

Infini-tea and beyond

Homemade food served with flair in Antioch

By Diana Kuyper

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ANTIOCH — Infini-tea, a tea room that features much more than tea, just celebrated its first year in business, at 902 Main St. Owner Lorrie Ferguson, a long-time tea lover, wanted to create a comfortable restaurant that offered homemade food served with flair. “I wanted to create the atmosphere where at any time of the day a customer could come in alone and sit at a table, relax, enjoy a cup of tea and read a book or come in with a friend and enjoy relaxing conversation.”

For years, even while she worked at Abbott as a sales representative before retiring in 2003, Ferguson was collecting furniture, china and flatware for her future tea room, which has blossomed into a gourmet restaurant with a staff of 14. Joann Bates is chief chef. She collaborates with Ferguson on all of the dishes that have evolved on the menu over the past year. “Each dish is a work of art,” said Ferguson.

Ferguson, 56, and her partner Kenelm Scheske, both active in PM&L Theater where they first met, have lived in the area for many years. When she decided to open Infini-tea, she searched far and wide for a location, but ended up in her hometown of 25 years. “In larger towns I felt like this place would have gone unnoticed. It would have been swallowed up. Antioch is unique because it has charm and a hometown atmosphere. I picked the right place for this kind of business.”

“Today’s pace is just too hectic, so my philosophy about Infini-tea is leave the fast pace outside and come in and relax, enjoy the company of others or just enjoy a little peace and quiet for yourself,” said Ferguson.

Customer Debbie Rose, enjoying mid-afternoon tea and a salad, said she comes to Infini-tea at least once a week to relax and enjoy her favorite tea, Earl Grey White Tip. “I would be in here every day if I could,” said Rose. “I wouldn’t keep coming here if I didn’t love it.”

Rose said she and a group of about 15 local women would travel to Long Grove for tea at least once a year. “Now we don’t have to go to Long Grove, we can just stay in Antioch.”

Ferguson, with the help of Scheske and her daughter, Leah Haling, emphasize high quality food and service. Although she had patterned her shop after successful tea rooms, her restaurant is much more than a tea room, even though she offers more than 40 varieties of teas, including herbal teas. Her menu describes each tea in detail and she has labeled jars at the front of the shop where customers are encouraged to open the jars and enjoy the fragrance of the different teas.

Some of her more exotic-sounding teas are African Skies, Belgian Chocolate, Irish Cream, Kyoto Cherry Rose, Lavenderberry, Precious Eyebrows and Moon over Madagascar. She also serves the traditional favorites, including Darjeeling, Earl Grey, Formosa Oolong, Grand Keemun, Jasmine and Lapsang Souchong.

The menu explains the different types of teas, which all come from the same basic plant, the Camelia Senensis plant. “The difference in teas comes from geography, growing conditions and processing.” She said there are more than 3,000 varieties, making tea the most consumed beverage in the world after water.



MICHAEL SCHMIDT / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Lorrie Ferguson, owner of Infini-tea in Antioch, visits with Jane Snyder of Deerfield (left), Delainy Grube, 9, of Barrington and Chloe Deasy of Highland Park during their lunch.

Tea can be divided into five basic categories — black, green, oolong, white and puerh. The difference is in the processing. Herbals or Tisanes are drinks made from other plants and herbs, such as peppermint, so they are not technically teas.

The restaurant is open for breakfast six days a week and Sunday brunch. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Saturdays closing is at 5 p.m. and on Thursdays and Fridays dinner is served until 8:30 p.m. Sunday brunch is offered from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Tea is served anytime, and can be ordered as simply a pot of tea, or afternoon tea served with tea cakes, scones and savories or the “Royal Treatment” is tea served with soup, scones, finger sandwiches and pastries. Children may choose the “Royal Child” option that includes hot chocolate or a smoothie instead of tea, and fruit, peanut butter and jelly tea sandwiches and dessert.

Attention to details

No matter how elaborate the tea ordered, it is always served the same way.

The water to prepare the tea is kept at a constant 208 degrees, with a separate pot kept at a constant 180 degrees for herbal teas. “Boiling water makes the tea taste flat,” explained Ferguson. The loose tea (one teaspoon per cup) is placed in the strainer which is placed over the teapot. The hot water is poured over the leaves and is allowed to seep for four minutes. Each customer has his or her own timer, and when the timer goes off, the server returns to the table and pours the tea, which is served with sugar and cream. Iced tea is made by pouring the strained mixture into an ice filled glass. “We serve with flair and finesse,” said Ferguson. “We want our customers to feel like they’ve been to a spa, so we pamper them.”

In England, traditionally the leaves are placed directly into the pot and the hot water is poured over them. The strainer is placed over the cup and the tea poured through the strainer, while the leaves are allowed to continue to seep in the pot. That is why a separate pot of hot water is served with the pot of tea, to dilute the strong brew that is remaining in the original pot. “I don’t like to serve it that way, because the subsequent cups of tea take on a bitter taste,” said Ferguson.

Earlier this year she traveled to England and checked out a few tea rooms, ending up at The Ritz. She likes her way of serving tea better. “Visiting the tea rooms in England just confirmed that I prefer my way of serving tea,” said Ferguson.

After researching the history of tea, she found that the origin of low tea dates back to Queen Victoria’s lady in waiting Anna, Duchess of Bedford. “She found that she needed some refreshment between a light lunch and late dinner, so she started entertaining her friends in the afternoon by serving tea in her parlor on a low table. That’s where the term low tea comes from.”

High tea had nothing to do with high class, she said. “High tea was a poor man’s dinner. It was tea served with heavier foods.”

Whether in Antioch or England, scones, less sweet than muffins or other sugary rolls, are a traditional accompaniment to tea. At Infini-tea Scheske is the master scone maker. According to Ferguson, his secret recipe for currant and orange scones dates back to his ancestors, Kenelm and Edward Winslow, who came over on the Mayflower. It is reported that Edward was the first elected governor of the Colonies. Scheske’s grandmother was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. “So there is quite a history behind our scones,” said Ferguson. The scones are always served with imported clotted cream and lemon curd or a fruit preserve.

Continuing the tea theme

The shop also serves specialty and regular coffees, hot chocolate, juices and fruit smoothies, but based on the eclectic decor with a tea room ambience, Ferguson’s love of all things tea-related is obvious. All of the entrees on the dinner menu are prepared with tea, said Ferguson.

Specialties of the house include Beef Wellington, a filet of beef seared and topped with mushroom duxelles made with Earl Grey White Tip Tea and enclosed in a flaky pastry.

Garlic-rubbed lamb chops are prepared with peppermint tea and served with mint jelly, chicken pot pie is baked with China White Spring Blossom Tea and Shrimp Dejonghe is seasoned with Darjeeling Tea.

The menu includes beef, pork, poultry, duck, and seafood. The lunch menu includes quiche, salads, sandwiches and soups. "We are usually packed at lunch time," said Ferguson.

The breakfast specialty is strata, which is a baked egg and bread casserole. "All of our entrees are baked, never fried. There isn't a fried food that comes out of my kitchen," said Ferguson.

The restaurant's 14 tables can seat up to 50 in a pinch, such as a special event, shower or party, but normally she seats up to 42 customers during regular hours.

"I think about expanding to a second location in the future, perhaps even turning Infini-tea into a franchise, but I will always be hands on with the business, and right now I am happy in Antioch," said Ferguson.

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