



Steeped in Sophistication

Synonymous with refinement and relaxation, tea time in Toronto is more appealing than ever. BY LAURA SABATINI

From its origins in China to its adoption in Europe to its significance in the American Revolutionary War, tea's history has been long and tumultuous; its adventurous journey through time and across continents has left us with all manner of diverse beliefs, customs, and traditions relating to its consumption. In the East, tea is oft cited for its life-sustaining properties, whereas Western societies tend to see it as an accessory of social gatherings.

As a former British colonial outpost, Toronto has of course known a certain type of tea—and the rituals surrounding it—for over a century. But not until fairly recently did any true tea culture spring up here.

Few specialty tea retailers existed in Toronto when Marisha Golla opened her **House of Tea** 16 years ago. “When we first came here,” she says, “there was no tea shop as such, but I knew there was a market for it.” With expertise gained from working in Sri Lanka’s huge tea industry, Golla helped establish a local base for the drink’s emergence by offering a traditional assortment of naturally flavoured blends. Her shop now imports nearly 300 loose-leaf varieties. These days, nearly every neighbourhood in the city boasts at least one emporium—traditional purveyors like Golla’s, or newer, quirkier stores like **Tealish** or **David’s Tea**, which sell standard and unconventional concoctions. And though recipes like David’s festive “birthday cake” rooibos may not be to everyone’s taste, they have helped widen tea’s appeal, particularly amongst younger generations.

Thus infused with a love of the leaf, Torontonians have returned to one of the more specialized ways to indulge in it: that epicurean vestige of the Victorian era, afternoon tea.

Yorkville’s **Windsor Arms Hotel** has had 85 years to

perfect its tea service, and the experience shows. Three beautiful rooms, each dressed in distinct hues, welcome aspirant sippers. Once seated, you’ll be presented with a scrumptious assortment of finger sandwiches, scones and petit fours that complement a lengthy menu of specially blended teas. The **Fairmont Royal York** can claim similar refinement—it’s hosted tea time since 1929—by plating a variety of nibbles that make use of herbs and honey harvested from the hotel’s own rooftop garden. Another regal retreat, the **King Edward Hotel**, offers an intimate tea service in its **Victoria’s Restaurant**, conjuring British tradition with a signature rose petal and jasmine blend.

Of course, where heritage institutions successfully uphold long-held rituals, others seek contemporary reinvention. Café and dessert boutique **Moroco Chocolat** encourages patrons to add “rock’n” chocolate truffles (what else?) to a service that can also include such non-traditional bites as truffled macaroni and cheese. For further decadence, sipping chocolate is offered as a tea substitute. Modern touches also pervade at the **Ritz-Carlton Hotel**, which hosts afternoon tea on its expansive Deq terrace—or chic lounge, when the weather is less than cooperative. Its tea packages come with delicacies served on an architecturally tiered platter, and can be supplemented with a cocktail or glass of champagne.

Regardless of how or where you choose to partake in it, calming, even intellectually stimulating tea time is clearly enjoying a renaissance in Toronto.

“It’s an old tradition, coming back I think because of its relaxing effects,” Golla says. “You can sit down with your family, your friends, your relatives—whomever it is, there are no restrictions. And you get to discover different teas!” **E**

Laura Sabatini is a Toronto-based writer and budding tea aficionado.



Above:
The Windsor Arms Hotel

Inset:
The Fairmont Royal York

THE LIST

David’s Tea
336 Queen St. W., 416-506-0653
plus other locations
davidstea.com

Fairmont Royal York Hotel
100 Front St. W., 416-860-5004
fairmont.com

House of Tea
1015-1017 Yonge St., 416-922-1226
houseoftea.ca

The King Edward Hotel
37 King St. E., 416-863-4125
thekingedwardhotel.com

Moroco Chocolat
99 Yorkville Ave., 416-961-2202
moroco-chocolat.com

Ritz-Carlton Hotel
181 Wellington St. W., 416-585-2500
ritzcarlton.com

Tealish
728 Queen St. W., 416-203-3301
tealish.com

Windsor Arms Hotel
18 St. Thomas St., 416-971-9666
windsorarmshotel.com