

Guests can linger in new St. James' parlor

Tearoom steeped in loveliness

BY CHARLOTTE BALCOMB LANE
OF THE JOURNAL

The new St. James Tearoom is a breathtaking experience from the lovely Haviland cups and saucers to the cutwork place mats to the delicately starched cotton napkins to the scones that melt like a baker's dream on the tongue.

This tiny tearoom hidden behind the raucous Rio Grande Cantina can only accommodate 27 people when every seat is taken. But such seats! Imagine an English lady's parlor of comfortable chairs in fresh fabrics, and in each corner a separate vignette, where guests can linger into the afternoon sipping tea and gradually nibbling through a three-tiered tray of exquisitely dainty and savory biscuits and luscious desserts.

The St. James Tearoom opened in December and is the vision of its owner, Mary Alice Higbie. Higbie herself blows like a refreshing breeze through the tearoom, a whiff of culture and civility in a parched landscape of fluorescent lighting and chain-restaurant sameness.

In her vision, Higbie has overlooked no detail and missed no opportunity to incorporate beautiful, feminine touches into the experience of tea. For example, she adorns each tray with fresh flowers and slips tiny silver spoons into each pot of lemon curd.

And the lemon curd! A tart, sweet, delicate pudding as memorable as a baby's first kiss. It is perfect on scones no wider than silver dollars, scones so tender the little biscuits



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ANN DINIUS, LEFT, AND SHELLY FRITZ ENJOY AN AFTERNOON TEA AT THE ST. JAMES TEAROOM IN OLD TOWN.

crumble without chewing. This lemon curd is not acidic commercial stuff — Higbie and her cook, Charnia Parrish, make it themselves and you can taste the difference.

At the St. James Tearoom, guests can order a full afternoon tea for \$14 a person, which includes a pot of tea and the three-tiered tray of goodies. The top tier is for savories, the middle is for crumpets and scones, and the bottom is for sweets. It is a lot of food delivered in very small packages.

Savories vary, but may include a tea sandwich with lettuce and mint butter; a delicate quiche-like drop flavored with English Stilton cheese and artichoke hearts; tiny cherry

tomatoes piped with savory curfiques of herbed bleu cheese.

My favorite was a crusty sweet potato biscuit sliced and filled with a sliver of salty ham and a dab of honey mustard.

The second tier fills you up with a deliciously chewy, golden crumpet and the delicate scone. A separate plate with condiments arrives for the breads: the lemon curd, unsweetened heavy cream and butter whipped to a froth with fresh strawberries.

Desserts are symphonies in single bites. One was a cluster of plump blackberries and sliced strawberries arranged on a snow-white disk of crisp meringue. Another was a



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A THREE-COURSE TEA STANDS READY FOR DINERS AT THE ST. JAMES TEAROOM.

chewy coconut macaroon, topped with *creme ganache* (chocolate whipped with cream) and dipped in chocolate glaze. Another was a miniature pineapple upside-down cake baked in a tiny cup.

The sweets are so lovely, at first you may be tempted to gobble them indiscriminately. But the tearoom is so peaceful and quiet — as is the garden surrounding it — your more civilized side will rise to the fore.

Besides, there is no need to hurry — Higbie and her staff allot a full two hours for guests to enjoy the

St. James Tearoom

★★★★

LOCATION: 901 Rio Grande
NW Suite F140; 242-3752

HOURS: 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
Tuesdays-Saturdays

NO SMOKING

**RESERVATIONS STRONGLY
RECOMMENDED**

experience.

If you don't want full tea, there are five other options. Light tea costs \$11 a person and includes tea, scones and an assortment of sweets. Tea and dessert for \$5.50 includes a pot and a large sweet. One day, the "sweet" was a magnificent iced layer cake decorated with tiny pink icing roses.

St. James Tearoom offers a roster of 20 teas, three of which are offered on any given day. If you know *nada* about tea, fear not. Higbie or her server will explain your choices then brew it in the most loving fashion in a fabric "sock," which allows the leaves to expand and release their full flavor.

Restaurants and movies are sometimes labeled as being for "guys" or "girls." The St. James Tearoom doesn't exclude men but its floral style and feminine sensibility definitely appeal to women. Besides, I cannot think of a lovelier place than the St. James to sit and catch up with a girlfriend.