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England will endure if there are scones Serve with cream, jam for teatime treat

July 20, 1994 | By Anne Z. Cooke | Anne Z. Cooke, Los Angeles Times Syndicate

The waiter at London's Dorchester Hotel, clad in a smart black tuxedo and bow tie, hovered discreetly beside a marble pillar, waiting for my signal.

"Would you care for tea, Madam?" he finally murmured, bowing and motioning me toward a low table surrounded by upholstered chairs, and set with a white tablecloth, silver cutlery and Wedgwood china.

At last, the moment I'd anticipated: afternoon tea at the Dorchester, the creme de la clotted creme of teas served with piles of finger sandwiches and no crusts, sweet pastries and, chiefly, authentic English scones.

English scones are, to my mind, the country's signature food, a biscuit that is light but hearty, plain but not sweet. A first cousin to baking powder biscuits, scones make a meal by themselves when spread thick with traditional condiments: butter, strawberry jam and clotted cream (more later on this strange dairy product).

Though whole nations have come and gone in the 63 years since the Dorchester served its first "cuppa," high tea at this venerable hotel seems likely to survive indefinitely. The English, after all, drink 512 million cups of tea each year, and show no sign of letting up.

But tea as the centerpiece of a meal is a much younger custom. Though tea-drinking began in earnest around 1660, it wasn't until 1840 that Anna, seventh Duchess of Bedford, decided to add sandwiches and sweets as a late afternoon pick-me-up.

Her casual soirees were soon the buzz of London, and by 1880, teatime was a formal social event for the nobs, and a cheap but filling supper for everybody else.

Today, tea at the Dorchester, served daily between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., is as carefully staged as any Japanese tea ceremony and begins when you choose your brew. Lapsang, Jasmine or Darjeeling perhaps? Or will it be China, Earl Grey or Tisane?

Cold milk goes into the cup first, then the hot tea is added. Presently a tray piled with bite-size sandwiches appears, of white and brown bread filled with smoked salmon, cheese and olives, thin-sliced cucumbers, prawns and smoked ham.

Now the second course is borne to the table on a silver platter: scones seconded by butter, strawberry jam and a dish of clotted cream. More tea is poured and the pastry cart rolls within range, laden with lemon tarts, eclairs and sponge cake. Conversation hums, the pianist at the Steinway patters out old favorites, and you find yourself wondering if you could make scones at home.

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Fortunately, nothing could be easier, says Willi Eisener, the Dorchester's executive chef who inherited the original scone recipe when he joined the hotel in 1986. Chary of meddling with success, he turned it over to his pastry chef, Sous Chef Stuart Pate.

Mr. Pate, 32, a native of Devon, where a pot of strong tea, a plate heaped with tomato, cucumber, egg salad and tuna sandwiches, scones and a sweet tart occasionally still make a supper, learned scone-making at his mother's bread-board.

For scone-meister Pate, turning out 500 scones a day is a walk in Hyde Park. His staff of three bake 200 scones for breakfast, half with sultanas (golden raisins) and half with bits of apple. After lunch, 300 more go into the oven for the 150 to 180 teas served on a typical afternoon.

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