

TEA

A MAGAZINE

TEA TALK

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BREWING LOOSE
BLACK TEA

by FRANK MURPHY
and
PEARL DEXTER



Mary Alice Higbie is one of New Mexico's leading tea advocates, and it shows in every corner of her St. James Tearoom near Albuquerque's Old Town. It is at a particularly convenient location if you are visiting any of the nearby museums, botanical gardens, zoo, aquarium, or Old Town itself.



Mary Alice Higbie

The St. James serves a truly splendid afternoon tea. There are 50 teas from which to choose and all the savories, scones, and sweets are created on the premises. When the three-tiered tray of food came to my table it was so exquisite I did not want to disturb it—I wanted to sketch it. It became immediately clear to me that there was no other place to have tea of this caliber in the entire state of New Mexico.

As a graduate of The Protocol School of Washington, Mrs. Higbie has trained her staff well. Guests are graciously tended and pampered, but not in a cloying manner. Everyone is respectful of a patron's space and conversations. And, no cell phones allowed!

Higbie has poured her heart and soul into this tearoom. Her life has been dedicated to tea in one capacity or another. An invalid as a child, she gave tea parties on her bed for imaginary friends and woodland spirits. For years she studied the Oriental method of throwing porcelain pots on wheels, creating her own teapots, and later studied with a master porcelain potter in Japan. Also an accomplished artist, her tea room has now become the canvas upon which she creates.

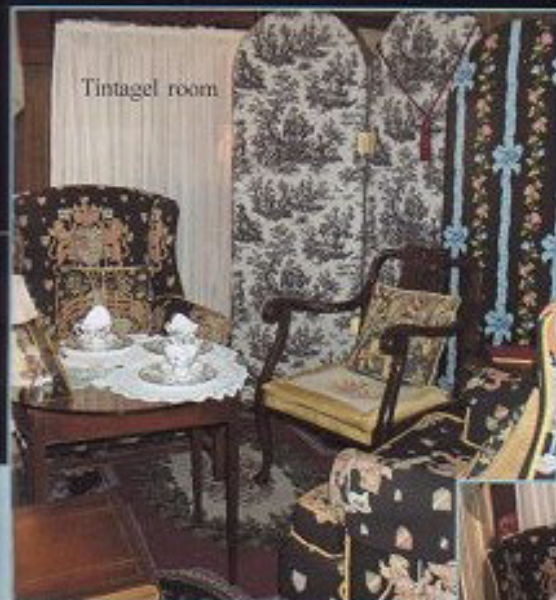
Mary Alice not only understand the fine points and particulars of serving tea and the delicacies that go with it, she also understands tea itself. Listen to this description of her "Morning in Giverny Tea" "...rich, bright, luminous color, bold brushstrokes capturing the shimmering, shifting light and dappled shade; reflected hues—a riot of gleaming greens, golds, blues, and palest pinks. Search for his (Monet's) signature, there at the bottom, in red, no less, but blending into the whole as if another grouping of flowers."

Stow-in-the-World



Vicki

Tintagel room



The St. James Tearoom



Two for tea in the Tintagel room.



Folding screens removed in the Tintagel room for Pearl Dexter's book signing.



St. Bees room



Magdalen room



The essence of tea is evident in the furnishings she has chosen for her 3000 square foot building: soft and soothing textures and tones, elegant sofas and chairs, beautiful and delicate linens and porcelain. What a find!

As a student of China tea, I was not conversant in the English tradition. I did not expect to be initiated into the full glory of English tea when I entered the rarified and radiant chambers of the St. James, but initiated I was. ...and converted. The St. James Tearoom is a delightful place to nurture ourselves in the harsh and arid clime of north central New Mexico. It is an oasis of civility in a world gone mad, a way station for pilgrims, where are offered a few moments of respite and resolve.

Thank you, Mary Alice Higbie!

—Frank Murphy

Frank is a freelance writer living in Santa Fe. He has toured tea estates in China and studied tea at the Tea Research Institute in Hangzhou. Although he lectures about China tea, he still considers himself a student.



Mary Alice



Vicki arranging three-tier servers.



Guests in the Gwynedd room.



Daniel greeting guests.



The fruits of Mary Alice Higbie's labor were recognized in February, when the Small Business Development Center presented her and seventeen other entrepreneurs to the New Mexico Legislature. A dinner was held to honor each with a "Company of the Year" award. One recipient had opened a much-needed grocery store in Mesquite, and another had set up a salsa company to raise money for his sister's heart transplant. Mary Alice's business had grown from two employees to thirty-two, using the principles of grace, civility, beauty, gentility, and excellence. Her goal to change and contribute to society has been accomplished. We congratulate her and her staff for doing just that, albeit one pot of tea at a time.

The St. James Tearoom



Adrian creating placecards.

I sat with the St. James Tearoom proprietress Mrs. Higbie over afternoon tea, soon recognizing that it was the perfect place for a tea rendezvous. The chef had prepared a gluten-free afternoon tea for Mary Alice, and a vegetarian one for me. The petit fours were exquisite. We sat in an area called Stow-on-the-Wold—the dining areas, divided by folding screens and hanging drapes from the ceiling, are all named after places in the British Isles. In the evening the drapes were drawn aside to accommodate the crowd for my lecture on the writing of *Tea with Presidential Families*.

On a tour of the kitchen and pantry, I watched Chef Sue Holmer fill and crown with precision the grape-size tomatoes with salmon mousse, her assistant dip the petit fours in hot icing, and the servers beautifully arrange the sweets and savories before taking them to meet the eyes of awaiting guests.

Displayed in the gift shop is a myriad of tea accoutrements. If you forgot your *chapeau* at home, you may purchase a new creation at the St. James.

As I reflected on my visit, words from Lu Yu's *The Classic of Tea (Ch'a Ching)* seemed to sum up the entire experience of being in Mary Alice Higbie's presence and at her establishment.

In the introductory chapter of Lu Yu's book Francis Ross Carpenter translates 8th-century author Lu Yu:

"Every tea hour must become a masterpiece to serve as a distillation of all tea hours, as if it were the first and with no other to follow. And so the act of drinking tea must be attended by beauty. ... The environment, the preparation, the ingredients, the tea itself, ... Even the equipment for brewing must reflect no lack of attention."

The St. James Tearoom exemplifies Lu Yu's edicts. Not only her customers, but her staff are of great value to Mary Alice. She oversees 32 people to produce a celebration of life via tea. Her son Daniel is one of the 32 who defer to her with an orderliness that results in graciousness, politeness, civility, and harmony, all of which provide an atmosphere of beauty. —Pearl Dexter

St. James Tearoom

Chef Sue Holmer



SALMON MOUSSE IN TOMATO CUPS

from Chef Sue Holmer, St. James Tearoom

- 1-1/2 tablespoons unflavored gelatin
- 1/2 cup liquid from salmon
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire Sauce
- 1/2 cup cocktail sauce
- 1-1/2 cups mayonnaise
- 1 cup cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons fresh dill
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon white pepper
- 1 can salmon (reserve liquid)
- 1/4 cup onion, finely diced
- 1/2 cup celery, finely diced
- 4 hard-boiled eggs, diced

Dissolve gelatin in salmon liquid; heat 30 seconds in microwave. Put aside. Then combine lemon juice, Worcestershire Sauce, cocktail sauce, mayonnaise, cream cheese, dill, salt, and white pepper. Add gelatin mixture. Mix in salmon, vegetables, and eggs. Let sit 1 hour until set. Cut tops off cherry tomatoes and scoop out the insides. Pipe salmon mousse into tomato cups, using pastry bag with star tip.



GLUTEN-FREE SCONES

- 2 cups white rice flour
- 1 cup tapioca flour
- 1 teaspoon xanthum gum
- 4 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 teaspoons soda
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup butter
- 1/4 cup buttermilk
- 3/4 cup heavy cream

Mix dry ingredients and butter until coarse and crumbly. Add cream and mix until soft ball forms. Knead slightly and roll out to 1-inch thick. Cut with cookie cutter. Bake 10 minutes at 375°, until golden brown.

Tea cozies made by Figleaf Company, available in the St. James Tearoom giftshop.

The St. James Tearoom

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Tues-Sat 11am-6pm ~ Fri 11am-8:30pm