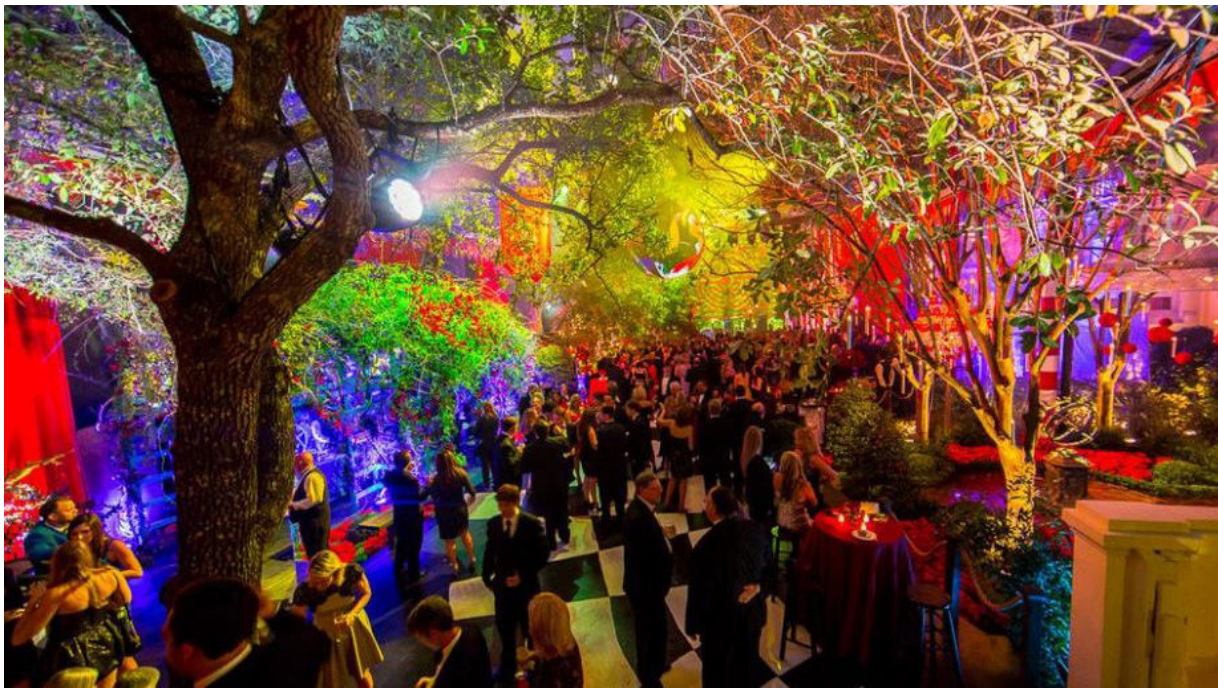


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Lavish and large or small and selective, debutante parties are an enduring tradition

BY SUE STRACHAN | Staff writer

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The scene at Clare Conwill's "Alice in Wonderland" party hosted by her parents Mary Clare and Danny Conwill in December 2014. Bronson Van Wyck was the event planner.

Photo provided by Josh Brasted

For those who follow the debutante party scene, the 2014-15 season was big.

That was the year that Mary Clare and Danny Conwill threw an “Alice in Wonderland” party for their daughter, Clare. The Conwills hired event planner Bronson van Wyck, of New York,

to turn the family home and yard into a rainbow-colored, somewhat hallucinogenic and definitely entertaining playground, filled with Wonderland tents. Major supporters of New Orleans music, the Conwills hired Trombone Shorty as the headliner.

At parties hosted by other parents during that season, national pop acts Maroon 5 and Wiz Khalifa provided the music.

In 2016 and 2017, the Conwills hosted parties for deb daughters Marcia and Mary Elizabeth Conwill, themed “Late Night in Emerald City” and “A Journey to Neverland,” at the Sugar Mill. Those events were also immersive experiences.

“We wanted to do something very theatrical,” said Danny Conwill. “And the storybook themes gave us the opportunity to introduce characters — human and animal — to make it more intriguing.” (Note: The Conwills have one more daughter, but locals will have to wait a few years to see how her story plays out.)

A busy season

Many of the debutantes' main parties are known for creative decor, gourmet cuisine and great bands providing a night of dancing.

Others are classic affairs, such as a tea: Who doesn't love cucumber sandwiches, scones and Earl Gray?

For parties big and small, the 2019-20 season is a busy one. More than 40 parties are planned, beginning in mid-June, with a break for summer and fall, a spike around Thanksgiving, and the Christmas holidays hosting the bulk.

It's a mix of debutantes' main parties, almost always themed, some with multiple honorees, and "boutique" parties, which are usually teas, cocktail or dinner parties and almost always spotlight just one honoree.

This doesn't count presentations, starting with Le Début des Jeunes Filles de La Nouvelle Orléans on June 15 and ending with the swirl of Carnival balls.

It's a busy schedule, one that has ebbed and flowed through the years.

When Mathilde Villere Currence made her debut in 1992-93, there were 15 parties in her honor, including a main party with the theme “Topiary,” which was held with another debutante and co-hosted by their parents on New Year’s Eve.

Currence's party schedule, which included invitations to the soirees of fellow debutantes of the season, began Memorial Day weekend and continued nonstop through the summer, into the fall, holidays and Carnival, culminating in Mardi Gras. In addition to deb parties, there were presentations and Carnival balls. To top off the season, Currence was Queen of Carnival.

A modern take

Currence has fond memories of her season and reign, and is grateful for all of the parties people had for her. Still, when recalling how many, Currence and her daughter, Lucille, agree that it may have been too much.

A junior at the University of the South (Sewanee), Lucille is being honored along with another debutante at a party co-hosted by their parents. There are plans for two smaller parties to be hosted by family and friends.

Deb parties are all-ages affairs. It's not unusual to see a debutante's grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins grooving together on the dance floor, sharing in the fun — and telling tales the next day.

The main difference between debuts now and in the past? Today's debts are often busy with summer internships or semesters abroad. Lucille Currence has an internship in Los Angeles this summer and will study abroad this fall. It was a trend that started in the late 1990s, when University of New Orleans' summer program in Innsbruck, Austria, became popular. The presentation Le Debut recognized this changing pattern, and in 2012 moved the event from August to June, when more debts are in town.

Once in a lifetime

Debutantes presented in the Original Illinois and Young Men Illinois clubs are usually high school seniors. They have fewer parties, but nevertheless a full schedule.

In the Original Illinois Club, members' wives Marion Maheia, Bettye Johnston and Tracy Dido are in charge of a workshop for mothers and

daughters that teaches girls the do's and don'ts.

“Etiquette, social graces, how to communicate with adults,” said Maheia, ticking off the lessons.

The young ladies have already participated in a tea at the Windsor Court Hotel, as well as a health and wellness session and a cultural activity, such as a trip to a museum.

It’s not all serious, as Maheia recounted. “We remind them that tea is where women used to meet up to gossip.”

They also start taking part in rehearsals for the OIC ball, held the second Saturday before Mardi Gras. Maids are not required to have parties, but the queen is.

Chevel Caprice Johnson, whose daughter Shelbi is making her debut as a maid in the Young Men Illinois Club, is doing much of the training remotely because they live out of state.

“I wanted my daughter to have the opportunity,” said Johnson. “It is a once in a lifetime opportunity to pass it on.”

Johnson made her debut in 1987 in Les Mesdames Mode. Marc Morial was king that year (he would become mayor of New Orleans a few years later). The group no longer exists, but like the Original Illinois Club, it provided girls with teas and training before the ball.

'Debutante Delights'

When Morell Trimble Corle made her debut in 1971, her parents hosted a tea.

“I was away at school at (University of North Carolina in) Chapel Hill,” said Corle. While many other debs in her year attended Newcomb College in New Orleans or Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, “I couldn’t come back and forth a lot,” Corle said.

In those days, each young woman attended parties with an escort. From the late 1970s through the ‘80s, Corle worked for Esther Dupuy Breckenridge, whose claim to fame was setting up dates for the young women with "Debutante Delights."

“The debutante would have to send about three or four names of boys that they would like to be paired up with for the parties,” recalled Corle.

Memories of these setups linger. Great dates, as well as terrible ones, made for entertaining dinner conversations later. And some parents regret that "Debutante Delights" are no more. But as one social observer said, "They are going in groups to parties now, so it's too hard to change that."

What's not going to change: New Orleans' debutante tradition, with its special season of fun, friends, family bonding, lifelong memories — and plenty of parties.

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