



The White Heron Tea & Gifts

Falling in Love with Afternoon Tea in The Sunshine State

Text by Lorna Reeves

Photography Courtesy of Kelly Hackman



Kelly Hackman is the first to admit that her journey into tea was somewhat unexpected. The native Floridian's earliest recollections about tea weren't of tea parties with pretty china and dainty foods but rather of her mother putting teabags in a big jug and setting it

outside to make sun tea. "If you had told me 7 or 8 years ago that I would be doing this," says Kelly, owner of The White Heron Tea & Gifts since 2016, "I would have denied you up and down, because tea wasn't anything I thought of as an option in my life because it wasn't prominent growing up."

Born and raised just north of Tampa in New Port Richey, Florida, a town of approximately 16,000, Kelly worked for several years for an agency that raised money for non-profit organizations. She loved the impact she was making, but she found the work exhausting and stressful. She decided that if she was going to work that hard, she wanted to do it for herself and to help her town. "I said to my husband, 'I think our town has potential, and I want people to love it like I love it,'" Kelly recalls. "New Port Richey is so picturesque. The buildings are beautiful. I just see it like that town you would see in a Hallmark movie." And because the towns featured in those movies all seemed to have a gift shop, Kelly decided that she would like to open one. Her CPA and her attorney, concerned about the long-term viability of such a retail venture, advised her to put something else with the gift shop—perhaps a bakery or



(Above) Loose-leaf teas served in the tearoom are available for purchase in the gift shop and online at driftwoodteacompany.com. Many of them are blends owner Kelly Hackman (pictured opposite page bottom) created herself.

a coffee shop, they suggested. But none of those options resonated with Kelly, so she put the entire idea on the shelf until one fateful day in 2015.

"My husband, Bryan, works for an engineering firm near Tampa, and he was driving to MacDill Air Force Base to do a survey for his company and passed by this little tea shop and gift shop together," Kelly relates. "He called me up and said, 'I have the perfect idea! We need to do a tearoom with a gift shop because that will draw people into downtown.' " A few days later, the couple stopped by The Royal Tea Room & Gift Shoppe, the business that had sparked the idea, to see if the concept might work for them in New Port Richey. Because advance reservations were required for dining in the tearoom, Kelly and Bryan were only able to visit the gift shop, but a few days later, she and her mom, Debbie Zisa, returned for afternoon tea. "That was the first time I had had tea in a tearoom with the tea sandwiches and everything," Kelly explains. "My mom and I spend a lot of time together, but we never had sat down and spent an hour like that just visiting. It was so nice and so relaxing that I started to convince myself that I wanted a tearoom instead of a gift shop."

A few weeks later, Kelly made reservations for two friends to join her and Debbie for afternoon tea at The Royal Tea Room. Kelly laughs as she remembers telling her friends how their teatime was going to work, "You're going to eat the food they give you. You're not picking and choosing. You're going to drink the tea and stay off your phone." She thought one of the women, who was always very busy and normally on her phone a lot, was



"going to have heart failure." A few days later, though, that same friend told Kelly how much she had enjoyed that hour of serenity and that she was looking forward to repeating the relaxing experience again soon.

"So for me, it became about the time versus the beverage. It became about creating an environment where people could get together and have that calmness and be out of the everyday hustle and bustle even if just for an hour," explains Kelly, who has since become a Certified Tea Specialist and Tea Sommelier through World Tea Academy. "If I could give somebody that, that became my goal. And that's how I ended up making the decision to do tea versus the focus of a gift shop."



Finding a location for the tearoom ended up being easier than Kelly anticipated. When the longtime owner of a local gift shop learned about her desire to open the tearoom, the shopkeeper offered to vacate the corner unit of the three her business occupied for decades in one of the most prominent buildings in the city, so that Kelly could have that space. She opened The White Heron there in January 2016. “The tearoom started off with a little tiny lobby and a room in the middle of the unit with three tables and 12 seats,” Kelly recalls. She opted for a simple, spa-like décor of teals and whites, which she felt would be more in keeping with the relaxed atmosphere people expect in Florida.

A few months later, when the gift shop owner decided she was ready to retire, Kelly purchased that business and expanded the tearoom’s footprint into those two units to accommodate 32 seats with 8 tables, space she desperately needed to handle the growing demand for bookings. “When I decided to open a tearoom, they all [the city] thought I was crazy, but now they see what a tearoom can do for a community, and they’re so thankful,” she says. “One thing I love about tea is that people will travel to enjoy it. Over 60 percent of the guests that visit us aren’t even from our city.”

The White Heron Tea & Gifts is open Wednesday through Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., with afternoon tea served by reservation at noon and 2:00 p.m. When calling to book a teatime, guests talk with Debbie, Kelly’s mom, who handles reservations and works the gift shop cash register. Dawne McDonald, who started as a part-time dishwasher, now manages the tearoom full-time and makes sure everything runs smoothly. “My staff is amazing,” Kelly beams, as she mentions the remaining team members. “That’s what makes a tearoom successful—you can’t just have great food and great tea. You have to have a great group of people that work in there that can answer questions.”

When patrons of The White Heron arrive for afternoon tea, Kelly or Dawne will greet them and show them to their table. “We give you a tea menu, which we’ve tailored to include a couple of green teas, black teas, and



Tearoom manager Dawne McDonald, right, pours tea for a guest and answers questions about the loose-leaf infusion.

caffeine-free herbals,” Kelly says. Each guest chooses an infusion, which is prepared freshly from loose leaf in a small teapot with a tea cozy on it to keep it warm. “I want people to pick the tea they want, and we have a rule that if someone doesn’t like the tea they chose, we’ll change it,” assures Kelly, who believes that sets the tone for the entire experience. The tea menu changes seasonally to complement the food menu, which is also geared to correspond with the time of year, and she says there are certain items that have proven so popular they will always serve them.

“We always have chicken salad in a petit croissant and a cucumber sandwich,” she explains, noting that the savory tier includes four different sandwiches. The scones, one plain and one flavored according to the season, are served with strawberry jam and Devonshire cream. French macarons imported directly from France are a staple on the dessert tier, as are the made-in-house mini lemon cream pies. Other sweet treats, such as cakes, cream puffs, and éclairs, vary from week to week.

“Most people today use teatime not for what it was traditionally, a little snack between lunch and dinner. They’re using it as a meal,” observes Kelly. “You want it to be something that when they leave, they feel good that they were there.” And she hopes that they, too, will fall in love with afternoon tea just like she did, savoring the time for what it can do to bring calm to their body, mind, and soul.

For more information about The White Heron Tea & Gifts, visit thewhiteheronfl.com. To make a reservation for afternoon tea, call 727-203-3504.