

The Portland Press Herald

At a new emporium in Freeport, it's . . . **HIP TO SIP**

October 19, 2005
Meredith Goad

Gentlemen, would you like to get more in touch with your feminine side?

Or maybe you're in the doghouse with your significant other after coming home at 2 a.m., smelling like beer.

Two hours sitting in one of Jacqueline Soley's floral fabric chairs should do the trick.

You don't even have to know that the metal gadget sitting next to your genuine English china is a **tea** warmer. Just try to look manly while you sip a spot of Earl Grey and let your partner relax in girly-girl heaven.

Jacqueline's **Tea Room** recently opened at 201 Main St., just a few doors down from the Harraseeket Inn and the Freeport library. It's actually a set of three lavish rooms separated by sliding French doors, bathed in white and filled with chandeliers that dangle crystals and pearls.

The chandeliers hang from garden trellises fixed to the ceiling, and the window treatments are made of grosgrain ribbon, toile beads and balls of flowers.

If a wedding gown exploded, this is what it would look like - and I mean that in a good way. In fact, actual pieces of fabric from wedding gowns were used in the decor. Soley's own wedding gown hangs on the wall, next to the restroom.

This is a place that is serious about fun, and really serious about **tea**.

Jacqueline's **Tea Room** carries 68 varieties of **tea**, including black, white, green, herbal, oolong, rooibos and tisane (which technically is not a true **tea** but a blend of herbs, flowers and spices).

The **tea** menu, in quality and variety, rivals the wine menus at better restaurants.

For traditionalists, there's English breakfast **tea**, "a robust, full-bodied **tea** with light floral undertones," the menu informs. "Blended with milk, it produces a comforting aroma eerily similar to warm toast and honey."

Feeling adventurous? Try one of the exclusive teas that come at an extra charge because they are rare or difficult to produce.

Yin Zhen/Silver Needle, for instance, grown in the Fujian province of China, is picked at dawn and has three times more anti-oxidants than green teas.

For the guys doing their penance, there's flavored teas with names that will make you hungry, such as chocolate chunk chai, sticky buns and coconut cream pie. Or try a cup of organic Lapsang Souchong, the favorite **tea** of Sherlock Holmes.

Jackie Soley first thought about opening a **tea room** several years ago, when she and her daughter visited one in Tampa with her mother and grandmother.

"It was four generations of women sitting there, enjoying the company of women," she said. "There were a lot of bridal showers going on, and socializing, and it was just a nice atmosphere."

At the time, she was married and traveled a lot with her husband. "I made sure I went to every **tea room** I could go to, and my children became **tea** connoisseurs," she said, "and we talked about what we liked and we didn't like, and what we wanted and what we didn't want in our **tea room**."

Soley began collecting real English china at yard sales and antique shops. During her divorce, she began searching for a place where she could live and start her **tea** business. She looked into buying a bed-and-breakfast in an 1848 Greek Revival sea captain's home, and when that didn't work out she designed and built her own home in a similar style.

The flooring, which she installed with a friend's help, is made of 12- to 18-inch pine boards harvested in Maine and refinished to give them an 1800s pumpkin pine look.

There are fireplaces in each of the **tea** rooms, which are located in the front of the house and named Royal Albert, Royal Doulton and Royal Winton.

This is not a place where you can just drop in and have a cup of **tea**. Reservations are required. For \$19.50 per person, visitors experience a two-hour "queen's **tea**," the traditional afternoon **tea** begun by Queen Victoria. Many people confuse this with "high **tea**," Soley said.

"High **tea** is really the dinner **tea**," she said. "People in England sat at high tables, and that's why it's high **tea**. I don't know why in America we associated high **tea** with the finest of **tea**, but it's really afternoon **tea** that was the queen's **tea**. She would sit down and entertain guests."

Seatings are offered from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., but the **tea room** opens at 10:30

a.m. so visitors have time to browse the gift shop. For sale in the shop, among other things, are teacup nightlights, English clotted cream (an extra-thick cream made from heated, high-fat milk), books on manners, thank-you notes, potpourri made of lavender and **tea**-quality organic rosebuds, and boxes of Pretty Sweet Sugar Cubes decorated with little purses and shoes and hats.

Soley's **tea** begins with scones, served with English clotted cream, Devon cream and lemon curd. Then comes three or four kinds of finger sandwiches, and a variety of desserts and pastries. She bakes everything herself, which is why reservations are required.

"I end with a sorbet in the summertime, and then I start with a cup of soup in the wintertime," she said. "It's a full-course meal that I make."

Each person gets his/her own teapot and **tea** warmer.

"It's all-you-can-drink **tea**," Soley said. "So if you can sit here for two hours and drink 200 cups, more power to you. And if you don't like one (**tea**), the next batch we will be happy to change it and give you a totally different one."

The most exclusive **tea** on the menu is Gyokuro, a Japanese **tea** that costs \$4 extra because of the complicated manner in which it is processed. Before harvesting, it is shaded from the sun with black blankets and covered in bamboo.

"I personally don't care for it, but there are many **tea** connoisseurs who do care for it," Soley said. "There are people who claim it has all sorts of healing powers."

Soley's favorite is her own blend, "Jacqueline's **Tea**," a black **tea** made with lavender flowers and honey bee pollen.

Soley is hoping her new place will attract bridal showers, book clubs, and couples celebrating birthdays or anniversaries.

"I'm actually getting a lot of couples," Soley said. "And men, they love it. I thought they would have an uncomfortable time sitting in the floral print chairs, but they do."

Maybe it's because they enjoy seeing their partners so happy, she guessed.

"I like pleasing people, especially women," Soley said. "I think they work hard and don't get a lot of credit and benefit, and don't have a lot of time to socialize with friends, and this is sort of a haven for that."

Staff Writer Meredith Goad can be contacted at 791 - 6332 or at: mgoad@pressherald.com