

# Ritual combines leisure, friendship

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STAFF WRITER

A close friend invites you to her home "just to talk and have a leisurely afternoon." When you arrive, you notice she has set a beautiful table, prepared a tempting dessert, even chosen the perfect music for your relaxing get-together. "Coffee or tea?" your hostess asks.

But to this inquiry, White Lake Township resident Mary French would probably shiver. For her, the question doesn't merit asking if the host's intention is to treat his or her guests (tea parties aren't just for women anymore) with a day of pampering.

"Having tea is taking time for yourself," said French, who has been collecting tea cups since age 12.

Recently, the antiques collector started putting her tea cups to work by providing others with the luxury of a tea service complete with all the traditional trappings.

At a cost of between \$11 and \$13, French brings the tea, food, linens and all the necessary silver and china serving pieces. After setting up and serving a classic high-tea to guests, she gives a tea-related talk, like the history of tea.

French's business, Ms. Mary's Memories and Tea, allows others, including the party's hostess, a break from the whirlwind of today's chaotic world. And only tea, she said, will do the trick.

Coffee and the rituals that surround it are much different, said Sandra Vetter, one of French's friends and regular tea guests. "It's psychological... with coffee you make it, get up and you're out the door." Taking tea, to describe the act properly, is about taking time out for relaxation, she said, sipping tea from one of French's antique, flowered cups.

The fragile, china cups, demitasse (miniature) spoons and other traditional tea accoutrements, are so dainty and small, French theorized, because the ritual issued from royalty.

Likewise, the *petit fours*

(miniature cakes), finger sandwiches and other foods that traditionally accompany tea were kept small so guests could carry the items on their cup saucers. Historically, guests would stand with their tea, rather than sitting, French said.

The proper handling of a tea cup and saucer was another curious custom about which French shed some light.

The extended "pinkie," she said, probably came about because many tea drinkers, perhaps especially men, couldn't fit all five fingers beneath the small cup handle.

But during Victorian times, how a woman held her tea cup indicated her marital status, French said.

If a woman held the cup above the chest and just below the eyes that meant she was unwed. Married women, on the other hand, had to hold their tea cups just below the waist.

At French's afternoon tea, her guests drank a robust, black tea with finger sandwiches filled with salad spreads and a variety of sweets.

Bread crusts removed, the sandwiches were cut into heart shapes and elegantly displayed on a silver, three-tiered serving tower.

In the center of French's afternoon tea setting, which brought together a mix of colorful china patterns and antique white linens, was a plate of small, butter cookies and a homemade, blackberry cream cake.

Preserving one of the traditions of the tea ritual, French refused to allow her friends to lift a finger, serving all of these delicacies to her guests herself.

"It's about taking time out to be with someone and pampering them," she said. "I've always just loved to fuss over people."

Comfortable seats around the tea table, French's friends agreed that the traditions of tea drinking made for a special afternoon with friends. "People today, don't take time out for visits," Vetter said.

The fine linens, detailed china and sterling silver only add to



STAFF PHOTO BY DAN DEAN

**Taking tea:** Contrasting today's casual get-togethers, the act of taking tea includes allowing one's host or hostess to do the serving. Mary French pours a cup of tea for Linda Dunham. Both reside in White Lake Township.

the romantic feeling of the tea party, she said. "It just makes you feel pretty and special... I think tea tastes better in a china cup."

"A teacup is a good thing to remember something by," French said of her personal collection of about 100 different patterns and styles of tea cups.

But of the gesture and ritual of offering and taking tea, she said, "It's like an art."

For more information about Ms. Mary's Memories and Tea, call (248) 698-2766.

## Faux pas of taking tea

■ While stirring your tea don't clink the sides of the cup with your spoon. Stir slowly and carefully to avoid this.

■ Don't drink from your tea cup without removing your spoon from the cup. After you finish stirring, place the spoon on your saucer alongside the cup.

■ If you are a guest, don't pour tea for yourself or others. It's traditional for your hostess to do the pouring.

■ Never slurp or rapidly consume your tea. Always sip it slowly. Tea is a ritual of leisure.

## Tea's a treat at Townsend

Taking tea at the Townsend is a pastime that has become popular at the hotel in Birmingham.

Hours for tea are 3-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Special parties may be arranged for Sunday. For more information call "Pauline," the tea director, at the hotel (248) 642-7900.

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