



The Ecstasy of Tea TEA AT 1024

BY ALBERT LANIER

To the uninitiated, the name of O`ahu's enduring teahouse—Tea at 1024—sounds as if it were a quaint establishment tucked into one of Waikiki's older hotels or a tiny but charming hideaway in a lush and verdant spot like Manoa Valley. The idea of a teahouse located anywhere else on the island might seem downright sacrilegious to the serious tea drinker who can only see taking tea in a beautiful locale.

And yet, reality has a funny way of making assumptions fade into nothingness, for Tea at 1024 can be found not in Waikiki or Manoa but in Downtown Honolulu. You read that right. The urban epicenter of Honolulu plays host to a teahouse that will celebrate its 10th anniversary this fall. Located at 1024 Nuuanu Avenue (thus the name), Tea at 1024 has become a source of delight for local tea addicts.

Enter and walk a couple of paces and to the right you will find a space filled with varied hats and feather boas, while on the left there are a couple of tables. Walk further inside and you will find more tables. You will also find teacups and saucers everywhere at Tea at 1024: on shelves, in a display case, even above the entrance to the kitchen.

The creator and owner of this virtual shrine to teacups and tea is Michele Henry, who first got the idea to serve tea when she owned a boutique right next door. "I design clothing and I thought it would be nice, when I'm working with my customers, to offer them light refreshments. The idea of tea came to mind," Henry told me.

Unfortunately, the space the boutique inhabited didn't include the requisite plumbing and the City's Board of Health forbade installing a kitchen. But when the space next door became available a couple of years later, it offered a kitchen and plumbing that was just right for her needs. She decided to make her move and expand her initial concept by creating a full-scale teahouse.

Henry bought the space, conducted research by reading several books on tea and made the necessary physical and decorative preparations before finally opening Tea at 1024 in November 1999.

The teahouse has been a success ever since. One reason may be consistency. Henry told me the menu has largely remained unchanged (although quiche and some soups have been taken off the menu since Tea at 1024's early days). Customers can choose from 20 different teas including such staples as Darjeeling and Earl Grey as well as green and black teas. Popular teas include English Breakfasts and blended teas. Henry's personal favorite is a blend of Earl Grey with milk and she notes she can add "100 different teas in a snap."

The full tea service is priced at \$15.95 and includes tea and scones served on a tiered tray.

Tea at 1024's menu also includes soups, salads and pastries. Of course, sandwiches are part of the fare and patrons can have their choice of tea along with chicken, egg salad and even peanut butter and jelly—

perfect with a cup of hot chocolate. "Comfort foods" Henry noted. "Stuff your mom used to make."

Another reason for this teahouse's continued good fortune is the most obvious: the quality of tea served. During my visit, I had a cup of iced tea along with some finger sandwiches made from a cheese spread. Granted, my idea of iced tea usually comes from a 12-ounce can of Lipton but the cup of tea I had that day was full-bodied and mixed just right, with the perfect dovetailing of sugar and tea to produce the best cup of iced tea I've ever had.

How did she do it? Henry confided she used a martini shaker to mix and make my cup of iced tea. She also noted that after years of experimenting, she had finally perfected how to produce the best quality cup of tea:

"To have a proper cup of tea, the water has to be boiling hot." Then, this scalding water must be poured onto the tealeaves to create an effect known as the Agony of the Leaves, which occurs when the hot liquid opens up the leaves so that oxygenation can occur. The tea should be poured and served as soon as possible because allowing such a pot to sit for even a few minutes will lead to the tea becoming bitter.

Even the cheese finger sandwiches I had were outstanding. Henry says that sandwiches and other dishes offered are usually made fresh and she added that she is working with a local baker to eventually offer Taro Bread, Guava Bread and Yogurt Cheese Cake items to patrons.

Owning a teahouse has been an interesting career move for a dress designer. Born in Washington, Henry moved to Hawai'i with her family when she was 6 years old. Henry comes from a family steeped in tailoring skills and she learned to design dresses from the time she was 10 years old. After graduating from high school, Henry took some design classes, worked a flight attendant in the early '80s for the now-defunct inter-island carrier Mid-Pacific Air for three years, moved to Los Angeles and worked in a crisis center, then traveled in Mexico before coming back home.

Back in the islands, Henry soon married and gave birth to two daughters. As a stay-at-home mom, Henry designed clothing to bring in some income. She began by marketing cloth diapers she had initially made for her daughters, calling them Nappies. Nappies proved successful and Henry soon found herself designing nursing dresses and then wedding dresses, prom dresses and vintage-style apparel. She soon



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became a busy designer who found herself shuttling to Japan and other locales each year for fashion shows.

Henry became so successful that she decided to shift from designing at home to opening her own boutique—Design by Henry, on Nuuanu Avenue—in 1996. The idea of offering tea to her customers derived from Henry’s childhood, when she would shop and eat afterward with her mother in Downtown Honolulu.

After opening Tea at 1024, Henry ran both the boutique and the teahouse. Eventually, Henry opted to close down her boutique and focus on her teahouse even though both businesses were thriving. “When you get into business, and I have been doing this for over 20-something years, lifestyle becomes important,” Henry told me. “My hours here are short. I figure if I can make it work within these hours, I can also have another life as well.”

Tea at 1024 is open Tuesdays through Fridays 11 a.m.–2 p.m. and on Saturdays from 11 a.m.–3 p.m. Reservations are recommended. The teahouse can comfortably accommodate 28 patrons and has a maximum capacity of 42. Saturday is the busiest day of the week and Tea at 1024 is open on holidays such as Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day.

Besides the fact that taking tea is a centuries-old tradition in countries like England, the appeal lies in its soothing nature. “There’s a kind of civility to it,” noted Henry. “There’s a sense of calm. It slows you down a little bit. It’s a kind of a cult itself.”

The collection of hats and boas not far from the entrance also invites the mostly female patrons of Tea at 1024 to dress up a little and have some fun while they drink their tea.

Tea at 1024 also serves as a refuge from reality. “Reality doesn’t exist,” stated Henry, adding, “You should just come in here and enjoy yourself and have a good time.”

Indeed. At Tea at 1024, the Agony of the Leaves soon becomes the Ecstasy of Tea allowing you to sit, sip and savor a sanctuary of tea-drinking civility in the midst of the often frenzied pace of work and business activity just outside its door. □

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