

Over dainty cups of Persian melon tea, Mary Alice Higbie, the gracious proprietress of St. James Tearoom, tries to explain why more and more women love to take tea.

It's about filling our cups — literally and figuratively, she says. "We think doing is most important; but I think people are most important," says the immaculately coiffed 52-year-old. "Especially women — we tend to give and give, and don't stop to fill our own cups. An emptiness comes from giving and giving, and not taking in. This (place) is about beauty, relaxation, sitting and being present to one another."

Sounds simple, yes, but so many wives/moms/corporate execs today don't take time out to relax, just be and really listen to each other. That may be exactly why so many are flocking to Higbie's elegant Victorian haven, searching to bring back the quiet of a gentler time into their lives.

"You're just transported to another time and place," says Marilyn Bodnar, 60, who owns an antique restoration business. "It's very gentle and civilized. Everything slows down. It's very relaxing, like getting massaged."

Higbie's parlor also brings beauty to the lives of its patrons.

"We're lacking beauty in our lives," she says. "It somehow fills our souls. I think it's a basic need, especially in women. It's like an island of calm in an ocean of chaos, a time capsule of serenity and safety from pressure and crassness."

### Only the finest

A self-described "tea partier" since childhood, Higbie, a porcelain artist and Albuquerque native, opened St. James Tearoom, 910 Rio Grande Blvd. NW, in December 1999. With its fine china, silver, lace, crystal chandeliers and antique velvet sofas, Pachelbel's Canon playing softly in the background, the traditional British-style tearoom is divided into intimate seating areas named after English places. More often than not, best friends, moms, daughters, grandmothers, groups and pairs from ages 5 to 85 show up for tea wearing flowing floral dresses and garden party hats.

The tearoom serves high tea in only the finest accoutrements — hand-painted porcelain, sparkling silver — accompanied by mouth-watering, homemade savories, clotted cream and lemon curd, scones and pastries artfully arranged on a three-tiered tray. Higbie's menu changes monthly, and she imports



**NECESSARY SPLENDOR:** Maggie Reysen, left, and Michele Reynolds take time out from their busy days to share tea in the elegant St. James Tearoom near Old Town. Reynolds says coming to tea "used to be a luxury, and now it's a necessity."

fine teas ("one of life's most affordable luxuries"), which can cost from \$68 to \$285 a pound. She also sells the teas, plus dainty accessories arranged creatively around the main room, including lots of hats.

The hostess, a graduate of the two-year Protocol School of Washington, D.C., and certified tea consultant, also offers gratis etiquette lessons by reservation. With calm in mind, high tea reservations are for minimum two hours. No 45-minute power lunch here. Amen, say the tearoom's disciples.

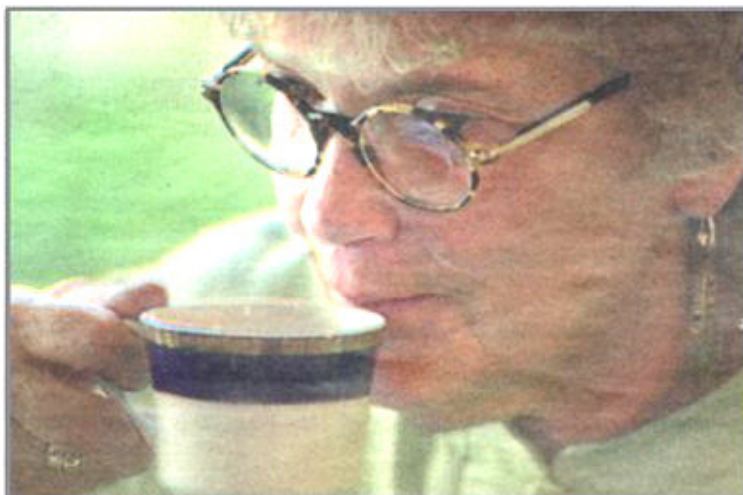
After only one year in business, St. James became so popular, Higbie doubled the size and is still sometimes booked weeks in advance. Now there are 46 seats total, plus patio two-tops and an outdoor gazebo. Fans talk about the

place with an almost giddy religious fervor.

"The place has become a necessity," says Michele Reynolds, a 47-year-old attorney with the U.S. Department of Energy. "If I don't go twice a month and try the new menu, I feel deprived. It's kind of like having a cleaning lady: It used to be a luxury, and now it's a necessity."

"(Mary Alice) has created an environment that's a respite from this treadmill we're all on. I can leave this office feeling so stressed, inundated, overwhelmed, and the moment I get there, I take a deep breath and feel so comforted. It's strange."

Not at all, says Higbie. Americans need a relaxing tradition because our culture is so frenetic. That's her credo.



**TIME TRAVEL:** Marilyn Bodnar, who runs an antique restoration business, says of taking tea, "You're just transported to another time and place. Everything slows down. It's very relaxing, like getting massaged."

## If you go

### St. James Tearoom

**WHERE:** 901 Rio Grande NW, Suite F-140; 242-3752

**WHEN:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays (last reservation accepted at 4:30 p.m.)

**RESERVATIONS:** Recommended.

**OTHER INFORMATION:** No alcohol. No smoking.

"Gradually over decades, we've lost the art of conversation and companionship," she says, daintily nipping a sorrel-lamb pastry. "We can watch TV together and be miles apart. We need to learn everything in this world doesn't need us. We can stop for 20 minutes. I call it the tyranny of the urgent."

### Return to civility

So Higbie did. After raising her two children and pursuing a career as a porcelain painter, she decided at age 50 to realize — and share — her dream. She earned her certificate as a tea consultant, read books and traveled to tea houses in the United States and the United Kingdom to get inspiration.

Her theory: The trend represents a backlash to the "let it all hang out," anti-protocol 1960s. We started losing some of the civilities we had as a culture, including treating each other nicely, Higbie says: "The pendulum is swinging back the other way. We're tired of this sloppiness and ready for the niceties we've been missing."

Reynolds, who brings along her teen daughter, Meredith, and bud-

dies agrees.

"The ritual of tea teaches us the values of civility," she says. "There's a lot to be gained in doing things in an ordered way. There's an awful lot more to it than meets the eye. It's not just taking tea. It's symbolic."

The pouring of the tea, the finger food and proper etiquette make for a pleasurable ritual, says Bodnar, who every afternoon takes tea at home with fine china.

Thirteen-year-old Isaac Sullivan-Leshin likes to go to the tearoom with his parents and just chat.

"A lot of people don't get the chance to really sit back and relax, and have a conversation," he says. "So many meals are rushed."

Maggie Reysen, a 53-year-old library services coordinator for Albuquerque Public Schools, says the ambiance inspires her to share stories she normally wouldn't with friends Pat Jensen and Caroline Beckner.

"The Victorian atmosphere makes us share confidences," she says. "We listen more attentively; it slows us down. The closeness of the seating arrangements, the quiet elegance and beauty make it a special place. We all need a bit of elegance in our lives."

It's a woman's experience, says Bodnar, in a world where there aren't many opportunities for women to just sit, not do anything and not have any interruptions.

"There's no other place I can go to have a heart to heart conversation with my friends," says Reynolds, who turned down her husband's offer to tag along. "It's like a little celebration, and very romantic — without men! — a place where women can be women. And I want this to be my little private place."