

The origins of Mardi Gras can be traced to medieval Europe, passing through Rome and Venice in the 17th and 18th centuries to the French House of the Bourbons. From here, the traditional revelry of "Bœuf Gras," or fatted calf, followed France to her colonies.



What Is Mardi Gras?

Mardi Gras is a tradition that dates back thousands of years to pagan celebrations of spring and fertility, including the raucous Roman festivals of Saturnalia and Lupercalia. When Christianity arrived in Rome, religious leaders decided to incorporate these popular local traditions into the new faith, an easier task than abolishing them altogether. As a result, the excess and debauchery of the Mardi Gras season became a prelude to Lent, the 40 days of fasting and penance between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Along with Christianity, Mardi Gras spread from Rome to other European countries, including France, Germany, Spain and England.

What Does Mardi Gras Mean?

Mardi is the French word for Tuesday, and gras means "fat." In France, the day before Ash Wednesday came to be known as Mardi Gras, or "Fat Tuesday." Traditionally, in the days leading up to Lent, merrymakers would binge on all the rich, fatty foods—meat, eggs, milk, lard and cheese—that remained in their homes, in anticipation of several weeks of eating only fish and different types of fasting. The word carnival, another common name for the pre-Lenten festivities, also derives from this feasting tradition: in Medieval Latin, carnelevarium means to take away or remove meat, from the Latin carnem for meat.

When Is Mardi Gras?

Mardi Gras is traditionally celebrated on "Fat Tuesday," the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. In many areas, however, Mardi Gras has evolved into a week-long festival.