

# Afternoon delight

Dust off your teapot and shine your silver – afternoon tea is making a surprising comeback for elegant entertaining.

Words **Amanda Weaver**



**A**lthough tea is the second-most popular drink in the world after water, its image has long needed a makeover. Tea used to be what your nanna drank from a teapot clad in a woollen tea-cosy, but not anymore. Women of all ages (and a few brave men) are now lifting their pinkies and rediscovering the genteel joy of tea parties.

For some, afternoon tea has never been out of fashion, but in the last couple of years it's become positively trendy. In London the likes of Madonna, Kate Moss and Kylie Minogue have been spotted sipping cups of Earl Grey and Darjeeling while nibbling dainty finger sandwiches. The Berkeley hotel in Knightsbridge even offers Prêt-à-Portea where fashion devotees can take their tea with Dolce & Gabbana tropical eclairs and Gucci bikini biscuits.

It didn't take long for Australia to follow suit. Caterer Kathy Heath opened Brisbane's High Societea (tel (07) 3357 4299) in May 2004 and is now booked out three weekends in advance. Stepping inside the tea-house is like revisiting a bygone era when women wore hats, gloves and pearls. The tables are set with crisp white linen and adorned with fresh roses, while the tea is served from one of 100 china tea sets Kathy has collected. The menu also boasts more than the obligatory Devonshire tea – the house special is the Royal Ascot Tea, which is your choice

## Did you know?

- Tea accounts for 18 per cent of all beverages consumed in Australia.
- We drink 22 million cups daily; 80 per cent of those are made with tea bags.
- About 68 per cent of tea drinkers have milk but only 38 per cent have sugar.
- Australia produces 1600 tonnes of tea each year but

we consume more than 10 times that much. India is the largest producer of black tea in the world.

- More than 2000 types of tea come from one plant – *Camellia sinensis*. Different types are made by varying the growing and processing methods, and by adding fragrances and flavours.

Source: Tea Industry Forum, [www.tea.org.au](http://www.tea.org.au)

## Drink to your health

"Young people should drink tea if they want to live a longer, healthier life," says Merrill J. Fernando, owner and founder of Dilmah Tea. Why? Merrill says green tea contains disease-fighting anti-oxidants called catechins. "Fresh tea is loaded with anti-oxidants but they begin to fade away within 10 months, so make sure the tea you drink is as fresh as possible," he says.

It was recently found that oxidised polyphenols in black tea, such as theaflavins, are just as beneficial as the anti-oxidants in green tea. "A cup of tea has less than half the caffeine of one cup of coffee," adds Merrill. But don't drink it with meals as it may reduce iron absorption from your food. – Eva-Maria Bobbert

of tea served with a glass of Pimm's and a selection of sweet and savoury or gluten-free temptations that arrive on a magnificent three-tiered gold cake stand.

Kathy says High Societea has become a popular choice for mother and daughter outings, birthday parties (from 12 to 80 years), bridal showers, baby showers and any other reason its customers can think of to get together. "When I opened I learnt quickly that Brisbane had been waiting for this," she says. "Getting dressed up appeals to people and they love the overall experience."

It's a scene that's being repeated around the country. Tearooms and teashops are popping up everywhere, and they're not just for ladies who lunch. Since it began offering afternoon tea earlier this year, Sydney's Shangri-La Hotel (tel (02) 9250 6000) has attracted a diverse clientele. "It's also become popular for informal business meetings," says Joanna Cadbury, the hotel's director of communications. "We have wireless internet, so they can bring their laptops and do presentations in relaxed surroundings with snacks and a nice pot of tea."

Tea first became popular in China almost 5000 years ago, so afternoon tea is a relatively new concept that originated in Britain. It all began in the 1830s when Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, found herself in need of sustenance in the lengthy



### Party favours

1. Bodum Tea Egg Infuser, \$9.95.
2. Villeroy & Boch Tea Delight tea caddy, \$99.95.
3. Annie Sandwich Plate, \$29.95, from Ashdene Australia.
4. Maxwell & Williams Chintz Bone China Royal Sugar and Creamer gift box in Antique Blue, \$24.95 per set.
5. Villeroy & Boch teapot, \$160.
6. Kensington Teacup, Saucer and Plate (not shown) gift-box set in Mint, \$24.95, from Ashdene Australia.
7. Sunbeam Express Stainless Kettle, \$69.95.

### Take a leaf

If you're thinking of hosting a tea party at home, take these expert tips:

- Stephen Twining of Twinings says filling your kettle with fresh cold water maximises the oxygen content and improves the flavour of the tea. Pour the water into your teapot as soon as it boils so you don't lose oxygen (the exception is green tea as boiling water makes it bitter – let the water stand briefly before pouring).
- He also recommends cleaning your teapot with fresh cold water rather than detergent. To remove any stains, fill the pot with hot water and add two dessertspoonfuls of bicarbonate of soda, then set aside for three hours before rinsing thoroughly.
- Never use aluminium or chipped enamel teapots as they'll affect the

brew's taste. Porcelain, earthenware, glass or silver teapots are preferred.

- If using a teapot, Stephen says the rule is to use one teaspoonful of tea (or one tea bag) per person, plus one for the pot. Allow the tea to brew for 3-5 minutes and stir before pouring.
- Karina Shipley from Tea Rose Lane suggests providing guests with individual tea infusers so they can try several teas in one sitting.
- Presentation is everything. Use your best table linen, silverware and china, and decorate the table with fresh flowers or a bowl of strawberries.
- Kathy Heath from High Societea says that less is more. "Great big scones are a no-no. Try mini tarts or quiches, dainty sandwiches, frittata cubes, petit cakes and chocolates."

break between lunch and dinner. To counter what the Duchess described as "a sinking feeling", she had her servants prepare light snacks to accompany her cup of tea between 4pm and 5pm. The practice caught on and soon became a ritual among society ladies.

So why do some tearooms call it "high tea"? Karina Shipley, owner of Tea Rose Lane ([www.tearoselane.com.au](http://www.tearoselane.com.au)), a Queensland-based mail-order business dedicated to "the art of taking tea", says it's a bit of poetic licence. She says high tea has different origins and isn't as sophisticated as it sounds. It can be traced back to England's industrial revolution era when the working class had their main meal at lunch but were hungry by the time they got home. So they began taking their tea at around 6pm with any leftovers (sausages, bread, cheese, pickles, etc). They called it "high tea" because it was consumed around a high dining table.

The beauty of modern afternoon tea is that it can be an intimate affair with two or three of your closest friends or it can be a more lavish event with lots of people. But its pleasures are not restricted to five-star hotels or tea-houses. With a few packets of gourmet tea from the ever-expanding range available in our supermarkets and grandma's old tea set, it's easy to do at home.

However, if you're a tad timid about your tea-making abilities, keep an eye out for workshops on how to serve the perfect afternoon tea. Earlier this year, Tognini's BistroCafeDeli in Brisbane (tel (07) 3831 5300) ran a High Tea Workshop where participants were shown how to create a range of dainty delicacies, from pinwheels to Belgian chocolate petit fours.

There's no denying that tea drinking is definitely making a comeback to the tables of Australian consumers. According to the latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, tea consumption has risen for the first time since the late 1930s. Stephen Twining, director of corporate relations of the famous British tea company Twinings, says he believes the resurgence reflects our renewed appreciation of the finer things in life. "I know that in London afternoon tea is now a very popular way of entertaining, particularly in business. People haven't got time for the long business lunch, but if you want to show good hospitality afternoon tea is a great way of doing it," he says.

Stephen says tea also offers a chance to slow down in today's fast-paced society. "You can't just wing it with tea. You've got to take the time to prepare it well." **AOT**

**NEXT MONTH: COOKING WITH TEA**