

Gentle Joys of Teatime

The Tea Renaissance

It's the backbone of the British Empire, and it has crossed the Atlantic to thrive amid the elegant lobbies and potted palms of this country's finest hotels. It brightens the afternoons of dock workers, office workers, and "the best families" alike. It's steeped in centuries of tradition yet recently has gained new popularity in our hectic world. It's afternoon tea, and in its finest form, it's accompanied by the most tempting array of cakes the hostess or host can manage.

The Story of Tea

Many Americans are finding that tea is an easy, affordable way to entertain and a nice change of pace from dinner, brunch, or cocktail parties. Because the essence of teatime is warmth, formality, and relaxing conversation, it has strong attraction for today's hostess who may prefer not to offer a full meal requiring elaborate last-minute preparations and clean-up.

Although afternoon tea in the U.S. is not so formal as in Britain, it nevertheless requires that the hostess or host serve delectable sweet things with which to tempt guests' appetites. A hostess in Victorian England had a "downstairs" staff to prepare tea cakes, scones, and watercress and cucumber sandwiches, but today's hostess can take advantage of the ready-to-eat cakes.

These baked treats are a delightful addition to any teatime with no embellishment yet versatile enough to serve as the base for some very fancy tea party fare with only a few minutes' preparation time.

Tea and Cakes

The variety of tea flavors ranges from mild and herbal, even decaffeinated, to strong and stimulating. Tea lovers can argue endlessly over the merits of Darjeeling, Ceylon, Jasmine, Earl Grey, English Breakfast, Orange Pekoe, After Dinner Anisette, Spicy Lemon, Chamomile, and more. Suit your own taste!

Here are some tempting tea cakes. The Petits Fours are made from Pound Cake and a variety of frostings. From Vienna, chocolate lovers' paradise, enjoy a Sacher Torte made from Chocolate Cake and yet more chocolate. The New Orleans Cheese Cake starts with a Cream Cheese Cake and turns into a praline fantasy. Next the tea party goes exotic with an elegant Tropical Coffee Cake. And for a light touch, a Lemon Filled Coffee Cake incorporates lemon yogurt in an easy-does-it recipe.

After decades of cocktails, colas, and coffee, Americans are rediscovering the gentle joys of teatime. When the clock points to four in the afternoon, people are drawing close to hearth, family, and friends. Here we can gear down, relax, and enjoy a sip of tea and a taste of goodness.

Pound Cake Petits Fours

- 1 frozen Pound Cake, thawed
- 1/2 cup apricot preserves
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons water

Chocolate Icing

- 1 square (1 oz.) unsweetened chocolate
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 3/4 cup confectioners' sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon vanilla
- 2-2 1/2 tablespoons hot water

Orange Icing

- 3/4 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 1/2-3 tablespoons orange juice concentrate

Cherry Icing

- 3/4 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 tablespoons maraschino cherry juice
- 1/4 teaspoon almond extract

Cut Pound Cake lengthwise into 2 layers. Cut each layer into 12 cubes; set aside. Place cake rack over cookie sheet. Stir together apricot preserves, sugar and water; bring to boil, then simmer for 2 minutes. Pour through sieve into bowl. Place cake cube on fork. Holding over icing, quickly spoon apricot glaze over cake to coat. Using small spatula, push petit four onto cake rack; let stand 30 minutes to dry.

Place another cake rack over another cookie sheet. Ice cake by placing glazed cake on a fork. Holding over icing, spoon desired icing on top and sides of cake, letting excess icing drip back into bowl. Use small spatula to push each petit four onto cake rack. Touch up fork prints. Dry 20-30 minutes. If icing begins to thicken add 1/2-1 teaspoon hot water. Makes 24 petits fours.

Chocolate Icing: Melt chocolate with butter. Beat in confectioners' sugar, vanilla and hot water. Use immediately to ice petits fours.

Orange Icing: Beat orange juice concentrate into confectioners' sugar. Use immediately.

Cherry Icing: Beat cherry juice and almond extract into confectioners' sugar. Use immediately.

Decorating: Garnish with candied red and green cherries, sliced almonds or small pecans.

New Orleans Style Cheese Cake

- 1 frozen French Cheese Cake
- 2/3 cup buttered scotch chips
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 2 tablespoons chopped pecans

Cut frozen Cheese Cake into 6 servings. Heat and stir buttered scotch chips with milk; cool slightly. Spread mixture over frozen cheese cake top. Garnish top with pecans. Thaw at room temperature about 1 1/2 hours. Makes 6 servings.

Tropical Coffee Cake

- 1 frozen Butter Streusel Coffee Cake
- 1/3 cup orange marmalade
- 1/4 cup flaked coconut
- 1/2 teaspoon rum flavoring

Cut frozen Coffee Cake into 6 pieces. For Conventional Oven: heat in preheated 350° F. oven 12-14 minutes if frozen, 10 minutes if thawed. OR For Microwave Oven: remove coffee cake from pan, place on plain side of lid. Heat on high power about 1 1/2 minutes if frozen, about 1 minute if thawed. Stir together marmalade, coconut and rum flavoring. Spoon about 1 tablespoon mixture over each warm coffee cake piece. Makes 6 servings.

Quick Sacher Torte

- 1 frozen Chocolate Cake (single layer)
- 1/3 cup apricot OR raspberry preserves OR orange marmalade
- 3/4 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 squares (2 oz.) unsweetened chocolate, melted, cooled
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted
- 2-2 1/2 tablespoons milk
- Whipped cream, optional

Cut frozen Chocolate Cake lengthwise into 2 layers. Place top layer, frosting up, on serving plate; spread on preserves. Top with remaining cake, bottom up. Make frosting by beating together confectioners' sugar, melted chocolate, butter and milk until smooth. Frost cake top and sides. Serve with whipped cream, if desired. Makes 6-8 servings.

Lemon Filled Coffee Cake

- 1 frozen Pecan Coffee Cake
- 1/3 cup lemon yogurt OR 1/2 cup (5-oz. can) vanilla pudding

Cut frozen Coffee Cake lengthwise into 2 layers. Spread yogurt on bottom layer. Replace cake top. Cut into 6 pieces. For Conventional Oven: heat in preheated 350° F. oven 15 minutes if frozen, about 11 minutes if thawed. OR For Microwave Oven: place on plain side of lid. Heat on high power about 1 1/2 minutes if frozen, about 1 minute if thawed. Makes 6 servings.

Tea Etiquette

Americans are often puzzled by the formalities of tea. High tea is a substantial meal and a dinner substitute for those attending a concert or play. It is served to children after school and to adults between five and six-thirty in the evening and can include eggs, sausage, meat or cheese sandwiches, fresh strawberries with rich Devonshire cream, and an assortment of pastries. Afternoon tea is simpler but choreographed just as carefully.

The proper hour for serving afternoon tea is four o'clock, and how it is prepared and what accompanies it are the difference between making a cup of tea and having tea.

The tea pot is pre-warmed with hot water which is emptied into the "slop" bowl. Next, the hostess puts tea into the pot. The measure is about one rounded teaspoonful of loose tea per cup. The tea is barely covered by boiling water, then allowed to steep for about five minutes. More hot water is added, and now the tea is ready to be poured to the guest's taste. ("Strong, please, with just a bit of sugar and lemon," or "Weak, please, with two lumps of sugar and a dash of cream.")

Sweets and "dainties" are passed around to guests on a plate or a "cruise," a three-level serving plate with a handle at the top. It's all very proper, based on a code of etiquette that has evolved over centuries.



Gentle joys of teatime recipes pictured (clockwise): pound cake petits fours, New Orleans style cheese cake, and quick sacher torte.