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FOOD

Spilling the Tea

by **Matt Kirouac** — FEBRUARY 12, 2025**Pastry Chef Jamon Harper's tea service at ESPACIO, the Jewel of Waikiki** PHOTO: DUARTE STUDIOS

ea service has always been more of an experience than a meal period. Marked by tiered tradition, it's a moment of leisure filled with teacups, scones, finger sandwiches, and clotted cream. But tea service, for all its twee traditions, is only limited by imagination, and nowadays, restaurants and tearooms are raising the bar.



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T By dusting off tradition, approaching through an experience-driven lens, and fostering an immersive environment, tea service can add another tier of profitability, while appealing to travelers and locals alike.

“Modern tea services can vary depending on the establishment, but what we’re increasingly seeing is restaurants putting a personal spin on classic afternoon tea,” says **Andrew Chen**, executive chef of the **Hilton Toronto**, where **Frenchy Bar et Brasserie** serves Sunday tea (\$85 Canadian per person) with atypical items like cacio e pepe egg salad, smoked brisket and mushroom duxelles, and cassis choux. “For us, afternoon tea is more than just food, it is an experience; a moment of indulgence woven into the rhythm of the day.”

It’s an experience curated not just by top-tier teas and dishes, but by creating a “sensory escape,” as Chen explains, with live jazz, the aroma of freshly brewed tea, and indulgent bites. While nodding to tradition with a tiered presentation, it’s elevated with unique flavors and accompanying tea boxes containing detailed booklets that guide guests through the aromas and steep times of each blend, like Goût Russe black tea and Nuit à Versailles green sencha. “This thoughtful approach ensures every sip is as intentional and indulgent as the bites that accompany it,” Chen adds, citing caviar and Champagne add-ons. “Staying attuned to food trends and guest preferences, we craft an experience that feels both exclusive and inviting.”

For Pastry Chef **Jamon Harper**, tea service, ultimately, is about thinking outside the tea box. At **ESPACIO**, the **Jewel of Waikiki**, in Oahu, Harper orchestrates a 12-course omakase-style tea service (\$120 per person) at **Mugen**.

“Modern tea service is more focused on guest engagement, cultural heritage, storytelling, and presentation, and less on ‘drop and run,’” Harper explains. “It’s about taking your guests on a journey, igniting their senses and creating memories.”

Amidst a career preparing tea services in luxury hotels, Harper sought to break from tradition to create more of an indulgent, multi-sensory experience for guests. “In this afternoon tea service, all senses are engaged,” he says, highlighting table-side banyan trees dangling with confections like honey-glazed Okinawan doughnuts and lemon poppy scones with calamansi-pineapple marmalade, 18 different artistically crafted teapots, and more than 24 teas from luxury blender, Tealeaves, all set against an

ocean view. “The omakase-style format also allows quick tweaks to the menu according to new product availability, and guests’ dietary restrictions and preferences.”

That artistry and individuality is woven through Harper’s ever-changing tea tastings, too. “I serve elevated dishes from traditional tea service, Caribbean dishes from my heritage, and scones inspired from baking with my mom,” explains the pastry chef, noting items like foie gras torchon with pink peppercorn gelée and Caribbean curry. “I am at every tea service, interacting with our guests and talking about the dishes and ingredients,” says Harper.



Sunday tea service at Frenchy Bar et Brasserie in Toronto PHOTO: COURTESY OF HILTON



At Mugen, table-side banyan trees dangle with confections PHOTO: DUARTE STUDIOS

Marketing the Tea Experience

Not just an amenity for hotel guests, tea should be marketed as an immersive experience.

“Tea service, in all its beauty, is meant to be a time to slow down and enjoy a respite from the hustle and bustle,” explains **Kelly Hackman**, a **World Tea Academy** certified tea sommelier, and owner of **The White Heron Tea & Gifts** in New Port Richey, Fla. “When we market afternoon tea service, we focus on the ability to sit across from someone and have a conversation. The environment is calm and relaxing, and we market to our guests to take a time out and enjoy the art of teatime.”

Adds Hackman, “Guests look for that unique experience they can share with a friend or family member, and we share that the best way to get quality time together is sitting down over a pot of tea and a beautiful meal.”

Beyond marketing to locals, she emphasizes the importance of promoting across the country, tapping into the concept of tea travel: “We know guests who enjoy tea time will travel to enjoy different tea experiences,” she says of her afternoon tea (\$24.95 per person). “Therefore, we market our tea service through our county and state tourism offices, and through national campaigns with tea industry leaders.”

Traditionally tied with hotel restaurants, places like Frenchy position it as an immersive experience to enhance a guest’s stay, or as a “day experience” for locals, while ESPACIO promotes tea service in

pre-arrival communication, as well as upon check-in. But beyond hotels, tea can be pitched to broader clientele.

“To market tea service beyond hotel guests, we highlight it as an experience for locals and visitors alike,” says **Leslie Rohland**, chef/owner of **Cottage Cafe Bakery and Tea Room** in Bluffton, S.C. “Social media plays a big role in showcasing the visual appeal of our tea service, with styled photos and customer testimonials.” Hosting different themed events, like holiday teas and literary-themed teas (prices vary), as well as partnering with local businesses to cross-promote, helps attract diverse audiences. “This approach emphasizes creativity, community, and sustainability, ensuring our tea service is both delightful and profitable.”

Making Tea Service Profitable

Especially when marketed to broader audiences, emphasis on presentation and quality can do wonders for profit.

“At The Cottage, we focus on thoughtful presentation and high-quality ingredients while managing portion sizes and minimizing waste,” says Rohland. “Tea has a high-profit margin compared to other beverages, so the key is to enhance the experience with unique offerings that justify the price, like housemade scones or themed events. Pre-booked reservations also help us control inventory and staffing, ensuring efficiency and cost-effectiveness.”

For Hackman, profitability is about finding the right balance of food offerings, along with a hospitable environment that encourages repeat business. “To keep our tea service profitable, we worked to ensure the items we offer during teatime are unique but also simple,” she says, revisiting ingredients in multiple items, like tea sandwiches and scones, to keep costs low. “If a guest visits for tea and they fall in love with the environment you have created, with your team, and with everything about what you do, it will always be worth the price to them.”

Matt Kirouac is a travel and culture writer, and he curates Plate’s weekly Chefs on the Move newsletter.



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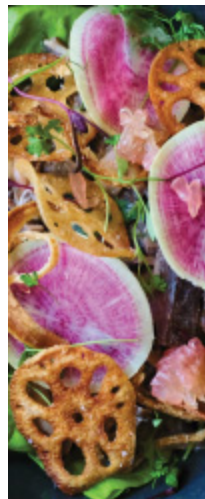


The advertisement features a chef in a black uniform standing in a kitchen. To the right of the chef is a red box with the text "GO FROM BLAND TO GRAND" and "NEW LIGHTWEIGHT, BREATHABLE CHEF WORKS SIGNATURE SNAP COAT®". Above this box is the ChefWorks logo and the text "RENTAL CLOTHING APPLIED EXCLUSIVELY FROM CINTAS". Below the red box is a grey button that says "Freshen up your look >". At the bottom is the Cintas logo with the tagline "READY FOR THE WORKDAY™".



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