

Steeping for success

London lauds the world's first tea sommelier

By Seánan Forbes

At The Lanesborough in London, the afternoon tea menu bears a list of accolades: Award of Excellence, The Tea Guild 2010 and 2008; Award of Excellence, The UK Tea Council 2009, 2007 and 2006; Top London Afternoon Tea, The UK Tea Council, 2008 and 2005. Behind the tea stands London's first tea sommelier, Algeria-born Karl Kessab. He took time from his packed tearoom to talk about how to make tea a success.

What is a tea sommelier?

I was the first one, appointed in 2003. The idea came through the Tea Council, an external body that governs all of the tea institutions in the UK. They said, "Why not have someone who will introduce the same concept as wine sommeliers do, but without the alcohol—with tea?"

What's new in the tea world?

Everything is changing. In the last 10 years, we've seen an amazing interest as far as how the market evolved. People have become very savvy. They know exactly what they're drinking.

How is the industry changing?

The best tea institutions are enhancing the tea-taste with what we eat. We're doing the same exercise with food-and-tea match. So that's the next thing. It's an exercise that's proven very, very successful.

Could you give an example or two of matching?

The pastry chef will marry a beautiful Earl Grey tea with the nicest Godiva chocolate for a mousse, or a beautiful seafood sandwich that you might marry with your white teas or green teas.

Are there any tea trends hoteliers should look for?

The "power tea" has taken London by storm: We're not going to have an hour for lunch, where we have to go back to the office. We'll meet for tea at three, four o'clock, finish up our meeting, and then home. At that time, it's six or seven o'clock. It's a great market for anyone who wants to grow the tea business. It's a great niche, depending on the location. It's something you can do, in terms of point-of-difference from your competitors.

Apart from excellent tea, are there any necessities?

Training is a must—not only on the ground level, but on the top level, too. You have to have a training program in the research part of it, but also the delivery. It's all about having the right attitude and guiding the customers through the process. When you come to my world, I want introduce you to the world of tea. I want to give you a bit of knowledge, share my expertise and guide you through the complexities of the teas.

Any savvy marketing tricks?

We give a little memento. You have your favorite tea that you've drunk here. Take it home and remember us.

How do you start building a tea business in a hotel?

Building relationships is the first step—and then you move on to understanding what your customer wants. It's listening to your customers, looking at what the market needs, and then coming up with points of difference and sourcing the best tea.

Your staff gives a bit of history when serving tea. Do you have any all-purpose history a server could use?

You get asked, "Do I put milk first?" If you go back to 50 years ago, you had to put milk first because the temperature was so hot that when you poured tea in a cup, the cup used to crack. The china couldn't withstand the temperature. Now, china is made to withstand extreme temperatures, so you can put your tea in first.

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LINKS

HOTEL: <http://www.lanesborough.com/>

AFTERNOON TEA MENU: http://www.lanesborough.com/pdfs/lanesborough_festive_afternoontea.pdf

THE UNITED KINGDOM TEA COUNCIL: <http://www.tea.co.uk/>