

A Big Tea Party in Victoria, British Columbia

In February 2010, the Victoria Tea Festival in British Columbia's capital, Victoria, celebrated its fourth successful year in a city long associated with tea and the rituals of tea. These include Asian and European traditions, along with many currently-fashionable options adopted from around the world. For the modest sum of CAD\$20 in advance or \$25 at the door for a weekend pass, visitors travel to Victoria for this event from across North America to experience the pleasure of totally immersing in tea, the most widely-consumed beverage in the world after water.



One or two days spent wandering two floors of creatively-decorated exhibitor booths will send visitors home with a bag full of tea tasting tips, information on the health benefits and nutritional values of various teas, and a mind-boggling range of recipes in which tea adds an illusive new flavour to a special menu. Who would know there are so many different teas to sample and learn about - from South Africa and South America to China to India!

Booths are awash in tea samples, advice and fresh-baked tasty treats to complement each tea. Visitors also have opportunities to purchase hundreds of different teas (signature blends or pure leaf), tea-related products and exquisite tea wares. A range of inexpensive to one-of-a-kind extravagant gift ideas means there is something for everyone and every occasion.

"Though we continue to attract a wide cross-section of ages to the Tea Festival, a significant part of the demographic attending is young, in their 20s and 30s," comments Lisa Stekelenburg, coordinator of the event since its inception. "People are looking beyond the traditional concepts of tea and tea drinking to learn about new trends and blends, tea pairings with food, health benefits and a variety of ways to make tea a part of the cuisine experience."

Did you know that green tea is commonly served with seafood and white meat whereas Darjeeling tea goes best with red meats? Scheduled throughout each day are free one-hour lectures and tea-laced cooking demonstrations, challenging the festival's 3,000 visitors to associate tea with many aspects of their life. One of Canada's highest-quality chocolate makers, Rogers Chocolates, used the 2010 festival as the perfect venue to launch three new dark chocolate bars, laced with Matcha, Chai or Earl Grey teas as distinctive taste tantalizers.



There is also an admirable social conscience reflected in this festival. Raising awareness of how teas such as South America's Yerba Maté are grown while protecting the rainforest and benefiting local indigenous communities provides inspirational food for thought. Orchestrated by an efficient, welcoming army of 200 volunteers, all funds raised from the festival go to support college daycare services and provide financial support for disadvantaged parents trying to upgrade their education.

No one should visit Victoria and turn their thoughts to tea without paying homage to the **Fairmont Empress Hotel** (Fairmont.com/empress), the grand-dame that started this garden city's powerful association with afternoon tea 102 years ago. With its Old World charm still evident today, the hotel's elegantly-restored Tea Lobby and veranda overlooking Victoria's Inner Harbour serves 160,000 afternoon teas each year. **Walkabout Tours** (Walkabouts.ca) offers an entertaining insider Empress Hotel tour and afternoon tea package that puts guests right in the historical spirit.

Here are some special venues around Victoria where afternoon tea is much more than a refreshing drink. All require advance bookings for what are creatively-served meal-sized teas. Tea menus are displayed on each website:



The Butchart Gardens (Butchartgardens.com) serves tea daily in the historic Butchart home overlooking these famous gardens, noon to 3 p.m.

Venus Sophia Tea Room (Venus Sophia.com) has recently opened a classic space of imaginative elegance, serving both a regular and a special-diet tea several times a week.

Fairmont Empress Hotel (Fairmont.com/empress) has the most famous afternoon tea in North America, if not the world. Bookings from noon each day, with special menus to meet a variety of dietary requirements.

Point Ellice House and Gardens (Pointellicehouse.ca) offers tea and tour packages of this impressive national historic site from May to September, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Hotel Grand Pacific (Hotelgrandpacific.com) serves afternoon teas with a distinctive "West Coast" menu, and also offers a reduced-price children's afternoon tea with special kid favourites, Thursday through Sunday, 2 to 4 p.m.

By Alison Gardner

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