



The Traditional Elegance of Afternoon Tea



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AFTERNOON TEA IS SUCH AN ELEGANT SPACE. It is a relaxed time between a hurried lunch and dinner at the end of the day.

Indulging in tea is a proclamation of true freedom, with the taste of carefully poured Earl Grey, Darjeeling, Assam, Lapsang Souchon, or good old English Breakfast tea merging with the flavors of delicate finger sandwiches and toasted buttery crumpets, followed by scones smothered in jam and Cornish clotted cream. It's a memory that lingers for days.

I have a particular affinity for tea in all its variegated forms as from 1986–1998 I owned The China Ware House Company, a specialist fine English bone china dinnerware and giftware store, located in the West End of London at the junction

of Ganton and Carnaby Street. Our shelves were piled high with fine bone china cups and saucers and mugs from companies such as Royal Crown Derby, Royal Doulton, and Wedgwood, as well as a multitude of different designs produced by craftsmen manufacturing magical shapes and styles in small courtyard kilns located in Stoke-on-Trent.

The teapots ranged from the traditional to novelty designs, all expressing an attitude reflective of their origin and age. There was the aristocratic [Royal Antoinette teapot](#) from Royal Crown Derby with its delicate floral decorations graciously standing beside the fullness of the richly rounded [Wedgwood Sage Green Columbia teapot](#) with its fine gold



decorations. Their spouts welcomingly pointed to the humble but much loved [Brown Betty teapot](#) that graced the tables of so many English homes. Nearby were the very colorful art deco pottery [Clarence Cliff-style tea pots](#) made at the Moorland Chelsea Burslem Pottery.

Then there were the teapot rebels, the novelty ranges whose character was so different that they merited a separate display table. They expressed themselves in so many ways. There were teapots shaped as sewing machines, petrol pumps, kitchen sinks, vanity tables, bathtubs, drum sets, teddy bears, and Charlie Chaplin. Building on the tradition of previous centuries, modern ceramic designers such as Paul Cardew, Tony Carter, Richard Parrington, and Andy Titcomb let their imaginations run riot and produced a fascinating range of originally shaped teapots.

In my family, afternoon tea was the way we often marked special occasions, such as birthdays and anniversaries. My earliest memory of afternoon tea was at [London's Lyons Corner House](#) where fast-moving waitresses called

Nippies in black-and-white starched uniforms served up steaming cups of tea and sweet bath buns.

As the years passed, afternoon tea became more sophisticated with visits to The Dorchester, located on Park Lane overlooking the greenery of Hyde Park, and The Lanesborough, whose gorgeous garden conservatory tea room disguised the fact that it had previously been the site of the operating room of St Georges hospital. London had a never ending choice of fine tea rooms that included Claridge's and Fortnum and Mason.

But the *crème de la crème* for us as a family was [The Ritz](#), where everything came together—tradition, elegance, atmosphere, and fine china. Afternoon tea has been served in the sumptuous Palm Court since 1906, and it really represents the quintessential English afternoon tea experience.

There was nothing quite like sipping the Ritz's own Royal English Breakfast tea, a blend of Golden Kenyan, Assam, and Orange Pekoe



teas poured from silver teapots into delicate teacups and deciding which of the sandwiches and pastries to indulge in. All the while we relaxed and soaked up the ambiance of the rich decor with its mirrors, palm trees, and sparkling chandeliers with just the hint of soft piano music in the background.

When I decided to move to California in 2005, I knew that this wonderful tradition might change. But I was mistaken, as I soon discovered a similar ambiance at San Francisco's Palace Hotel with its atrium-style Garden Court Restaurant.

However, after a while, I found myself yearning for something not quite so ornate but still with a British flavor, and discovered Lovejoy's Tea Room. It had delightful eclectic mismatched china cups and saucers and tea pots, amusing British decor, an excellent tea menu, and the traditional mix of sandwiches, crumpets, and scones. Every mid-August for more than ten years, I used to meet in San Francisco's Noe Valley with a group of eight or

nine friends to enjoy our Reserved for Royalty Lovejoy's Afternoon High Tea.

Then suddenly this annual tradition was threatened by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. With everything shut down, were we going to lose our lovely celebration of friendship and summer?

No way! We all had our own collections of cups and saucers, so we set up decorated tea tables near our computer screens, and from 2020 through 2021 we celebrated tea via Zoom.

In 2022 we decided it was time to change our tradition and try something different: an English Afternoon Garden Tea Party, following the example set by Queen Elizabeth each year at Buckingham Palace and in gardens in towns and villages all over England.

My garden was prepared accordingly—although nothing could disguise the mounds in my lawn left by pesky California gophers. Chairs and tables were set up, and a collection of elegant teapots, cups and saucers, and plates from my China Ware House Company



days was put out to use. It was a potluck tea, which immediately attained the authenticity of the traditional tea, with smoked salmon and cucumber, Stilton cheese and pear, and egg and onion finger sandwiches; crumpets; scones with cream and strawberry jam; and cakes and pastries, all washed down by a variety of

traditional and fruit teas. A new tradition was evolving.

Tea and its social appeal seem universal. So, wherever I live in the world, I find that the moment I sit down with a cup of steaming English Breakfast tea, it can mean only one thing: I am home. ☼