



WHAT'S STEEPING ACROSS AMERICA? • BY BRUCE RICHARDSON

I often talk to teashop owners to see what teas their customers are buying. Many of the shops are also tearooms that serve pots of tea or tea foods. They all offer loose tea for purchase. If a guest invests \$10 to \$20 for a package of tea to take home, it means they have formed a strong opinion about that tea, and they want to re-create that positive tea experience at home. That's how we educate and grow devoted tea customers.

I also like to know what kind of special events or marketing tools teashop owners are using as they expand their customer base and promote a growing number of specialty teas that are coming on the market. Here is a quick survey of what I've found from coast to coast across America:

THE TEA ROOM, SAVANNAH, GA.

Elizabeth Ruby began The Tea Room almost 10 years ago. A devotee of Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Ruby drew upon Mackintosh's famous tearoom designs for Glasgow tea maven Kate Cranston at the turn of the 20th century. Ruby's devotion to tea has made her a "must stop" for students of tea traveling the Savannah-Charleston corridor.

I recently caught up with Ruby on a day when the heat index along the Georgia coast was 110 degrees. That's not unusual for the low country, where the main pastime in August can be searching for a bit of breeze and a glass of iced tea.

She was still excited from hosting a summer tea tasting and book signing by London tea writer Jane Pettigrew. "Hot tea and air conditioning is what keeps them coming in the door," Ruby points out. "They are looking for any kind of relief from this oppressive heat!"

The Tea Room serves lunch and afternoon tea that are gender-friendly. But what first impresses customers entering the Broughton Street location is the wall of gleaming silver tea canisters behind the counter. Eighty teas are stocked for guests to take home. Teas are measured after customers look into the containers and breathe in the exotic aromas. Half-

ounce samples are gladly distributed. Teas average \$3.50 to \$5 per ounce, and most consumers buy in four-ounce increments. What teas are the tourists and locals in Savannah taking home these days?

- **Empress Bride.** Also called Keisarin Morsian, this Finnish tea has a base of Assam and Ceylon teas. Pineapple chunks, dried orange peel, thistle petals, essence of quince and elder enhance the blend.
- **Pomegranate Pai Mu Tan.** This is a combination of two popular healthy foods: Chinese white tea and pomegranates.
- **Brin's Cup Green.** This is a house blend of Pouchong and Oolong flavored with essence of peach and cherry, with the addition of sunflower, corn flowers and rose petals for visual enhancement.
- **South African honeybush** blended with Rooibos, orange peel and vanilla. This herbal blend is popular for its antioxidant power. "It cleans your sinuses," Elizabeth likes to tell her customers. "That's all it takes to make the sale."

MISS MABLE'S, DICKSON, TENN.

Miss Mable's is a pink paradise of feminine froufrou where Red Hatters are welcomed like family. The comfortable, long-established, family-run tearoom occupies a restored white cottage in the town of Dickson, Tenn., just off the endless stretch of Interstate 40 that goes from Nashville to Memphis.

Owner Fay Davidson stocks one of the largest selections of loose teas in the state. More than 100 teas are offered for consumption or to take home. Teas are individually measured and bagged for retail customers. To boost tea sales, Davidson loves to do "at table" tea demos for her guests. She finds that a lot of people are afraid of trying green tea because they don't know what to expect or how to make it. "I'm trying to encourage my clients to blend their own teas," she says. "They're coming up with some awesome things!"

A little bit of tea knowledge goes a long way in empowering them to take blending into their own hands. Some of



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the concoctions her customers are coming up with include strawberry sencha with white tea, vanilla rooibos with Assam and Irish blend with fruit infusions. It seems as though her regulars have found a new pastime with tea blending.

The top teas that are being bagged and carried out by her customers point to a trend that is evident in many small-town teashops. Fruits and flavors continue to spur tea sales. Here are the leading teas carried home from Miss Mable's:

- Peach Apricot. This flavored black tea also makes a great iced tea.
- Strawberry Green. The base for this blend is a Sri Lankan gunpowder green leaf with strawberry flavoring.
- White Chocolate Truffle Rooibos. Davidson stocks six rooibos blends. This is the favorite, with hints of chocolate and mint.

Miss Mable's was on the cutting edge of teadom a couple of years ago, when the business started offering bubble tea. "It's just not moving here," Davidson lamented. Red hats and bubble tea? That's a combination that may take time to catch on.

ST. JAMES TEA ROOM, ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.



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One of the ingredients common to nearly every teashop is the on-site presence of the owner. His or her personality is often evident as soon as you enter the door, and it's the owner's energy that will leave a positive memory in the customer's mind.

For seven years, Mary Alice Higbie has been the creative energy behind the St. James Tea Room, with help from her son, Daniel. His influence may be the reason more men are discovering tea in Albuquerque.

"One of our goals is to get more American men to enjoy tea—both in the teashop and at home," Higbie says.

Teashops are always scheduling special events to broaden their customer bases. But this mother-son team may have staged the most unusual soiree I've encountered since I witnessed a belly-dancing demonstration at an Indian teahouse in Santa Fe: They have just hosted their fourth annual Cigar Tea.

Guests paid \$45 to gather on the patio for a full afternoon tea featuring savories, scones, sweets and teas. Afterwards, they sampled fine cigars that were paired with port and Madeira. A trained sommelier was on hand to guide the pairings. "Even the women lit up!" Higbie boasted. So, what teas are the good people of Albuquerque drinking when they are not puffing cigars and sipping port? Here is a list of the top take home teas from St. James:

- Lady Londerry. This blend of Sri Lankan and Indian black

teas is highlighted with lemon and strawberry flavorings.

- Eye of the Tiger. Almond, rum and butterscotch flavorings enhance the enjoyment of this Sri Lankan black tea.
- Picasso Soiree. Who needs cake after drinking this blend of black tea with chocolate?
- Buckingham Palace. This traditional black tea blend is found in many teashops. It has notes of Earl Grey and Jasmine. English tea drinkers love it because it takes milk and sugar so well.

THE TEA CUP, SEATTLE

The Tea Cup has offered Seattle's largest selection of teas for more than a dozen years. Located on trendy Queen Anne Avenue, it has a reputation of stocking anything a tea lover needs to equip their home tea chest. Elizabeth Nottingham keeps her busy shop open seven days a week so her customers are never out of their favorite leaves.

The Tea Cup doesn't offer coffee because there is a coffeehouse next door. (None of the teashops interviewed for this column offers coffee.) One of Nottingham's most popular carry-out drinks is the Matcha latte. Her young customer base makes it their beverage of choice. Here are the teas that are most popular in this Northwest location:

- Ceylon black teas. These are the favorites for people who want a good, traditional cup of black tea. Her favorite single estates include New Vithanakanda and Kenilworth.
- New Zealand Sunny Slope. This is an all-fruit infusion of strawberries, kiwis, dried apple, orange peel, rose petals and hibiscus. Another choice is Coconut Grove, which Nottingham describes as a fruit punch for adults with an ambrosia of exotic, tropical fruit pieces, herbs and luscious flavors.
- Earl Grey. This English favorite continues to be the most consumed flavored tea in the world. It is high on the best-seller lists at most American teashops. The Tea Cup stocks nine different Earl Greys, including a popular Earl Grey Lavender.
- Scented greens. China is exporting some very affordable sencha teas that are easily married with fruits and herbs. Nottingham stocks several flavored with tangerine, quince, vanilla or cherry.
- White teas. You will find four white teas including on sale here. One of the most interesting is an Assam white.

The American tea scene is fascinating these days. Tea retailers are always on the lookout for new teas and trends. Every tea professional I know spends countless hours educating staff and customers. Thank goodness, there is a never-ending thirst for tea information in this country. The only thing I'm left wondering is: What tea do you match with a cigar? ●



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