

Lifestyle - Sunday Read

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High time for tea

Brunches are passé. The beverage of sophistication is back and everyone wants to sip into the latest trend

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The latest edition of Guy Ritchie's interpretation of Sherlock Holmes, serves up a delectable slice of early 20th century London.

In one of the significant and richly detailed scenes, Irene Adler walks into a bustling tea house where the deep mahogany brew is poured into fine china, and plates are heaped with colourful macarons and cookies. Perfect setting for the film's criminal mastermind to plan a murder over a leisurely cup of tea.

Thankfully without such evil intent, the city's cognoscenti have rediscovered the pleasures that brew in a tea pot. Unlike the undisputed symbol of the working city - the cutting chai - there is something elegant and decadent about a cup of Darjeeling First Flush or High Mountain Oolong. It also goes perfectly with the chatter about the latest Birkin or Botox.

Three to six is the new witching hour. And from vintage SoBo to the glass and chrome suburban business district, chic restaurant airs are redolent with the aromas of exotic teas and fruit and herbal infusions with accompaniments that seem to come alive from the pages of Enid Blyton.

Eight years in London turned Gauri Devidayal into a tea addict. She cannot do without my cup of black tea in the morning and several cups during the day, says the sassy legal professional-turned-entrepreneur. And like all addicts looking for their fix, she scoured Mumbai for the perfect tea served with the perfect ambience.

For the longest time, the Sea Lounge was the first and often the last port of call for all those looking for a classier alternative to yuppie coffee shops and the strictly-for-the-nostalgic Tea Centre.

With its hard-to-beat location and a sumptuous buffet spread, it is where you still find well-heeled foreign tourists forking through their samosas and roving socialites sharing quick notes about last night's party over sev puri and pastries.

It is where the likes of Deepak Parekh, banking head honcho, host their Christmas brunches too. But Devidayal yearned for more. For me, the perfect tea time was at The Ritz, she says. And I wanted to recreate the environment with The Table.

The Table's elaborate and pretty-as-a-picture tea service is tailor-made for a special occasion. You can choose your tea from a box that offers a small but impressive variety - from Kashmiri Kahwa to

the finest Oolong and a pink Hibiscus infusion. When the tea arrives - in a clear pot and cups - it comes with a three-tier tray stacked with sandwich triangles, scones and chocolate profiteroles.

Not surprisingly, it is a top draw with expatriates and tourists milling that part of the city. On a busy afternoon, you will also find the New York-meets-SoHo restaurant teeming with the town's chic set throwing a quick party.

The tea and the patrons are a shade different at Yauatcha. Inside the stylish black and white 200-seater restaurant, a senior banker and his colleague pore over the menu, discussing the beguiling range of teas, with the tea sommelier.

"We are a dim sum tea house," explains Ajay Berry, when you ask him about how the Michelin star restaurant has positioned itself. Situated in the thick of BKC's corporate hub, yet fiercely inconspicuous, it is not where you will find the ladies who lunch stopping by for a quick rendezvous or the curious tourist furiously clicking pictures of the setting.

The tea menu with its hot, cold, smoothie and mocktail variants is as elaborate as the wine and food menu, the latter dominated by the dim sums. The restaurant encourages you to pair anything you order - three course meals, just dim sums, or macarons - with endless cups of tea.

Besides, you can order a pot of the mysterious Dragon's Well Green Tea or the star from the Tea Hall of Fame - Golden Orange Pekoe Darjeeling, any time of the day or night, says Berry, not just during the afternoon.

At the Trident's Champagne Lounge, a tea trolley with jars of various blends is perhaps a nod to our growing fondness with tea as a beverage of sophistication. With a rarefied view of the city and a scarlet piano to match, it is where you are likely to run into those who make it to the society columns.

And though the choice of teas and accompaniments on offer may seem unremarkable, those in the know will go for a high-tea special: Soft-centered dark chocolate cookies, freshly baked. In fact, the attendants will request you to wait till the cookies firm up a bit on your plate, while you sip your tea, sweetened with organic honey.

"Tea - with its herbal and organic variants - works best for the health conscious," says Sharmilla Khanna, who has hosted several tea-time events this season. "And the timing is just perfect - before the kids and the husbands come home. It also works well for those who want a breezier alternative to a longer lunch-time rendezvous."

One of Khanna's favourite tea stops is Indigo Deli, where the House Blend, Organic Darjeeling, Organic Nilgiri, Organic

Ayurvedic, Chamomile, infusions with flowers and fruits and White Pearl are served with cookies, biscuits and mini sandwiches.

Kitty party hostesses, foreigners and people off work, is how Kersi Mistry, Brand Head of Café By the Beach, describes his target set for the new destination's tea service. And to go with the Rose or the Autumn Tea, the restaurant has a menu that includes muffins and pastries that seem designed to take care of the late-afternoon sweet craving. The sugar also helps to perk up the tired shopper.

Even as the Sea Lounge with its touched-up buffet spread leaves the tea set deeply divided - there are those who now find it stuffy and those who still swear by it - the party could well continue at home.

And to keep the conversation flowing, there is an interesting variety of exotic teas and infusions that you can simply buy off the shelves. In fact, while you were busy shopping, your neighbourhood grocery store has quietly stocked up on Ginseng and Vanilla infusions, clear green and citrus teas, next to the usual red, green and yellow boxes.

But if you are a connoisseur, you may want to deliberate over your blend of choice. At the Chado tea corner in Bombay Store's SoBo outlet, you can not only smell the texture of the leaves and the pods between your fingers, you can taste the tea too. In fact, as the attendant brews the tea, you could read all about the history of the magic leaf and wait for the little tasting cup to arrive.

In case you are wondering about this writer's current fix, it is a perky African blend called Honeybush Orange. Goes well with invigorating conversation.

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