



The Rodin Afternoon Tea at Rosewood London



# Reinventing Afternoon Tea

Afternoon tea is a time-honoured British tradition, but many of London's luxury hotels are introducing new twists to stand out in an increasingly crowded market.

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Mad Hatters Afternoon Tea at Sanderson



Tea-Tox Healthy Afternoon Tea at Brown's Hotel



Prêt-à-Portea at The Berkeley

The eyes of the world have been fixed on the UK this year as another spectacular royal wedding put the British way of life centre stage. The day before the much-anticipated ceremony, the Queen invited the bride-to-be and her mother for afternoon tea – a quintessentially British pastime that has long been a major source of revenue for luxury hotels across the capital.

A traditional afternoon tea generally comprises a selection of dainty sandwiches, scones and cakes presented on a three-tier cake stand, accompanied by a generous pot of freshly brewed tea served in delicate china teacups and saucers. But this tried-and-tested format is now undergoing a rethink at many establishments, which are really pushing the boundaries with their elaborate and creative concepts.

Brown's Hotel in Mayfair, part of Rocco Forte Hotels, has been serving the Tea-Tox Healthy Afternoon Tea in its English Tea Room for some time already, but with new Head Pastry Chef Vincent Josse at the helm, the flavours, techniques and ingredients are constantly evolving. For a traditional French pastry chef, the task is not an easy one. "There is a limit to what you can do, I need to produce something that looks like butter, tastes like sugar and has the consistency of a sponge. It is all anti-French pastry training," he says. But this is where the challenge of innovating comes into play and, together with his team, Josse is always experimenting and testing out new ideas. "The health-conscious movement is not a fad, it will stay and as a luxury hotel we need to curate something good for everybody," he says. With bites such as hummus, rocket and avocado on a beetroot crêpe and matcha raspberry cheesecake on the menu, the Tea-Tox concept is obviously tailor-made for this growing demographic.

Corinthia has gone wholeheartedly down the traditional afternoon tea route meanwhile, by making considerable changes to its Crystal Moon Lounge experience. The team, headed by Managing Director Thomas Kochs, has brought in an antique Champagne trolley, a Steinway piano and a tea sommelier to enhance the overall concept. Furthermore, specially commissioned, handpainted bone china by London-based designer Richard Brandon adds to the immersive experience.

"It touches all your senses, and instills a feeling of luxury when sitting under the magnificent Baccarat chandelier," remarks the hotel's Director of Communications Alice Jonsdottir. While the tea is being brewed and strained at the tea island, an elegant cake and patisserie trolley rolls around showcasing the work of Head Pastry Chef Lois Carbonnet. Rhubarb and strawberry tartlets, Irish coffee éclairs and lemon and rose drizzle cake are just some of the classic combinations on display to tempt guests.

The Rodin Afternoon Tea at Rosewood London, a tribute to celebrated French sculptor Auguste Rodin, raises the bar further still in terms of visual impact. In partnership with the British Museum's exhibition Rodin and the Art of Ancient Greece, Studio Appétit's Ido Garini and Executive Pastry Chef Mark Perkins have created an outstanding multisensory concept. "This is luxury with a modern twist," explains Garini. "It was a conscious choice to create a more fine-dining experience. We have used vitrines as opposed to tiered cake stands for presentation and instead of an overwhelming feast all brought to the table at once we have opted for separate courses." Garini has even created bespoke china in tandem with William Edwards that takes its cue from the geometric architecture of the hotel itself. The sweet finale with three exquisite Rodin-inspired delicacies – the Kiss, the Thinker and the Age of Bronze – certainly leave the visitor hungry for more, which is just as well because the pair have already started work on their next collaboration.

Fashion-conscious tea lovers have been flocking to The Berkeley for years – its Prêt-à-Portea afternoon tea concept has famously brought the likes of Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo to Collins Room. For its latest season, Head Pastry Chef Mourad Khat has drawn inspiration from Dolce & Gabbana, Miu Miu and Tom Ford among others to display sweets reminiscent of the catwalk astutely organised on bespoke Wedgwood fine bone china. "We start with 15 items with all team members contributing to the discussion and taste, and then we end up with nine based on the feedback. We zoom into details, it's not just about getting the colours right," explains Khat. Interestingly, no scones are served; miniature savouries are brought to the table in addition to the sandwiches instead.



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Ido Garini, Studio Appétit

By contrast, at Sanderson in London’s West End, the concept draws inspiration from the Mad Hatter’s tea party memorably portrayed in Lewis Carroll’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. For the new season, Head Chef Barry Tonks and team have collaborated with Laurent-Perrier Cuvée Rosé to celebrate the bubbly’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary; during the collaboration, £1 from every bill is donated to charity mothers2mothers. The playful Mad Hatters Afternoon Tea includes items such as the Pink Floquet Cake, a strawberry flamingo with a white chocolate Laurent-Perrier Cuvée Rosé croquet truffle. With just a few months on the job, Chef Barry is nevertheless determined to make further improvements to the already whimsical tea journey. “I want to bring more fun into it,” he comments. “It should be a bit madder.

We should have a sweets trolley to engage the guests and make it an interactive experience.”

In fact, a number of companies that supply the top hotels are busy developing new products to meet the demands of the booming afternoon tea market. Robert Welch’s Drift Tea Collection, for example, is characterised by fluid wave forms and polished-mirror finishes, echoing the elegance of mid-century silverware. Its centrepiece is a beautiful cake stand featuring removable and interchangeable trays and a sinuous frame specially designed for ease of lifting, turning and carrying. Meanwhile, Villeroy & Boch’s Artesano Tea Crockery collection includes classic crockery made from fine white porcelain and a rustic platter expertly fashioned from acacia wood. And Zieher’s Textura series comprises a variety of platters and trays that can be arranged into multiple layouts and levels; when used alongside the company’s rechargeable LED lights, the visual impact of an afternoon tea display is elevated to a whole new level.

Whether it’s a traditional version filled with pomp and grandeur, a truly inventive option or an indulgent Champagne-infused experience, London is full of innovative afternoon teas. With such intense competition in the marketplace, luxury hotels and their pastry chefs across the capital know only too well that standing still isn’t an option. These days, every guest expects and demands an afternoon tea fit for a queen. ●