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The True Nature of Tea

MARY EATS CAKE WITH LINDY SCHNEIDER
IN MONTROSE

Tea light flames twinkle under delicate glass teapots on each table and keep the golden liquid at the perfect drinking temperature. Every tea casts its own golden glow – colours range from pale straw, to rose-gold, from burnished amber to rich cherries and burgundies – the colours of autumn and the colours of the earth. If it is true that we eat with our eyes, then the same is true for drinking an exquisitely brewed cup of tea.

As one of Australia's few Master Tea Sommeliers, Sarah de Witt has embraced the mission to develop a tea culture in Australia that is on par with our passion for the best coffee and the finest wine. The art of blending, brewing and serving tea has become the foundation of Sarah's life, and her intrinsic entrepreneurial spirit has blossomed through her co-creation with Jessica Hillbrick (a French pastry chef) of Mary Eats Cake, last year in Montrose. Sarah and Jessica launched their first business together in Brunswick in 2016. Growing up at the gateway to the Yarra Valley, this former psychologist (who realised her love of tea through her enjoyment of preparing special blends for her clients) is sharing her gift for all things tea, and delights in connecting people together in a truly unique experience that reinvigorates and contemporises the traditional High Tea.





In the final assessment to qualify as a tea sommelier, Sarah was challenged to correctly identify 90 different teas, their origin and brewing style in a blind taste test. No wonder she is a sought-after judge on the international tea circuit travelling to China to bring an Australian perspective to judging panels of the finest blends in the world.

The art of tea is steeped in ancient ceremony and has been perfected over thousands of years. Inside this world, tea is a complex and treasured beverage, revered and full of meaning and history. "Last year two kilograms of an aged, fermented 'pu ehr' tea leaf sold for \$1.2 million in China, and there are many teas I serve that are valued at thousands of dollars per kilogram," she says. "All this from the humble leaf of the *Camellia sinensis* plant!"

Tea brings together all the elements in nature. The five senses are activated and the flavour profile incorporates the flavours of sweet, sour, bitter, salty and umami. "Tea is of the earth, so it brings with it the environment of its origin. Just as terroir (soil, climate and varietal) influences a wine, so too does it influence tea. Tea is best grown at high altitude and is grown all over the world. When I first tasted a sixty-year-old fermented tea I experienced the feeling of wet woodlands, of mushrooms and damp earth, like walking through a forest after the rain. Some teas will feature notes that are fruity, earthy, herbal, floral and/or vegetal and open out with even greater complexity. The qualities can be very nuanced. My morning cup today had notes of stewed white peach, and also a hint of spinach. My sommelier training taught me to discern and understand more than 130 flavour profiles. One batch of tea will vary to the next, so I'm

always testing, and always learning. There are infinite combinations," says Sarah.

"Tea is an art. Blending brings together the base, heart and high notes of your ingredients and invokes a deep sense of caring when done well. There are many scientific principles behind tea blending, but it also asks me to be creative and adaptable and to feel deeply into the process. I am always open to the new with tea, and always delightfully surprised."

"I'm of European descent and food, culture and hospitality are part of my DNA. My sister and mum are locals and work in the business with us. Jess's mum scours the local op shops for all the vintage crockery we set the tables with. Every mismatched china cup, saucer and side plate has its own little story to tell."

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Mary Eats Cake is wholly owned and operated by women. Sarah has visited the ethical farms where her tea is grown in China where women are the predominant workforce. And the cottage that is home to Mary Eats Cake was purchased from a woman in her nineties who wanted her home to be a 'place for women', and had previously been a childcare facility and a community house. In renovating the turn-of-the-century cottage, many original features and rooms were left in place, and given the 'fabulous grandma' treatment that was their design ethos. Soft colours, magnificent chandeliers, quaint artworks and floral displays set a tone that says "welcome" to the many groups of women that come to celebrate special moments, such as bridal showers and birthdays, hosted by Sarah. "Tea is a sign of respect in many cultures. It is also about connection. I see that every day now – often I will have three or four generations of women sitting at the table together, sharing time and stories, reconnecting and celebrating. Psychology tells us that one of the most important things we can do for wellbeing is socialise, be connected and in a community. Tea represents this for me. It's an honour to pour."

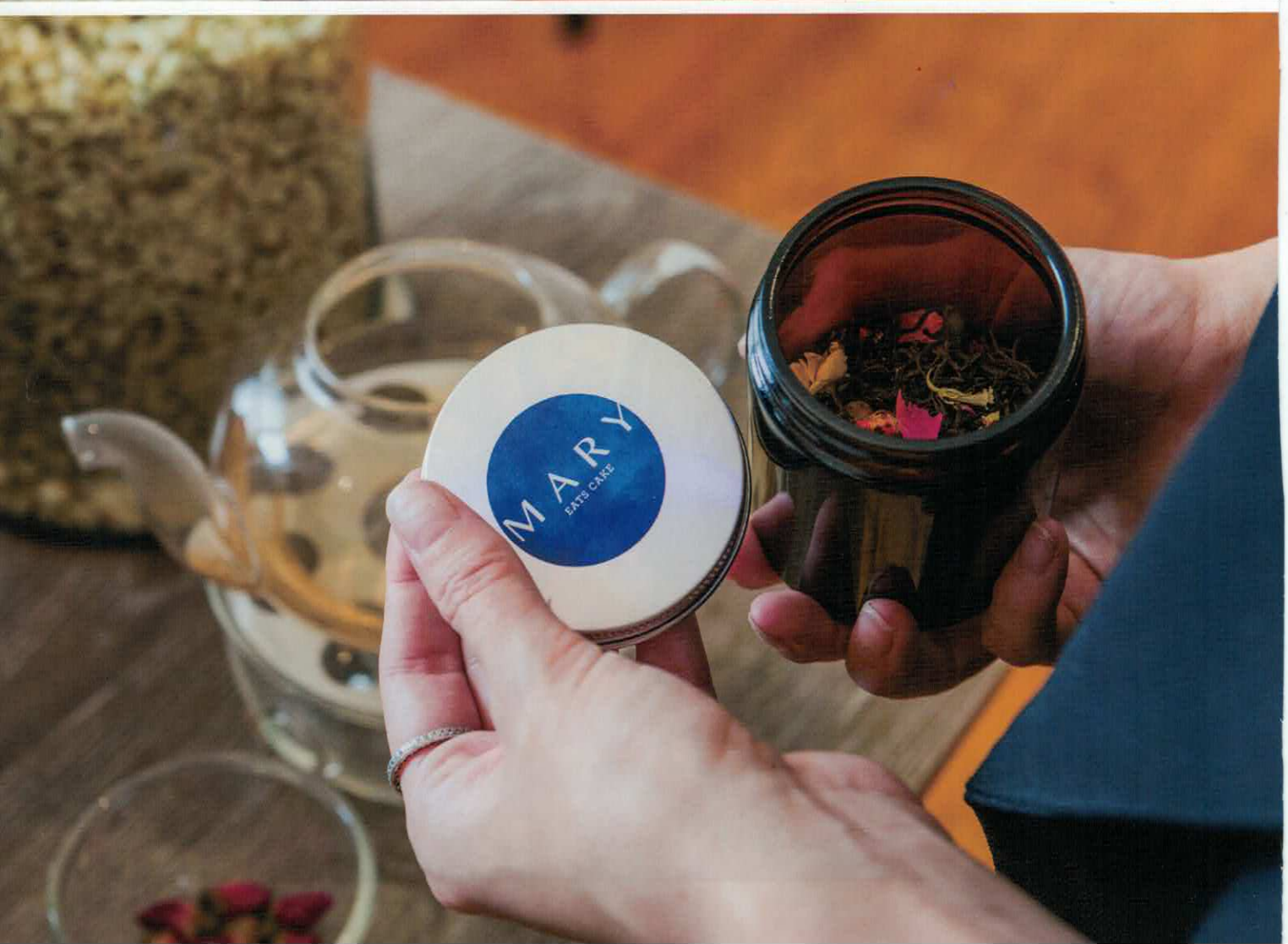
Sarah is also excited to create new ways tea can be connected – from paddock to pot – with the fabulous food and beverage of the Yarra Valley. From using locally grown ingredients in the Mary Eats Cake kitchen – a

lemon myrtle infused tea enhances the homemade lemon curd in a lemon meringue pie – to collaborations with local distillery Four Pillars Gin creating both teas to enhance cocktails, and blending special teas that become even more fabulous with a carefully selected touch of gin for their Gin High Tea. "Every cup has a little story to tell – tea is always about mood and moment!"

And as for the iconic 'Mary', she is a reference to Marie Antionette and her famous quote "Let them eat cake", but she is also the 'keeper' of the business and a mixture of Sarah and Jess. "We often ask 'What would Mary like?' when we taste-test new cake and tea combinations or make business decisions. She's our go-to who isn't afraid to be herself, get a little meringue on her face, or lick the bowl, but she will also lift her pinky finger for a cup of tea when she feels like it. That's the essence of the tea experience I want everyone to enjoy." ■

"I've always loved teas. Every day I have one really good coffee and at least twenty cups of tea."







SARAH SAYS TO MAKE A PERFECT CUP
OF TEA THE RECIPE IS
DOSE + TIME + TEMPERATURE!

1. Always put the milk in the cup first and add the tea slowly. This ensures the fat molecules in the milk don't split and gives the tea a creamy texture.
2. Different styles of tea steep best at different temperatures usually between 75 and 95 degrees – never use boiling water.
3. Steep times are important – maximum steep time for a delicate green tea is just 2-3 minutes, more robust teas a little longer. Remove the leaf before pouring.
4. The water you use influences flavour so use pure filtered or spring water when you can.
5. A fine-lipped cup is the perfect way to enjoy your tea. Find a special vintage fine bone tea cup for home and enjoy.
6. Tea puritans will have specific pots and cups for specific types of tea so there is no cross-contamination.

Mary Eats Cake
www.maryeatscake.com.au
Australian Tea Master
www.australianteamasters.com.au

