



Alice Siebert of Gloucester takes a turn stirring the gumbo.

february



Mardi Gras, Down East Style

It'll be months before the sunseekers return to the Crystal Coast, but great music, free food, and community spirit bring out the crowds in Gloucester, despite February's chill.

Written by Grant Britt • Photography by Barry Ragin

THEY COME SHIMMYING OUT OF THE woods dripping with booty, bead and coin necklaces draped across chests, their finery glittering in the cold February sunlight. It's only a few miles inland from the waters of North Carolina's Crystal Coast, where the notorious pirate Blackbeard plied his trade some 300 years ago. But this is no pirate resurrection, no troupe of faded apparitions struggling up from watery graves. These celebrants are very much alive and ready to party. On a freezing February afternoon, a dedicated crew of party-minded souls has gathered in Gloucester, a tiny eastern community located about 15 miles from Beaufort, to celebrate Mardi Gras, Down East style.

A closer look reveals that this ragged group of masked celebrants decked out in faded thrift-shop finery is a band of sorts. There's an accordion in the mix, a horn or two blatting intermittently, and several people thumping enthusiastically on percussive instruments as they shuffle along. But this Fool's Procession is just eye candy, a tip of

the hat to the spirit of the season and the kickoff to a day of feasting and celebration. The real party is taking place right beside the road at the Gloucester Community Club. An estimated crowd of 500 merrymakers are milling around on the grounds and inside the building, eating, drinking, and dancing to celebrate Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, the last day before entering the austerity of Lent.

'One big thing'

The brainchild of Bryan Blake and wife, Barbara, the Gloucester Mardi Gras is in its 17th year. The festival came about as a by-product of The Unknown Tongues, the band Bryan founded nearly 20 years ago. After gaining some regional fame, Bryan started receiving calls from the community wanting the band to do fundraisers. "We just decided instead of playing every little thing that came along, we'd just do one big thing each year and that's what Mardi Gras turned into," Bryan Blake says. "Basically, it started out as a little potluck, maybe 50 people, and grew and grew."

The Blakes are active in their adopted Gloucester

community. Bryan is fire chief for the Marshallberg Volunteer Fire Department, and Barbara ran for the state house of representatives last year. The Mardi Gras celebration has communal benefits as well. Because all the food and music is donated, and there's no admission charge, Blake puts out a donation box.

"We've always donated proceeds that we have from Mardi Gras to the Woodrow Price scholarship fund," Blake says. Price, a former editor of *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, retired down here and was very active in the community. When he passed away, his widow started a scholarship fund for local graduating high school students.

Although participants pack plenty of partying into the one-day celebration, those who come looking for the Big Easy bacchanal can keep their shirts on. This Mardi Gras is modeled after the rural Louisiana Mardi Gras, not the New Orleans style. But as the Blakes admit on their website, the Gloucester festival is even tamer than the rural shindigs.

In rural Louisiana, local citizens, disguised for the day in full face masks and gaudy costumes, are herded by handlers into horse-drawn cattle trailers and hauled from farm to farm to chase chickens that will go in the Mardi Gras gumbo.

In Gloucester, the idea is to get right down to the business of celebrating with a minimum of hoorah. Many participants bring their own chicken, and more. "We have a list of people who donate food, and that list is ever-growing," Blake says. "Starting sometime in January, we start making calls, and people will bring 10 pounds of onions or five pounds of chicken or whatever their assignment, and we get together Friday night and do all the prep work for the gumbo."

Crawfish are the focal point of the Louisiana Mardi

Gras menu, but Blake says there's so much demand for them that it's hard to get them exported that time of year. Shrimp and crabs take their place, and local fish dealers help out as well, donating frames of snapper or triggerfish.

"When they fillet a bigger fish, they've still got substantial amounts of meat

still left on the backbone," Blake says, "and we'll take those and stew 'em down for fish stock."

As revelers start to straggle in Saturday morning, the food factory is in full operation. Massive cauldrons of gumbo simmer on hissing gas burners in tents. Some attendees are overcome by the sights and smells and can't wait for the official chow-down time after the Fools Procession. Kids dash back and forth to the dessert tables, pie-smearing faces marking a successful hit-and-run raid on the cornucopia of sweet treats.

Fueled by music

The festival really hits its stride by mid-afternoon when Blake and The Unknown Tongues take the stage. Their mix of country, Cajun, Zydeco, and rhythm and blues has the dance floor packed with celebrants of all ages. Kids dive between the legs of dancers, scrambling for the beads tossed from the stage. Dance styles are as cross-cultural as the music, with the Twist and the Boogaloo sharing the floor with the two-step and the eight-count Zydeco.

Blake, a boat builder by trade, got interested in Louisiana music when his wife was in graduate school in Charlottesville, Virginia, and her folklore professor introduced him to Cajun fiddle tunes. Blake got to do a one-on-one workshop with legendary Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, whose appearance at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival in front of 17,000 people helped resurrect Cajun music.

Although playing at his own festival has not allowed Blake to attend Mardi Gras in Louisiana, he still slips away on occasion. "We like to go to Louisiana when there's not some sort of festival," Blake says. "We get a chance to meet musicians and in a lot of cases get to play with them. Everybody down there is pretty inviting and interested in their culture."

That communal musical sharing is evident in the Gloucester Mardi Gras as well. Impromptu jams take place outside with Bryan and Barbara wandering from group to group, joining in on guitar, accordion, or fiddle.

For many locals, it's the brightest spot in a long winter in the off-season. "It's just seven hours of free food and music and good times," Blake says. "I think that everybody who comes here finds something they enjoy. It's just a good party."

Grant Britt writes about the local, regional, and national music scene from his home in Greensboro and is featured in the book Making Notes: Music of the Carolinas.

if you're going

17th Annual Mardi Gras
Gloucester Community Center
Gloucester, N.C. 28528
(252) 729-8021
February 13, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.;
The band plays at 3 p.m.

Make the most of your trip — go to www.ourstate.com for your guide to where to stay, eat, and explore in the Down East area.

