King Cake

Ingredients:
- 2 packages (4½ teaspoons) yeast
- ¼ cup lukewarm water
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup sugar
- 1½ cups flour
- 1 cup milk, at room temperature
- 3 tablespoons melted butter, cooled
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon orange extract
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon nutmeg
- 2 to 3 cups flour
- 1 egg yolk
- 3 tablespoons milk, at room temperature
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- 3 to 3½ cups confectioner's sugar
- 6 tablespoons sugar
- Green, yellow, blue and red food coloring

The Sponge: Combine the yeast, ¼ cup water, and 1 teaspoon sugar in a 2 cup measure, whisking well, and set aside to allow to bubble and rise, about 10 minutes. Meanwhile, whisk the two eggs in a mixing bowl with the ½ cup sugar, 1½ cups of flour, and the cup of milk. When the yeast has foamed up ("proofed", or, proven to be working) whisk it into the egg mixture to form a smooth batter. Cover the bowl with a clean, damp dish towel and set it aside in a warm, draft free place until it doubles in size, about one to one and a half hours.

The Dough: When the sponge has doubled, stir it down with a wooden spoon and stir in the melted butter, the extracts, salt and nutmeg. Mix this well. Then stir in the 2 to 3 cups flour, ½ cup at a time, first with the spoon and then with the hands to form a dough you can begin to knead. Turn this dough out of the bowl, scraping the inside of the bowl, all onto a lightly floured countertop, and begin to knead. Add sprinkles of flour as needed to keep the dough from sticking, but it should be slightly tacky at the end of the process. (Do not add too much flour.) Knead for eight to ten minutes, until the dough is smooth and elastic. Place the kneaded dough in a clean, buttered bowl, turn it to coat, cover with the damp dish towel, and place in the warm, draft free place to rise until doubled, about one to two hours. Preheat the oven to 325° now.

Shaping and Baking the Cake: After the dough has risen punch it down with your fist and turn it out onto a lightly floured countertop. Knead the dough lightly to release any air pockets, and then divide it into three equal portions. Cover these with the damp dish towel and allow to rest for five minutes to make the shaping easier. After the rest roll each ball of dough into three "ropes" of one and a half foot lengths. Place the ropes side by side, and, beginning in the center, braid them to the end. Then, working from the other side of the ropes, braid them to the other end as well. Form the braided ropes into a circle, and gently pinch the ends together. Place the cake on a greased baking sheet, cover it with the damp dish

towel, and allow it to rise in the warm place until puffy and nearly doubled, about a half hour.   Be sure your oven is preheated to 325˚.

Once the cake has risen beat together the egg yolk with 1 tablespoon water.   Remove the damp towel and brush the egg mixture carefully over the surface of the risen cake.   Then place the cake in the 325˚ oven and bake for 35 to 40 minutes, until the top is golden brown and a toothpick inserted into one of the braids comes out clean.   When done, remove the cake from the oven, let it rest on the baking sheet for several minutes, then, with a pancake turner, remove it to a wire rack to cool completely.

Decorating the Cake: In a medium bowl mix together the 3 tablespoons milk, lemon juice, and 3 cups of the confectioner's sugar.   Check the consistency, adding more sugar to assure the icing is not too runny. It should have the consistency of corn syrup.   Pour this over the cooled cake as it sits on its rack.

Place two tablespoons sugar in each of three bowls.   To the first bowl stir in three drops green food color. Stir in three drops of yellow food color to the second bowl of sugar.   To the third bowl stir in two cups of blue and one of red food color, to make purple.   Sprinkle these colored sugars, in sections, on the top of the iced cake.

Into the underside of the completed cake tuck a New Orleans King Cake plastic doll, or a dried bean, or a whole shelled pecan, as a favor.

The green stands for Faith, the gold for Power, and the purple for Justice. These are the colors of New Orleans' Mardi Gras, as established by His Majesty, Rex, the King of Carnival, in 1872.

Submitted by: Brian Reid from St. George's Episcopal Church, New Orleans. Brian has contributed recipes that have appeared in The Times-Picayune and other local publications.