

WINE AND DINE

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Let The Good Times Roll – At Mardi Gras

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One of the great things about cultural celebrations is that it gives all of us a chance to experience a taste of another region's history, traditions and cuisines. This adds to the richness of our lives and broadens us culturally. And when you add in a fun festival, you have a winning combination. So let's take a look at Mardi Gras and Let The Good Times Roll!

History of Mardi Gras

Mardi Gras has its roots in religion, with the practice of eating rich foods on Fat Tuesday, before fasting the next day on Ash Wednesday, which starts the Lenten season. Mardi Gras has grown from a single day to a several week celebration. In New Orleans, the Mardi Gras parades started this year on February 19 and will conclude on Fat Tuesday, March 8. Mardi Gras is also known as Carnival and is celebrated around the world. The best known is Rio de Janeiro's Carnival. Other famous Carnivals include celebrations in Mexico's Mazatlan, Sydney Australia and Quebec City Canada.

When we think of the annual Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans, we have striking images of ornate parade floats, colorful costumes, lively jazz music, spicy Cajun cuisine and strands of colorful beads tossed to raucous crowds. It is without question one of the biggest parties in the U.S. The traditional Mardi Gras colors are purple which symbolizes justice, green which represents faith and gold which stands for power.

Creole and Cajun Cuisine

Creole cooking has an aristocratic background, with French and Spanish influences that create upscale dishes. Red Jambalaya is a traditional Creole dish. Cajun cooking is simple, country style cooking, creating dishes from local ingredients. The centerpieces of Cajun cooking are black cooking pots, used to cook the main dishes, rice and vegetables. Cajun cooking centers around the "Holy Trinity", comprised of 50% chopped onions, 25% diced bell peppers and 25% diced celery, seasoned with parsley, bay leaf, green onions and cayenne pepper.

Some of the popular Louisiana dishes include Jambalaya, Gumbo and Etouffee. All include meat or seafood, vegetables and rice. Creole or Red Jambalaya includes tomatoes and mixes rice directly into the dish. Gumbo does not include tomatoes and the meat and vegetable mixture is spooned on top of a bed of rice. Etouffee means "smothered" and is a creamy mixture with crawfish or shrimp also spooned over a bed of rice.

Food and Wine Pairings

Beer is popular in Louisiana. A general rule is to pair a heavier style beer with a heavy dish, like Jambalaya. Spicy food can affect your palate, not allowing you to enjoy subtle flavor pairings between your beverage and food. A couple of possible beer pairings to try include Dry Stouts and Porters with hearty stews, Pilsners with spicy shellfish dishes and IPAs with spicy beef/chicken/shellfish dishes. If your recipe calls for beer as an ingredient, plan to use the same beer you plan to drink with the meal.

With Creole or Red Jambalaya's spicy tomato sauce base, a red Zinfandel or Syrah are good wine pairing choices. Their jammy fruit character works well with spicy food and compliments tomato sauce. With Gumbo and Etouffee, a Riesling can balance the creaminess and spice levels of these dishes.

My Chef Catering's Etouffee Sauce

This is a popular recipe on My Chef's Mardi Gras Menu and serves four people as an appetizer. Either raw shrimp or cooked meatballs are added to this sauce.

Ingredients for sauce:

1/3	cup	butter
1/4	cup	all-purpose flour
1	ea	small green pepper diced
1	ea	medium Spanish onion diced
2	ea	stalks celery diced
2	ea	cloves fresh garlic minced
2	ea	medium plum tomatoes chopped
2	Tbsp	Louisiana Hot Sauce
1/4	tsp	cayenne pepper (optional)
1/2	Tbsp	seafood seasoning – like Old Bay's
1/2	tsp	ground black pepper
1	cup	fish stock or clam juice
1/2	lb	Raw shrimp, peeled and deveined
or		
16	½ oz	Cocktail meatballs, cooked

Melt butter over medium heat in a skillet. Add flour gradually and stir constantly until incorporated. Cook until light brown. Add onions, garlic, celery and bell pepper to the skillet. Sauté vegetables until softened but not browned. Stir in tomatoes and fish stock or clam juice. Add seafood seasoning. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add hot sauce and cayenne pepper. Add raw shrimp and cook just until shrimp turns pink. If adding cooked meatballs, simmer for 5 minutes or until meatballs are hot.

Bill's Beverage Pick's – with suggested retail prices

Mardi Gras Beers:

Big Easy Imperial Maibock – drier style	\$8.99 per 6 pack
Dixie Blackened Voodoo Lager – black color, light flavors	\$9.49 per 6 pack
Rogue Dead Guy Ale – light color, hoppy, balanced	\$11.99 per 6 pack
Hop Devil IPA – dark color, fruit notes, hop fragrance	\$9.99 per 6 pack

Mardi Gras Domestic Wines:

Columbia Crest Two Vines Riesling – 88 pts. Wine Spectator	\$ 6.00
Hogue Riesling – 89 pts. Wine Spectator	\$ 9.00
Ch Ste. Michelle Riesling Cold Creek Vineyard – 88 pts. Wine Spec.	\$13.00
Foxglove Zinfandel – 89 pts. R. Parker	\$13.00
Artezin Zinfandel – 87 pts. Wine Spectator	\$15.00
Bogle Phantom Syrah – Not Yet Rated (past vintages 88 – 89 pts.)	\$17.00

Wine of the Month:

Milbrandt Riesling Columbia Valley, WA

Suggested Retail Price: \$13

Rieslings are a nice pairing with creamy, spicy Cajun cuisine. The Wine Spectator rated the current 2008 vintage 90 pts. and said "This tangy, jazzy style delivers plenty of ripe apple, pear, peach and floral flavors on a mostly dry, open-weave frame. Drink now. 4088 cases made." This will compliment spicy gumbo and etouffee dishes. Enjoy!



Bill Garlough is the founder and owner of My Chef Catering in Naperville, the winner of the 2007 U.S. Chamber's national Small Business of the Year. Bill is a level 1 master sommelier and pairs food and wine for My Chef's customers. He can be contacted at www.mychef.com.