

AFTERNOON TEA – Around the World

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Sipping a cup of freshly brewed tea with a friend is truly one of life's greatest rewards. Add a few petite but savory sandwiches, delicate pastries; fresh home made jelly, Devonshire cream, a relaxing atmosphere and you will be enjoying afternoon tea. Life gets no better than this!

Now before our tea journey begins, go brew yourself a pot of your favorite tea and sit back and relax. Okay are you ready? Together we will hop-scotch around the world experiencing the grandeur, elegance, and splendor offered by this social event called afternoon tea.

Just what is afternoon tea anyway?

First, let us get our tea leaves straight. Many restaurants and tea houses use the phrase 'high tea' synonymously with the term "afternoon tea". Any person from England will tell you that this is incorrect. They are not the same!

Not to long ago my wife, Beverly, and I were enjoying afternoon tea at Fortnum & Mason in London. I told Alice, our server, how much we enjoyed the high tea we were experiencing. Alice politely, but sternly corrected me with her beautiful Polish-English blended accent. "You are having afternoon tea; it is not the same as high tea, she proclaimed." Wow, this Yank thought. I have a lot to learn about the world of tea.

Alice explained the difference between "high tea" and "afternoon tea"

"Afternoon Tea is a celebrated time for tea in the afternoon. It is also called 'low tea'. It consists of light sandwiches, freshly baked scones, cakes and pastry and a freshly brewed pot(s) of tea. This practice was formally established in the 1800's by Anna, Dukes of Bedford. For Anna it was served at 4:00 pm sharp; Today this special event often is made into a formal affair with linen table cloths and glistening silver trays. It is savored by the British today as a time in the afternoon for social and intimate conversation."

"High Tea is also known as 'meat tea'. It is a less social event than afternoon tea. It is more like a proper evening meal served between 5 and 6 o'clock. In fact, it originated as a meal for the working class. It consists of such things as Welsh rarebit, plum pudding, egg and kidney dishes." (To me meat tea can never compare to the grandeur and splendor of afternoon tea).

Our tea journey begins in Vienna, Austria

It is this humble writer's opinion that this is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. My visit to this fine city was to spend some time with my daughter Kati, who was attending the local University. We were invited to afternoon tea by Kati's landlord Frau Barbara. Barbara comes from a long lineage of Austrian ancestors, and tea, as she explained to me, has always played a role in their

lives. Anyone who travels to London just to purchase tea, as she does, must have a passion for it.

Never turning down a cup of tea, Bev and I joined Barbara for tea on several occasions. Each time was served with enthusiasm by our hostess. The ambience of a quite Vienna neighborhood was the view from her fifth floor balcony. Much to our pleasure we sipped some wonderful tea with our new friend and learned a lot about the Austrian culture.

Barbara makes her own special blend of tea using Darjeeling with just a dash of Earl Grey. (Darjeeling is a black tea from the Indian province of Darjeeling in India. It is a premium tea that takes on a light amber color). Not normally an Earl Grey fan, I found her tea to be some of the best to ever pass through my lips. It was a perfect blend with just a hint of the bergamont scented Earl Grey.

Barbara explained what she referred to as “the art of brewing the perfect pot of tea:

- bring cold water to a fast boil (use filtered water she demanded)
- heat up a porcelain or china tea pot with some boiling water; let the container absorb the warmth; pour the water out
- add 1 teaspoon of a quality loose leaf tea for each cup
- pour the boiling water over the tea
- cover and let it brew for 3-4 minutes (to keep it warm she snuggled a beautiful homemade ‘tea cozy’ around it)
- pour through a tea strainer into a fine china cup
- sip and enjoy!

All aboard for tea

Saying good bye to our gracious tea hostess, Barbara, we soon found ourselves speeding across Austria and Switzerland on the “Vienna to Bern express”. In Europe, train travel is not only punctual and fast, but it is down right fun. Bev and I enjoyed several wonderful cups of tea in the dining car. Many of the trains in Europe offer a very elegant culinary experience centered around a cup of tea. Not quite the grandeur of afternoon tea, but it is mighty darn close.

With each breathtaking view of the Alps dancing past our window, we felt the intrinsic feeling of how a cup of tea compliments beautiful scenery. Not a drop did we spill as we twisted and turned our way through some of God’s finest scenic handiwork.

Tea time in France

In France, we found the love of tea on the wane. The exception was found while visiting our French friends, Corrine and Ronald. We were served a wonderful cup of Assam tea. (This is black tea from the Assam district in India. More black tea comes from this area than any other area in the world).

With no pomp or ceremony, we found ourselves being served tea in what I thought to be a “deformed” cup. Or should I say a bowl. When I asked Corrine where the handle was, she stared at me with a smirk. With her darling French smile, she said, “this is the way we drink tea here, don’t you drink it the same way in America?” Oops, my international etiquette needs some work. Searching my grey matter, I recalled a bit of tea cup history. The first cups used in Europe were void of handles. The handle was an evolutionary appendage which apparently had not quite caught up with our friend.

It became apparent to me that a handle does not make a good cup of tea for Corrine’s tea was outstanding. I will always cherish that cup of tea served by Corrine. Sitting under a Bay Laura tree on her patio, each sip was heightened as she shared the history of her five hundred year old home.

London- the holy city of tea

Saying good-bye to France, we are off to England. Speeding along at a mere 300 kilometers per hour (approximately 186 mph) the Eurostar Train took us from the center of Paris to London in three hours. Hardly enough time to enjoy a cup of tea.

Our London priorities were well established before our feet touched the British soil: a stroll through Hyde Park, visits to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, the Chelsea Physic Garden and many more. Upon arriving, we addressed our tea priority first. Reservations were made at “Fortnum and Masons” for afternoon tea.

For those of you not familiar with this fine English establishment, let me give you a brief introduction. It was formed over 250 years ago by two gentlemen - Mr. Fortnum and Mr. Mason. Having a long history in supplying tea for the Royal Family, the store has built a solid reputation of providing fine foods and drinks.

Upon entering the first floor of Fortnum & Mason, you feel like you are in tea paradise. Your eyes scan the room with shelves filled with gourmet foods. In the center is a huge island of tea. Have you ever been sold tea by a sales clerk dressed in formal attire? Well, at Fortnum & Mason’s you are. They sell a multitude of teas from all the tea producing countries in the world. No time to shop now because we are on an afternoon tea mission. Finding our way to the steps, we vaulted up them on our way to what I call ‘tea heaven’.

On the fourth floor at Fortnum & Mason’s we arrive promptly at 2:00 pm for our scheduled afternoon tea reservation at the St. James Restaurant. Afternoon tea is served only between 2:00 pm and 4:30 pm we are told by our host.

Elegance & politeness is everywhere. The English certainly understand how to make a person feel important and comfortable; they are the masters of good manners. The ambiance makes each person feel like royalty. Gorgeous paintings of clipper ships adorn the walls. A picture of the Queen is the focal point of the room. The grand piano was providing soothing and beautiful classical music.

Alice, our server, who I introduced earlier, made us feel like we were crowned heads of state for the next two hours. Our tea was served in stunning china. The three tiered silver serving tray was filled with food for a god.

Tea is taken very seriously by the English. By now, I was obsessed with finding out as much about tea customs as possible from the experts. Fancying ourselves as true tea connoisseurs, Bev and I were at first horrified in seeing folks drinking a little tea with their milk. Why adulterate a perfect drink with milk? Not getting an answer that made any sense, I decided to try it. While in England do as the English do...or something like that. Not bad were both of our reactions. Bev brought the habit home with her, and starts each cup of tea with a splash of milk. To me milk compliments the complex flavors of blends like "Irish Breakfast".

My hypothesis of why the British like milk with their tea came to me while sipping a cup of Assam tea in "The Old Castle Tea shop" located in the shadows of the Edinburgh Castle in Edinburgh, Scotland. In this tea sanctuary with its walls adorned with a multitude of tea towels, I eagerly ordered my brew along with a scone. My lovely Scottish hostess asked if I liked my tea strong, to which I somewhat hesitantly replied, "yes". As I looked on in horror, she placed two large 'tea bags' into a tin container of hot water. She informed me that she adds an extra tea bag for folks like me. Unfortunately, her wonderful and soothing Scottish brogue did not make up for the harsh tannin tasting tea that she served. From this experience, I concluded there were times when milk helps soothe a bad steeped cup of the fermented leaves of the *Camellia sinensis* plant. (All black and green tea comes from this plant that is native to India and China).

If you are planning a tea party, remember that 'cream' is never served by the English with tea. Only milk is used with tea. (I forgot to ask if skim milk would be permissible). If you want to show someone how English your tea habits have advanced, first place a good portion of milk into your tea cup. Next, pour your tea. Add tea but never add more milk. Milk is used only at the time of the initial pour.

While I found some of the best tea my palate has ever tasted in England, I also sipped some rather rank and bitter tea on their shores. To my surprise, tea bags are commonly used in England and provide an average to mediocre cup of tea. I mean no offense to Sir Lipton, but it is my opinion that tea bags lack the quality of fresh brewed loose leaf tea.

Next stop Asia

The Chinese are credited with introducing the English to tea; however, the English are credited with introducing the Chinese to the afternoon tea ceremony. Next stop on our afternoon tea schedule is Hong Kong. This one time English Crowned Colony was the epicenter of the English tea trade. It is steeped and shrouded in tea history. So let us pack our bags and travel halfway around the world. Our objective is to see if afternoon tea has, survived the new China ruled Hong Kong.

After shedding our jet lag, Bev and I meandered through the streets of Hong Kong Island visiting the bird market, the flower market, the fish market, and countless other markets. The locals directed us to a small family owned tea shop. I cannot share the name with you because it was in Chinese, but I can share the wonderful experience of learning about the Chinese tea culture.

Entering the tiny store, we were greeted by what appeared the complete Chinese family from infant to grandparents. Their tea shop was a part of their home. The shelves were filled with tea pots and tea accessories. One wall was devoted to tins of tea marked neatly in Chinese symbols. We were seated at their kitchen table and served sample after sample of green teas. Each pot of tea was brewed while we watched. Some of the tea was deliciously bold and crisp in green tea flavor. Others were earthy and soil like in aroma and flavor. Leaving our new Chinese tea friends with our arms bulging with tea purchases we were off to a more traditional tea experience.

We hailed a water taxi and made the short journey to Kowloon. Our destination was afternoon tea. We chose the Peninsula Hotel because of its reputation as an icon of the colonial British presence in Hong Kong. The hotel has a reputation as being one of the finest English hotels outside of London.

Walking through the ornate entryway one finds a huge lobby. Although very elegant in décor, it reminded me of a train station in size and noise level. We arrived promptly at our reservation time for our afternoon tea experience. To our disappointment, afternoon tea is served in this huge lobby. Our table, draped in linen, was surrounded by countless other tables.

Our server showed no enthusiasm or knowledge for the sacred ritual that we were undertaking. The traditional silver platter of afternoon goodies had a wonderful presentation, but was over shadowed by the austere surroundings. Once we were served, our waiter disappeared only to return an hour later with the bill. Being a person who can find good in almost any experience, I must say with honesty that I was underwhelmed with afternoon tea at the Peninsula Hotel. I cannot even remember the type of tea that I ordered.

Next stop Canada

A visit to the Canadian Province of British Columbia provides countless opportunities to experience afternoon tea. Rumor has it that British Columbia is more English than England.

The Fairmont Empress Hotel in Victoria was our choice. We were promptly seated at our reservation time with cordial conversation from our hostess. She showed a genuine interest in us and assured us she would do everything possible to make our afternoon tea experience at the Fairmont one we would treasure. Tea is served in the Empress dining room. Seating is not crowded giving each guest a feeling of having his or her own intimate space. Our table

had a breath taking view of the Victoria Harbor. Tea was brewed to perfection. Everything on the three tiered tray was delicious. Special recognition must go to the mouth watering pastries. Our leisurely tea was culminated with a gift of the hotels special black tea blend. Memories of afternoon tea at the Empress will always be cherished.

Tea in the American Heart land

Afternoon tea opportunities are not as common in the United States as they are in Canada, but they do exist. One such place of this afternoon delight is at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Chicago. The atmosphere in the Greenhouse Restaurant fits the richness of an afternoon tea celebration. Many blends of black tea were offered along with herbal teas. Seldom have I found herbal teas on the afternoon tea menus of Europe, but I usually find them on menus in America. It was our first experience at having a glass of Porto served with afternoon tea. It proved a wonderful compliment to a relaxing and elegant time. Bev and I will be returning for afternoon tea in the Greenroom next time we visit Chicago.

No place like home

It is not necessary to travel around the world to enjoy afternoon tea. Many friends have walked our herbal lined garden pathways sipping a fine cup of tea and enjoying a fresh scone. Hosting a tea party is a wonderful way to show your admiration and appreciation to your friends.

My only caution in partaking in afternoon tea is that it is habit forming. Oh well, we deserve to pamper ourselves. What I like to practice, as well as preach, is to take a few precious moments out of each day and enjoy a fine cup of tea with a friend. I look forward to sharing a fresh brewed pot of tea with you soon!