jazz Studio. One of his current mentees is a member of Excelsior, playing right alongside men more than 50 years his senior.

While London and his bandmates provide the sounds of the season, you have folks like float designer Mark Calametti to thank for the sights. The Mobile native has conceptualized and designed over 600 floats since he started 25 years ago. He feels like Mardi Gras has always been a big part of his life. "My father rode [in the

parades], and my mother was a seamstress and sewed the costumes," he says. "It was year-round at our house, so designing these was always my dream."

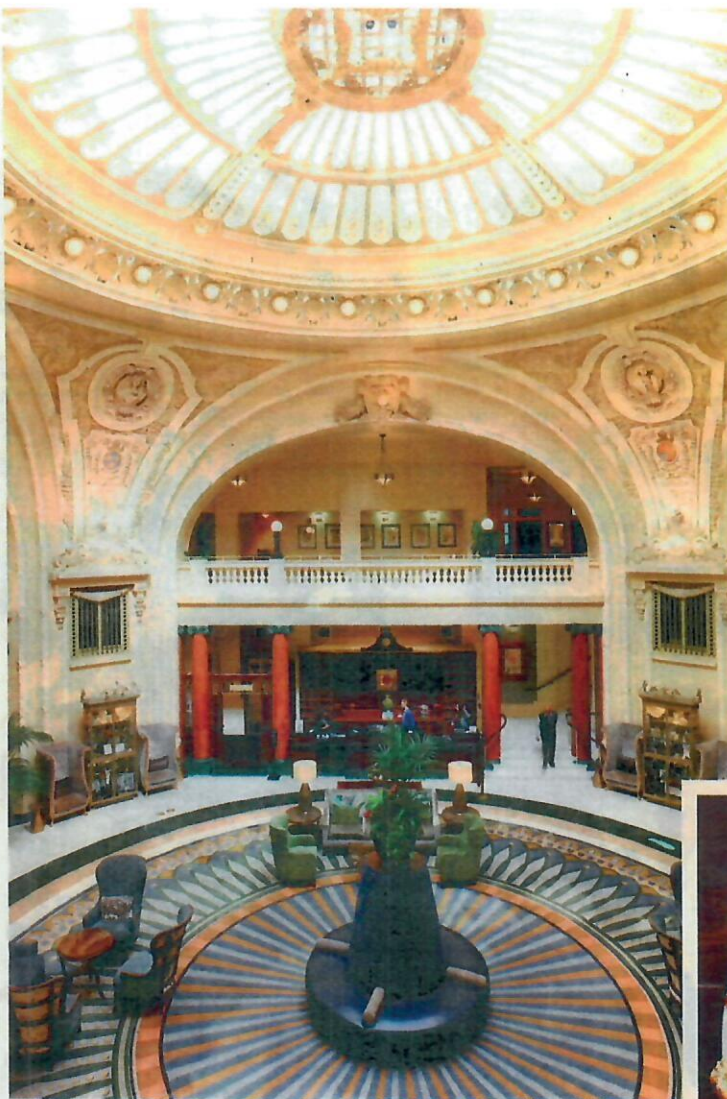
Though he's helped create floats for dozens of parades, he says the practice never gets old because each year brings a new element that'll never be replicated. "It's cool being a part of something that you grew up with and that has such a rich history. I don't know how to describe it, but in the end, if you're not there [in person], you've missed it," he says. "The floats are gone—they get turned into something else, but that's kind of the neat thing about it too. There's some permanence in the impermanence. The fact that they're not treasured and saved but are just enjoyed in the moment is what makes it special."

When it comes to these fleeting pleasures, Laura Stafford of Gourmet Goodies in nearby Daphne is an expert. She and her dedicated team have established themselves as the "king cake queens" of Mobile thanks to their sweet and savory creations. In 2022, they developed the recipe for their crawfish version, which went viral online. The 8-pound showstopper is made with a crawfish-cornbread dressing; wrapped in classic Amish roll dough; and topped with a seafood cream sauce, bacon bits, and scallions. After they placed in a major king cake competition, news spread quickly. Folks from all over the county—as well as from neighboring states—were lining up at the bakery's front doors.



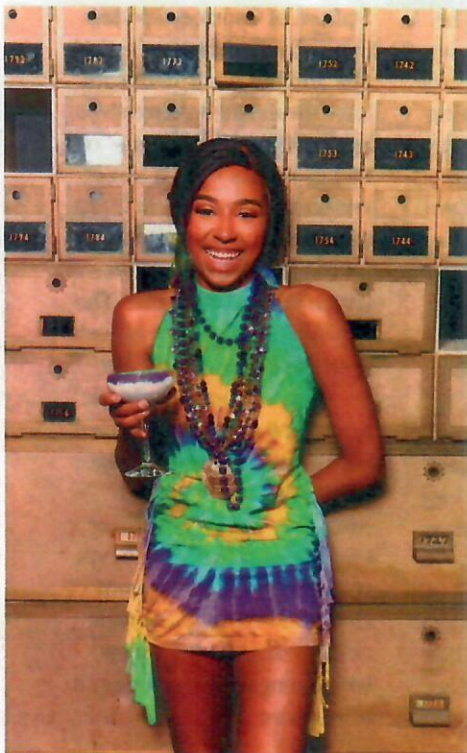
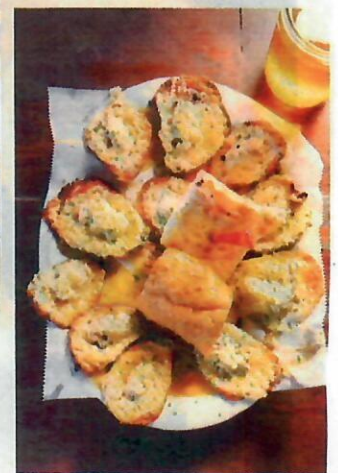
"It just kind of exploded," Stafford recalls. "We were getting here at 4 or 5 in the morning and then not leaving until 11 or 12 at night to make all the orders." To keep up with demand, Gourmet Goodies began selling their signature flavors—Crawfish, Monte Cristo, Alabama Sweet Heat, and Original—as "bombs," which come in sets of four. Each dinner-roll-size treat is stuffed with a creative filling and serves one to two people. This year, the group is working to develop a shipping protocol so they'll be able to share a taste of this special season in Mobile with the rest of the country.

You can certainly enjoy a king cake at home—wherever that might be—but to truly understand the culture and spirit of Mardi Gras, you've got to do as Mobilians do and join the big parade.



#### Plan Your Stops

(From left) Keep the fun going with themed cocktails at Post. The lobby of the grand Battle House is a popular meeting place during Carnival. Bluegill Restaurant's Famous Flaming Oysters is a must-order dish.



#### Eat, Drink, & Be Merry

*You can't celebrate on an empty stomach*

**SQUID INK** Chef Pete Blohme, owner of Panini Pete's, opened this gastro-pub downtown in 2019.

**MO'BAY BEIGNET CO.** Café Du Monde has met its match with these from-scratch beignets—plus they have fresh-brewed coffee and flavored syrups.

**LODA BIER GARTEN** Head over to this relaxed hangout for oversized Bloody Marys, 100-plus beers on tap, and great burgers.

**POST** The cocktail bar has Mardi Gras-themed drinks like a King Cake Martini.

#### THE NOBLE SOUTH

Sample seasonal fare from this farm-to-table eatery housed in a rustic yet modern space.

#### THE HUMMINGBIRD WAY

**OYSTER BAR** Try a fresh take on Southern classics, with an emphasis on Mobile-area seafood, from the former executive chef for the State of Alabama. Order the tasting menu, and hope that it ends with the Lane Cake.

#### BLUEGILL RESTAURANT

This casual indoor/outdoor place on the Causeway offers live music and good food—don't miss their Famous Flaming Oysters.

#### Places To Stay

*Hotels book up fast, so reserve a room early*

#### THE BATTLE HOUSE RENAISSANCE MOBILE HOTEL & SPA

This historic destination is located right in the center of all the action downtown.

**MALAGA INN** The 1862 boutique stay is known for its wrought iron balconies overlooking Parade Route A.

**THE ADMIRAL** Artistically designed, this spot in the Entertainment District has 156 rooms.