

Foreword: It's all about tea: ceremonial enjoyment, successful entrepreneurship, and cultural pride



My first experience of tea in a food service context was at Teatime, my teashop in London which I opened in 1983 with two friends and managed for six years. When we opened the tearoom, friends and colleagues told us that we were wasting our time and money since no one went out for tea any more. How was it then that an impressively large group of people was waiting outside the shop while we put the finishing touches to the art deco interior? Within minutes of declaring ourselves open for business, every seat was filled. Older customers told us how they had missed going out for a proper cup of tea and that they were determined to go home and unpack from the attic or spare room the teapots they had used in the past, the favourite cups and saucers they had hidden away as mugs had become

more fashionable. Younger guests found the entire experience somewhat quirky and old fashioned but also rather charming and so they too indulged in the traditional finger sandwiches, the warm scones with jam and clotted cream, and slices of the cakes I baked each morning. What visitors seem to have missed was the ceremonial aspect of British tea drinking and Afternoon Tea and, as time went by, we attracted people of all ages, from different countries, famous actors and rock stars as well as friends, locals and neighbours. Teatime's theatrical style was certainly an attraction but what really drew customers to the shop again and again was the time-honoured ritual of being seated at a table covered with a hand embroidered floral table cloth, perusing the menu which offered not just Afternoon Tea but all the traditional foods we had grown up with – toasted muffins and crumpets, hot buttered teacakes and scones. Our guests loved the choices they were offered – different breads for the sandwiches, a selection of jams, and a variety of teas. Everything we offered sprang from our own childhood memories so that we could share our traditional tea rituals and our love of tea times past.

But, just because the British are known around the world for their Afternoon Tea 'ceremony', it does not mean that every other country must copy our way of serving and drinking tea. Tearoom owners and hotel tea lounge managers around Europe should have a real desire to make their tea service a perfect example of their particular way of tea and should highlight and honour local traditions and rituals. Clever ideas, focused marketing, special offers during traditional seasonal occasions such as St Valentine's Day, Easter, Mothers' Day, Midsummer, Christmas, can attract new guests and loyal regulars. And at the heart of each location's tea service there must be a deep-

seated determination to give every single customer a special experience so that they too understand more about local rituals, traditional foods and the value of tea in the culture of each country. The menu should include a selection of teas to suit local tastes and traditions and can even include teas now being grown in that country. The foods offered should be made to local traditional recipes, using local ingredients. The service must be friendly and courteous and always delivered with a genuine warm smile. The brewing and serving of tea must ensure that each and every cup is perfect – brewed using the correct quantities of tea and water, the optimum water temperature, the correct steep time, and the leaves separated from the liquor. Each and every member of staff must understand the importance of and take pride in all those multilayered aspects of tea and tea drinking. And we should all remember that at times it's good to turn the clock back and pause to value and enjoy the simple traditions and ceremonies of the past instead of running helter skelter into the ever increasing speed of modern life. Settling around the tea table, wherever we are, creates a tranquil interlude during which we feel calm and soothed by the tea, the setting and the awareness of tea's timeless power to remind us of its importance through history and still today.

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