

Afternoon Tea in England

Like Cream Tea, Afternoon Tea is a treat. The English habit of drinking tea, it is said, goes back to Catherine de Braganza, a Portuguese princess who married King Charles II (around 1660, when – in contrast to the much more refined affairs of an Afternoon Tea session – Oliver Cromwell’s body was exhumed, post-humously hanged and his head mounted on a spike above Westminster Hall. Prior to this time, there was little water that was safe to drink and so even children often consumed alcoholic beverages. When coffee became fashionable, coffee houses were mostly the reserve of men. The places were deemed too rough for women!). Back then, tea was such a precious commodity that only small portions were available and they were kept in small tea chests with a lock. Usually, the lady of the house was the only person with a key to it, and she would only give a small quantity of tea to the servants when the preparation of tea was required.

It was only in 1840 that 7th Duchess of Bedford, Anna, introduced the concept of Afternoon Tea. Meal times are reported to have been at 8-10 for breakfast, around 12 for lunch and around 8 p.m. for dinner. Some reports claim that only breakfast and dinner were usual. In any case, Anna would feel a hunger pang in the afternoon and needed sustenance. The afternoon meal developed into a social gathering to which you would invite friends. This in turn gave rise to the opportunity to show your wealth, and it was thus that Afternoon Tea developed into quite a feast.

Today, traditional Afternoon Tea is served on a three-tier stand. It usually comprises crustless sandwiches (including the famous cucumber sandwich; luckily, the private chef to the Earl of Sandwich had invented the snack – albeit with a good slice of meat – during a game of poker at around 1750. In the olden days, the crust was cut off because it was thought to contain unhealthy particles, and this very fashion is still continued today when serving Afternoon Tea), scones, strawberry jam and clotted cream (i.e. one section of the tier is reserved for a meal that is called cream tea today if served on its own), and sweet treats.



Afternoon Tea in London

London is the Mekka of Afternoon Tea. There is an abundance of upper-class and luxury hotels in London that offer a gobsmacking feast, usually between 14:00 and 16:30. You will probably have to reserve in advance. Here is a small but fine selection:

The Dorchester Hotel

(53 Park Lane, W1K 1Qa; +44 20 7629 8888)

The Dorchester has been serving Afternoon Tea for more than 80 years, it claims. With this kind of experience at its hand, it does a wonderful job. Expect plush sofas in stunning surroundings, and don't forget to admire the chandelier.



The Savoy

(Address: The Strand – yes, this is a road in London. It’s a rather long stretch of road, but people who go to the Savoy know where it is. What most don’t know is that the name of the road goes back to a time when there was water here. Foreigners should google the post code WC2R 0EU; +44 20 7836 4343)

Afternoon tea is served in the Thames Foyer under a glass dome. (Visitors are accepted. Hold your head high, walk through the main entrance, go straight ahead down the stairs as if this was the most natural thing to do. The lady in the picture on the right will kindly ask you for your name. This gives the hotel a chance to discreetly charge guests directly to their room number without asking for the latter). They have a very nice selection of teas, and just before you leave through the main entrance, you will see a sweets and tea shop inside the hotel on your left. It is well worth a visit.



The Landmark Hotel: The Winter Garden

(222 Marylebone Rd, NW1 6JQ; +44 20 7631 8000)

This is one of those hotels where on looking back you would have loved to arrive in style in a taxi at the hotel as its own drive and the doorman waits to open doors into another world. Sadly, the traffic along Marylebone Rd will drive you insane before most of the daytime. Alternatively, you can take the Bakerloo line to Marylebone Station (It is also a small station with only 6 platforms and the last one to be built since 1899) and comfortably stroll across the road under a canopy should it rain. If it does not rain, it is well worth to walk around the hotel and enter from the opposite side, i.e. from Marylebone Rd. (Google the name if you are unfamiliar with the unexpected pronunciation). The Winter Garden, where Afternoon Tea is served, is mightily impressive, but it is even more breathtaking when you walk through the lower lobby entrance and discover the setting with huge palm trees as you climb up the stairs.

Afternoon Tea is served here on a separate silver-plated stand that is positioned next to your table. This way, it will not be in between you and your dining partner when you discuss the wide choice of excellent tea. The sandwiches cover the classic flavours enhanced to the high standard the kitchen here shows from breakfast to dinner, and the collection of sweets is regularly adapted to give visitors something new every time. Of course you should not order more finger sandwiches than you can eat, but if you accidentally do, you may ask whether you can take them with you. You will not be given a shabby doggy bag but a dainty little carton handbag that will make you walk back to the station most proudly. The hotel has a number of such wonderful tricks up its sleeve !

Since it was originally designed as a hotel for the then Great Western Railway Company and has since 1899 always been a hotel, you may also choose to book a room here. You will be pleasantly surprised by the size of the rooms.



Fortnum & Mason: The Diamond Jubilee Salon

(181 Piccadilly, W1A 1ER; +44 20 7734 8040)

Fortnum & Mason are not exactly a hotel, but because you want to pay Mr. Hilton in their tea department a visit anyway, you may also be interested in Afternoon Tea served in their Diamond Jubilee Salon on the 4th floor. Surprisingly, it's not rated among the top 10 on Tripadvisor (or the top 100, or 200, or 300, or 400 places to have tea). Nonetheless, with 82 different select teas on the menu, this is an interesting place. After all, they have been serving tea since 1707. (Twinings established the first tea parlour on the Strand in 1706).



The Berkeley

(Wilton Place, Knightsbridge, SW1X 7RL; +44 20 7235 6000)

With so many places to offer classy Afternoon Tea, you have to go a long way to beat your competitor hotels. This is why the Berkeley have invented a special Afternoon Tea with a pun: Prêt-à-Portea. Your three-tier stand will come complete with garments, shoes and handbags. Like in fashion, the theme changes every 6 months.





The Ampersand

(10 Harrington Rd, SW7 3ER; +44 20 7591 4414)

At the Ampersand, too, they do special themes that change on a regular basis. Often, you have the choice between classic, vegan or science Afternoon Tea.



One Aldwych

(1 Aldwych, WC2B 4RH; +44 20 7300 0400)

Based on Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the One Aldwych serves an Afternoon Tea with drink-me bottles, candy floss and other mini surprises. Don't forget to order the scrumdiddlyumptious Cocktail Charlie (available both in alcoholic and non-alcoholic versions).



St. James's Hotel

(7-8 Park Place, St. James's, SW1A 1LS; +44 20 7316 1600)

Sadly, the Queen's guards that used to guard the entrance to St. James's Palace – the main royal palace before Buckingham Palace – have retreated. Fortunately, the plush St. James's Hotel is still there and it still serves an imaginative afternoon tea. The theme changes from time to time, but their "It's all in the game" tea appears to be quite popular. The menu includes snakes and ladders, Monopoly top hat, chess board, dice, Scrabble, and Dominoes



Sunborn Yacht Hotel

(Royal Victoria Docks, E16 1AA; +44 20 3714 8111)

Space in London is rare whether it be in hotel rooms or in the street. With so many now unused docks left from colonial days, there is enough room at the Royal Victoria Docks for a luxury yacht hotel with 120 rooms and afternoon tea.



The Sanderson Hotel

(50 Berners Street, W1T 3NG; +44 20 7300 1400)

The prevailing theme at the Sanderson Afternoon Tea is the Mad Hatter tea party from Alice in Wonderland. On your three-tiered stand, you will find drink-me potions, little bugs and worms, the playing card soldiers, and resizing mushrooms for the daring eaters. It even comes with a biscuit watch, but you are advised not to follow the example of the Mad Hatter: Eat your watch, do not dip it into your tea.



Brown's Hotel

(33 Albemarle St, Mayfair, W1S 4BP; +44 20 7493 6020)

Brown's is a much distinguished hotel where staff will unpack your suitcase and a chauffeur will drive you to the airport in one of the hotel's own Rolls-Royces (Yes, they have several – just in case they need more than one). Here, they serve a classic classy Afternoon Tea as well as a healthier option called Tea-tox.



The Mandarin Oriental

(66 Knightsbridge, SW1X 7LA; +44 20 7201 3828)

In the Mandarin Oriental's Rosbery Lounge, the Afternoon Tea hangs on a tea tree. What an original idea ! The Afternoon Tea menu is in parts a little difficult to understand (Chicken shawarma sandwich, confit tuna with piquillo pepper), but in their Rare & Limited Teas section you will find tea from the Tregothnan Estate in Cornwall. This is the only tea estate in England (though surprisingly not the UK!) and it manages to produce only a small quantity. So small, in fact, that often even Fortnum & Mason will not have any. (World tea production: about 3-6 million tons. Tregothnan: 10 tons).



Rubens at the Palace

(39 Buckingham Palace Rd, SW1W 0PS; +44 20 7834 6600)

The Palace in question here is Buckingham Palace, but the insider, who happens to know that the post code for Her Majesty's London residence is SW1W 1AA, readily notices that you should not tell your taxi driver to take you to Buckingham Palace – unless you wish to walk the distance to the Rubens.

The Royal Afternoon Tea is served in the hotel's Palace Lounge, where some seats have view over the entrance to the Queen's Mews. You may spot some horses while you linger over your choice of PMD tea (Taxis are far more likely), and you also have the option of switching to the Vegetarian Royal (Afternoon Tea), the Vegan Royal, the Gluten-free Royal, or the Prince & Princess Royal. Watch out and order carefully: The Times (newspaper) journalist Valentine Low tried out their exclusive "Golden Tip" tea leaves in 2019, served with golden tweezers and weighed manually on golden scales, which he found comes at the royal price of £500 per pot – finger sandwiches, scones and sweets will be charged separately ! (When booking, you should check whether 20% VAT and 12.9% optional service charge are included as there is no mention of this in their menu, and bring your gold credit card).



Stoberry House & Garden

(Stoberry House, Stoberry Park, Wells, Somerset, BA5 3LD)

Stoberry House lies at the end of an impressively long drive-way leading through Stoberry Park. I highly recommend you stay there for a night or two and have Afternoon Tea in the garden. (Well, in one of the three, complete with pond and two duck houses, and with a superb view over the city of Wells). You can also visit for just the Afternoon Tea, but afterwards you will wish you had stayed there. Besides the fact that their excellent scones and cakes are homemade, they also have a very good selection of teas. They have even asked a tea company to produce a signature blend for them, and their house tea is indeed very appealing. On a good day, you will see Glastonbury Tor at the horizon. At the foot of the hill, there is a monastery where King Arthur was (or possibly was or may have been) buried, when most of the flat area was still under water and the Tor on an island. The City of Wells, its Cathedral as well as the Bishop's castle are well worth a visit too.





Afternoon Tea in Wales

Tu Hwnt i'r Bont

(Address: Llanrwst LL26 0PL, North Wales, United Kingdom)

On the west bank of the River Conwy resides the award winning, family run Tu Hwnt i'r Bont (Whatever the pronunciation, it probably translates as "Beyond the Bridge"), which is actually considerably older than the bridge it stands beside. Originally built as a residential dwelling in 1480, it was later used as the courthouse for the surrounding area. From here, the most serious offenders were taken to Tan y Craig in Llanrwst where they would be hanged outside the old gaol! (Llanrwst is not to be mixed up with the 30-mile far away Llanfair. The latter place is more famous for its full name, Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch, but lacks an equally beautiful tea house).

Over the centuries Tu Hwnt i'r Bont has fallen into disrepair several times and has been restored through the generosity of the townsfolk. During the last century, Tu Hwnt i'r Bont was acquired by the National Trust, which have since leased the building for over 50 years.

The decision made by the original leaseholder, over half a century ago, to turn Tu Hwnt i'r Bont into a traditional Welsh Tea Room has proved to be a success. To this day, the recipe for the scones remains true and continues to be a well-kept secret, they say.

Their menu lists a "Full Welsh Afternoon Tea", which includes a pot of tea, a warm scone with fresh cream and jam, a slice of cake, a slice of Bara Brith, wholemeal bread and butter. As it is still on my to-do list, I couldn't possibly comment on the Bara Brith.



