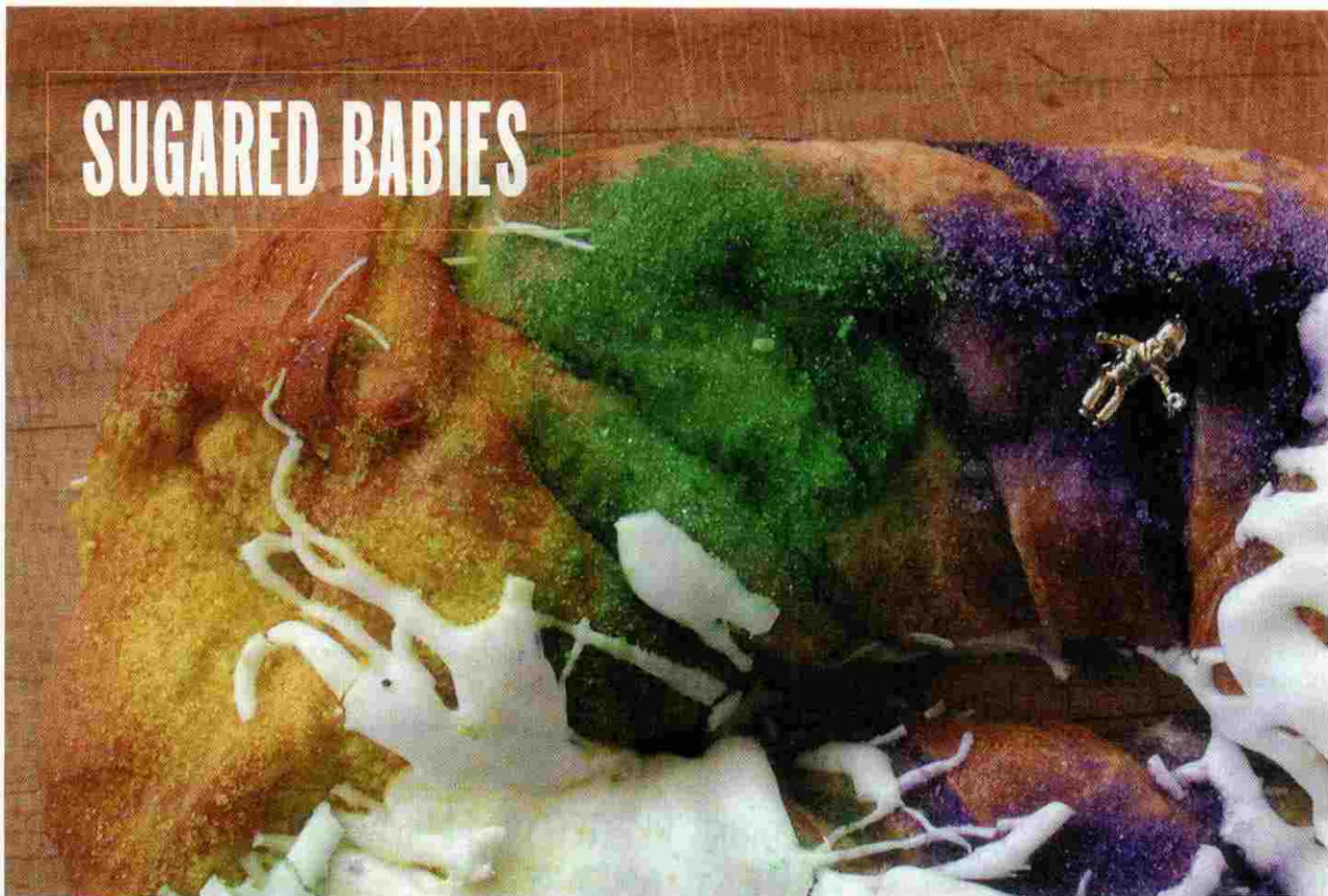


SUGARED BABIES



How McKenzie's brought the baby to king cakes

BY LIZ SCOTT MONAGHAN



CARNIVAL
2003

With 56 days between King's Day (Twelfth Night) and Mardi Gras, March 4, we are eating our way through a deliciously long king-cake season.

It would have been a banner year for McKenzie's Pastry Shoppes, if McKenzie's were still around.

But we can credit - or blame - McKenzie's for the fact that king cakes are omnipresent this time of year.

King cakes of some sort were being eaten for hundreds of years before McKenzie's sold them, of course, but

McKenzie's introduced the plastic baby doll. And after that, the cakes' popularity swelled, along with New Orleanians' waistlines.

Before World War II, you might bite down on a porcelain baby that looked like a kewpie doll, or on a

pecan or a dried red bean. If you were among hopeful debutantes at a Twelfth Night Revelers ball, you might be lucky enough to find a gold or silver bean in your slice.

But by the late '40s and '50s, most consumers of king cakes were teenagers - we were sometimes called bobbysoxers - and king-cake parties were a fine way to socialize on a Saturday night. The rule was that whoever got the foreign object - pecan, bean or doll - in his or her piece had to give the next party.

Then Donald Entringer of McKenzie's got a good deal on a whole bunch of pink-plastic baby dolls, the kind of dolls that were, at the time, used by little girls with dollhouses.

He found out they wouldn't melt if baked in a cake, and he put them in all the McKenzie's king cakes. They worked better than the porcelain dolls. They wouldn't break a tooth. You couldn't swallow them like you could a dried bean. And they were definitely classier than pecans.

Before long, most of the bakeries were using them. But McKenzie's became the king of king cakes, eventu-

McKenzie's may be only a sweet dream now, but its legacy lives on. The bakery gave birth to the plastic baby dolls that popularized king cakes.

Starting Sat., Jan. 2 to Mardi Gras

King Cakes
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With Dolls

Small Size	49¢	Med. Size	99¢
Large Size	1.79	Extra Large	3.25

McKENZIE'S
PASTRY SHOPPES

ally selling an estimated 350,000 cakes a season through its 47 outlets and Schwegmann's Giant Supermarkets.

The king-cake concept, along with other Mardi Gras traditions, originally came from France. The French-style king cake, however, did not arrive until recent years. The king cakes at parties in the '50s tasted like breakfast rolls. They were oval rings topped with purple, green and gold sugar. They looked enticing, but they weren't light like birthday cake or sweet like doughnuts.

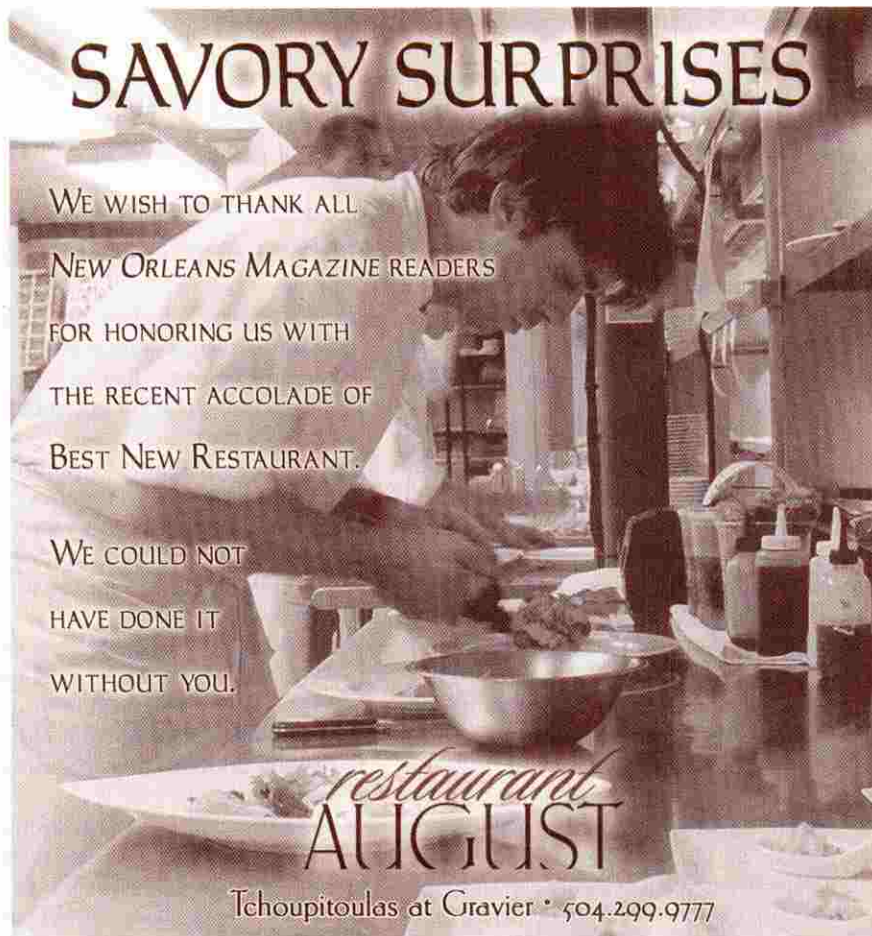
You took a slice just to be polite, even though your parents warned you not to do that until somebody else had bitten down on whatever was in there. They didn't want you coming home and announcing that the entire ninth grade would be jitterbugging in your living room next Saturday.

Gradually, king-cake eating began to spread beyond parties and balls to grade schools, then to offices, then anywhere that three or more people gather during the Carnival season. And a variation of the old rule became tradition— whoever got the baby had to buy the next cake.

Bakers are by nature creative, and they began to express themselves in new kinds of king cakes. Some simply iced them instead of sprinkling them with colored sugar. Some bakeries, such as Haydel's and Randazzo's, started to produce king cakes filled with sweet cream-cheese or fruit-pie filling. Before long, doughnut shops offered fried king cakes. La Madeleine, Croissant D'Or and other French bakeries began to make the cakes as they are made in France, delicate puff pastries with an almond-paste filling.

But through it all, McKenzie's remained the top seller, even though it bowed to the newfangled ideas and began making iced and filled king cakes as well as its time-honored ones. It had its own traditions to uphold.

In 1936, Daniel Entringer bought a little bakery on Prytanian Street. Its owner, Henry C. McKenzie, had worked for Entringer as head baker at a bakery in Biloxi, Miss., and the two later ran a bakery out of a Canal Street grocery. After he bought McKenzie's Prytanian Street bakery, Entringer hired McKenzie as manager and kept McKenzie's name for the business. (Entringer's price for buying the business was a Depression-era sum of \$83. He also assumed about \$4,000 of the bakery's debt.)



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Entringer was a superb businessman. When he died in 1950, the presidency of McKenzie's was passed to his son, Donald.

By then, McKenzie's Pastry Shoppes and their distinctive pastries, bear claws, chocolate-and-pecan turtles and buttermilk drops were well known across the city. I didn't celebrate a birthday without a pink-and-white almond cake from McKenzie's until I was well into adulthood and calorie counting.

Then, at the end of 1999, Schwegmann's closed. And that heralded the end for McKenzie's.

In January 2000, someone lodged a complaint against Entringer's Bakeries on Desire Parkway, which made baked goods for all the McKenzie's stores. The state Department of Health and Hospitals began to inspect the stores weekly. It drew

up a list of 30 health violations - nothing extraordinarily bad - you probably eat in restaurants every day that have the same problems. But the news media did their job and reported the story.

McKenzie's sales plummeted. According to *The Times-Picayune*, Donald Entringer said king-cake sales were off by 20 percent that year. And the king cakes made the difference for McKenzie's between profit and loss.

The company closed all of its outlets in May. A group of investors bought it and reopened for some 14 months, but they couldn't make a go of it either. So as of July 2001, McKenzie's was gone, probably for good.

But king cakes are still around in endless variety at every local bakery and in supermarkets. A few package the baby separately so the buyer can

insert it at his own risk. Haydel's offers a porcelain figure representing something distinctively New Orleans. This year it's a parade lieutenant.

But most of the cakes still hold plastic babies.

Some people - and I - brush off the crumbs and save the babies in a kitchen drawer. Others line them up on top of their computers, or string them into homemade necklaces.

Mignon Faget's jewelry shops sell glorified versions of the baby as pendants and earrings. And the babies appear occasionally in local works of art.

The buttermilk drops and the chocolate turtles and the Father's Day cakes shaped like neckties are the stuff of memory now. But the king-cake babies will never die.

That is McKenzie's lasting legacy. ❁

The results are in



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