

## Who says a Richmonder can't find a decent cup of tea?

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A decade ago, it might have been difficult for Richmonders to find a tearoom this side of the pond that served traditional afternoon tea with finger sandwiches and scones.

But the tea industry is experiencing a surge in popularity, thanks to research about its health benefits -- and places such as Cuppa Tea Co.

The cheerful little building at 1N. Morris St. in Richmond's Fan District opened in April and offers 60 specialty loose-leaf teas -- green, white, black and rooibos, a red tea.

Owners Lurline and Allan Wagner offer an afternoon tea and a lighter luncheon tea, as well as dessert teas, cream teas served with scones and cream and preserves, and Asian-style teas that come with Chinese dim sum and candied ginger coconut rice cakes.

A native of the Philippines, Lurline Wagner is certified by the Specialty Tea Institute, a division of the Tea Association of the USA.

Institute President Joe Simrany said its goal is "to educate the tea trade because a great many entrepreneurs were coming into the business and these entrepreneurs really didn't have the same skills about the tea they were selling."

"They had the passion, but not necessarily the skills," he said.

Ten years ago, 200 tearooms dotted the nation, Simrany said. Today, well over 2,000 exist.

Richmond was ripe for such a place, the Wagners said, because there are few full-service tearooms. Afternoon tea at The Jefferson Hotel was the standard to follow.

"We wanted to be the five-star tearoom competing with them," he said, adding that they spent more than two years looking for the perfect location.

"We could've done it in a strip mall years ago," he said. "But we didn't want that type of ambience."

Lurline Wagner is so serious about her teas that before servers are hired, they have to pass a test on the differences among teas and brewing techniques.

The Wagners said it's the little things that set them apart from other tearooms.

If you're unsure what kind of tea you want, you can sniff any number of leaves before trying one.

And, if you like blended teas, the Wagners will keep your information on file for next time.

The menu changes quarterly by season, and the place caters to individuals as well as special occasions.

Cuppa Tea Co. was Lurline Wagner's dream. Her husband said it became his dream, too, shortly after the couple met a few years ago.

During one of his first visits to her home, she offered him a cup of tea.

Odd, he thought then, that she offered tea rather than coffee.

"But we wouldn't have had this if I had said coffee," he said.

-- Holly Prestidge -RD>

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