

# spy boy, flag boy and big chiefs –



CHANNING JOSEPH

**W**arm, salty water wells up in Larry Bannock's eyes, temporarily blinding this big chief. Today is a bittersweet day, and only half the tears that fall are because of the boiling joy burbling in his heart. The others come because a Mardi Gras Indian suit is never really finished, even after months of work, and the chief must abandon his always-unachievable year-long dream of wearing colors never-before-seen by humankind and sporting feathers that stretch out for miles.

This morning, there is just no more time, so he hastily weaves the last few threads of string through the canvas of his feathery masterpiece and takes a moment to say a prayer of thanks. After this small ritual, all tears are left behind.

You see, it is on this Tuesday morning—the fattest of every year—when he will get his glory in the pulsing New Orleans streets, clad like a giant bird with electric wings and more admired than a beauty queen.

"Mardi Gras Indian suits started out of the garbage can," Bannock says, to my utter disbelief. I think he must be kidding. But no.

In times gone by, "if your wife had a dress with some sparkle on it..." he informs me, you "took it and used it."

But boy have things changed!

These days, Bannock says it is not unusual for him to spend anywhere from \$250 to \$275 per pound for feathers specially ordered from New

York. He does it, he says, to guarantee quality. After all, a big chief wants to make sure each of his plumes is at least a foot wide and two feet long.

"You may be wearing \$15,000" one day, the chief admits, "and wake up the next morning and not have bread and water."

But the price, he says, is worth paying for his glorious moment in the sun.

After all, Big Chief Bannock, the 56-year-old leader of Gert Town's Golden Star Hunters tribe since 1979, is not your typical, newfangled Mardi Gras Indian. Unlike some other chiefs nowadays, he's not the kind who puts his title away at sunset on the day of Carnival. For Bannock, who has been "masking" for more than three decades, being a Mardi Gras Indian is an all-consuming way of life.

His motto: "Mardi Gras starts. It never ends."

Such a statement should come as no surprise from a man who begins to

work on his Mardi Gras suits almost a year ahead of time, and with ideas and drawings for designs, sometimes two years in advance.

"A real Indian chief is a chief 365 days a year," Bannock says, and his own life reflects it.

Chief Larry Bannock is the former six-year president of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian Council. His stunning, wearable mountains of feathers and beads have been featured on *National Geographic*, *48 Hours*, and the *MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*. He has performed traditional Mardi Gras Indian music at Carnegie Hall and the New Orleans Jazz Fest, and has been seen in places as far-flung as London and Martinique, Scotland and the Bahamas.

On top of all that, Bannock is, as far as he knows, the only Mardi Gras Indian registered with the state of Louisiana as a master craftsman. (This may explain why he has a \$150,000



# It's Mardi Gras Indians



Mardi Gras suit on display in the St. Louis Art Museum.)

Perhaps most important of all, however, is the fact that Big Chief Bannock is respected throughout the Mardi Gras Indian community, and he is proud to tell anyone who asks him the story of how he made his way up from the lowly rank of "spy boy"—the tribe's main lookout and "number one bodyguard"—to become one of the most well-known big chiefs in New Orleans.

"I can go anywhere in the city," Bannock says, "and I'm recognized as a big chief because I paid my dues."

You see, Bannock explains, if you want to be a proper Mardi Gras Indian, there are a few things you've got to know first off:

**Rule Number One:** Every real Mardi Gras Indian chief pays his dues, and that means working your way through the ranks of the tribe. Despite this, Bannock says he sometimes meets self-crowned chiefs with little experience or commitment to this special way of life.

"What's killing the Mardi Gras Indians," this chief says, "is you get a lot of people who want to be big dogs."

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Bannock couldn't disapprove of this practice more. In the Golden Star Hunters, for instance, "it's like a dictatorship," he says, and "only the strong survive."

**Rule Number Two:** A real Mardi Gras Indian has got to know his history. Unfortunately, Bannock says, too few people do.

"Everybody now is into Nintendo, computers, rapping, and all that," Bannock explains of the younger generation. "Young people in America don't have the drive to keep history and culture going."

That is why this big chief often goes to schools in the area to speak to children about the history and culture of this often-misunderstood, "mystic and secret culture" of the Mardi Gras Indian.

He explains the origins of the culture in the early interactions between African slaves and indigenous Americans, two groups who found a kinship in each other as they suffered together under the harsh rule of European colonists.

"They lived off the land like we lived off the land," Bannock says, and at a time when Africans "were not allowed to participate in Mardi Gras, we adopted this way of paying [homage to American Indians]."

**Rule Number Three:** Masking Indian is about respect. Although he acknowledges that at one time, the Mardi Gras Indian culture was rife with violence, the chief assures me that things are very different today.

Mardi Gras Indians have learned to respect each other, and "now we do our battle...with the needle and thread," he says.

Yet a major problem they face now is gaining the respect of outsiders who are often tempted to exploit the culture for profit.

"People talk about you, write about you," Bannock says, "but they don't have to think about you."

Bannock is particularly angry when people publish photographs of him in his Indian suit without notifying him or asking permission.

"I don't like it when people take my picture and don't even talk to me," he says, but it has already happened twice.

This is why Big Chief Bannock is doing everything he can to preserve the tradition and to educate people about its true meaning.

It might never be more obvious than on Mardi Gras day how very much there is that must be preserved of this unique culture, especially when Bannock sings the traditional Mardi Gras prayer, "Indian Red":

*"Mighty, mighty, mighty cootee  
fahyo, Indian Red!"*

*O, jacamo findo hando hando! My  
God got plenty fire."*

This Mardi Gras, as he begins to call his gang, together they will slowly migrate to the corner of Claiborne and Washington Avenues, to meet and show off their suits to other Mardi Gras Indians. This is the place where, in an earlier era, violent battles would be waged, but where now only beauty kills.

On this Fattest of Tuesdays, here is where Larry Bannock proudly struts his stuff, dressed in his own awe-inspiring creation. The very sight of him steals the breath from masses of onlookers in the seething streets of the city. And the breathless crowds go blind as the glass beads in his shiny suit jab the sun's unforgiving rays into their eyes.

(The big chief is pleased—that's what glass beads are supposed to do.)  
Yes.

Being a Mardi Gras Indian is Big Chief Bannock's entire life.

"I live this," he says simply. "I love it."

*On Mardi Gras Day, Big Chief Bannock survives on the charity of others, as he and his gang go from party to party, bar to bar, eating and drinking all along the way. Though there are no official rules on this, Bannock's staple foods for this day are red beans and rice and fried chicken.*

*"Everything on Mardi Gras day starts from red beans and rice," the chief says.*

LC

**Channing Joseph** is a Louisiana-born freelance writer based in New York City. His other writing and reporting have appeared in publications as varied as *Glamour*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *U.S. News & World Report*.





Photo by Jim Scheurich

Big Chief Larry Bannock, leader of Gert Town's Golden Star Hunters Tribe labors for a full year, stitching, beading and feathering the suit that will debut on Mardi Gras day.

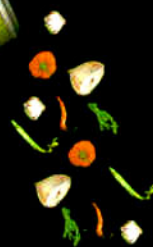


## Shrimp Creole

1 cup REX® Trinity  
 1 tbsp REX® Garlic Granulated  
 1/2 cup shallots, chopped  
 1/2 stick butter  
 1 16 oz. can tomato sauce  
 1/2 cup water  
 2 fresh tomatoes, chopped  
 1 thin slice of lemon  
 1/4 tsp REX® Cayenne Pepper  
 1/4 tsp REX® Black Pepper  
 1 dash REX® White Pepper  
 Pinch of REX® Thyme Leaves  
 2 REX® Bay Leaves  
 1/4 cup REX® Parsley  
 Flour to thicken  
 1 1/2 lbs. peeled, deveined shrimp  
 1 1/2 cups uncooked rice

Soak REX® Trinity in water for 5 minutes to re-hydrate. Sauté REX® Trinity, Garlic, shallots, and butter until clear. Add tomato sauce, water, tomatoes, lemon, REX® Peppers, Thyme, Bay Leaves, and Parsley and simmer 20 minutes. Add shrimp, cover and simmer 10 minutes. Remove Bay Leaves, thicken with flour and let set 1/2 hour. Prepare rice as you would ordinary rice. Salt to taste. Serves 4 to 6.

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## Red Beans and Rice from the Bayou

MAKES 12 SERVINGS.

4 cups red beans  
2 onions, diced  
4 cloves garlic  
4 teaspoons seasoning salt  
Ham hocks  
Bay leaf  
Pinch sugar  
Cayenne pepper, to taste  
Large smoked sausage links, sliced  
Cooked rice

Wash red beans, soak overnight, and drain. Cover beans and other ingredients (except sausage and rice) with chilled water. Bring to boil, then reduce the heat, and simmer until done. Add in smoked sausage during the last 30 minutes to give flavoring. Serve over rice. Makes a complete meal with hot rice and tossed salad.

## Pizzazzy Southern Fried Chicken

MAKES 4 TO 8 SERVINGS.

2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 cup cornflake crumbs  
2 teaspoons crushed Caribe chile,  
or to taste  
1 teaspoon ground pequin chile  
2 teaspoons poultry seasoning  
Freshly ground black pepper  
2 whole chickens, about 2 1/2 pounds each  
2 cups buttermilk or milk  
Vegetable oil  
Southern Cream Gravy (recipe follows)

Process flour, crumbs, both types of chile, poultry seasoning, and pepper in a food processor until fine. Set mixture to the side.

Cut chicken into serving pieces. Soak in buttermilk 30 minutes at room temperature or in the refrigerator 2 hours, turning and rotating the pieces to coat uniformly. Heat 2 inches of oil in a deep skillet over medium heat. To bread the chicken, lift the pieces out of the milk, shaking lightly. Then roll in the flour mixture and set on a waxed-paper covered baking sheet. Let stand about 5 minutes. Roll in the flour mixture again.

Place chicken pieces in the oil and partially



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### BARBECUE CHICKEN

Makes 4 servings

1 chicken, 3 1/4 to 4 pounds, cut into 8 pieces  
2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons Chef Paul Prudhomme's  
Barbecue Magic®  
Rub the chicken pieces evenly with the Barbecue Magic. Cook chicken  
on a grill until done and a crust has formed, 20 to 40 minutes depend-  
ing on your grill.

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### BARBECUE PORK CHOPS

Makes 4 servings

4 pork chops, cut 1/2 to 1-inch thick  
2 tablespoons Chef Paul Prudhomme's Barbecue Magic®  
2 teaspoons white vinegar  
Mix together the Barbecue Magic and vinegar to form a paste. Brush  
the pork chops evenly on both sides with the seasoning paste. Cook  
pork chops on a grill until done and a crust has formed, about 20 to 40  
minutes depending on your grill.

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cover the skillet. Cook 12 to 15 minutes or until golden on the first side. Turn, re-cover, and fry the other side. When chicken is uniformly golden and fork tender, drain well on paper towels. Keep warm in a 200° F oven. Do not cover tightly. Prepare gravy. Serve chicken with mashed potatoes and cream gravy.

### Southern Cream Gravy

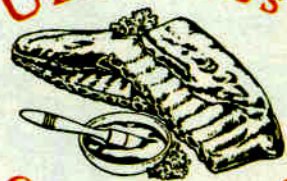
1/2 cup all-purpose flour  
2 cups half-and-half  
2 cups milk  
Salt and pepper, to taste

Drain all oil from the skillet except 1/2 cup. Leave the browned bits in. Add flour. Cook, stirring, over medium heat until flour is lightly tanned. Then, gradually stir in half-and-half. Keep cooking, stirring constantly, until mixture is bubbly. Add milk. Keep cooking and stirring until thickened and smooth. Taste and season with salt and pepper.

The mural on pages 4 and 5 was lovingly created by Randy Leo "Frenchy" Frechette on the Eleanor Street wall of National Art and Hobby on Magazine Street in New Orleans. For more information on Frenchy, visit his galleries at 8319 Oak Street and 711 Royal Street in New Orleans or online at frenchylive.com.  
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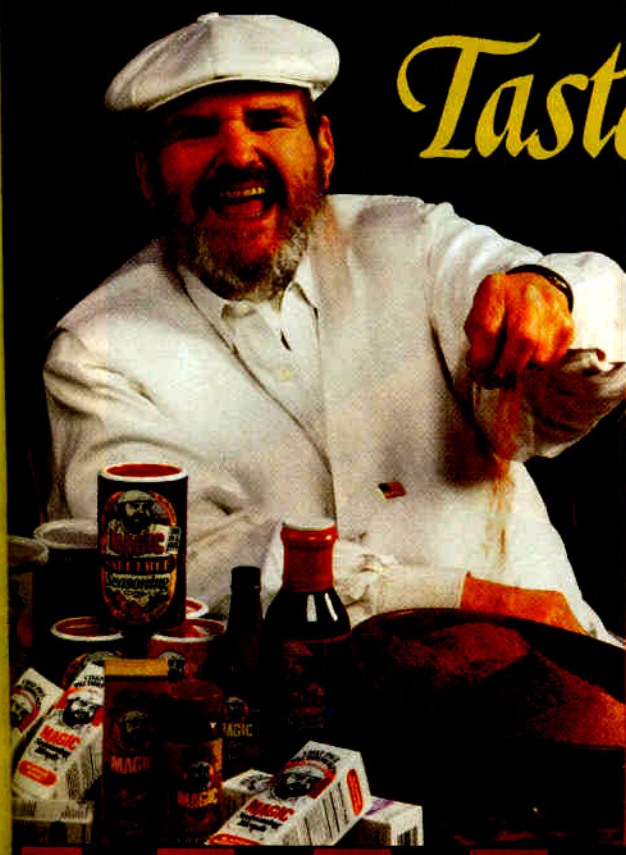
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