



Valentine's Day: Not-so-twee tearooms offer romantic but still hearty dining

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Sticky toffee pudding topped with vanilla ice cream and heart-shaped strawberries is a sweet way to end a Valentine's Day meal at Ana Beall's Tea Room in Westfield.

Alice and the Mad Hatter were late to tea, which resulted in a thoroughly unpleasant time for all. In fact, Alice was left gulping her drink and leaving in haste amid the Queen's demands for her head.

Now that's just wrong. One should never be late to tea. Luckily, you still have five days to get your act together for Valentine's Day. And if your beloved loves tea, today's tale may save your head in more ways than one.

Tea, which has calmed the spirit since ancient times, can be beautiful. Many loose teas smell wonderful and contain flower petals, rosebuds, lavender sprigs or tiny pieces of fruit. Tea comes from exotic places such as India, Sri Lanka, Java, Sumatra, Malawi, Kenya, and Turkey. Even the

names of some of the varieties sound heavenly: Jasmine Dragon Phoenix Pearls, Shanghai Orchid, and Emperor's Clouds and Mist, to name just a few.

Learning about tea in all its variety, the health properties associated with each and the traditional ritual of drinking it, however, seems to require a college degree. Have I mentioned the accessories? Pots, cups, sets with matching trays, strainers, balls, tea makers, tins, books -- tea products themselves have become a cottage industry. Here are a few shops to get you started:

Teavana (eight mall locations in New Jersey) is like a Zen ride at Disney World. The shops are lovely, and you can taste several varieties to put you in the mood as you wander among designer cast iron, ceramic, china and glass tea sets. The staff knows everything about tea and is happy to share while putting together a beautifully wrapped gift package to fit your taste and budget.

Bean's (42 Church St., Montclair, (973)783-7175) has been around for almost 40 years. It's a delightful old-school shop filled from floor to ceiling with teas, accessories, and even freshly baked scones and pastries to take home and

enjoy with your purchase. The owners are fluent in every aspect of tea heritage and history, and tea makers, pots, strainers and gift sets are reasonably priced. Considering the parking issues on busy Church Street, one of the nicest things about Bean's is that if you call ahead, someone will bring your purchase outside to your car so you don't have to find a space.

Still, let's say you want to go out for a special Valentine's Day celebration. There are many terrific teahouses around New Jersey, and several now employ chefs serving "real" food in addition to traditional finger sandwiches and scones. I've chosen three with good fare, nice people, interesting loose tea selections, and unstuffy surroundings that should appeal to every member of your family. If you've never been to a tearoom, you may think it's all hushed voices and dainty teacups. But many are also man-friendly and offer special Valentine's Day packages. Keep in mind that tea service is not inexpensive -- meals typically run from \$15 to \$25 -- but there's more food than you might imagine, even though most items come in small pieces.

No matter what you wish for on Valentine's Day, enjoy, steer clear of angry queens and mad hatters, and spend your day with those you love.

Ana Beall's Tea Room, 415 Westfield Ave., Westfield, (908) 264-4221, anabeallstearoom.com: Owner Nancy Baker has designed a simple and elegant atmosphere and a menu to please anyone, regardless of gender or age. The food is great, the service friendly and informed, and you can opt for lunch, tea service, or even dinner on Friday and Saturday nights. Try chef Jason Brown's Burmese shrimp, pecan-crusted barbecue chicken, shrimp étouffée, slow-braised short ribs, two versions of mac 'n cheese (the grown-ups get crab and shrimp in theirs), or choose from several pasta dishes.

There's also Twilight Tea, which is essentially the same as high tea with scones, tea sandwiches and soup, except the dessert course is replaced by one of the daily dinner options so you can combine tea and dinner in one meal.

Belamari Tea Room, 198 Diamond Bridge Ave., Hawthorne, (973) 304-0188, belamari.com: Sisters Lynne, Valerie Joy and Karen Henderson made a toast to their mother in a Paris tearoom about 10 years ago, recalling how she taught them to enjoy catching up over a good cup of tea. A few years later, the sisters opened a 25-seat tearoom together. Lynne is the chef, and her scones and pastries are extraordinary -- you can even buy a bag of her scone



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Ana Beall's also offers grilled jumbo shrimp in a Burmese curry, served with a yogurt and cucumber sauce.

mix to try at home, but duplicating a master is difficult. There are three choices of scones daily, homemade hearty soup and several sandwiches, including three chicken salad versions (Mediterranean, apples and walnuts, and cranberry). For dessert, mini pound cakes, pecan or lemon bars, brownies or bread pudding are a perfect finish. Belamari is tiny, so reservations are required, but once you're there, the Hendersons make you feel like you're the only invited guest in their kitchen.



JERRY MCCREA/THE STAR-LEDGER

James Howard, the owner of the Cosy Cupboard, spent years traveling and learning about tea before opening the teahouse last year. The Convent Station tearoom also offers a rotating selection of salads, quiches and soups, hearty sandwiches and desserts.

Cosy Cupboard Tea Room, 4 Old Turnpike Road, Convent Station, (973) 998-6676, cosycupboardtearoom.com: James Howard, an architect, product designer and professor, spent years traveling and learning about tea before he opened this two-dining room restaurant in September 2010. It seems to have caught on quite nicely -- and with some interesting results. A men's club meets here once a month, grandmothers bring their grandkids to learn etiquette, and there's often a bridal or baby shower going on somewhere in this fine old house. The scones are excellent, the sandwiches are heartier than the usual dainty size, and salads, quiches and soups rotate weekly. Try the glazed lemon pound cake or English trifle for dessert, and if Howard is there while you are, ask him about the history of tea -- he's a walking

encyclopedia.

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