

TEA TWISTS

WHAT DO SHERLOCK HOLMES, THE MAD HATTER, AND AN INDIAN CHAIWALLAH HAVE IN COMMON? THEY'RE ALL CHARACTERS IN WELL-CRAFTED INTERPRETATIONS OF A TRADITIONAL AFTERNOON TEA AT THE ST JAMES' COURT, A TAJ HOTEL IN LONDON.



Afternoon tea emerged as a social event sometime around the 1830s or 1840s, according to Bruce Richardson, a historian who specialises in British tea. Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, often found her stomach rumbling between midday lunch and a fashionably late evening meal. She began requesting a tray of tea, bread and butter, and cake be brought to her room during the late afternoon. This became a habit, with friends soon joining in the merriment, spurring the widespread adoption of an afternoon pause as a fashionable social event.

Fast forward to today, and afternoon tea remains a firm fixture in the diary for Brits with time to spare. Gastronomic institutions across the country put forward a plethora of options to sate the post-lunch hunger pangs of the masses. Crustless cucumber sandwiches and scones with clotted cream and jam may still appear on menus up and down the country, but reinvention is becoming de rigueur for restaurants wanting to differentiate.

From feasting in a genie's cave at London bakery Cutter & Squidge to a science-themed afternoon tea at the Ampersand near the Science Museum, curators in the capital are getting creative with their offerings - there's even an afternoon tea to suit vegan tastes, at La Suite West, a stone's throw from Hyde Park.

Keen for a gastronomic frolic one rainy afternoon in London, my friend Caroline and I head to the St James' Court, A Taj Hotel, which, following the celebrated "24 Karat Gold Afternoon Tea" and "Royal Afternoon Tea" has introduced three imaginative afternoon repasts with a twist at their Kona restaurant.

The Jasmine Indian Afternoon Tea evokes the rich traditions of the Indian dining culture, with a selection of delights using traditional spices from across India. Think spicy sandwich fillings, crispy chicken tikka spring rolls and deep fried and sugar-poached milk dumplings to accompany the scones, washed down with a divine shot of salty caramel lassi, with a chikki toffee crunch. Naturally, the chaiwallah has not been forgotten - a selection of 40+ eastern and western teas is on offer.

The table next to us has opted to follow Alice down the rabbit hole, with an Afternoon Tea in Wonderland. An enormous top hat sits on the table, along with a mouth-watering selection of cakes and pastries in pastel colours. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see a strawberry potion labelled "Drink me" accompanying the 'Queen of Hearts' mango tarts, white chocolate mousse teacups and a selection of intriguingly hued finger sandwiches.

| ABOVE Afternoon teas are becoming creative feasts - like the afternoon tea in wonderland.

Caroline and I, however, are following in the footsteps of Sherlock Holmes. A tweed runner lies across our table underneath a rolled world map, a pipe, a pair of handcuffs, a miniature violin in a case, a sign for Baker Street, where the fictional detective resided, and a deerhunter cap, all overlooked by a skull on the ledge of the window. Our knowledgeable waiter is quick to answer our tea-related questions as we peruse the extensive menu, our individual pots swiftly delivered. The food follows shortly after.

The savoury and sweet selections are plated on framed pictures, barely visible beneath the mounds of goodies. The savoury sandwiches are inspired by *The Sign of The Four*, the second of the Sherlock Holmes novels. The Five Orange Pips is an intriguing combination of smoked salmon with orange flavoured horseradish, while Hound of Baskerville harks at tradition, with a filling of roast beef and English mustard on a small bun. Yorkshire's Favourite Son is there, with Yorkshire ham, cheddar, and Branston pickle, but it's the Study in Scarlet that takes my fancy, the classical cucumber sandwich enhanced with minted cream cheese. The final is a Baker Street Pie, where shortcrust pastry is wrapped around chicken breast in an ale gravy.

"We're never going to get through all of those," says Caroline, eyeing the mountain of plain, chocolate chip and raisin scones. Naturally, we make our best attempt, and I notice Caroline is quick to accept the take-home box when we fail. There's a mildly alcoholic theme in three of the sweets: the 221B Macaroon is flavoured with 25-year-old Scotch, Moriarty's Bomb is a coffee and Bailey's cheesecake, and Watson's moustache is a delicious Stout cupcake. There's more, too, with Mrs Hudson's sticky date pudding and my favourite, a delightful smoked caramel mousse, shaped into Sherlock Holmes' Smokey Cigar.

By the time we've finished, afternoon tea has become dinner and the rain has stopped. Reluctantly removing the deerhunter cap from my head, I can but quote Henry James: "There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea."

For more information about the magnificent afternoon teas on offer at St James Court, A Taj Hotel see www.stjamescourthotel.co.uk



TOP Jasmine Afternoon Tea.

ABOVE Part of the Sherlock Afternoon Tea is served on a framed picture



For other stylish afternoon teas across the UK, try:

Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire

Make the most of a visit to Blenheim Palace with a quintessentially British afternoon tea in the beautiful surrounds of the Orangery Restaurant, overlooking the 12th Duke of Marlborough's private Italian Garden. www.blenheimpalace.com

Colwick Hall, Nottingham

Colwick Hall has gone Potty for Peter, with a Peter Rabbit "Tails of Afternoon Tea", featuring Squirrels Savoury Treats, from Lady Susan's Garden Soup, to Chef Lee's creamy leek and cheese pie, and a Burrow of Sweet Surprises. www.colwickhallhotel.com

Talland Bay Hotel, Cornwall

Order a signature Talland Bay "G and T" and wash down your delicate sandwiches, cakes and scones with thirst-quenching Tarquin's Cornish gin and tonic, along with a hot beverage of your choice. www.tallandbayhotel.co.uk