

CLASSY CARE

St. James Tearoom provides a special takeout

BY RICHARD S. DARGAN
FOR THE JOURNAL

For many locals, a visit to St. James Tearoom is a treasured holiday tradition, a chance to escape the rush of Christmas and New Year's and decompress for a couple of hours with friends and tea and artfully prepared bites.

So how does the experience rate when takeout is the only option? How much do you lose when you remove the plush, curtained booths, the costumed servers, the multilevel silver trays and the porcelain teapots?

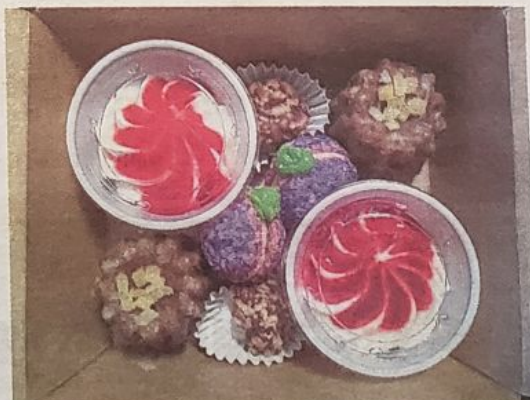
To find out, I pulled up the website on a recent Saturday, put in an order and drove down to the tearoom on the southwest corner of Osuna and Edith. Founder Mary Alice Higbie and her son, Daniel, moved the operation to this secluded, tastefully landscaped spot after they outgrew their original location near Old Town.

Opening a restaurant is a long-shot proposition; launching a tearoom in sun-drenched, laid-back Albuquerque is almost preposterous. But that's what the Higbies did back in 1999, and they've made it work since then through creativity and attention to detail. They change the menu frequently to suit the seasons and roll out events such as a Harry Potter-themed service so that there's always a reason to come back. To say they have a following is an understatement: If you wait until November to book a table for the holidays, you'll be out of luck.

Dining-out restrictions necessitated by COVID-19 have challenged the Higbies, but instead of folding up shop, they've created a well-organized, convenient takeout



Savory offerings at St. James include beef Wellington, creamed Bruffled potato, cheddar quiche and a cucumber tea sandwich with cranberry cream cheese.



Sweets for two: framboise custard, gingerbread cake with lemon glaze, sugarplum cookies and truffles.



St. James' scones and scones the regular ver

system. You order online and then select from several scheduled pickup times. When you arrive at the tearoom, you'll park in one of the

numbered parking spaces and text them with your name and space number, and a server brings the goods out to you. I arrived right on time for my

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Provides a special take-home experience

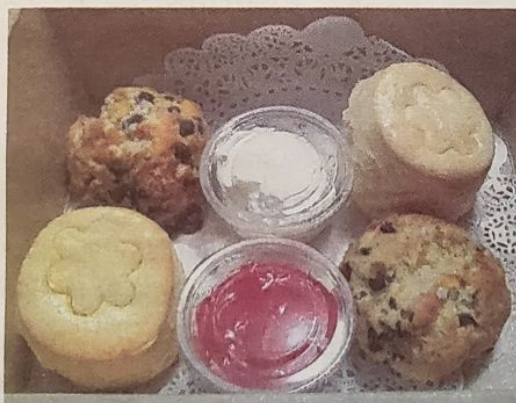


RICHARD S. DARGAN/FOR THE JOURNAL

de beef Wellington, creamed Brussels sprouts and mushrooms, and a cucumber tea sandwich with roasted turkey, and orange and



gingerbread cookies and



St. James' gluten-free versions of cream scones and soda bread are similar in quality to the regular versions.

umbered parking spaces and text them with your name and phone number, and a server brings the goods out to you. I arrived right on time for my

4:30 pickup, sent a text and the server materialized in about 20 seconds.

The four tea options — regular, gluten-free, vegan

ST. JAMES
TEAROOM

★★★★

LOCATION: 320 Osuna NE, Building D, 242-3752, stjamestearoom.com

HOURS: 10:45 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday; closed Monday

NO ALCOHOL

and nut-free — include three courses of food and three teas with all the accouterments. There also are a few à la carte options, including six-packs of frozen beef Wellington (\$23.95).

The outgoing menu, organized into two acts with an intermission, is based on "The Nutcracker," Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky's 1892 ballet. Many of the items are named for characters in the ballet.

I ordered one regular tea (\$45.52) and one gluten-free (\$50.49) version. The savories, sweets and breads are packed in separate cardboard boxes along with three 1-ounce servings of tea in silver envelopes. You also get sugar (granulated and lumps), tea bags and a handy pamphlet titled "Your Guide to Teatime at Home" with instructions for preparing the tea and reheating the food.

The highlight of the savory treats that made up Act 1 was Godfather Drosselmeyer's Beef Wellington. St. James has perfected the art of beef Wellington, turning out succulent blocks of tenderloin wrapped in crisp but not greasy pastry shells. The meat cooked to medium-well when it was reheated for the recommended five minutes

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in a 315-degree oven. Its heaviness was spelled by an excellent cucumber tea sandwich with roasted turkey, orange and cranberry cream cheese that tastes like a sandwich you'd make with Thanksgiving leftovers. The savory menu is rounded out with creamed Brussels sprouts and mushrooms, a truffled potato and an exceptional cheddar quiche, the creamy filling held in an exquisitely light, flaky crust.

The savories were backstopped by a strong, rich Indian Assam black tea in which the leaves were formed into small pellets. The Intermission portion of the meal consisted of soda bread and cream scones served with sugarplum-scented black tea. The bite-sized soda bread, freighted with chocolate chips and rolled in coarse sugar, can be eaten alone, but the cream scone pairs beautifully with a delicious cranberry curd and clotted cream. The sugarplum tea, a China black tea with plum bits and sparkling

sugar crystals, was spicy and a little tart, making it a good match for the buttery breads.

Act 2 brings a colorful variety of sweets, from a rich chocolate truffle rolled in nuts to a tart, airy framboise custard. Two baked goods — a small gingerbread cake with lemon glaze and two plump purple sugar cookies rolled in coarse sugar and sandwiched around a cream filling — showcase St. James' skill at creating small bites appropriate for the season. All of it was terrific, and the accompanying Sleigh Bells Herbal Tea, chock-full of oranges, almonds, dried apples, cranberries and sparkling sugar crystals, was like Christmas in a cup.

The regular and gluten-free selections were similar in both content and taste. If you don't treat the experience like an eating competition, you'll have leftovers for the next day, and the tea should last even longer.

Craft and creativity make St. James Tearoom a special experience, even in takeout mode.