

Cream of the teatime crop offers the real, clotted deal

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When it comes to afternoon tea, the general public tends to bandy about terms rather freely.

The first and most abused among them is "high tea." This term does not refer to formal afternoon affairs with finger sandwiches, scones and sweets. "High tea" is a working man's supper in England.

"High tea refers to something like baked beans on toast or a shepherd's pie of hamburger meat and mashed potatoes," says Caroline Cracraft, the recently retired vice consul for public affairs at the Midwest's British Consulate in Chicago. "And it's all eaten with a good strong tea."

Then there's clotted cream. Often listed on afternoon tea menus, it is not always served. Real clotted cream is pale yellow and butter-like. Although it can become fluffy-ish when whipped, it always remains thick and spreadable rather than just creamy. It is not sour cream, it is not whipping cream, it is not cream cheese and it would certainly never collapse into a puddle the way canned whipped cream does when you squirt it on a warm scone (which rhymes with "spawn," by the way).

"Some people tell me that they make clotted cream at home with sugar and sour cream," says Unity MacLean, owner of Britishsupplies.com, an importer of clotted cream in Plymouth, Mass. "I don't know what that is, but it sounds ghastly--and it is not clotted cream."

No, real clotted cream (or the less rich but still delicious double Devonshire cream) is sturdier stuff, boasting at least 50 percent butterfat and ideally derived from the udders of grass-fed cows living in the English counties of Devon or Cornwall. Most important to know, though, is that when this rich, creamy delight is paired with dollops of strawberry jam on a split, warm scone, it rivals the finest culinary combos in the world.

We recently went for afternoon tea at a couple Chicago institutions that said they served real clotted cream. What we learned is that your server doesn't always know the difference. Call and ask the food and beverage manager or the chef to be sure. Why go through this trouble? Because there is a big, luxurious difference between clotted and (40ish percent fat) Devonshire cream. While Devonshire's flavors are clean, creamy and lovely enough, the clotted cream offers a gentle, nutty sweetness with a decadent buttery finish. And when you're slapping down double digits for tea and snacks, you might as well get the real thing.

Here's what we found:

Lobby, The Peninsula Chicago, 108 E. Superior St., 312-573-6760: In the Lobby of this grand hotel, gracious servers led us over the cushy carpet to our table in the elegant room filled with hushed chatter and the soothing sounds of live chamber music. The only dissonant note was when we announced we were there for afternoon tea and our host piped back, "So you're here for high tea?"

Still, it's hard to get too uptight in this plush room at twilight when you are sipping lovely fragrant assam tea accompanied by finger sandwiches, fancy sweets and--the pieces de resistances--warm buttery scones topped with luxurious clotted cream and strawberry jam. Servers will not just

bring you more of this ambrosial trio, complimentary, upon request, they'll actually offer to do so--and it's hard to resist.

As far as the Devonshire versus clotted debate goes: The menu says Devonshire, but our server insisted it was clotted. We think he was right. In fact, this yellow, fluffy cream was so decadent that my dining companion actually referred to it as butter. Afternoon tea: \$28. Served Monday through Saturday at 2:30 and 4:30 p.m. seatings, and from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. on Sunday.

The Greenhouse at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago, 160 E. Pearson St., 312-573-5154: If you don't make a reservation for tea here and simply arrive after 4 p.m. as we did, you may have to forgo the complete tea service and just get tea with scones and condiments. And that's just fine. With its big windows overlooking the city and a toy train circling a large Christmas tree, this lobby lounge offers festive views and decent tea snacks. Our pots of tea with scones, cream, jam and curd were plenty of food for what is traditionally supposed to be a pre-dinner tide-me-over.

Although our server insisted that we were getting clotted cream, this light, white, smooth stuff recalled heavy whipping cream or Devonshire in a stretch. And, in fact, the menu does call it Devonshire. Tea here--which, as a full service, would also include tea, pastries and finger sandwiches--costs \$27 and is served at reserved seatings from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.

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To tea or not to tea

Here are some options for afternoon teas. Especially during the holidays, reservations are strongly recommended.

DOWNTOWN SPOTS

American Girl Place, 111 E. Chicago Ave.; 877-247-5223: Tea costs \$17 per person and includes tea breads, finger sandwiches, sweets and gingerbread scones matched with jam, not cream.

Atwood Cafe, 1 W. Washington St.; 312-368-1900: Through December this elegant restaurant in the Hotel Burnham will be serving afternoon tea from 2 to 4 p.m. for \$15-\$22. Service includes a pot of tea, finger sandwiches, sweets, scones and clotted cream.

Four Seasons, 120 E. Delaware Place; 312-280-8800: Afternoon tea is served in the lounge and conservatory from 3 to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The \$25 tea service includes a pot of tea, finger sandwiches, tea bread, French pastries, scones, Devonshire cream, preserves and lemon curd.

Hotel InterContinental, 505 N. Michigan Ave.; 312-944-4100: Afternoon tea is served in the hotel's "Living Room" or above the foyer from 2 to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Through the month of December it will be served only by reservation. Afternoon tea includes a pot of tea, pastries, finger sandwiches, scones and Devonshire cream for \$17.95.

The Palm Court at the Drake Hotel, 140 E. Walton St.; 312-787-2200: Holiday tea service costs \$29 and is served at 11 a.m., 1:15 and 3 p.m. seatings daily through December. Tea service includes tea, finger sandwiches, scones, served with whipped cream and double Devon cream and jam for \$29.

Russian Tea Time, 77 E. Adams St.; 312-360-0000: This Russian restaurant in the Loop offers afternoon tea at 2:30 and 4:30 p.m. daily for \$21.95 per person. Afternoon tea includes a pot of tea, mini sweets, tea sandwiches and scones with Devonshire cream.

SUBURBAN SIPS

Celtic Knot, 626 Church St., Evanston; 847-864-1679: Afternoon tea is served here from 2 to 4 p.m. on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Service includes tea, scones, jam, clotted cream, finger sandwiches, tarts and various sweets for \$14.95.

Infini-Tea, 902 Main St., Antioch; 847-395-3520: This Lake County tea room is as serious about tea as it is about real clotted cream. Afternoon tea is served all day long in two styles: The \$18.95 Royal Treatment Tea comes in four courses and includes several teas, little tea muffins, a scone with lemon curd, strawberry jam and clotted cream, a cup of soup and finally, tiered trays of finger sandwiches and an assortment of desserts. The Tea Lite goes for \$9.95 and offers tea with a scone and condiments, savory bites, tea cakes and cookies.

The Spice Merchant and Tea Room, 108 W. Park Ave., Elmhurst; 630-941-7288: Various teas services here range from \$5.95 to \$20. One of the simplest is the cream tea with scones, Devonshire double cream, jam and a personal pot of tea from \$5.95 to \$6.95. Tea and scones are available 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, but the full afternoon tea is available only until 2:30 p.m.

--M.E.

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