

DINING REVIEW:

AFTERNOON TEA ON QUEEN MARY 2

by

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Afternoon tea on Cunard Line's Queen Mary 2 is a unique dining experience. Several cruise lines including Holland America Line, Celebrity Cruises, P&O Cruises, and surprising to some, Carnival Cruise Lines, have very nice afternoon teas. However, there is something special about experiencing afternoon tea on a traditional British passenger line, on a unique and already historic ocean liner, in a magnificent setting; particularly on a transatlantic crossing.

A British Tradition

At its most basic level, afternoon tea can be described as a mid-afternoon meal during which a server offers sandwiches, muffins and cakes to accompany the drinking of cups of tea. However, afternoon tea is more than a culinary event. It has its own etiquette, traditions and romantic associations. It evokes images of cultured and civilized behavior.

Although people have been drinking tea in

China since before recorded history and elaborate tea ceremonies have existed in Asia since ancient times, afternoon tea on Queen Mary 2 is distinctly British in origin.

Tea first appeared in England during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell as a medicine. But it did not become popular until after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. King Charles II married a Portuguese princess, Catherine of Braganza, whose dowry included a chest of tea from Portugal's colony in India. This tea was meant to be drunk for pleasure, which, of course, suited Catherine's new husband who history remembers as Britain's "Merry Monarch." Just as modern royal weddings trigger fashion crazes, Catherine's new beverage quickly became popular with the British public, rich and poor. Indeed, reformers bemoaned the fact that working people spent a disproportionate amount of their incomes on this frivolity.

The British passion for tea persisted after the reign of Charles II and it became the nation's beverage



Afternoon tea in the Queens Room

of choice. But it was not until early Victorian times that afternoon tea came into vogue. Indeed, Queen Victoria's friend Anna Maria Russell, Duchess of Bedford, is usually credited with inventing it. In those days, people usually only had two meals a day: a large breakfast at mid-morning and an even larger dinner in the evening. Moreover, in the upper classes, dinner was becoming later and later. The Duchess found that she felt fatigued at around four in the afternoon and decided that a repast of sandwiches, muffins and cakes along with a pot of tea was just the thing to carry her over to dinner. She soon began inviting her friends to join her and inasmuch as the aristocracy were the trend setters of the day, the idea spread throughout the British Empire.

Afternoon tea remained a daily part of British life into the 20th Century. Images of fashionably-dressed Edwardians meeting for tea at the London Ritz and young aristocrats having tea in stately country houses during the "Long Weekend" between the two world wars have been romanticized in movies and novels. Today's busy lifestyle, however, has pretty much relegated afternoon tea to special occasions.

One place where afternoon tea has remained a daily part of life is Cunard Line. Founded in 1840, Cunard honors both its traditions and its British heritage. Even after the end of the ocean liner era in the 1960s, afternoon tea was a daily feature on Queen Elizabeth 2 throughout the remainder of the 20th Century. That tradition has now been passed on to Queen Mary 2, the only ship still making regularly

scheduled transatlantic crossings.

Occasionally one hears a passenger on QM2 refer to the afternoon tea as a "high tea" -- the assumption being that an upper-class style tea must be "high" in the same way that the rich in America used to be called "high society." The Duchess of Bedford and her friends, however, would never have had a high tea. High tea refers to a meal, usually eaten around six in the evening by farmers and working class families. It would include such things as eggs, kippers, ham shepherd's pie, and was a very substantial meal. As we shall see, it bears no resemblance to the afternoon teas on QM2.

In fact, the teas on QM2 would be properly described as a "low tea." The designations "high" and "low" are derived from the type of table used for each type of tea. High tea was eaten at the dinner table while a low tea was eaten at a drawing room table, which is lower in height than a dinner table.

Tea In The Queens Room

The place to have afternoon tea on Queen Mary 2 is the Queens Room. Yes, one can have tea in the King's Court buffet and weather permitting on the open decks and passengers traveling in the suites can have it in the Queens Grill Lounge but in all these other locations, afternoon tea is just a meal, not an experience.

The Queens Room sets afternoon tea on Queen

Mary 2 apart from afternoon tea on all other ships. It is the largest ballroom at sea. Two decks high, the room spans the width of this extra-wide ship. Beyond its size, the room is elegantly designed with tables surrounding the dance floor and a raised tier of tables running around three sides. Tall windows on either side let in natural light. Statues and portraits of British monarchs or their consorts are tastefully blended into the décor. It is a grand room but not overpowering. It is sophisticated yet comfortable and welcoming.

There are entrances to the Queens Room on both the port and starboard sides. The doors open at 3:30 but it is wise to arrive early as this is a very popular activity. On cruises where there are port days, it is usually less crowded on port days

Do not come to afternoon tea thinking that it will be just a light snack. Waiters will tempt you with tray after tray of tasty items. They look small and innocent and only those with the firmest resolve are able to resist the invitation to have another. Keep in mind that when the Duchess of Bedford invented this repast, people did not eat lunch. Thus, if you are planning on going to afternoon tea, it is best to dine lightly at lunch or skip it altogether.

When the doors open, the guests enter and seat themselves. The tables at the forward end of the room are nearer to the galley from which the waiters emerge with their trays. The tables next to the dance floor are closer to the entertainment, which depending on the day may be a string quartet or a pianist.

The tables are small cocktail tables and are set with white Wedgwood china for four people. Again, this is a popular activity and it is a social occasion so other passengers may ask to join you if there is an empty space at the table.

People dress casually. There is a complete absence of tea gowns and blazers with ties.

The waiters, on the other hand, are dressed impeccably down to their white gloves. In the Queens Room, the staff of the Britannia Restaurant handles the afternoon tea. Although the Britannia is the ship's main dining room, it has some of the best waiters aboard because a server needs considerable skill in order to handle the rigors associated with two seatings for dinner each night. In any event, the same contingent of waiters normally handles the afternoon teas throughout a voyage with another contingent rotating in for the next voyage.

The waiters are assigned to a section of the room rather than to a specific table. Thus, during the course of afternoon tea you will be served by several different waiters. Each specializes in a particular item (e.g. sandwiches) but they are usually happy to carry a message to their appropriate colleague if you are craving another

item (e.g. cakes).

The first waiter to approach will be the one carrying a large pot of tea. He or she will ask whether you would like to have tea and if you limit your answer to "yes", he or she will pour a cup of tea from the pot. Cunard has a relationship with Twinings and the default tea is a special blend of Assam, Ceylon and Kenyan teas called "Traditional Afternoon". One can, however, ask for another type of tea. The cards placed on each table list Darjeeling and Earl Grey teas as alternatives but peppermint tea, green tea and various herbal blends are also usually available. If you request one of the alternative teas, you will receive your own personal pot of tea but, of course, it will take time to prepare it.

Proper etiquette calls for the guest to served sandwiches before any sweets. Knowing this, the waiters with the trays of scones and the trays of cakes will generally wait until their colleague with the sandwiches has visited the table. However, if you indicate that you are willing to go out of order, the servers will accommodate you.

The sandwiches served are traditional tea sandwiches - - dainty, narrow strips of crustless white or brown bread with a filling in between. These are not meant to be a main course but rather a light, opening round that leaves space for the heavier items to come. QM2 offers most of the traditional varieties including egg, tomato, ham and the quintessential tea sandwich, cucumber. Disappointingly absent from the selection on a recent voyage was the delightful smoked salmon of years past.

Next is my favorite course. The scones on QM2 are excellent. They are freshly baked and neither overcooked nor undercooked. They are not too moist but not at all dry. Most importantly, they are served with a dollop of cream and strawberry preserves on a separate plate. You then slice the scone horizontally and add the amount of cream and preserves to each half that suits your taste.

The final course is the tray of cakes and pastries. The selection differs somewhat from day-to-day but includes such things as slices of fruit cake, chocolate cake, banana cake, profiteroles, eclairs and fruit tarts.

Afternoon tea does not end with the serving of the final course. Waiters continue to appear with their trays and silver serving tongs asking whether you would care for seconds, thirds and even fourths. Additional pots of tea are also presented. Meanwhile, the string quartet continues to play and the conversation flows. When you look around, you are reminded of the magnificence of the setting - - a grand room on a historic ship - - and you realize that you are part of it as well.