

A tearoom fit for a queen (or king)

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MATT RAINEY /THE STAR-LEDGER

Ana Beall's Tea Room. 415 Westfield Avenue, Westfield, (908) 264-4221. Hours: 10 a.m.- 6 p.m., Tuesday to Saturday; 9 a.m.- 6 p.m., Sunday; closed Monday. anabeallstearoom.com.

If Alice had been invited to sit down to finger sandwiches with the crusts cut off, warm scones with clotted cream and a tray of designer pastries, she probably wouldn't have told the Mad Hatter, "Of all the silly nonsense, this is the stupidest tea party I've ever been to in all my life."

Of course, with the Queen of Diamonds demanding "off with her head," we know just how fast she drank her tea and ran. But usually, sitting down to tea is a leisurely, tranquil affair, tailor-made for good food and good conversation.

In fact, tea has calmed the spirit and fueled the day with balance and energy since ancient times. There are Chinese and Japanese proverbs about tea, and now our children learn about it through Winnie the Pooh and his tea and cake parties. Even Harry Potter's cup makes him feel braver.

The ritual of afternoon tea -- or "high tea" as it is often known -- can be found at tearooms all over the state. Traditionally, you choose a tea from the house offerings, which comes in an individual pot, and you let it steep until it's ready to pour. Next comes a selection of finger sandwiches, scones with clotted cream, preserves and possibly lemon curd and then a tray of miniature pastries.

Many tea rooms lean on the Victoriana side of decor as an homage to English tea ceremonies, so generally, they tend to be more suited to women than men. All that lace and flowers aside, this is a really fun meal, especially on a cold winter's day.

So my friend Sandy and I went looking for a place everyone would feel comfortable and found a winner at

Ana Beall's Tea Room in Westfield. The first floor of this renovated, 1920s-era home is a sunny, all-wood, eat-in or take-it-out room. Upstairs, there are two rooms with white linens and good art. It's charming, warm and welcoming and in fact, there were several men who lingered for a couple of hours, as we did.

Who can blame them? The food at Ana Beall's is exceptional, and for a tea room to have a CIA-trained chef with Pacific Rim sensibilities and a pastry chef from Gotham Bar & Grill speaks volumes about owner Nancy Baker's concept for Ana Beall's.

With a background in corporate technology and a love of baking since her early childhood in Kentucky, Baker decided to change course a couple of years ago. Already a tea lover, she attended the Specialty Tea Institute in Manhattan, went to tea tastings, read everything she could lay her hands on, and after years of talking about opening a restaurant with her friend Kush Wadhwa, they decided on a tea room instead.

They opened on December 4th, her daughter Angeline's (called Ana) sixth birthday. Beall is Ana's middle name, a family name that dates back to 1802 and the first Angeline. They wanted Ana Beall's to be comfortable, they wanted great food, and they wanted to appeal to people who weren't necessarily familiar with tea rituals. So they schedule all kinds of special events, including children's tea parties, tea tastings and talks about tea and wellness.

As for the tea menu, you can order afternoon tea (\$17.95, the traditional three-course meal), high tea (\$21.95, includes soup) or children's tea (\$12.95, scaled back).

Menus change seasonally to take advantage of local produce. Finger sandwiches may include goat cheese and cucumbers, roasted peppers and bleu cheese, curried chicken salad, shrimp salad, air-dried beef and manchego cheese, egg salad or house-smoked salmon and cream cheese.

This time of year, scones might be cream, lemon ginger, gingerbread, chocolate chip and walnut, dried fruit, maple walnut, butterscotch or butter pecan.

Some of the miniature pastries might be frangipane rainbow cookies, brownies, fruit breads, cookies (including salted chocolate and shortbread-infused with chai), macaroons, mini tarts and delicious mascarpone mousse with pomegranate seeds.

We ordered a portobello and goat cheese salad from the lunch menu (\$9.95, roasted mushrooms over greens, herb-encrusted cheese and toasted pistachios) and only stopped halfway because we knew a complete tea menu was coming -- it was that good.

There are several other salads and sandwiches we liked on the menu, and also thought the brunch menu, served on Saturdays and Sundays, is a really good deal. It includes stuffed French toast (\$7.95), curried eggs with bacon or sausage (\$6.95), several egg dishes, and a basket of breads (\$2.25, scones, muffins and quick breads).

Sandy had to have hot chocolate soup from the special dessert menu; she pronounced it "very intense; thick, but not cloying." The homemade marshmallow was light and lovely and the topping of caramel left a sweet aftertaste. "I love it," she smiled.

Baker says they'll open a tea accessory shop in the next few months, and you can purchase tea by the ounce now. Sandy really enjoyed her lavender Earl Grey and bought some for home; I had chosen peach apricot, but our delightful server, Leo, says I should be more daring next time.

There will be a next time for me, and I suggest reservations. If you're on a schedule, afternoon tea may not be something to try and fit in. Tea, good talk, good friends and good food all take time to perfect.

But make some time soon. Even Alice would have stayed and chatted for a while if she weren't so worried about her head.

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