

SPRING FESTIVALS

The awe-inspiring diversity of Louisiana is easily taken for granted. A quick survey of the state's spring festivals — Louisiana is home to more annual festivals than there are days in the year — is an apt reminder that there's no place like the state that we call home. Here are a few of Louisiana's best festivals for mingling with the locals, dancing like you're not on Facebook or connecting with your roots — whether they're in Senegal or Sicily.

BY CHRIS JAY

NORTH

MARCH 18

Louisiana Redbud Festival

Small-town festivals don't come much more charming than the Louisiana Redbud Festival in Vivian. There's the Ruby Collins Memorial Redbud Treasure Hunt — which whips locals into a frenzy as they search for a \$300 prize hidden somewhere within city limits — as well as the annual pancake breakfast, carnival rides, arts and crafts vendors and live music. The Redbud Parade, now in its 53rd year, will roll at 2 p.m., and the festival will conclude with an old-fashioned street dance on the town square.

Where: Downtown Vivian
Tickets: Free admission
More info: laredbud.com

APRIL 7-8

Grillin' for Grads

A 30-foot tall inflatable hog welcomes visitors to Grillin' for Grads, a barbecue cook-off and college scholarship fundraiser attracting competition barbecue teams from throughout the region to downtown Shreveport. Teams arrive and get cooking on Friday, which includes a public live music showcase and a VIP tent party. On Saturday, festival attendees can enjoy a kids cook off, mechanical bull rides, a rib-eating contest and more. The main attraction of this event is Saturday's barbecue showdown. Attendees can sample and vote on dishes in several categories, bestowing a coveted People's Choice token to their overall favorite dish. Serious barbecue aficionados should plan to arrive in time to be among the first wave of People's Choice voters to work their way through Festival Plaza sampling smokey brisket, spicy ribs and juicy smoked chicken during what amounts to an all-you-can-eat buffet prepared by trophy-toting pitmasters.

Where: Festival Plaza, Downtown Shreveport
Tickets: \$15
More info: arklatexambassadors.com

JUNE 3

DoMo Brewfest

Launched in 2015 as a fundraiser benefiting the Downtown Monroe Alliance, DoMo Brewfest is an afternoon-long beer tasting featuring more than 150 beers. Expect the beer list to highlight local brews from Flying Tiger Brewery and Ouachita Brewing Company as well as lots of other regional breweries. Beer lovers who make the trip should plan to spend some time at the incredible Flying Tiger Brewery tasting room, which opened in 2016 and features a replica of the shark-faced nose art of a P-40 Warhawk fighter suspended above the bar.

Where: Riverwalk, Downtown Monroe
Tickets: \$35
More info: domobrewfest.com

CAJUN

MARCH 31-APRIL 2

Dave Robicheaux's Hometown Literary Festival

One of Louisiana's newest festivals celebrates fictional detective Dave Robicheaux, the rule-breaking Cajun sheriff's deputy who appears in numerous novels by best-selling author James Lee Burke. Dave Robicheaux's Hometown Literary Festival, launched in 2016, invites fans of Burke's detective novels to explore the character's hometown haunts like Shadows-on-the-Teche and Victor's Cafeteria during guided bus tours. There's also an academic symposium on Burke's life and career, a book fair with author appearances and book signings, and even a Cajun bourré tournament. This being New Iberia, there are plenty of opportunities to sample local food (including a cochon de lait) and dance to Cajun and zydeco music while enjoying scenic views of Bayou Teche. Burke, who spent summers in New Iberia as a child, did not attend the festival in its first year — but hundreds of his fans did.

Where: New Iberia Historic District
Tickets: Many events are free, other events \$15-\$60
More info: daverobicheauxliteraryfestival.com

MAY 4-7

Thibodaux Firemen's Fair

Thibodaux is home to the largest volunteer fire department fundraiser in the United States: The Thibodaux Firemen's Fair. Going stronger than ever after an unbelievable 134 years, the event netted more than \$750,000 in funds for the Thibodaux Volunteer Fire Department in 2016, despite heavy rain. A huge live-music stage, carnival rides, Cajun food and a live raffle drawing for \$10,000 cash are just a few of the main attractions. The Firemen's Parade, held annually on the Sunday of the festival at 11 a.m., is one of the oldest parades in Louisiana and a crowd favorite.

Where: Thibodaux Fire Department Fairgrounds, Thibodaux
Tickets: Free admission
More info: firemensfair.com

MAY 10-13

Rayne Frog Festival

It may be easier to list the things that you can't do with frogs at the Rayne Frog Festival, which will celebrate its 45th year this spring, but it's more fun to list activities such as frog racing, frog eating contests, frog cook offs, a frog kissing booth, frog dress-up contests and frog jumping competitions. Don't have a frog of your own? No problem! You can rent a frog for the day. All of this takes place, naturally, in the "Frog Capital of the World."

Where: Frog Festival Pavilion, Rayne
Tickets: Free on Thursday, \$5 for adults on Friday and Saturday
More info: raynefrogfestival.com

FESTING THROUGH 2017

MARCH

Buku Music and Art Project New Orleans

Congo Square New World Rhythms Festival New Orleans

Tennessee Williams Literary Festival New Orleans

Taco Fest New Orleans

Spring Fiesta New Orleans

Louisiana Winter Beer Festival Lake Charles

Annual Black Heritage Festival Lake Charles

Cajun Chili Fest Youngsville

Iowa Rabbit Festival Lake Charles

Wild Beast Feast Lake Charles

Dave Robicheaux's Hometown Literary Festival New Iberia

Youth Art Month Festival Alexandria

Scottish Tartan Festival Shreveport

Taste of Covington Festival Covington

French Quarter Festival New Orleans

Covington Antiques and Uniques Festival Covington

Abita Springs Busker Festival Abita Springs

New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival New Orleans

Dave Robicheaux's Hometown Literary Festival New Iberia

Louisiana Railroad Days Festival DeQuincy

Downtown Lake Charles Crawfish Festival Lake Charles

Southern Garden Festival Lafayette

Westlake Family Fun & Food Festival Westlake

Flea Fest: Flea Market Lake Charles

Grand Isle Migratory Bird Festival Grand Isle

Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival Breaux Bridge

Mid-City Bayou Boogaloo New Orleans

New Orleans Wine & Food Experience New Orleans

Contraband Days-Louisiana Pirate Festival Lake Charles

Starks Mayhaw Festival Starks

Cochon de Lait Festival Mansura

Mudbug Madness Shreveport

Greek Festival New Orleans

Jambalaya Festival Gonzales

Marion Mayhaw Festival Marion

Riverboat Festival Columbia

Jeff Fish Fest & Rodeo River Ridge

JUNE

Lake Arthur Regatta Lake Arthur

FestiGals New Orleans

Louisiana Redbud Festival Vivian

Lagniappe Dulcimer Festival Baton Rouge

Louisiana Crawfish Festival Chalmette

Sacred Music Festival New Orleans

Merryville Heritage Festival Merryville

NOLA Pyrate Week New Orleans

Amite Oyster Festival Amite

Fête Française New Orleans

Saints and Sinners Literary Festival New Orleans

Kite Fest Louisiana Port Allen

APRIL

NOLA Pyrate Week New Orleans

Boggy Bayou Festival Pine Prairie

Zapp's International Beer Festival Baton Rouge

Spring Fiesta New Orleans

FoodFest New Orleans

Jane Austen Literary Festival Mandeville

Franklin Parish Catfish Festival Winnsboro

Bayou Teche Black Bear and Birding Festival Franklin

Baton Rouge Blues Festival Baton Rouge

Italian Festival Tickfaw

Louisiana Railroad Days Festival DeQuincy

Ponchatoula Strawberry Festival Ponchatoula

Festival International de Louisiane Lafayette

Scott Boudin Festival Scott

Melrose Arts Festival Melrose

MAY

Greater New Orleans International Dragon Boat Festival Madisonville

Sunset Herb and Garden Festival Sunset

Mayfest Leesville

Thibodaux Firemen's Fair Thibodaux

Bayou Country Superfest New Orleans

Zwolle Loggers and Forestry Festival Zwolle

Plaquemines Parish Seafood Festival Belle Chasse

Bon Mangé Festival Ghensens

Louisiana Catfish Festival Des Allemands

Wednesdays on the Point New Orleans (Algiers)

Cajun Heritage Festival Larose

New Orleans Oyster Festival New Orleans

Louisiana Peach Festival Ruston

Beauregard Watermelon Festival DeRidder

The Day the War Stopped St. Francisville

Louisiana Corn Festival Bunkie

Let the Good Times Roll Festival Shreveport

Smoked Meat Festival Ville Platte

Louisiana Cajun-Zydeco Festival New Orleans

Essence Festival New Orleans

Oilman's Fishing Invitational Houma

JULY

Tales of the Cocktail New Orleans

Cajun Music & Food Festival Lake Charles

Running of the Bulls New Orleans

CENTRAL

MARCH 25-26

Cotile Trade Days

For more than 30 years, the Cotile Trade Days have been organized as an annual fundraiser benefiting the Lions Club of Alexandria. Vendor booths sell everything from arts and crafts to tools, antiques, "junk" and jewelry. (A promotional flyer reads: "If it's legal, you can sell it.") Food and non-alcoholic beverages are available for purchase on food row and organizers have recently added a children's activity area featuring a climbing wall and inflatable slides. Cotile Lake Recreation Park is located 20 miles west of Alexandria via LA-496.

Where: Cotile Lake Recreation Park, Boyce
Tickets: Walk-in admission \$1, children ages 6 and younger free
More info: cotiletradedays.org

APRIL 21-22

Louisiana Forest Festival

On paper, the Louisiana Forest Festival reads like the description of a fever dream. There are professional lumberjack competitions, bed races, karate demonstrations and a meet-and-greet with Smokey the Bear. There's even the perfectly named Run, Forest, Run 5K. Festivalgoers who need a break from the ax-tossing action should head into town for a visit to the Louisiana Political Museum and Hall of Fame. This gem of a museum is packed with artifacts from the lives of Louisiana's most colorful political figures including Winnfield natives Huey P. Long, Earl Long and O.K. Allen.

Where: Winnfield Fairgrounds
Tickets: Free admission
More info: laforestfestival.com

MAY 26-27

Little Walter Music Festival

Rock and Roll Hall of Famer and Marksville native Little Walter – who learned to play the harmonica while living in Alexandria and went on to become the preferred sideman of Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley and others – is celebrated annually at this startup blues festival on the banks of the Red River. Serious students of the blues can sit in on workshops, lectures and jam sessions or visit the site of Little Walter's home at 2331 Lee Street.

Since launching the event in 2013, festival organizers have demonstrated impeccable tastes in curating a blues showcase featuring regional, national and international talent. Past performers have included Shemekia Copeland, Chubby Carrier and Japanese blues guitarist Nacomi Tanaka.

Where: Alexandria Amphitheater
Tickets: Free admission
More info: alexandriapinevillela.com/littlewalter

NOLA

MARCH 31-APRIL 1

Hogs for the Cause

2017 will be a big year for Hogs for the Cause, a charity barbecue cook off and music festival benefiting pediatric patients with brain cancer. Rapid growth has pushed organizers to move the event from City Park to the University of New Orleans Lakefront Arena Grounds, where the 2017 festival will welcome barbecue teams from across the U.S. as well as local and national music acts including The Chris Robinson Brotherhood, Fruit Bats and George Porter Jr. Competitive barbecue events can sometimes offer little for the non-competing public to enjoy, but Hogs for the Cause has evolved over the years into the kind of party where there's always something to do, whether that means visiting the dedicated gin and tonic bar, catching a live music set or wandering the festival grounds spotting celebrity chefs. Regardless of who takes top honors in 2017, the real winners are families fighting pediatric brain cancer — Hogs organizers recently announced that they have donated over \$1 million to fight the disease since launching the festival just nine years ago.

Where: UNO Lakefront Arena Grounds, New Orleans
Tickets: \$25-\$310
More info: hogsforthecause.org

Bucktown Bash Metairie

Cake and Ice Cream Festival Abbeville

Bayou BBQ Bash – "Morgan City Under the Bridge" Morgan City

Erath Fourth of July Celebration Erath

Louisiana Watermelon Festival Farmerville

Natchitoches/NSU Folk Festival Natchitoches

Essence Festival New Orleans

Slidell Heritage Festival Slidell

Grand Isle Tarpon Rodeo Grand Isle

AUG

Dirty Linen Night New Orleans

Whitney White Linen Night New Orleans

Satchmo SummerFest New Orleans

Red Dress Run New Orleans

Gueydan Duck Festival Gueydan

Arts & Crabs Fest Lake Charles

Le Cajun Music Awards and Festival Lafayette

OCT

St. Tammany Crab Festival Lacombe

Rougarou Festival Houma

French Market's Boo Carré New Orleans

Ragley Heritage & Timber Festival Ragley

State Fair of Louisiana Shreveport

Andouille Festival LaPlace

Voice of the Wetlands Houma

Louisiana Cattle Festival Abbeville

Harvest Festival on False River New Roads

Oktoberfest Kenner

Louisiana Gumbo Festival of Chackbay Chackbay/Thibodaux

Bridge City Gumbo Festival Bridge City

Ponderosa Stomp Festival New Orleans

Red River Revel Shreveport

Yellow Leaf Arts Festival St. Francisville

International Rice Festival Crowley

Old Farmers Day Festival Loranger

Voodoo Music + Art Experience New Orleans

Oak Street Po-Boy Festival New Orleans

NOV

Greater Baton Rouge State Fair Baton Rouge

State Fair of Louisiana Shreveport

Louisiana Indian Heritage Association Pow Wow Gonzales

Louisiana Pecan Festival Colfax

Three Rivers Art Festival Covington

Sugar Day Festival Alexandria

Words & Music Festival: A Literary Feast in New Orleans New Orleans

Atchafalaya Basin Festival Henderson

Louisiana Swine Festival Basile

Giant Omelette Celebration Abbeville

Louisiana Renaissance Festival Hammond

Mirliton Festival New Orleans

Sabine Free State Festival Florien

PLANTATION

MARCH 10-12

Independence Sicilian Heritage Festival

If you've ever wandered among the food vendors at a festival, driven to despair by banal rows of corn dogs, curly fries and turkey legs, the Independence Sicilian Heritage Festival may be an event more to your liking. Popular foods sold by vendors at this festival include stuffed artichokes, eggplant casserole, lasagna and cannolis. There's also live music, Sicilian folk dancing and a children's meatball toss. ("Kids can throw meatballs to one another," an online commercial for the festival says.) Festivalgoers of Italian descent should stop by the Independence Italian Cultural Museum for a fascinating exploration of Italian life in Louisiana.

Where: Independence
Tickets: Free admission
More info: indsicilianfest.com

APRIL 22-23

Angola Prison Spring Rodeo

The Angola Prison Rodeo, the longest-running prison rodeo in the U.S., can be an intense experience. During the rodeo program, inmates dubbed the "Angola Rough Riders" ride broncos bareback, attempt to milk running cows and stare down raging bulls as part of a spectacle that typically sells out weeks in advance. In stark contrast to the rodeo, there is a large arts and crafts fair — referred to as Hobby Craft — where minimum security prisoners are allowed to sell their art to patrons. Inmates sell everything from paintings and furniture to handcrafted leather goods, using the proceeds to support themselves and purchase art supplies.

Where: Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola
Tickets: Rodeo \$20, Hobby Craft \$10
More info: angolarodeo.com

MAY 26-28

Gonzales Jambalaya Festival

The Gonzales Jambalaya Festival, chartered in 1967 by the local Lions Club as a means to promote the city, will turn 50 in 2017. Where many food-themed festivals only use their namesake dish for marketing purposes, the Gonzales Jambalaya Festival takes jambalaya seriously. More than 100 jambalaya cooks are whittled down through various heats until only 12 remain. Black pots simmer over wood fires throughout the weekend as returning champions face off against newcomers. In addition to the annual championship, there is the Champ of Champs cook off — which pits past champions against one another — as well as an absurd competition called the Mini-Pot, which demands that competitors prepare a jambalaya in a tiny pot. Past editions of the festival have reported selling more than 10,000 plates of jambalaya. There are also carnival rides, three stages of live music (including one indoor stage), a car show and a 5K run.

Where: Irma Boulevard, Gonzales
Tickets: Free admission
More info: jambalayafestival.org

MARCH 18-19

Congo Square New World Rhythms Festival

The music and dance of Africa, the Caribbean and the American Gulf South Region are celebrated in this two-day, family-friendly festival held in Louis Armstrong Park. What the music lineup may lack in pop appeal it makes up for with authenticity, vibrance and the raw, soul-stirring power of some of the greatest rhythm makers on earth. Highlights of the 2017 schedule include Re-birth Brass Band, DJ Soul Sister and the annual Mardi Gras Indian battle.

Where: Louis Armstrong Park, New Orleans
Tickets: Free admission
More info: jazzandheritage.org

MAY 19-21

Mid-City Bayou Boogaloo

For a free festival, the Mid-City Bayou Boogaloo sure has a lot to offer: three stages of live music featuring national touring acts as well as Louisiana legends, an art market, hip food vendors and local craft beer stations are just a few of the main attractions. There's also the possibility of spotting a real-life pirate ship — the chosen method of transport for one group of festivalgoers in 2016. What makes the Bayou Boogaloo unique is the Bayou St. John itself, the site of a rowdy flotilla of boats, floaties, canoes and kayaks during the fest.

Where: Bayou St. John, from Dumain to Conti streets
Tickets: Free admission, donations accepted
More info: thebayouboogaloo.com

Southern Decadence New Orleans

SEPT

Red River Revel Shreveport

Louisiana Zydeco Music Festival Opelousas (Plaisance)

Southern Decadence New Orleans

Best of the Bayou Houma

Louisiana Shrimp & Petroleum Festival Morgan City

Bogalusa Blues & Heritage Festival Bogalusa

Louisiana Sugar Cane Festival New Iberia

New Orleans Burlesque Festival New Orleans

Alligator Festival Luling

St. Martinville Kiwanis Pepper Festival St. Martinville

Downriver Festival at the French Market New Orleans

Louisiana Chicken Festival Dubach

Louisiana Seafood Festival New Orleans

St. Tammany Crab Festival Lacombe

Greater Baton Rouge State Fair Baton Rouge

French Food Festival Larose

Blues in da Parish Festival Violet

Gretna Heritage Festival Gretna

Crescent City Blues & BBQ Festival New Orleans

Roberts Cove Germanfest Rayne (Roberts Cove)

Madisonville Wooden Boat Festival Madisonville

Louisiana Cotton Festival Ville Platte

Festivals Acadiens et Créoles Lafayette

Louisiana Art and Folk Festival Columbia

Violet Oyster Festival Violet

October Fete Kaplan

Louisiana Tournoi Ville Platte

Rapides Parish Fair Alexandria

West Louisiana Forestry Festival & Fair Leesville

St. Tammany Parish Fair Covington

Louisiana Book Festival Baton Rouge

Treme Creole Gumbo Festival New Orleans

DEC

Festival of the Bonfires Litcher

Christmas Under the Oaks Sulphur

Bon Fest Port Allen

Reflections of the Season Port Allen

Fall Harvest Festival Grant

Christmas on the River Monroe-West Monroe

Fire and Water Rural Arts Celebration (Le Feu et L'Eau) Arnaudville

Noel Acadien au Village Lafayette

Celebration in the Oaks New Orleans

Delcambre Christmas Boat Parade Delcambre

Christmas Festival of Lights Natchitoches