

MENU



Scones served up at The Capital

London's best Christmas afternoon teas

Six of the capital's most indulgent festive teas

CHRISTMAS

Melanie McDonagh 15 Dec 2016

This is the season when a good hotel afternoon tea comes into its own. When the streets of London are a scrum site and you stand every chance of being shoved off the pavement and into oncoming traffic by shoppers, can there be anything better than a grand hotel tea? If you scrutinise the faces of the people having tea as their Christmas treat, they show a rather moving willingness to be enchanted. It's their time to be spoiled, especially the shoppers from outside London, the tables of women taking selfies. Children are saucer-eyed at the notion that they can have as much as they can eat.

And at Christmas, the grand hotels take the festive thing seriously. The Savoy bills its tea as a Frozen Fantasia, and that's what it is. You enter through actual fake snow, which is a nice touch when nature isn't delivering. The outside of The Goring is transformed with lights and before you even get to the drawing room in Claridge's, you enter a veritable wood, its Christmas installation.

As it happens, it's sandwiches I really like: in The Capital they come in pleasing colours: matcha green, beetroot red, white and brown bread. That's fun. And if you're a complete pig you can ask to take some home: Claridge's has a classy box.

The cakes are obviously an opportunity for the kitchen to shine. They all have a Christmassy touch; The Goring has little coconut snowball men with mousse inside and a Christmas tree filled with chocolate brownie; The Capital has a mint meringue Christmas tree and a lemon cheesecake Snowman. Claridge's has a Christmas pudding ice lolly as a seasonal special before you get to cake.

And plain cake should have its place as well as fancy ones; Brown's for instance, will always have a trad Christmas or plain cake as well as the insubstantial ones; so does the Savoy, though there it's a lighter brioche plus an apple and cinnamon cake.





Christmas treats at the Savoy

So, now to the downside, and I'm afraid there is one. It's the cost. The price of an afternoon tea for one at Claridge's is £82 per person, not including champagne. At the Savoy it's £68. The Goring is £42. The Capital, though it's equally good, is a veritable bargain, at £29.

But then, if you want to squander money, there are much worse ways of doing it in London at Christmas than in a little afternoon tea fantasy – at the indescribably awful Winter Wonderland, for one. If it's just once a year, if you're taking refuge from the crowds while you're shopping, if you can afford a treat, well, it really is a treat. So, here are six places to have really lovely afternoon tea in London. Obviously, outside London it's way cheaper...

The Savoy, from £68 per person. The children I brought were enchanted by the Savoy: friendly, discreet service, as you'd expect; a riot of festive decoration; delicious scones (with very good lemon curd) and, as well as fancy cake, a couple of plain ones. It defeated even the children.

The Capital, £29.50. This is the haven of all havens, an exquisite hotel a couple of minutes from Harrods, sufficiently small to be intimate, and with sublime service. The multi-coloured sandwiches are fun; as ever, the cakes are made for the season. An ineffable treat.

The Goring, from £49. Excellent service – well, it's where the Queen goes; the atmosphere in the sitting room is cosy but the restaurant, which accommodates the Christmas overspill, is lovely too. Plainer sandwiches than elsewhere, but all good.

Claridge's, £82. Prohibitively expensive, obviously, but what a splendiferous experience it is. The waiters are grand, but very much on your side. The sandwiches are heavenly, the Christmas pudding ice cream fine, the little

seasonal eccles cake a nice touch and the cakes festive and good – especially, as it happens, the little ginger parkin. The tea itself is wonderful here.

The Victoria and Albert Museum, prices start with scones at £4.50. This is where you can join the bunfight and construct your very own tea, with scones and clotted cream, plus cake of your choice; self-service. And the reason I mention it is that the William Morris room and the Gamble Room, are the most beautiful in London, with the dark green tiles like perfect Christmas greenery. Forget the tea, which is fine; just marvel at the place itself.

Sotheby's is one to bear in mind if you're shopping in Bond Street – and good luck with that. Yes, the auction house. Tucked away on the ground floor of its Bond Street premises is a very decent café. The afternoon tea is £25, which, you'll have gathered, is at the more affordable end of the spectrum, with the option of straight scones, jam and cream for £8.75. With the usual optional champagne, it's £38, though really, with a good cup of tea, you shouldn't need it. This place is a Godsend. Only downside is that tea is served from 3pm-4.45pm, so not one for late shoppers.

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