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Short Order

by Deveron Timberlake

Not since the days of the antebellum tearoom has Richmond been so awash in teacups. It's no coincidence that our espresso culture begs for an antidote, led locally by a group of ladies who want you to take tiny bites and sips, to breathe in the scent of fresh pastries and hold the rest of the world at bay while you partake of the ancient traditions of tea-drinking.

In the Fan, Lurline and Allan Wagner are poised to open Cuppa Tea Company at 1 N. Morris St. Its location across the street from The World Cup coffee shop, one of Richmond's favorites, isn't entirely accidental. Both businesses are neighborhood-oriented and within walking distance of a sizeable number of customers, many of whom will linger and nibble on pastries while sipping their favorite brew.

But similarities end there. At Cuppa Tea, an East-meets-West theme will be quiet and elegant with nary a laptop in sight. Customers will choose from 60 fine loose-leaf teas and a traditional assortment of fresh scones, tea sandwiches, clotted cream and sweets. Lurline Wagner, who is certified by the Specialty Tea Institute, a member of the Ethical Tea Partnership and a graduate of the University of Richmond's culinary arts program, has fond memories of tea-drinking with her grandfather in Canada. Now she's hoping to encourage others to partake of the social and elegant tradition. Look for an opening this spring.

Out in Powhatan, Becky's Tea Café offers a similar menu and welcomes groups for dainty showers and luncheons in an area better known for barbecue and comfort food. Carytown Teas, among the first to introduce fine teas to Richmond, is expanding its Nansemond Street setting to accommodate more tea-drinkers upstairs and to share expertise about the art and benefits of tea.

And now in Mechanicsville, Whispering Willow Tea Time Memories extends the trend east, with a dress-up component for those who'd like to wear a feather boa or other regalia while sipping.

Owner Melody Walton opened her shop at 8245 Windmill Watch Drive last month and is already booking tea parties for children and adults through August. The demand has been surprising, she says: "Most people don't know what to expect when they come the first time, but they love to sit down, relax and enjoy their friends, and just take the time to be with each other, talking and eating in a beautiful setting. And our scones are delicious — I have to brag about them."

Walton collects antique porcelain in flowered patterns and enjoys setting different tables for customers. She's been to the World Tea Expo in Las Vegas and has taken classes through the Virginia Tea Society. "I love everything about tea, and it's a learning experience every day," she says. See details at www.whisperingwillowttm.com.



Customers at Mechanicsville's Whispering Willow Tea Time Memories can sip their tea while playing dress-up in fancy hats and feather boas.

photo by Scott Elmquist

Some of Richmond's best restaurants are also the city's most philanthropic. That includes Acacia, usually first to participate in a good cause.

Chef Dale Reitzer and his wife, Aline, long celebrated for their work in the community, are among the local restaurateurs involved in a benefit for Breadwinners, a job-training program for women in food service.

From March 19 to 25, Acacia, Mekong, Old City Bar, 1 N. Belmont and Six Burner will donate a percentage of their proceeds to the program. Belmont Butchery and River City Cellars are doing the same with weekend sales. The fundraiser, called Benefit Thyme, helps women develop skills that will lead to financial self-sufficiency. **S**

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