

Louisiana's Festivals

As you read, look for:

- examples of the many festivals in our state, and
- vocabulary terms **gumbo**, **jambalaya**, and **Mardi Gras**.

People first organized their lives around the seasons and only later developed the formal calendar. Their earliest festivals celebrated a successful harvest. These celebrations are part of cultures around the world. In Louisiana, the harvest festivals have expanded into year-round fun.

The more than four hundred Louisiana festivals showcase local food and music. The fall festivals begin Labor Day weekend. These late August and early September celebrations signal the end of summer.

August and September

On the Gulf Coast at Morgan City, the Shrimp Festival celebration began more than sixty years ago. The blessing of the shrimp fleet combines a religious rite and a social occasion. This is a common feature of Louisiana culture. Not long ago, to honor a new source of income for St. Mary Parish, the festival planners expanded its title to the Shrimp and Petroleum Festival. But the solemn ceremony with the priest blessing the pennant-decorated shrimp boats is still the highlight of the weekend. Carnival rides signal the festive side of the event. As you can guess, the featured food is shrimp—any way you like it.

The Frog Festival began in Acadia Parish more than twenty-five years ago. Rayne calls itself the “Frog Capital of the World,” and huge frog murals decorate the entrance to the town. Visitors to the festival can eat frog legs and watch frog-jumping contests.

On the same weekend in nearby Plaisance in St. Landry Parish, zydeco music has created a different kind of festival. Crowds of music lovers gather at this party and dance for hours as famous bands and newcomers play the upbeat music.

Dancing and music are also part of the celebration of French heritage at Festival Acadiens (a KA di en). Every year, more than 100,000 people join the fun in Lafayette. Cultural preservation combines with a good time for the locals and



Above: Lively Cajun music is just one aspect of the Festival Acadiens, a celebration of Cajun culture.



their international visitors. Experienced elders demonstrate traditional crafts to young beginners. The alligator skinning always draws a large crowd.

Alligators are the focus of an entire festival in St. Charles Parish. After years of selling only the valuable alligator hides, trappers now have a market for the meat too. This is the place to go if you want to try fried alligator or alligator sauce picante.

Sweet foods are part of the Sugar Cane Festival in New Iberia. The huge fair serves as a pause before the hectic time of the actual harvest, or *cane grinding* as it is called. As one of the state's oldest festivals, this celebration offers dancing, music, food, and carnival rides. A Bayou Teche (BI yo tesh) boat parade and a street parade entertain the crowds. Cooking contests and livestock shows bring many competitors to the festival.

October and November

Shreveport, the largest city in North Louisiana, celebrates the arts in the fall. The Red River Revel is held along the banks of the Red River in the downtown area. This art show and sale features the works of artists who compete

Lagniappe

About 75 percent of all wild alligator hides, along with about 85 percent of all farmed skins, used by tanners around the world, come from Louisiana.



for prizes at the festival. Music and food of the region add to the week-long party. A special feature of the Revel introduces children to art and artists.

Another salute to the arts is held in Hammond. Southeast Louisiana State University sponsors Fanfare, held throughout the month of October. This program displays the culture of the region and introduces new cultural experiences. The fine arts, including theater and literature, are featured.

In Acadia Parish, the heart of Cajun country, Robert's Cove is home to people of German heritage. The residents there celebrate the traditional German OktoberFest. The publicity poster says *Wilkommen*, the German word for "welcome." And that welcome is an invitation to share German bands, German singing, and German foods.

Along the Texas border, Zwolle (za WA lee) in Sabine Parish recognizes its ties to Spanish and Native American cultures. The Tamale Festival highlights the special food that combines these two legacies. A parade and street dance entertain the community.

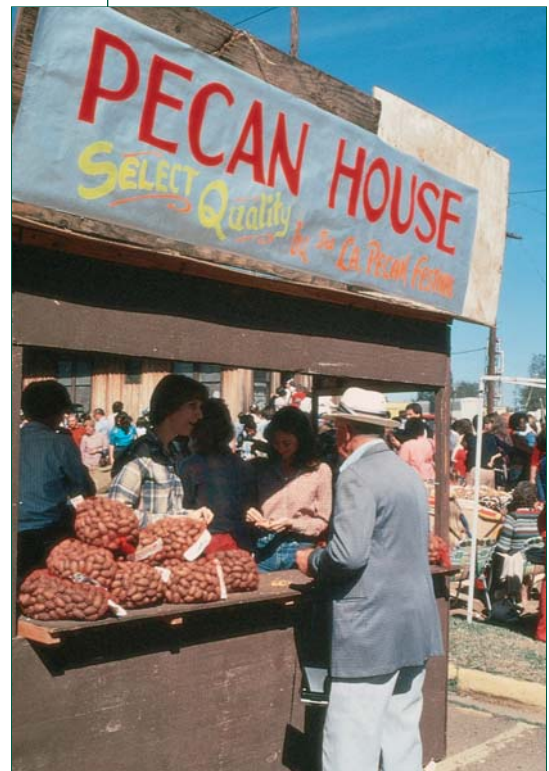
Located in the rice-growing prairie region, Crowley recognizes the economic importance of rice. This Acadia Parish town calls its festival the International Rice Festival. Visitors from other countries now join neighbors at this harvest celebration, which was begun in 1939. A school holiday highlights the importance of this local tradition.

Another of the older festivals in the state has been held in Opelousas (op e LOO sas) in St. Landry Parish for more than fifty years. Begun to celebrate the harvest of the locally grown Louisiana yam, that favorite food is still featured at the Yambilee Festival. Children can enter a contest in which they create "yam-i-nals," yams decorated to look like animals.

Abbeville, in Vermilion Parish, is home to one of the more unusually titled Louisiana festivals. The Giant Omelette Festival has an interesting history. Legend has it that an innkeeper in a small French village made a fine omelette for Napoleon. The emperor liked it so much that he directed the people from the village to bring all the eggs they could find. The giant omelette made from the eggs fed his entire army. The tradition continues today, with French villages making huge omelettes to feed the poor at Easter. Abbeville joined an organization called the Confrerie, an international association that celebrates French culture and

tradition, including the tradition of the giant omelette. More than five thousand eggs go into the giant omelette in Abbeville. The chefs always add hot sauce to give it a Cajun flavor.

The central Louisiana town of Colfax in Grant Parish salutes another Louisiana crop—the pecan. Delicious sweets made with pecans are sold along with handmade crafts. The Louisiana



Many of Louisiana's festivals celebrate local foods. The Pecan Festival in Colfax (above) and the Tamale Festival in Zwolle (opposite, above and below) are just two of many examples.

Lagniappe

The skillet used at the Giant Omelette Festival has a diameter of 15 feet!

Pecan Festival offers a glimpse of country life in the past. A country store offers old-fashioned items like home-ground cornmeal and homemade jellies. Cultural diffusion, however, is responsible for the alligator on a stick to be found at this North Louisiana festival.



December

During the Christmas Festival of Lights, Natchitoches (NAK a tosh) fills its riverbank with Christmas lights and its streets with visitors. The first Saturday in December is the day for parades, food, and music. A fireworks display is the highlight of the evening; then the historic town is filled with the lights of the season.

A unique Christmas celebration occurs in St. James Parish. Bonfires burn on the lower Mississippi levee on Christmas Eve. Family groups and organizations take part in the tradition of building wooden structures. They create replicas of houses and steamboats or just erect the more basic shape, which looks like the framework for a tepee. This preparation is done about a month ahead, so the willow logs will dry and burn easily.

January and February

A celebration begun in 1993 involves the descendants of a long-established cultural group. The French and African American heritage



combined in colonial Louisiana as part of the Creole culture. In Natchitoches Parish, the St. Augustine Historical Society invites relatives and friends from across the United States to gather and recognize their culture. At the Creole Heritage Day Celebration, traditional skills are demonstrated, such as making filé (fi LAY) powder for gumbo from the leaves of the sassafras tree. **Gumbo** is a traditional Louisiana dish, a hearty Creole soup made of seafood, chicken, okra, and other vegetables.

March and April

Baton Rouge and New Orleans both celebrate St. Patrick's Day with parades. "The wearing of the green" honors the Irish heritage of Louisiana. Following Louisiana tradition, float riders throw trinkets to the waiting crowd.

The Strawberry Festival draws huge crowds to Ponchatoula (pon cha TOO la). The strawberries grown in Tangipahoa (tan ji pa HO uh) Parish are eagerly awaited each year. Buying and eating berries is a favorite activity at the festival, along with the music and regional foods.

The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival brings more visitors to Louisiana than any celebration except Mardi Gras. More than a half million people come to see the thousands of musicians who perform every style of music. For ten days, the fairgrounds are filled with people, music, food, and dancing.

May

The well-known Crawfish Festival is held in Breaux Bridge. Fewer than 10,000 people live in this St. Martin Parish town, but in May more than 100,000 visitors show up to eat crawfish and dance to the chank-a-chank music. *Chank-a-chank* is the music of the Cajun bands who sing in French. This party first started in 1959, and the state legislature has proclaimed Breaux Bridge as the "Crawfish Capital of the World."

Fisher hosts Sawmill Days. This tiny town in Sabine Parish invites everyone to see how a lumber town looked at the turn of the century. The old company store and theater are examples of how a company-owned town was organized. As at many other Louisiana festivals, visitors enjoy the folk crafts and regional food. Here you might buy a sock doll or some mayhaw jelly.

In May, Fest for All brings everyone to the tree-shaded North Boulevard in downtown Baton Rouge. Art, food, and music are features of this popular event. The organizers spotlight local artists and invite participants from other states. Children's hands-on activities add to the fun.

Just south of Baton Rouge in Ascension Parish, Gonzales holds the Jambalaya Festival to determine the jambalaya champion of the state. The cooking is done outside in huge pots, and most of the contestants are men. **Jambalaya**—a spicy dish of rice and meat—is considered a basic dish in Cajun kitchens. An example of cultural diffusion, it was developed from a Spanish dish called *paella*.



Above: Ponchatoula claims to be the "strawberry capital of the world."

Opposite page, above: This wooden Christmas tree in St. James Parish will be set ablaze as part of a tradition that dates back to the late 1800s. **Opposite page, below:** The Christmas Festival of Lights in Natchitoches features more than 300,000 colored lights and over 70 displays.



Top: This man is carving decoys at the Folklife Festival in Natchitoches.

Above: Local crafters display their wares at Baton Rouge's Fest for All.

This adaptation came about during the colonial period, when the Acadians came to Spanish Louisiana.

June and July

You can buy a hand-sized fried peach pie in Ruston during the Peach Festival. The sweet peaches that grow in the nearby orchards are a Louisiana treat. Visitors come to this Lincoln Parish town to buy the peaches and stay for the parade and arts and crafts show.

Blueberries have recently become a commercial crop in DeSoto Parish, and the residents of Mansfield created a celebration for their community. The Blueberry Festival offers elements of country life in northwest Louisiana, including good barbecue and good country music. A wood-chopping contest is a reminder of an important skill of the past.

The Folklife Center at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches was established to preserve information about Louisiana's cultural elements. In July, the university sponsors the Folklife Festival. Visitors and participants can escape the hot Louisiana summer as they enjoy this indoor event. The gathering bridges the distance between nineteenth-century folkways and the Internet. You can watch the Isleños mend a fishing net or use a computer to find information about an ancestor.



Mardi Gras

Louisiana's biggest celebration is, of course, **Mardi Gras**. The tradition began in Europe and was brought to Louisiana by the first French explorers. An eighteenth-century Mardi Gras parade was described as a group of men ringing cow bells in the streets of New Orleans. Today, more than a half million people line the streets for the more than fifty parades held in the city.

Mardi Gras is the festive time before the solemn religious season of Lent. The forty days of Lent are part of the Christian religion, especially in the Roman Catholic Church. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, and Mardi Gras Day is the day before. *Mardi Gras* means "Fat Tuesday."

In Louisiana, however, the celebration of Mardi Gras begins on January 6, also known as Twelfth Night. Parties, balls, street dances, and parades fill South Louisiana. Mardi Gras parades have long been a part of the culture of Lafayette, Morgan City, New Roads, and Thibodaux (TIB uh do).

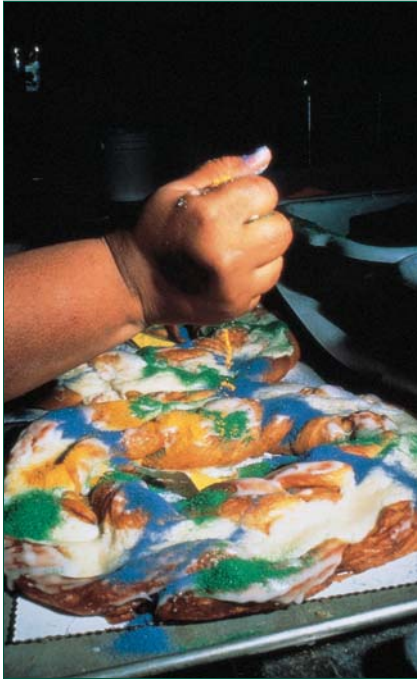
The traditional country version of Mardi Gras takes place in Basile, Church Point, Eunice, and Mamou. This piece of the prairie Cajun culture had almost been lost until, in the 1950s, an appreciation for the importance of cultural customs developed.

The traditional celebration is described as "running the Mardi Gras" (*le courir de Mardi Gras*). Masked riders on horseback go from house to house collecting food for the community feast. The riders entertain with singing and dancing as they go. Part of the tradition requires the participants to catch live chickens on the farms they visit. The chickens later become part of the gumbo.

Above: People crowd streets and balconies in 2006 to watch the colorful and elaborate floats that are a trademark of New Orleans's Mardi Gras parades.

Lagniappe

The official colors for Mardi Gras, which were chosen in 1872, are purple, green, and gold. Purple represents justice, green stands for faith, and gold stands for power.



Above: The colorful king cake is a Mardi Gras tradition. **Above right:** The capuchons (tall pointed hats) and masks are part of the costume for “le courir de Mardi Gras.”



Mardi Gras celebrations have even spread to the Protestant cities of North Louisiana. Because this area has few Catholics, the celebration holds little religious significance. Their neighbors in South Louisiana say the North Louisiana cities simply could not resist the fun.

Check for Understanding ✓

1. What was the main purpose for the first fall festivals?
2. Give two examples of Louisiana festivals that celebrate connections with other cultures.
3. What are two festivals that celebrate a holiday?
4. What is an example of a festival that honors a specific ethnic group?
5. Name two kinds of Louisiana music featured at festivals.
6. What is the religious purpose of Mardi Gras?