

Afternoon Tea Misconceptions

By Jill Evans Kryston, Etiquette Consultant

Q: I'm part of a committee whose job is to plan a Tea and we're having a debate about whether to call it High Tea or Afternoon Tea, whether one should add milk first or last, and whether "pinkies up" is appropriate. Could you please comment on these points?

A: Although there are many types of social teas throughout the world, you are referencing the lovely and genteel "Ceremony of Tea" made famous by the English. There are many "experts" who claim authority about afternoon tea practices, but in their enthusiasm they have circulated much misinformation. The following has been confirmed by the British Royal Household.

It is a misnomer to confuse "Afternoon Tea" with "High Tea." Many people equate the two names believing "high" means lofty or regal. In fact, high tea is a heavy evening meal eaten by the working class at a high table around 6:00 P.M. just after the laborers arrive home from work, hungry and tired. It is similar to our evening meal and is often referred to as a "meat tea."

On the other hand, "Afternoon Tea" is an elegant tea meal traditionally served between 2:00 and 4:00 P.M. during a time when many of us experience a "sinking feeling." It consists of dainty finger foods such as scones with jam and clotted cream, savories, sweets, pastries and of course tea, the beverage. Another name for Afternoon Tea is "Low Tea" referring to the low table it is served on in the sitting room. However, this term has not been widely adopted as its name seems to imply a less than lofty image.

Tea lovers have long discussed whether milk should be poured into the cup first or last. In Great Britain this issue seems to have a class connotation. The middle or working classes would have added milk first because they had earthenware cups which were more susceptible to cracking under heat. The more posh households could afford porcelain which withstands the heat of boiling water so they would have added milk last. Today, either way is acceptable, but the more practical method would be to add milk last. Note that cream is never used in tea because it reacts with the acidity level of the tea and masks the flavor.

With regard to pinkies up or down, some feel the last finger should be curved down in the course of lifting a cup to drink. To lift a pinkie gives an appearance of affectation. The truth is, before handles were applied to cups, the thumb and the next three fingers were placed around the rim of the cup at the 6:00 and 12:00 positions, and the pinkie went up to balance the cup. This is a graceful way to avoid spills. Both methods are practiced and one does what comes most natural.

Although tea customs evolve, purists maintain there are certain issues that are not negotiable. The fact of the matter is no one really cares if pinkies are up or down and milk is added first or last. Knowing and practicing good manners always enhance the pleasure of a social situation and makes it more pleasurable among friends.

Do you have an etiquette question you want Jill to answer in her monthly column? Email your question(s) to: information@DefiningManners.com or mail to: P.O. Box 1703, Shavertown, PA 18708.

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