

Royalty-free tea made us feel like queens for a day

One of The Durham News' veteran newshounds learned recently that the Washington Duke Inn serves an elegant afternoon tea. Clearly, there was just one appropriate response: Send in an investigative team. Here are the team members' reports:



Sheri Shuler-Farmer

When my best girlfriend turned 60 this year, we decided to make a list of things we'd like to do some day.

High on the list were a full day at a spa and afternoon tea. I went online to see if Durham had anything to offer along those lines. Well, darlin', Durham does! Who knew?

Tucked in the Fairview Dining Room at the Washington Duke Inn is nirvana. On our designated day it was raining everything except puppies, but the experience was more than worth the soggy clothes and wet shoes.

Our server was very patient in explaining all aspects of "tea." The selection numbered from approximately 12 to 15 different teas. My cohorts and I

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Flo Johnston

The place for pleasant conversation is afternoon tea. It's a safe haven, a place where nobody dredges up political unrest, murder and mayhem or speaks of dreaded diseases.

Tea at the Washington Duke Inn is tailor-made for anyone looking to spend a leisurely afternoon with friends around a beautifully appointed table with one's own pot of tea and a little jar of honey to make it sweet.

The idea of "tea time" is just a romantic notion for most Americans. We tend to think it's something uppity folks in England and Scotland do, a frivolity we working folks simply don't have time for.

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■ Afternoon tea is served in the Fairview Dining Room at the Washington Duke Inn, 3001 Cameron Boulevard, Tuesday through Saturday from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

■ Reservations are required; call (919) 493-4499.

■ The Classic Tea, \$20, is served with tea sandwiches, sweets and fresh scones.

■ The Tea Royale, \$28, comes with everything in the Classic Tea and also includes a glass of French champagne or mimosa.

JOHNSTON

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Personally, I love afternoon tea because beautiful bone china, silver teapots, tasty little sandwiches and sweets whet all my appetites. And for me, good conversation is an addictive drug. Thus the food, in my opinion, is not really the focus of these afternoon soirees; it's the setting, the ambience and the calming effect such a quiet time can have on the spirit.

At the Washington Duke, traditional tea foods — little sandwiches, sweets and scones — are beautifully prepared and elegantly served. The cucumber sandwiches are open faced and the cucumber is sliced so thin you could read a newspaper through it.

My favorite among the sweets was a tiny little cheesecake garnished with a bit of strawberry. The macaroons also were delicious. Then came the basket of warm scones, austere little cakes, both plain and raspberry, accompanied by lemon curd, clotted cream and jam.

As you can see, the menu is not exactly gourmet, reinforcing my notion that these gatherings have a significance that goes far beyond food.

Henry James in his opening words of "The Portrait of a Lady" wrote, "There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea ..."

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FARMER

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made our choices and proceeded to be our usual chatterbox selves. Then the fun began.

We were served our tea and shortly after, the goodies arrived. And I do mean GOODIES! Finger sandwiches, salad cups. Pastries and crème brûlée. Confections, and did I mention the crème brûlée? Lawdamercy,

I'd go back every week just for another spoonful of that.

And it gets better. Scones hot out of the oven, served with crème fraîche, lemon curd and preserves rounded out the experience.

I have since talked about my tea experience to anyone who'll listen. Give it a try, I can promise you'll be talking about it, too.

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No tea unsipped, no scone left unturned during this investigation.

STAFF PHOTO BY SHERI SHULER-FARMER

Why is everything better when the crust is cut off?

I know they were just little open-faced sandwiches, and that the crustless cheesecakes were bite-sized versions of their larger, heavier cousins, and that ultimately I was



Elizabeth Shestak

still in Durham, it was the middle of the afternoon and I still had hours of work to do before the day was over.

But none of that mattered.

The crust was cut off, and so, apparently, was my connection with reality.

There is only one way to describe what it was like to take two hours to have (my first) tea at the Washington Duke Inn: relaxing.

I like the crust on sandwiches, and I don't usually care that much for cheesecake. But strange things happen when you get to eat with your hands, there is classical music playing in the background at just the right volume and you have views of the rolling green hills of the Duke golf course.

When the crust is gone, so are the expectations one places on oneself. The gorgeous environs of the Washington Duke dining room might have been intimidating (at the next table, the women were wearing hats, for Pete's sake).

But I felt right at home, and the warmth of the staff was refreshing. Our smiling server, Krystal Farrington, made sure to tell us at the beginning that she would be there to talk us through the whole thing.

They make it easy for you. The tray of goodies that came with our tea had an orchid blossom as a garnish, and there were three tiers of yumminess arranged in pinwheel fashion so each diner had easy access to her share.

The lavender-infused white chocolate truffles that came in a dark chocolate cup with goldleaf garnish were divine; the turkey and goat cheese on pumpernickel with a petite tomato on top, delicious; the raspberry macaroons, pretty in pink; and the smoked cheddar wedges, nothing short of smoky perfection.

I'm actually not much of a tea drinker, which became obvious as I heisted my companions' single-serving honey jars and then called Krystal in for reinforcements. But no judgments were made about my need for excessive amounts of cream and sugar.

Everything is sweeter when the crust is cut off.

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