



LA VIDA

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Stacia Spragg/Tribune

As a surprise gift, Nancy Weaver (right) took granddaughter Ariel Baca to the St. James Tearoom in Old Town last month. Weaver has a tradition of throwing a tea party whenever her granddaughters come to her house, but decided to treat Baca to a real tearoom for her 13th birthday.

A SPOT OF

civility

Local tearooms are trying to revive etiquette, conversation and relaxation one pot at a time

By Carrie Seidman
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Two years ago, Bob and Sally Lowder got into the habit of going to Page One Bookstore's cafe for early-morning coffee. So did Jim and Rita Peaslee.

One day the couples, now both in their early 60s, struck up a conversation about hiking in the Sandia Mountains. That led to hikes and dinners out and a friendship that each has come to treasure.

In fact, the only thing that didn't survive was the coffee.

Instead, once a month, the Lowders and the Peaslees take a two-hour break from the demanding pace of daily life to enjoy each other's company over several pots of tea, amid the pressed linens and elegant period furniture of the St. James Tearoom.

"Even if you don't have an 8-to-5 job, it's a hustle-bustle world," says Jim Peaslee, who sells real estate part time with his wife. "But you can't be in a hurry when you go to tea."

In a country with a Starbucks on every corner and daily planners packed with commitments, taking the time to "take tea," as the British say, is not the norm.

But more and more people are discovering

the pleasures of the experience — from the fine china and luscious treats, to the delightful conversations and congenial atmosphere.

"There's something about tea that makes you want to sit down together, even more than a cup of coffee," says Mary Alice Higbee, owner of the St. James and a self-described "tea lady and Anglophile."

Higbee grew up in an old Albuquerque adobe, but her heart lay in a Victorian parlor. As a young girl, she gave endless tea and dress-up parties and dreamed of one day having her own tearoom.

After "doing all the things people are supposed to do" — in her case, pursuing a career as a porcelain artist — Higbee opened the tearoom four years ago to counterbalance what she calls "the tyranny of the urgent" in American society.

"We've become an anonymous society; we've lost the art of conversation and the art of companionship," Higbee says. "We need a return to grace, civility, beauty, gentility and

TEA FOR TWO ... OR MORE

In the Albuquerque area (call for times):

St. James Tearoom, 901 Rio Grande Blvd. N.W., Suite E-130. 242-3752. \$20. Reservations recommended.

Devonshire Adobe Inn, 4801 All Saints Road N.W. 898-3366. \$15. Reservations required.

Bottger Mansion of Old Town, 110 San Felipe N.W. 243-3639. \$11-\$20. Reservations recommended.

The Special Touch, 5200 Eubank Blvd. N.E. B-7. 294-2396. By private arrangement for parties of at least 10. \$21.95. Reservations required for annual Mother's Day tea.

Another Place 'N' Time Antiques, 11814 S. Hwy. 14, Tijeras. 281-1212. Themed teas twice monthly May to October. \$16. Other months, a pot of tea (\$2.95) or tea with a sweet (\$4.95). Reservations required.

In Santa Fe:

Hotel St. Francis, 210 Don Gaspar. (505) 983-5700. \$15. No reservation required.

Grant Comer Inn, 122 Grant Ave., (505) 983-6678. \$11.95. Reservations required.

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Mary Alice Higbee, owner of the St. James Tearoom

CIVILITY from CI

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Even in Great Britain, the tradition of an afternoon break for tea has become less prevalent, says Higbee, who visited 20 tearooms in England last fall and was distressed to find tea bags — instead of the traditional loose tea leaves — at most of them. But Americans, in particular, have had a long-standing bias against the brew.

"It's just not in our cultural past," Higbee says. "We have the Boston Tea Party to blame for that. Especially for men in this country, if you drank tea, it meant you were a sissy, red-coated Royalist."

Bob Lowder and Jim Peaslee have no such problem, though they acknowledge they're in the tearoom minority.

"Only men that are sure of their masculinity go," says Lowder, a retired human resources manager, grinning at Peaslee. "We hunt, we fish, we watch football... and we go to tea."

Whether tea time could be the solution to getting Americans off the hamster wheel, the Lowders and Peaslees think it's a fine way to start.

"It's an opportunity to relax, something we don't know how to do much anymore," Bob Lowder says. "In an era of fast food, pre-packaged, microwaveable, 'Do you want fries with that?'... this is the opposite end of the spectrum."

A visitor to the St. James is welcomed graciously upon arrival, and women are offered a variety of elegant hats to don for the interlude. Each party is assigned a screened-off private area, named for a place in England and filled with antique furniture, lace curtains, thick rugs and porcelain china.

Servers in period costume who look straight out of a British picture book, arrive with pots of steeped tea (there are 50 flavors to choose from) and three-tiered, doily-lined pedestals that feature savories, scones and clotted cream, and sweets, in descending order.

Each tidbit is prepared with attention not only to taste but also to aesthetics. The cucumber sandwiches around the holidays, for example, are made to look like small gift-wrapped presents.

The whole experience is about as far from a typical drive-through meal as can be imagined.

Though most local visitors refer to the afternoon tea as "high tea" ("as in highfalutin," Higbee says), a true high tea is served around 6 p.m. and is more like a light supper. The St. James serves a full tea at three sittings between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.

The Lowders and Peaslees enjoy everything about their visits — from the exquisite food (miniature beef Wellingtons are their favorite) to the unfettered stretch of time to discuss everything from a planned float trip down the San Juan River to the names of television characters they cannot recall.

For those who grew up with a tea tradition, seeing more Albuquerqueans take to the concept is heartwarming, Jay Power says. Power, born and raised in London, and her Texas-native husband, Pat, run the Devonshire Adobe Inn, where tea is offered twice a day, at least four days a week.

"In England, when I was a young child, during the war (World War II) and just after, people couldn't invite you to dinner because of the rationing," says Power, a short, energetic woman with what her granddaughter calls "bubbly eyes." "But they would invite you to tea, and everything was displayed magnificently. So tea was always very special."

Power, who still drinks at least four cups daily — including the one she takes to bed with her at night — created the tearoom in the couple's 8-year-old bed-and-breakfast because "there wasn't any place for ladies to gather and just sit and talk about pleasant things with a friend."

But more than just ladies visit the tearoom now. In addition to the over-50 female social group called the Red Hat Society, the tearoom now draws everyone from the occasional elderly male to a group of Girl Scouts who've made their visit an annual tradition.

Not only does tea give people a chance "to get caught up or vent without the phone ringing," Power says, but it's also an excellent opportunity to teach manners and etiquette to the younger set.



Stacia Spragg/Tribune

Erin Treat, 19, tries on hats from the hat box to wear during tea with her grandmother, Lariene Treat, at the St. James Tearoom. Tea can also be an excellent time to try on manners and etiquette, proponents say.

On a wall in the tearoom, a framed letter from Power's granddaughter thanks her "special Nona" for a lesson in suitable behavior. "Thank you for teaching me how to drink tea with my little finger in the air and not to put the cookie back on the plate after you have licked it," the letter reads.

Etiquette is more about making people feel at ease than any set of regulated behaviors, Higbee says.

"The case I always talk about is when the Prince of Persia was given a finger bowl after tea with Queen Victoria and he drank from it," says Higbee, who attended the Protocol School of Washington in preparation for her tearoom but found it "too proper." "So Victoria, in order to make him feel at ease, drank from hers as well. That's true courtesy."

That civility is what has drawn Frank Osuna, an electrical systems designer, and his wife, Julie, a bookkeeper for a real estate company, to the tea tradition. The couple began going to tea when they lived in Pennsylvania and continued the practice when they

moved to Albuquerque in 1997.

They now go once or twice a month to St. James and often share a bottle of wine as well as tea. Frank Osuna has even scheduled all-male business meetings at the tearoom.

"It's so civil," says Julie Osuna, 47, who plans to celebrate their 25th anniversary at the tearoom in May. "We look at it like a vacation, like going outside of yourself."

Julie says their marriage has benefited from tea times because they are "one of the rare times I can get my husband alone and talk to him."

Over a warm pot of darjeeling or English breakfast they've discussed everything from a possible move to Europe, to trips past and future. The only complaint they have is that sometimes the allotted two hours just aren't long enough.

"It's so wonderful just to take the time to enjoy yourself and each other," Frank muses. "Quite often, even after two hours, we're rather reluctant to leave."

TEA TYPES

High tea: Also called "meat tea." Served around 6 p.m., this is a supper that includes heavier, more savory foods. Called "high" because it is served on a high dining table.

Low tea: Afternoon tea, usually taken in a sitting room on a low coffee table, around 4 p.m.

Full tea: An afternoon tea with a three-tiered pedestal of savories, scones and desserts.

Farmer's tea: A combination of a ploughman's lunch (heavy bread, cheese, fruit, and sausages or meat pie) and a sweet.

Cream tea: Afternoon tea that features scones, clotted cream and tea only.

Royal tea: A full tea with a glass of sparkling wine or sherry.

Light tea: A lighter version of full tea that includes only scones and a sweet.



Pam Roache (left), Mary Ann Pineda (facing camera) and Terri Allahdadi celebrate a girls' day out recently at the St. James Tearoom. As they help themselves to cucumber sandwiches, scones and sugar plums, the brew is kept warm by a cozy, covering the teapot.