

London Life

Afternoon tea at the Ritz

Anna: Hello, I'm Anna Jones and this is London Life. And in today's programme we're looking at a very English custom. What do you think this woman is describing?

I think the whole art of tea-taking is a very elegant and a very English thing to do. This whole ambience of tea-taking makes you be elegant.

Anna: Well that was Gerrie Pitt who is the director of press and public relations at the Ritz hotel in central London. And she's describing the very English custom of having tea or "tea-taking." The Ritz hotel is one of the most famous hotels in London and this year is celebrating its centenary – it opened 100 years ago in 1906 –its centenary. The Ritz is especially well known for its wonderful teas but taking tea at the Ritz is not an everyday event – it's usually reserved for a special occasion like a birthday or anniversary. Tea is served in the beautiful surroundings of the Palm Court – displays of flowers and palms add to the experience of "tea-taking." Gerrie says that the "whole ambience" of tea taking – the whole character or quality of the Ritz – makes you feel "elegant - it makes you feel attractive and you behave in a very graceful way. And it's not just a cup of tea either – it's almost like having a 3 course meal. Listen to Gerrie as she describes the food served with a pot of tea. What do you eat with tea at the Ritz?

The actual food items on the tea menu come on a three-tiered cake stand. The bottom being the finger sandwiches – very traditional – and the waiter will explain what the fillings are. Then we do our scones in the middle and we do our cakes and pastries on the top. It's done almost like courses.

Anna: Well we hear that the food arrives on a “three-tiered cake stand.- there are three levels, one on top of each other and on each level there’s a plate for holding the food. And what food is there? Gerrie tells us that there are finger sandwiches – these are small sandwiches filled with a variety of different things. She describes this kind of sandwich as “very traditional” – if something is described as traditional then it has been going on in the same way for a very long time – so finger sandwiches have been a part of the traditional English afternoon tea for a long time. In the middle of the tier there are scones which are small round cakes which are often eaten with jam and cream which is known as a cream tea. And finally, at the top of the tier there are various cakes and sweet pastries. Gerrie says that tea is its almost done like “courses” - a part of a meal which is served separately from the other parts of it.

Anna: Now what about making the tea? How do you make a proper cup of English tea? What does Gerrie say is the most important thing about making a cup of tea? Have a listen. _

The crucial things about tea-making and tea-taking is that the water should always be absolutely piping hot and it has to be on the boil and boiling and then you let the leaves stew. And we don’t put milk in first simply because we feel that it’s up to the guest to decide how strong or weak they would like their tea.

Anna: According to Gerrie the most “crucial” thing about tea making – the most important thing - is to make sure that the water is “piping” hot – it is very hot and has just boiled. Then after pouring the water onto the tea leaves you let the leaves “stew” or absorb the water to make the tea. If you hear someone talking about “stewed tea” they are describing tea that has been left too long in the tea pot before being poured and tastes strong and bitter. What about the milk – what is the tea making etiquette – what are the rules or socially accepted way

of adding the milk? Does it go in to the cup before the tea is poured or afterwards? Listen again. Well at the Ritz the etiquette – or the accepted way – is to add the milk afterwards so that the guest can decide how strong or weak they would like their tea. Well as we mentioned earlier the Ritz is a very famous London hotel – so famous in fact that its name now appears in the dictionary as an adjective. What do you think it means? Here's Gerrie. _

Even the name The Ritz has become generic in the dictionary. People talk about things being “ritzy” and even if something is not very ritzy or something is very ritzy and that all comes from the name.

Anna: If something is described as “ritzy” it is expensive and fashionable – for example you might describe someone's dress or car as ritzy. Well its 4 o'clock now so it must be time for a cup of tea.