

Most American families have already taken down their Christmas trees by January and begun boxing up holiday cheer for next year. But in French homes, the season of joy jingles to a halt much later. Pine wreaths hang from front doors well into the New Year, as Christmas trees stand guard in living rooms, and *crèches* "nativity scenes" wait for three more figures to appear: Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspard.

This eagerly awaited trio is none other than the three wise men, or *Magi*, who — as legend has it — traveled to Jerusalem from the East with gifts for the infant Jesus. In Western Christian tradition, the Magi are also believed

to have been kings, and for the past 17 centuries, their arrival in Bethlehem, or Epiphany, has been celebrated on January 6. In France, however, people tend to make the festivities last throughout the month of January.

Part of the reason why the French savor the Epiphany for so long is because they have something scrumptious to celebrate it with — the *galette des Roise*, or "Kings' cake." With its flaky double crust of puff pastry and frangipane cream filling made of almonds, butter, eggs, and sugar, the *galette* is simply *délicieuse*. The most exciting part of the Kings' cake though, is not what it is made of, but what it holds inside.



French Epiphany

by Magda Elghobashi Schmit

Inside every mouthwatering galette hides a small charm or *fève*, and the person who finds it becomes the Epiphany Queen or King for the day!

This game of chance has been playing a role in winter celebrations since Roman times. However, it didn't become part of Epiphany festivities until the Middle Ages when Christians began to see the *fève* as a souvenir of Jesus' gifts from the Magi. The *fève* also serves to remind people that their place in life is uncertain because the finder of the charm is only crowned king or queen for a limited time.

So what exactly does this lucky charm look like? Originally, just it was a simple dried bean — *fève* means "bean" in French — or a gold coin for the wealthy. Today a charm can be anything from a miniature Eiffel Tower to a glittering piece

of jewelry if your galette comes from a chic Paris bakery. Whatever the *fève* in the pastry, if you are the lucky one to find it, you can wear your crown proudly for the rest of the day.

Before any crowning can take place, though, there are some rules to follow. First, the youngest person present must crawl under the table. That way, he or she won't be able to peek and see where the *fève* is hiding. Then someone else cuts the galette and announces, "This piece is for . . ." And from the hiding place, it's up to the youngest to call out: "for Mom!" or "for Uncle Pierre!" until everyone at the table has a slice. Then the real suspense begins. Who will find the *fève*? But don't eat too quickly, or you might break a tooth — or worse — swallow the charm!

Magda Elghobashi Schmit and her husband live in Paris, where they enjoy tasting French life.

Galette des Rois "Kings' Cake"

To bake your very own — and very French — galette des Rois, you'll need

- 1 package (2 sheets) puff pastry, thawed
- 2 eggs, plus 1 yolk
- 4 ounces ground almonds
- 4 ounces butter (or margarine), softened
- 4 ounces confectioner's sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- pinch of salt
- 1 charm (Hint: use a small figurine made out of pottery so it doesn't melt in the oven!)
- 1 paper crown

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F.
2. In a small bowl, beat the 2 eggs with a whisk.
3. In a larger bowl, mix together the sugar, butter, salt, and ground almonds until smooth.

4. Add the whisked eggs and vanilla extract to the almond mixture. Stir until well blended.
5. Roll one pastry sheet on a lined baking sheet into a square, cutting off the corners to make a circle. Spread the cream, called *frangipane*, evenly on top. Don't forget to add the *fève*!
6. Roll out the second sheet of the puff pastry and set it on top of the *frangipane* layer. Using the prongs of a fork, press the edges of the two pastry sheets together to seal.
7. Beat the egg yolk, and using a pastry brush, apply the glaze to the top layer of puff pastry. Then decorate the top of the *galette* with a diamond design by gently cutting parallel diagonal lines, first in one way and then in the other, into the top sheet of pastry.
8. Bake for 25 minutes, or until golden brown. Serve warm with chilled apple cider. Serves six.

M.E.S.

Lucky Boy!

He found the prize and gets to be king for a day.

