

Mardi Gras in Cajun country

In this recording you will hear two people, Clothilde and Carla, talking about Mardi Gras, a Cajun celebration. Cajun people were originally French people who lived in today's Canadian provinces Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and moved to Louisiana after 1755. Clothilde, who is Cajun tells Carla in this conversation about the celebrations of Mardi Gras.

Carla: Mardi Gras sounds French. What is it and has it something to do with the Cajun culture?

Clothilde: Mardi Gras, Mardi means Tuesday, gras means fat. So, it's "Fat Tuesday" and Fat Tuesday, so it's always going to be celebrated on a Tuesday. And it always comes before Ash Wednesday, and Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. Mardi Gras is that final day of celebration before the Lenten season begins. People wear costumes, there are parades in my hometown, at the parades you can catch a lot of beads that are thrown from floats, and you eat and drink throughout the day. There is no school, no mail is delivered on that day. It's a state holiday. New Orleans is well known for their Mardi Gras parades and balls and they are truly wonderful events. Cajun Mardi Gras is quite different from what you'll see in New Orleans.

Carla: I understand. Because New Orleans is not Cajun country?

Clothilde: Not really. I mean there is a lot of Cajun people that have moved there.

Carla: Does the Cajun Mardi Gras have more of a French influence?

Clothilde: Absolutely. The day, in certain cities like Mamou, the day begins with something that's called a Courir de Mardi Gras which translated it means the Mardi Gras run. I really love being in this small Cajun town that's named Mamou. This is where revelers, people who're masked, wearing costumes go from house to house asking, or begging really, for ingredients to make a gumbo. The prize ingredient is a live chicken. Just for show the live chicken is thrown into the air for costumed participants to chase, as the gumbo is going to be a chicken gumbo, you see. And all the ingredients that the revelers have begged for, they are all going to go into a big gumbo for everyone in the community to share. Lent is the 40-day period leading up to Easter, so it is a time of fasting. Mardi Gras is the last day to celebrate; I guess you could say it's the final hurrah before Lent. And Cajuns love to celebrate. We are known for our joie de vivre or joy of life.

Carla: You know, this reminds me; lot of countries in Europe have a last day of celebration before Lent.

Clothilde: Absolutely!

Carla: So, this is probably something Cajun people took from France because there is something similar in Austria, southern Germany.

Clothilde: It's a Catholic culture.

Carla: Exactly. And I'm imagining a huge pot for the whole community, or a very little city. A tiny town or a huge pot. Or maybe gumbo is not cooked in a pot?

Clothilde: Oh yes, it is. You were right.

Carla: That's good.