Less than a year after the Louisiana Purchase, one could enjoy “A FINE TURTLE SOUP” as well as coffee and alcoholic refreshments at “the COFFEE HOUSE” on Royal Street in New Orleans. Known as the “CAFÉ DU COMMERCE” in French, the commercial function of this and other early Crescent City coffee houses earned them the name “exchanges,” where gentlemen would meet to do business, negotiate, auction, gamble, dine, drink and lodge. The auctions involved the sale of plantations, ships, houses, furniture, land and slaves.

Coffee and alcohol were not the only choices, however. In an ad in the Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser, dated February 2, 1807, New Orleans merchant Francis Wells, No. 17 St. Louis Street, offered not only “Malaga Wine of a superior quality, French Brandy,” and “Madeira and Claret Wine” but also “a few Chests Souchong Tea”.

Roasted in bamboo baskets, Souchong tea comes from the fourth and fifth leaves of the tea plant, located further away from the more highly prized bud (pekoe) of the tea plant. The Souchong leaves are heated over burning firewood to impart a smoky flavor.
Although the custom of drinking tea dates back to the third millennium BC in China, it was not popularized in England until the 1660s when Charles II of England married the Portuguese Infanta, Catherine of Braganza.

Catherine arrived in Portsmouth on May 13, 1662, and, as soon as she arrived, she asked for a cup of tea. Trouble was, there was none to be had. So rare was it at this time in England that the princess was offered a glass of ale instead. Fortunately Catherine’s father King John IV of Portugal provided her several ships full of luxury goods, including a chest of tea, the favorite drink at the Portuguese court. Further, another gift to Charles II in Catherine's dowry was the city of Bombay in India (now called Mumbai). This valuable port was signed over to the East India Company, for an annual rent of £10 in gold. In time it became the Company’s Far East trading headquarters and was to prove invaluable to the tea trade.

Although she adopted English fashions, Catherine continued to prefer the cuisine of her native Portugal - including tea. Soon her taste for
tea had caused a fad at the royal court. This craze spread within aristocratic circles and then to the wealthier classes.

It wasn't until the 1800s, when tea prices dropped and became affordable to the masses, that the custom of tea drinking really took hold. And Afternoon tea, that most quintessential of English traditions, is, you may be surprised to learn, a relatively new custom.

There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.”
- Henry James

Afternoon tea was introduced to the British Isles in the 1840s by Anna Russell, the seventh Duchess of Bedford (1783-1857), a lifelong friend of Queen Victoria. The Duchess would become a bit peckish around four o’clock in the afternoon because her evening meal was served fashionably late around eight o’clock. This left an extended period of time between a light luncheon and dinner. Her grace requested a tray of tea, bread and butter and cake be brought to her room during the late afternoon. This became a habit of hers and she began inviting friends to join her.

Afternoon tea was popular during the Victorian era.

Some years earlier, 1762 as the story goes, John Montagu, the 4th Earl of Sandwich had the idea of putting a filling between two slices of
bread so as to leave at least one hand free for his gambling activities. The concept of putting meat or cheese between bread slices and dressing with condiments, it must be acknowledged, was a culinary practice of ancient origin among the Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples, but the Earl’s “new” idea for this light repast soon spread among the English gentry. It wasn’t long before dainty crustless finger sandwiches became a mainstay of a proper English afternoon tea.

Traditional afternoon tea sandwiches are often those made of thinly sliced cucumber, egg salad, watercress or salmon with softened cream cheese. Sometimes thinly sliced strawberries and cream cheese between soft white bread slices are served on Southern tables. Scones served with clotted cream and preserves are popular, as well macaroons and lemon curd. Clotted cream is a silky, yellowish cream made by allowing unpasteurized cow’s milk (traditionally from Jersey cows) to sit for 12-24 hours in shallow pans to “clot”. The cream, called Devonshire cream if produced in the county of Devon, England, is skimmed off and served with scones, berries, or desserts. Attractive desserts, such as petite cakes and pastries are also served at afternoon tea. The Victoria Sponge, a favorite of Queen Victoria’s, is a sponge cake sandwiched together with raspberry jam and dusted on the top with caster sugar. And, of course, tea grown in India or Ceylon (Sri Lanka today) is poured from silver teapots into delicate bone china cups.

One must not confuse afternoon tea, however, with high tea. Despite its name, high tea actually originated with the British lower classes. The working classes weren’t afforded an afternoon lunch break, so they took their tea right after work with heartier fare (such as meat, pies, cheeses, bread and crackers) to truly satisfy their hunger.

The term “high tea” came into general use because these more robust meals were served at “high” dinner tables, rather than while seated upon “low” comfortable armchairs, couches or settees. The upper echelons of British society, therefore, enjoyed “low tea” accompanied by fancier but more modest fare. And saying “high tea” in England when you really mean “afternoon tea” is a dead giveaway you’re American, as well as requesting high tea at 2 in the afternoon. But don’t be too worried. Even hotels purposely conflate the two terms erroneously because they know their public confuse the two. Even the Picayune talked about a later “5 o’clock or afternoon tea” in an article entitled The Tea We Drink, published April 25, 1883:
“A good deal might be said in favor of the 5 o’clock or afternoon tea of modern times. It is a very enjoyable refreshment, and a very timely one, with common sense to recommend it. Always provided, if I may make use of medical phraseology, it be prettily compounded, carefully prepared and neatly dispensed. There ought to be an air of refinement in the room in which it is partaken, the guests few, if possible, and perfectly at their ease. The tea equipage should be neat and well chosen, and the tea itself the finest and best procurable for love or money. No need to say what the hostess herself should be; she will be natural, that is enough.”

The Brits have also expanded the possible daily tea times to three, adding what is known as “Elevenses”, their version of the morning coffee break.

The first tea room in Great Britain was opened in 1706, twelve years before the founding of New Orleans, by Thomas Twining. It was located at No. 216 Strand, London and still operates today. The firm’s logo, created in 1787, is the world’s oldest in continuous use. Tea rooms, establishments serving tea and sometimes cake or light meals, can be found today all over England. Private teas and teas served in hotels have also grown in number.

*Five O’Clock by American artist Mary Cassatt*
In 1822, two brothers named Joseph and Edward Tetley who sold salt in Yorkshire, England, shifted to selling tea. They were so successful they set up shop as “Joseph Tetley & Co.” tea merchants in 1837. By 1856, they had relocated to London and today they are the second largest tea company in the United Kingdom and Canada, and the second largest in the U.S. by volume. Tetley was the first company to sell tea in tea-bags in the United Kingdom in 1953.

As a teenager, self-made millionaire Thomas Lipton signed up as a cabin boy and journeyed to the United States where he held a series of jobs before returning to Scotland to make his fortune as a grocer, tea magnate and yachtsman. At age 17 he even worked as a streetcar driver in New Orleans. In 1888, when his grocery empire had grown to 300 stores, Lipton bought tea plantations in Ceylon and established the Lipton tea brand, which is today a subsidiary of Unilever. A marketing genius, Sir Thomas Lipton excelled in the sale of “farm to table” tea, using the catchy slogan “direct from tea garden to tea pot.” Lipton, today the world’s largest tea company, celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2015.
Meanwhile, back in the states ...

Another grocer, William B. Reily, running a wholesale grocery operation in the 1890s, started his coffee business in 1902 and the Luzianne brand was born. The Reily Foods Company of New Orleans manufactures Luzianne products, derived from the name of its home state, has products manufactured by the Reily Foods Company of New Orleans. In 2017, Luzianne was the second largest seller of tea in the United States, with annual sales of over $200 million.

New Orleanians will remember Luzianne television ads from the 1950s with a young Betty White and, during the 1970s and 80s, Oscar-winning actor Burl Ives telling us “Luzianne Tea doesn’t get cloudy.”

Tea was not an immediate hit in pre-Revolutionary War America, largely because it was symbolic of England, from whom the colonists were seeking independence. Just one of the ways the British government angered the colonists was the passage of the Tea Act in 1773, the main purpose of which was to bail out the floundering East India Company, a key actor in the British economy, and make the American colonists pay for it. This, of course, led to the Boston Tea Party where American patriots dressed as Indians boarded ships in Boston Harbor and threw the whole shipment of tea overboard.

Hyson tea, originally from the Anhui Province of China, also known as Lucky Dragon Tea, represented 70 of the more than three hundred chests of tea that were destroyed during Boston Tea Party. “Hyson” either means “flourishing spring” in Cantonese or got its name from an English tea merchant named Philip Hyson. Hyson Tea was one of the more common green teas shipped to the Crescent City in the early 1800s, as evidenced by the local newsclippings shown below.
Over a century after the tea dumping in Boston, Americans created teabags; and iced tea was invented by an Englishman at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904. The first modern tea bags in the Western World were hand-sewn fabric bags. Roberta C. Lawson and Mary McLaren, two women from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, designed the “Tea-Leaf Holder” and filed for a patent in 1901. First appearing commercially around 1904, tea bags were successfully marketed about 1908 by the tea importer Thomas Sullivan from New York, who shipped his silk tea bags around the world (instead of in the more common tea tins). The Englishman who invented iced tea in the United States was a tea dealer named Richard Blechynden, who was trying to introduce Indian tea to Americans at the St. Louis World’s Fair, but in the stifling weather he was getting few takers. After dropping some ice cubes into the brew, thirsty fair goers went for the new refreshment in a big way and iced tea was born. It is still preferred in the United States to hot tea (about 80% of tea Americans drink is iced).

Long before afternoon tea became a tradition on either side of the Atlantic, William Sergeant & Co., New Orleans importers of French and English China, 36 Chartres Street, advertised “rich patterns of … tea services … “teapots, sugars, creams …, etc.” The ad appeared on April 10, 1839, in the True American, a nativist or Know-Nothing newspaper founded in New Orleans in 1835.

All tea comes from the same basic plant: Camellia Sinensis. While there are over 3,000 varieties, tea can be divided into six basic types: black, dark, oolong, yellow, green, and white. The differences between teas arise from drying, aging, processing, growing conditions, as well as geography.

Merchandise (Black and Green Tea varieties) offered for sale by George Foster & Co., 49 Common Street, New Orleans, published in the Picayune November 4, 1852.

Oolong tea is a traditional Chinese tea that combines the qualities of dark and green teas, giving it several interesting health benefits. It
represents only 2% of the world’s tea, but is widely known. The appearance, flavor and shape of Oolong tea (also known as wulong) can vary wildly depending on how it’s processed and the region where it’s grown. Darjeeling is a city in the Indian state of West Bengal, located in the Lesser Himalayas. It is famous for its tea industry, and tea from that region carries its name. Darjeeling teas are processed as black, green, white and oolong teas and have a floral aroma.

Orange Pekoe (or Orange Pecco) is not actually a type of tea but a term used for determining the size and style of leaf. And it is neither “orange” in taste nor flavor, for it is believed that the “orange” part of the name is derived from the Dutch Royal House of Orange-Nassau, since the Dutch East India Company was a huge player in the tea trade. So why do so many people think of Orange Pekoe as a type of tea? This is simply due to the clever marketing skills of Sir Thomas Lipton who thought it was a memorable, marketable name.

There is a tea that does have a citrus connection. Earl Grey is not really a type of tea but a blend, also known as “Earl Grey’s Mixture”, presumably named for Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey, British Prime Minister in the 1830s. He reportedly once received a gift of tea flavored with bergamot oil, which comes from an orange-like fragrant citrus fruit common throughout the Mediterranean.

Tea rooms and tea dances spread all over England, and New Orleans was no different. The tea dance, or thé dansant, was a dance held (usually with a live orchestra) where young people could socialize.

Audubon Tea Room Dance 1921
The new Audubon Tea Room

The original Audubon Tea Room in Audubon Park was built in the early 1900s and was the scene of countless sorority and fraternity dances,
as well as a “carnival dance” in 1921 for the city’s bankers, with music by the “Maple Leaf Jazz Band”. This author attended a dance there in the early seventies with music by an oldies rock band. Sadly, in 1976 the tea room was razed by flames, but like a phoenix has been rebuilt in another area of the park as a popular event venue known as The Jerome S. Glazer Audubon Tea Room.

Another unusual tea tradition was the gypsy tea room. They sprung up all over the United States beginning in the 1920s, but their heyday was the 1930s Depression Era. Built on the allure of telling one’s fortune by tea leaf reading, their menus usually consisted of a cup of tea bundled with inexpensive food. In New Orleans a toasted sandwich and tea went for the low price of 15 cents.

The Gypsy Tea Room in the Tremé neighborhood at 1434 St. Ann, however, emerged as one of the top black nightclubs in New Orleans in the 30s and 40s, decorated in a starry night motif, with burning candles suspended from the ceiling. Louis Prima, himself from Tremé, recorded a popular version of the song “In a Little Gypsy Tea Room” in 1935.

Louis Prima and his 1935 recording, “In A Little Gypsy Tea Room”

The music was top notch at the “Tea Room”, where the local elite hobnobbed with visiting celebrities like Cab Calloway. A young Dave Bartholomew and his orchestra played there pre-Fats Domino, as did Smiley Lewis and barrelhouse pianist “Tuts” Washington. The club was a regular stop and venue for the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, as
well as for the Mardi Gras Indians. It was eventually demolished to make way for a “cultural center” that became Armstrong Park.

But for a more subdued afternoon tea in the New Orleans area, there are several possibilities. If you decide to have afternoon tea at the Ritz-Carlton, served in the Davenport Lounge 7 days a week, you can say you had tea at the White House – or at least the old *Maison Blanche*. A local harpist adds the appropriate soundtrack.

*Afternoon tea at the Windsor Court, New Orleans*

The Windsor Court Hotel offers a truly traditional British afternoon tea in *Le Salon* every Friday through Sunday. Of course, when in Rome, this New Orleans tea party begins with a light cocktail or sparkling beverage followed by a selection of “26 of the finest loose-leaf variety brews” accompanied by “gourmet tea sandwiches, house-made scones and decadent desserts”. They, too, provide a harpist or pianist to soothe the savage breast. And the Windsor Court puts on some specialty themed teas, as well, such as Mardi Gras, Princess, Mad Hatter and Prohibition.
Last but not least is The English Tea Room & Eatery, housed in a quaint cottage at 734 East Rutland Street in Covington, Louisiana. It was founded by Tim Lantrip, who shared tea in his youth with his grandmother, whose own parents emigrated from Great Britain in the nineteenth century. With Union Jack displayed outside and British memorabilia within, it’s a place where one can enjoy tea and crumpets in either the Tudor Room, Queen’s Parlor, Britannia Room or, as I did, in the Churchill Room. There are countless teas from which to choose, served along with freshly baked scones, clotted cream, tea sandwiches and sweets. Travel across the pond, Lake Pontchartrain that is, to savor a very agreeable British tea experience.

Tea time in New Orleans has been around for centuries now. I always delighted in a cup of hot tea with my grandmother, who took hers in an enormous china cup. No matter how far one’s pinky finger extends, tea is treasured in its many different forms by all kinds of people – and its popularity shows no sign of waning.

By the way, in addition to giving us the “Orange” in “Orange Pekoe Tea”, we have the Dutch to thank for the word “pinky”. It came to us from Scotland by way of the Dutch — first recorded in 1808 in An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language. Having nothing to do with color, pink is the Dutch word for “little finger”.

While no tea leaf reader myself, this author believes that teatime is undoubtedly here to stay.
New Orleans Nostalgia
“From Tea Garden To Tea Pot”
Ned Hémard
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