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King Cake with baby figurine baked by Olivia Bardo. (NCR photo/Olivia Bardo)



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Between Epiphany and Mardi Gras, people all over the world eat King Cake. Whether simply because it tastes good or because people love holiday traditions, the King Cake is beloved.

Before [Lent starts on Ash Wednesday](#), people traditionally eat foods like pancakes, doughnuts and King Cake to prepare for the Lenten season by using all rich ingredients not needed for the next 40 days.

The King Cakes, twisted into rings and covered with white icing and purple, green and yellow sprinkles, are so culturally significant that they are widely available in bakeries and stores.

KING'S CAKE RECIPE

DOUGH

2 1/2 cups (10.6 ounces) all-purpose or bread flour
2 tablespoons + 2 teaspoons granulated sugar
1 1/2 teaspoons instant yeast
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 cup (4 ounces) milk
2 eggs
8 tablespoons (4 ounces) unsalted butter, softened and cut into 1/4-inch cubes

FRANGIPANE

4 tablespoons (2 ounces) unsalted butter, softened
1/4 cup (1.8 ounces) granulated sugar
1/2 cup (2 ounces) almond flour or almond meal
1 egg
2 teaspoons almond extract
1 tablespoon + 1 teaspoon all-purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt

ADDITIONAL FILLING

1/2 cup (1.7 ounces) dried cherries, cut in half
Large dried bean, whole unshelled nut, or baby figurine

TOPPING

Egg wash

1/4 cup (1 ounce) sliced almonds

1/4 cup (1 ounce) powdered sugar

INSTRUCTIONS

1. In a large bowl, mix the flour, sugar, yeast, and salt.
2. Heat milk for 30 seconds in the microwave to remove the chill. You can also heat milk on low over the stove until just barely warm to the touch.
3. Form a well in the middle of the flour mixture and add the milk and the 2 eggs. Mix the ingredients with your hand until the flour is hydrated, then knead the dough inside the bowl.
4. Once the gluten has begun to form, mix in 8 tablespoons of butter. Squeeze the dough to help distribute the butter all the way through. It will be very sticky. Let the dough rest for 30 minutes.
5. After the dough has had a 30-minute rest, stretch and fold the dough 16–20 times, then cover with plastic wrap or a damp tea towel and let chill in the refrigerator for 4–12 hours.
6. Just before you are ready to shape the dough, mix the frangipane. In a medium-sized mixing bowl, combine 4 tablespoons of butter and 1/4 cup of sugar and mix until smooth. Add the almond flour, egg, almond extract, flour, and salt, and mix again until smooth.
7. Turn your dough onto a lightly floured countertop. Flour the top of the dough as well, then roll with a rolling pin to a 10-inch by 18-inch rectangle, with the long edges running parallel to your body. Spread the frangipane over the dough, leaving an inch-wide border on both long sides. Sprinkle the dried cherries on top. Place the bean, nut, or baby figurine somewhere on the dough, then gently roll the dough, pinching the seam together with your fingers to seal the filling inside. Pull the ends together to create a circle and pinch the ends together.
8. Cover with plastic wrap or a damp tea towel and let rest at room temperature for 45 minutes to an hour, until you can gently poke the dough with one finger and the indentation slowly fills in halfway. While the dough rests, preheat the oven to 325°F.

9. When the dough is ready for the oven, brush with egg wash and sprinkle with sliced almonds. Bake for 30 minutes, until golden brown. Let cool, then dust with powdered sugar. Slice and serve.

Adapted from *Bake & Pray* by Kendall Vanderslice. Copyright © 2024. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, a Division of Tyndale House Ministries. All rights reserved.

I remember the first time I had a King Cake. I was working in Washington, D.C., celebrating Mardi Gras in a cold park so my coworkers and I could remain socially distanced during the COVID pandemic. As someone explained the symbolism of the cake, I dug into its rich layers of cinnamon filling peeking out from ribbons of icing and colored sprinkles. Then, someone excitedly waved around a tiny plastic baby plucked from their slice.

Even though I didn't have any previous knowledge of King Cake or its history, I could tell there was something special about it.

"I think having all of this additional fun and ritual and tradition and communal celebration around it is part of what makes it so much more than even just like a birthday cake or any other kind of cake that has traditional meaning," said baker and theologian Kendall Vanderslice.

She told NCR that a huge part of the excitement around King Cake is the lore surrounding the treat. "It's a great avenue through which we can tell the story of the church," she said.

While there are several kinds of King Cake, [the Louisiana style](#) is the most traditional and recognizable. With a brioche-like texture, it is more of a sweet roll than an actual cake.

The sprinkles, in the traditional colors of Mardi Gras, hold their own meaning: purple for justice, green for faith and yellow for power. The circular shape represents our connectedness as a church and community.

Hidden inside the cake is a small plastic baby. If the baby is found in your slice of cake, you are then crowned king or queen for the day. It also means that next year, it's your duty to supply the cake.

Vanderslice, who lives in Durham, North Carolina, said King Cake is part of a global tradition that developed over hundreds of years.

The celebrations surrounding King Cake originated somewhere in France, around the 12th or 13th centuries, likely coinciding with other festivals that were taking place regionally.

Today, the celebrations surrounding King Cake coincide with the Carnival festival and are celebrated all over the world. Here, our religious and cultural celebrations intertwine. Carnival is a time for dramatic excess and the disregard for order. It is a time of extravagant costumes, celebrations and eating. The celebration is intertwined with the liturgical period between Epiphany and Lent. It is a time to be wonderfully joyful and excessive before entering into a period of fasting.

The celebration begins at Epiphany and follows the story of the three kings arriving to worship infant Jesus as their true ruler. King Herod, fearful and enraged that a small child could hold so much power and significance, decided to invoke wrath across the land.

Throughout the Lenten season, the emphasis is on the reversal of roles and expectations. King Cake is symbolic of that reversal that continues to resonate with people.

"We also have this very tangible reminder that ultimately God is the one with ultimate power and also the way that God was set out that God chose to enter the world is in this very small, simple, subversive way, and we also can navigate life in these very small, simple, subversive ways," Vanderslice said.

The King Cake's ring shape is also a reminder that we're all connected. As Vanderslice said: "You wouldn't just buy and eat a King Cake on your own. It's meant to be eaten in community."

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