

Times and the tea can be special, or simply a luxe break

►TEA

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pour his or her own tea.

Tea tends to bring out the best in a venue. Smooth, unobtrusive service is a hallmark of the Bristol Lounge in the Four Seasons Hotel, where diners can opt for window tables or cushy couches (as opposed to the delicate settees at the Taj). Even the food is a tad more casual: tiny banana bread in lieu of a second scone, chicken salad instead of lobster salad. But, like the Taj, the Bristol Lounge is a popular place to mark a special occasion. We saw many a plate with "Happy Birthday" scrawled in chocolate.

Tea drinkers look out through huge windows — all the better to appreciate the views of the Public Garden when the sun shines, or to feel snug and warm as pedestrians bustle down Boylston Street bundled up against wind and rain. We think of the tea ritual as sweet consolation for having to move indoors now that the weather has chilled.

At the other end of Boylston Street, adjacent to the Mandarin Oriental, a street-level elevator whisked us above it all to the posh confines of L'Espalier. Tea service here begins with a whimsical surprise. (Spoiler alert.) After a server fills balloon glasses with boiling water, tea sommelier Cynthia Gold presents each diner with a tightly rolled little ball of dried flowers — lavender, jasmine, and amaranth, in our case — encased in green tea leaves. "It's like an amuse-bouche for afternoon tea," she told us. We dropped the balls into the glasses and waited patiently as they swelled and unfolded into lovely underwater gardens.

Gold has also developed some special tea blends for L'Espalier. A former chef, she says blending tea is like creating any recipe. "Once you become comfortable with the flavors, you just play and adjust."

The signature L'Espalier Afternoon Blend is an elegant tea with soft tannins and a lingering, complex bouquet. It com-



KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Robyn Yee, above left, and Courtney Oesterling at the Four Seasons; Mitsuko Yoshizumi, left, and daughter Ryoko Allen at the Courtyard Restaurant; blooming tea at L'Espalier.



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

bines Darjeeling with three Sri Lankan estate teas, two Chinese green teas, jasmine, oil of bergamot, and grapefruit peel. It's a far cry from a Tetley bag dunked in a mug. "I wanted to create a general afternoon blend that would be only lightly

scented and would pair well with a variety of foods," Gold said. Among those foods are the airy and delicate scones served with scant portions of strawberry preserves, crème fraîche, and honey.

Alas, these three restaurants

mostly reserve tea for weekends (the Taj also serves on Friday), supplying a pleasant dalliance for tea-sippers not wed to televised football. But the calming and restorative effects of the civilized hour might be even more welcome during the

If you go . . .

Reservations are strongly recommended.

Taj Boston

15 Arlington St.

617-536-5700

www.tajhotels.com

Afternoon tea Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, \$30-\$38.

Bristol Lounge

Four Seasons Hotel

200 Boylston St.

617-351-2053

www.fourseasons.com

Afternoon tea Saturday and Sunday, \$32-\$40.

L'Espalier

774 Boylston St.

617-262-3023

www.lespalier.com

Afternoon tea Saturday and Sunday, \$27-\$36.

Courtyard Restaurant

Boston Public Library

700 Boylston St.

617-859-2251

www.thecateredaffair.com

Afternoon tea Wednesday-Friday, \$22.50.

Rowes Wharf Sea Grille

Boston Harbor Hotel

Rowes Wharf

617-439-7000

www.bhh.com

Afternoon tea daily, \$30-\$39.

Holiday tea Nov. 30-Dec. 31, \$49.

workweek. Fortunately, there are good options, including the Courtyard Restaurant at the Boston Public Library. The high arched ceilings, marble floors, bright windows, and large-format photographs of the library's architectural details recall the BPL's nickname as "the People's Palace." It delivers democratized elegance to the city's best-value afternoon tea, served Wednesday through Friday.

For harried workers playing afternoon hooky on a weekday, there's no anxiety over making choices. "You don't have to worry about anything," server Linda Moy joked. "Just select your

tea." On the day we visited, there were five tea sandwich choices on the plate, including a surprising crumbled bacon and tomato. They were, of course, crustless. It was enough to warrant a pinkie salute.

Ryoko Allen and her mother, Mitsuko Yoshizumi, who was visiting from Japan, sat in big plush chairs at the window overlooking the library's courtyard. "It's our first time here," Allen said. "It is spectacular! We have tea rooms at home, but this fancy style is not so common."

Afternoon tea is a great way to show Boston at its best to visiting friends and relatives. At the Rowes Wharf Sea Grille in the Boston Harbor Hotel, Grace Ramos, 6, was enjoying tea with her mother, Anna Ramos, and her grandmother Mary Karchem, who was visiting from California. "We're having a girls' afternoon," said Anna. It was Grace's second tea, but, we suspect, not her last.

The Sea Grille serves afternoon tea every day. The hotel's all-day restaurant makes for a more casual setting than some other teas, but it does have great views of the harbor and rose petals scattered on the tables set for tea lend a slightly decadent touch. The "Delights" tray is also unusually generous in its portions, adding several tea breads to the scones course and including a Boston cream profiterole to give the pastries a local touch. Server Zachary Dillahunty told us that the restaurant frequently serves tea for special occasions. "We recently did a bridal shower tea for 56," he said.

By the way, there's a bar at the lobby end of the Sea Grille, complete with a large-screen television. If you need a little Brady, Welker, and Gronkowski to go with the Earl Grey, scones, and clotted cream, the set is usually tuned to sports.

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