

An elegant tradition

High tea, a centuries-old British celebration, can be enjoyed at a tea room near you

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAN FEDUCK

From the moment the elegant cups and saucers were placed on the tablecloth, I knew this experience would be more like taking tea at Downton Abbey than grabbing a “steeped tea” on the go.

Proudly, our server placed a three-level tray of delicacies in front of us and watched for our astonishment.

My mom, a friend and I were on a quest to visit area eateries that carry on the age-old tradition of serving high tea. In these times of fast-paced living, the experience of high tea allows us to slow down and enjoy the luxury of sharing quality tea and delicacies with friends and family.

Tea was first brought to Canada in a shipment by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1716, as the British settlers brought customs around afternoon and high tea to their new country.

It is widely believed that the custom of serving afternoon

tea originated in 18th-century England when Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, requested tea and sweets in the afternoon to ward off hunger between breakfast and late dinner. At that time, high tea was a term used to describe a more substantial afternoon meal for workers arriving home from a hard day of labour.

Over the years, these terms became intertwined and high tea is now considered to be a special afternoon dining experience including fine tea (or coffee) and small sandwiches, scones and sweets, usually served on a three-tiered tray.

Many fine hotels and tea shops around the world serve high tea in the afternoon, continuing this elegant tradition.

Here are some places that offer high tea in the southern Ontario area. Each has its own story and style and all share a passion for creating a memorable experience.



LEFT: Langdon Hall in Cambridge has hired a dedicated pastry chef to produce the bite-sized delicacies offered at high tea. The trays have three levels: scones, savoury and sweet. A selection of fine teas is sourced from Tealeaves, a Vancouver-based company.

ABOVE: The Boathouse in Guelph, located next to the Speed River, is a cosy place to enjoy high tea.



LANGDON HALL
CAMBRIDGE
langdonhall.ca

To enjoy high tea at Langdon Hall is a grand experience. As you drive up the treed country lane to the large white mansion, you feel elegance in the air. For most of a century, this Federal Revival-style mansion was a residence, until it was recreated in 1987 as a Country House Hotel.

My mother, daughter and I met for a three-generation Mother's Day high tea.

High tea has been served at Langdon for more than 20 years and is offered from Friday to Sunday afternoons in a bright room that overlooks a garden.

The menu opened with a history of high tea, honouring the historical aspect of this dining experience. The selection of fine teas is sourced from Tealeaves, a Vancouver-

based company.

From the first bite, it is evident that this is high tea prepared with care and flair while maintaining tradition in the trendy, bite-sized pastries. A dedicated pastry chef has been hired to produce the delicacies served on individual tea trays.

Sour cherry and star anise scones were served with honey butter, house-made preserves and Devonshire cream. The savoury tray included such specialties as rarebit on pumpernickel rye, a tart fine of apple, shallot and aged cheddar. The sweets level of the tray offered four fineries: pomegranate cheesecake, a florentine, cinnamon macaron and cornes de gazelles.

We admired the pastry chef, who took ordinary cooking ingredients and created these small gifts.

As we left the grand front entrance, we vowed to slow down and celebrate life more often.

THE BOATHOUSE
TEA ROOM
GUELPH
theboathouseguelph.ca

Beside the Speed River in Guelph is a grey and pink boathouse that has been restored to its 1930s interior, with open wooden rafters and a rustic, cosy interior. The Boathouse has been serving high tea along with lunches and ice cream for 16 years. We sipped and tasted, watching the river go by and listening to the laughter of friends. In the inviting atmosphere, each table is set uniquely and local art and historical pictures of the Boathouse are displayed on the walls. The outdoor patio opens in warm weather.

With an impressive tea menu of 33 blends, it was hard to choose just one. I chose the McCrae House Private Blend mixed for the Guelph Museums to honour the author of "In Flanders Fields."

The flower-donned tea tray included tea-style egg, tuna and cucumber sandwiches with a second level of freshly baked scones, whipped cream and jam. The top tier held four sweet treats, including a delicate bite made of two meringue layers filled with a lemon cream. It was a small work of art, almost too beautiful to eat.



TINTAGELS TEA ROOM
& MORE, ERIN
tintagelstearoom.ca

Tintagels was abuzz with the atmosphere of friends catching up. Most were here to enjoy the British-style lunches, but we were here to enjoy the high tea. I chose Darjeeling from a choice of 28 blends of tea. The teas are sourced from a master blender at Creative Tea in Elora.

Tintagel's high tea tray honoured authentic British tradition. The top layer of the individual tea tray held cucumber sandwiches. These delicate sandwiches have a history of inclusion in upper-class teas and they were made with very thin slices of bread, crusts off, buttered right to the edges and thinly sliced cucumber.

The second layer of the tray held two large warm scones with a choice of Devonshire cream, lemon curd or jam from Rootham Gourmet Preserves of Guelph, petit fours and squares. Petit fours are dainty little cakes dipped in icing and decorated like small presents, a delicacy rarely seen these days.

Tintagels is located in a historical storefront. The British-style tea room offers an eclectic mix of furniture in intimate seating areas, which gives the feeling that you have just popped into a tea room in a small English town. Tea accessories, gifts and clothing are sold in different rooms. Jim and Audrey Devonshire have run the tea room since 1997 and it was named after visiting the seaside ruins of Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, a memory now reflected in a wall mural.

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LEFT: The Secret Garden Tea House in Elora is run by a mother-daughter-aunt trio. From left, Sandi Kerr, Sharon Dupuis and Cayley Stanko.


THE SECRET GARDEN TEA HOUSE, ELORA
thesecretgardenteahouse.com

Roses are everywhere as you step in the door of the Secret Garden, even the cloth napkins tucked into Royal Albert teacups on each table are rose-shaped. “Do what you love and you will never work a day in your life,” Cayley Stanko told me, as she explained how she, her mother, Sharon Dupuis and aunt Sandi Kerr decided to build their tea house in Elora.

It is a labour of love and all food served is made on site with the exception of sweets from a chocolatier in Chicago. Cayley’s grandmother came to teach the staff perfect scone baking for a day, the egg salad is a great-grandmother’s recipe and the jam is homemade. Delicacies on the tray change with seasonal ingredients. Strawberry tarts are made in season and the types of tiny wraps and sandwiches vary with the day. Attention is given to every detail to provide a formal high tea in a relaxing setting.

Mom and I relaxed while we enjoyed tea and treats as we listened to classical music and looked out the window on the busyness below. High tea can be taken on the outside garden patio, in an elegant upstairs area with settees and wing chairs or at tables on the main floor.

Our bill arrived inside a copy of the popular children’s book “The Secret Garden,” a book with the message that happiness comes from caring for others.

High tea is a tradition that celebrates caring through sharing tea and fine food with friends. 

THE NEW DUNDEE EMPORIUM, NEW DUNDEE
thenewdundeeemporium.com

On a country drive southwest of Kitchener is the small town of New Dundee. The New Dundee Emporium provides a spot to enjoy high tea in what has the atmosphere of a modern-day general store, with mementoes of the past on display. Tea or lunch can be followed by a browse through the gift and clothing shop.

One should save an appetite for their indulgence high tea, which includes a selection of tiny savoury sandwiches, such as smoked salmon and crab salad. The sweets include a chocolate truffle made on site, a classic Maid of Honour tart and other squares. The scones are served with Devonshire cream and jam. Most importantly, the tea, a selection of 26 blends, is Higgins & Burke and Taylors of Harrogate.

Who would guess that such an elegant high tea experience could be found in the smallest Ontario country town?



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