

A Brief History of Victorian Tea

Information taken from *Steeped in Tradition: A Celebration of Tea* by Frances Hoffman.

The beginnings of Victorian Tea have been credited to Anna, the 7th Duchess of Bedford, around 1840. It was the custom of the time to have a relatively small breakfast and lunch, but a huge dinner late in the evening. It was reported that the Duchess was a little hungry one afternoon, so she ordered sandwiches and cake along with her regular afternoon cup of tea. This soon became a habit. Very simply, thanks to Anna, afternoon tea had arrived!

Traditionally there are three types of tea: Cream Tea, Afternoon Tea, and High Tea. If the English tea style is followed, the cups of tea are carried to the guests on a tray, with a tiny table to rest the cups on, placed within reach of each group. Harlequin tea service, meaning cups of various designs, were popular for this kind of a tea. Naturally, the formality commanded by grand occasions was not reflected in smaller, less wealthy homes. Similarly, those living in rural areas would also have a less rigid approach to entertaining with tea.

The Cream Tea is the simplest. It consists of little more than a pot of tea and a scone, served with homemade jam and heavy cream. It may also include an oatcake, muffin or perhaps a slice of plain tea bread. In Britain the cream accompanying the scones is usually thick double cream* or the famous clotted cream*. Canadian tea establishments generally serve a domestic heavy cream or Devon cream* imported from the United Kingdom. The Cream Tea is the most common tea served in modern Canadian Tea Rooms.

According to British tradition, Afternoon Tea is the elegant affair generally served between four and five o'clock. Food is often presented on three tier cake servers, allowing one tier for each course. Afternoon Tea must include sandwiches. These are always served with the crusts removed and assembled with a variety of fillings, the most famous of which is the cucumber sandwich. Next comes a selection of quite firm sweets, such as scones, which are always served with cream and jam. There might also be oatcakes, teacakes and fruitcake. The final tier consists of tiny fruit tarts, or similar pastries and small cakes or squares. For a very elegant Afternoon Tea, seasonal fresh fruit adds a finishing touch. If trying to stay true to the teas of one hundred years ago, the food should be such that it can be held in the hand without causing too much mess. This harkens back to a time when teas were served in drawing rooms or even outdoors during warm weather. Ladies invariably came to these affairs dressed in splendid outfits. Hats and gloves, which were everyday wear at this time, were not always removed prior to eating.

High Tea is traditionally the evening meal of the ordinary people. Served at six o'clock, this meal has nothing to do with grand Victorian drawing rooms. It always includes sliced meats, and a number of other meat, fish and vegetable courses. In farmhouse kitchens of days gone by, it included homemade breads, butter and cheese, followed by desserts. High Tea is always served at the table, because there is simply far too much food for balancing acts with plates and teacups.

A note about cream

*Whipping cream contains thirty-five per cent fat. It will whip to double its original volume and is great for decorating desserts. It will freeze for up to two months, but must be whipped first.

*Double Cream is a rich cream containing forty-eight per cent fat. This cream lends itself to cooking. It will pour and it can be whipped.

*Devon(shire) Cream is sometimes referred to as extra thick double cream. The fat content is also forty-eight per cent. This product goes through a process of homogenization, which results in a far thicker consistency, much like custard. Whipping is not necessary since it spoons nicely. This cream is not suitable for freezing.

*Clotted Cream is the richest of creams. It contains fifty-five per cent fat. It is the ultimate cream for serving with scones. Unfortunately, it is not generally available in North America. A mock clotted cream can be made by adding one ounce of sour cream to four ounces of well-beaten heavy (40%) cream. One teaspoon of icing sugar is then added and the whole is beaten until very thick. After about six hours, the consistency of this cream will change. A little gelatin can be added which may help to bind the mixture together.