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Get a new start at the New Year during Tet celebration in New Orleans East

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com FEB 5, 2019 - 8:00 AM

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Residents celebrate Tet, or Buddhist New Year, a three-day festival that draws more than 10,000 people to Mary Queen of Vietnam.

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If New Year's resolutions have already gone by the wayside, you have a second chance.

Tuesday is Tet, the beginning of the new year

in Vietnam. It's the Year of the Pig, which, according to lore, brings prosperity and luck.

A good place to start anew is at Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, epicenter of the Vietnamese-American community that settled in the area beginning in 1975 after the fall of Saigon. The church has been hosting its Tet Festival, open to the public, for 29 years.

"Tet is a time when families and friends come together to celebrate," said New Orleans Councilwoman Cyndi Nguyen, who represents District E, where the church is located. Through its three days of festival, Tet attracts over 20,000 people, said Nguyen, and generates a significant amount of sales tax for the city.

Tet is short for Tết Nguyên Đán, or Feast of the First Morning of the First Day. The date of the festival is based on the lunar calendar, taking place over seven days in Vietnam. It plays an important role in Vietnamese culture as a way of "getting all the bad luck and evil out of the house, then starting the year fresh," said festival spokeswoman Lang Le.

While there already have been Tet celebrations at local schools and other churches in New Orleans, the Mary Queen of Vietnam festival is the largest and takes place over three days, Friday through Sunday.

The community get-together celebrates Vietnamese culture with live music, traditional dances, children's activities and food.

“Lots of good food,” said Mark Vicknair, who has been attending off and on for 10 years. “If you’ve never been, go. It is one of my favorite festivals.” He recommends the pandan, or green, waffles. Extract from pandan, a floral grass used in Vietnamese cooking, brings a fragrant herby flavor that is subtly sweet and almost vanilla-like.

The food is prepared by different church ministries, which makes for a diversity of flavor in the phos, Vietnamese egg and spring rolls, fried bananas, bánh mì and other Vietnamese cuisine for sale.

Many festivalgoers return to favorite food booths each year. Le said at one point, a new layout was suggested, but organizers realized

that their regulars, who know where they want to go, would be unhappy with the changes.

What you probably won't see offered are traditional Tet foods, such as bánh chưng (a sticky rice cake filled with mung bean, fatty pork and spices) and bánh tét (a circular sticky rice cake with a mung bean or mung bean and pork filling). Le said the traditional Tet foods are served at home during this time rather than at the festival.

Vietnamese cuisine isn't the only food at the festival: There are also shrimp and oyster po-boys, french fries, grilled kebobs, Manchu chicken ("A festival favorite," said Le), nachos, cheese fries and fresh sugar cane, a nod to the area's Latino population. Fried plantains are a favorite of festivalgoer T.J. Rogers, in addition to the pho.

"Get them served hot out the fryer, and then dip them in the fish sauce, which you have to ask for," Rogers said. "But it's so good!"

Bands perform, including Royal Street (1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday) and Groovy 7 (1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday) with the main attraction being

Vietnamese group the Headline Band, with Vietnamese performers as special guests.

Fireworks — good for scaring away ghosts and evil spirits, and bringing good luck for the new year — illuminate all three nights about 6 p.m. If you get there during the day, or miss the fireworks, don't fear, there are "snappers" for children to throw on the ground, re-creating the sound of fireworks.

The pyrotechnics are followed by lion or dragon dances: The lion is manned by two people, the dragon by more because it is longer. Minh Luu, who is part of the Versailles Lion Dance Team, said they have been practicing year-round.

There will also be other traditional Vietnamese dances and a fashion show. Children's rides and games round out the festival activities.

"Most of all, what I love is that the festival brings people together," Nguyen said.

Tet Festival

WHERE: Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, 5069 Willowbrook Drive, New Orleans

WHEN: 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday; 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday

ADMISSION: Free

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