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NolaVie

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Voices From The French Market

By [LAINE KAPLAN-LEVENSON](#) ([/PEOPLE/LAINE-KAPLAN-LEVENSON](#)) AND RENÉE PECK



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drawn wagons line the narrow street in front of New Orleans' French Market, Jan. 1915.

Credit National Archives

The French Market may seem like one big urban flea market — with everything from tee-shirts to Mardi Gras masks, alligator heads to shot glasses. And tourists... lots of tourists. But upon closer inspection, you discover that this outdoor shopping plaza is full of individuals who couldn't be more different from one another.

NolaVie's Laine Kaplan-Levenson and Renée Peck met some of these local vendors who make the French Market another unique corner of the city.

Listen

5:38

Meet a nutria seamstress, a mask seller, and a niece and aunt who each live their own French Market reality.

Sunlight glancing off sequins threw splashes of color onto the pavement at the uptown lakeside corner of the [French Market](http://www.frenchmarket.org/) (<http://www.frenchmarket.org/>) on a cold bright day in February. Such hints of Carnival were strewn among the usual clutter of busy flea market stalls like so many bits of mica on a sandy beach.

The gear at Darlene's Designs runs to nutria-trimmed bustiers, men's jackets appliqued with multi-colored skulls and parasols daintily outfitted with lace and feathers, all turned out painstakingly beneath the adroit needle of Darlene Hargreve's sewing machine in Cut-Off.

“My grandmother sold sewing machines,” Darlene says, “so I had to learn to sew.”

These days, Darlene hits the French Market on weekends (“I have a home to attend to and food to cook during the week”), where bustier clients tend to be young women and other clients hail from near (Lafayette) and far (California).

By Mardi Gras weekend, says Darlene, her costumes will be out. Tutus and Carnival-colored umbrellas and jester pants edged in satin. Meanwhile, she’s showcasing her nutria couture; she gets the pelts from a third-generation nutria farmer in Galliano.

Sales, says the three-year veteran of the French Market, have been slow. Holidays — Halloween, Mardi Gras, French Quarter Fest — bring better crowds. “I’m here seven hours straight, but I like it,” she says.

Under the main roof nearby, two men from Kuwait are trying on masks. The annual Mask Market won’t start for a few weeks, but here masks are year-round best sellers. This booth will average \$400 in mask sales today; big ones run \$20, plaster versions \$10, while smaller feather eye masks are three for \$10.

A pheasant feather concoction goes into the Kuwait businessman’s shopping bag — a take-home gift for his kids, perfect for parties back home.

For now, shoppers are passing on the preserved alligator heads, allegedly the real thing from an alligator farm in Mississippi. Not to worry, says the shopkeeper. “Tourists are crazy; they buy everything.”

Maryland residents Sherrie Brown and Darlene Henry, in town for a half-marathon the next day, sip frozen daiquiris in the aisle. They, too, are shopping for trinkets to take to the kids. They love New Orleans.

“This is such a celebratory city,” says Darlene. “It’s very Bohemian. And I love the sense of community here.”

“It’s hard to explain New Orleans,” agrees Sherrie. “You have to experience it rather than talk about it.”

Midway through the market, at Spot 118, Mable Howard holds court. It’s a select location, protected from inclement weather on one side by a market wall and open to the strolling crowds on the other. Mable gets preferred placement as the number-two seller in seniority at the French Market: She’s been a vendor here for 37 years.



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Market scene: Look beyond the obvious for the individuals behind the tables.

Credit Renée Peck / NolaVie



<http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wwno/files/201402/darlene.jpg>
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French Market vendor Darlene Hargreaves of Cut-Off.

Credit Renee Peck

“I started outside, and then moved in,” she says. “Now I’m No. 2 on the list, so when I rent I can get my choice of spot.” Vendors have to sell a minimum of six days each month to keep their tenure. Numbers 1 and 3 both sell tee-shirts, she tells us.

The market has changed exponentially in her three decades there.

“Everything has gone up, rent, license fees,” she says. Nowadays, much of the merchandise is from China. But tourists, Mable finds, “like handmade things.” These days she does a brisk business with conventioners and cruisers.

Farther down the aisle, a Tarot card reader stays busy. She wears a No. 30 Saints jersey. Everywhere, goods are piled high on tables, and pinned to temporary walls. Most are bulk goods — tee-shirts, baseball caps, purses, posters, paperweights, mass-produced jewelry. In between lie the handmade treasures: soy candles, wooden plant stands, feathered headbands, beaded bracelets.

Wandering back into the sunlight, we pause to admire a tent lined with miniature headwear — or fascinators, as they are called in the industry. Tiny top hats shine with sequins; miniature veils cascade from poufs of wispy feathers. Jason Tullos has been making them for the past 9 years.

“I started during Mardi Gras, when I was king of Morpheus,” he says. “People were tired of those big hats with elastic that cut into your chin, so I made 60 little ones for everyone on my float.”

Now he and his partner spend most of their leisure hours in their garage, turning out the diminutive headpieces for everyone from float riders to bridal parties. Jason himself rides in six parades.

“No glitter allowed inside our home,” says Jason ruefully. “Though we have a white dog who is pretty much purple, green and gold with it these days.”

Mardi Gras and “anything St. Patrick” are big sellers, advises Jason, who has been selling at the Market since last April. “It’s phenomenal — you meet people from all over the world.”

The annual [Mardi Gras Mask Market](http://www.frenchmarket.org/featured-event/) (<http://www.frenchmarket.org/featured-event/>) will take place at the French Market from Friday, Feb 28 to Monday, March 3 (Lundi Gras), from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day.

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Mable Howard is the second-longest seller at the Market.

Credit Renée Peck / NolaVie



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Jason Tullos sells colorful and popular diminutive headgear.

Credit Renée Peck / NolaVie