
Village Tea Room

by Pauline Uchmanowicz

Dotted with white lights, a trio of archways flanked by boxy planters invites customers uphill to the entrance of The Village Tea Room & Restaurant, announced by large, mellow-yellow block letters (spelling TEAROOM) mounted to the establishment's barn-red exterior. Housed in a renovated nineteenth-century building in the heart of downtown New Paltz, a block away from SUNY and across the street from Ariel Booksellers, it's poised to become a discrete, bohemian hangout.

Originally from Ireland, owners Agnes Devereux and her husband Dan Sheehy relocated from Manhattan to New Paltz four years ago, drawn to village life as well as proximity to Mountain Laurel Waldorf School, where their children attend. Purchasing a house and adjacent parcel, formerly the site of Alderd Schoonmaker's tailor shop (c. 1832) and more recently an apartment complex, they dreamed of converting the commercial zone into a family-run business that "told the original story of the building."

Deciding on a tearoom, Devereux, who attended the Fashion Institute of Technology and also New York School of Interior Design, came up with its structural concept. Merging her college training with principles grounded in Waldorf founder Rudolf Steiner's theory of organic architecture, she created a setting in which form, materials, surfaces, character and mood mingle with the surrounding outdoor landscape to create a nurturing and hospitable environment.

The owners began renovations by completely gutting the building, raising the ceilings and installing a wheelchair ramp. Working from "the inside out," they aimed for a warm, old-fashioned look. "I wanted to reference the past but hate literal recreations of colonial days," says Devereux. "I also wanted a lot of color without being aggressive." Constructing unique, pleasantly hued rooms and then reinstalling original beams as well as accents (such as reproduction sconces) for ornamental effect, the designer has successfully balanced old- and new-world aesthetics. "I like going to a place where you have all

kinds of rooms to discover," the designer explains. "They say children like to create small spaces; I think adults like to do that too." Numerous windows throughout the building wash the interior nooks and crannies with natural light, creating an expansive feel.

Serving continental breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and country suppers, the two-story tearoom holds a beverage and baked goods counter, open kitchen and three distinct interior seating areas. Front and rear outdoor patios, graced with café tables and striped umbrellas, complete the layout. Soft jazz piped over the sound system soothes the senses as one enters, where the service counter stocked with pastries and homemade salads tempt the appetite. To the left of this self-serve area sits a cozy, angled "storybook" room with three wooden dining tables. Miniature chairs are tucked into a fourth, kid-friendly table, pushed against a ceiling-to-floor chalkboard that gets a lot of use. A banquette runs along two of the remaining walls, all bathed in a soft yellow. The burnt-red linoleum floor adds to the cheerfulness.

At the opposite end of the ground floor a more casual space awaits. Projecting the feel of a well-used den, it holds five wooden tables with matching chairs. A ledge wide enough for a magazine, backpack or notebook runs along the front of the room under a row of windows, which look out over a copper beach tree. It's the sort of space that summons inspiration for sketchbook drawings or musings for the great American novel. A few steps away, a staircase with antique railing leads to the upper level of the store, which holds the kitchen as well as an additional dining area, suitable for private parties. Light russet walls, printed drapes and upholstered chairs lend formality to the room.

Imported from Ireland, over twenty teas, including such intriguing possibilities as Rooibos Earl Grey and Soom First Flush Darjeeling, lie at the heart of the operation. "I love tea. The whole experience of having tea is about a china cup, a spoon and a pot with water at the right temperature - 220 degrees for dark teas and 190 degrees for greens," says Devereux. A steaming pot arrives with loose leafs packed into a tea sack, the usual accoutrements as well as a three-minute hourglass timer. "One shouldn't over steep tea," the proprietress says.

Traditional afternoon tea, served twice weekly, includes a variety of scones as well as an assortment of pastries. "I love to bake," says Devereux, who learned by watching her mother, the cook at a small hotel her parents ran in Ireland. Once encamped to New Paltz and after expanding her original business plan from a simple tearoom to a full-scale restaurant, Devereux attended Manhattan's Institute of Culinary Education (ICE), focusing on the pastry and baking curriculum. Treats and sweets served at the Tea Room are made daily from scratch, using organic eggs, sweet cream butter and unbleached flour.

Seasonal menus for lunch and supper include ingredients procured from local farms, including Meadow View, Taliaferro, Dressel, Apple Hill, Nettle Meadow, and Four Winds. "I like rustic foods with lusty flavors," says Devereux, who worked for many years at New York City's Union Square Café, supporting herself through college. "I think when you have really good ingredients you don't have to doctor the food."

The seasonal *prix fixe* (\$25, children half price) dinner menu rotates nightly and features one meat and one vegetarian entrée. Served family style, the meal includes a salad, side dish and dessert. One evening last week, my companion and I tried a country supper. We appreciated the presentation, freshness and taste of the red leaf salad, topped with shaved Toussaint cheese and toasted pine nuts. Roast chicken (free-range) au jus, *herbes de Provence*, accompanied by basmati pilaf rice was lightly spiced, offering subtle flavor. The almond butter cake served with chocolate sauce and Marsala whipped cream especially pleased us. Since the Tea Room doesn't have a liquor license, we brought our own bottle of wine, which our server decanted, providing us with glasses. The only customers seated in the tiny "storybook" room during our stay, we enjoyed private dining.

Located at 10 Plattekill Avenue in New Paltz, The Village Tea Rom opens daily at 8 a.m. Afternoon tea (\$18) is served Tuesday and Wednesday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Supper starts at 6 p.m. The restaurant is closed on Monday. For more information, you may call 255-3434.

