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## Suited to a Tea

By [Michele Laudig](#)

Published: December 20, 2007

Can you believe I wrote my college admissions essay about how coffee was going to take over the world?



Jackie Mercandetti

Hip to sip: Fresh-brewed tea goes well with chef Christopher Jinette's creations at The Urban Tea Loft.

**Subject(s):** [tea in the Valley](#)

Me neither. But somehow it worked. Not only did I get into the university of my choice, my prediction came true — sort of, at least. In 1992, I was a true bean believer. This was back in the days before there was a Starbucks in every neighborhood, back when I thought I was cool for wearing a "Coffee is god" button on my black leather jacket. Coffee was a

beverage with an attitude, suitable for beat poets and existential philosophers and punk rockers.

Tea, on the other hand, struck me as a genteel liquid quietly imbibed by British aristocracy or Buddhist monks. I thought of it as a stay-at-home drink, and was too antsy for it. Never mind that before adolescence, I'd spent countless childhood afternoons sipping tea with my grandma.

The truth is that while adolescence triggered a longtime love of a good dark roast, I've been a tea fanatic for even longer.

Don't tell my punk rock friends. Or maybe you should. Funny how something so timeless and homey could suddenly become hip. (As usual, we're behind other cities in this trend, but better late than never.) Until recently, tea wasn't something you went out for — except, perhaps, a fancy high tea at a posh resort. But the newest crop of tea-centric spots in the Valley plays on the popularity of coffee, offering a variety of exotic brews with cafe-style lunch menus, plenty of pastries, and the kind of atmosphere where hanging out is encouraged.

**The Urban Tea Loft 11 West Boston Street, Suite 2, Chandler 480-786-9600, [www.urbantealoft.com](http://www.urbantealoft.com) Hours: Tuesday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Saturday, 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.**

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**"Scottsdale's Premier Laser"**

Open just a couple of weeks, The Urban Tea Loft is the newest on the scene. And so far, it's very promising.

First off, I like the setting. It's part of San Marcos Plaza, Chandler's own walkable square of shops and restaurants. (Jeez, this burb's got more dining action than any single block in downtown Phoenix.) There's a small patio out front, and comfy chairs and tables inside, arranged next to shelves of packaged tea, teapots, and accessories. The vintage vibe of high tin ceilings is complemented with warm, contemporary décor.

The tea menu, presented along with the lunch menu, doesn't appear to be all that expansive, although it turns out that any of the teas displayed on the retail shelves can be ordered to drink on the spot. Actually, there are dozens of choices. I took my sweet time drinking a small pot of vanilla-scented tea, thanks to one of those insulated plastic tumblers that makes the liquid look like it's suspended in midair. Even the last sip was piping hot.

Classic high-tea sandwiches, like cucumber or watercress, are an option here, as are scones, croissants, and biscuits. Mostly, though, the menu comprises casual lunch fare, including homemade soup, baked potatoes with a variety of toppings, salads, and sandwiches, including a hefty one with aioli, lettuce, tomato, and thick slices of roasted turkey on toast, with a sesame-tinged side of red cabbage and carrot slaw.

Of all the spots I visited, this is the one I'd come back to even if I wasn't in the mood for tea.

**Tea Dreams Modern Tea Room & Boutique (in the Gilbert Town Square) 1090 South Gilbert Road, Gilbert 480-497-6633, [www.shopteadreams.com](http://www.shopteadreams.com) Hours: Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.** According to an employee at Tea Dreams, the place has already become a popular bridal shower destination in its four months of existence. That's no surprise — this is the girliest eatery in town.

Walk through the front door, and you're standing in a trendy boutique, surrounded by stylish tops, shoes, aromatherapy candles, and accessories. The restaurant is on the other side of the wall that partially divides the space.

Bubblegum pink and glossy brown banquettes line the dining room, which is sparsely decorated, except for crystal mini-chandeliers above each table. There's no sign that says "Women only," although pink napkins and plates send the message loud and clear.

A handful of quiches and salads make up half the menu. But \$15 for a mediocre honey Dijon chicken salad topped with half-warm meat and not-ripe avocados? No, thanks. That said, a generously sized "small" pot of tea is worth the three bucks, and the apricot/white chocolate/pecan scones are tasty. I don't see myself coming back here for a meal, although it would make a fine pit stop for tea and sweets.

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**Tea Infusion Tea Bar and Café (in the Tempe Marketplace) 200 East Rio Salado Parkway, Tempe 480-967-1141 Hours: Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.** It was downright refreshing to find this little indie business tucked amid the chains at the new Tempe Marketplace.

Don't expect a full-on bohemian refuge from corporate America, though. Tea Infusion takes plenty of cues from that slick coffee behemoth Starbucks, from streamlined seating to a shelf of colorful teapots for sale. Wi-Fi service gives customers reason to linger, but if you're too busy to savor a whole pot of organic peach rooibos or smoky lapsang souchong black tea, get your brew to go in the kind of disposable cup usually used for lattes.

The modest list of sandwiches, salads, and pastries won't lure anyone for its originality, but in the midst of a shopping spree, a Tuscan chicken and artichoke sandwich on ciabatta bread, and perhaps some homemade soup, would be fortifying.

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In any case, the tea is worth a try, if only because there are nearly 70 kinds on hand.

**Subject(s):** [tea in the Valley](#)

**Mandala Tea Room 7027 East Fifth Avenue, Scottsdale 480-**

**423-3411, [www.mandalatearoom.com](http://www.mandalatearoom.com) Hours: Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. (lunch), 5 to 9 p.m. (dinner, open 'til 10 p.m. Friday); Saturday and Sunday brunch, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (kitchen open 'til 10 p.m. Saturday); Sunday, 2 to 6 p.m.** Two-year-old Mandala Tea Room deserves credit for kick-starting the trend locally. Tucked into a low-slung strip in Old Town, just off Goldwater Boulevard, the laid-back atmosphere here is a far cry from the fussy trappings of traditional English tea.

Instead, this is a modern take on the tea salon, with colorful

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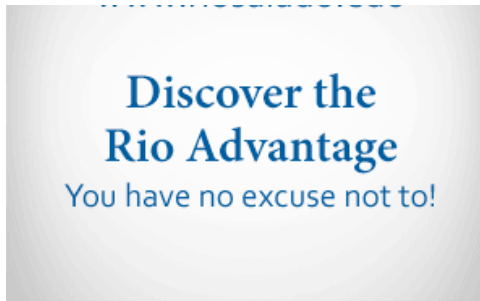
mandala paintings and a cozy nook near the front, where you can sit on pillows behind a wooden screen. There's plenty of seating for lounging outside, and next door, the Mandala Apothecary offers organic skin-care products and holistic spa treatments.

As far as tea goes, I found Mandala to have one of the better selections around, with a few dozen varieties of black, green, white, oolong, and herbal.

It's expertly served, too, with a digital timer to go along with your French press pot of Darjeeling or Japanese sencha.

Meanwhile, the menu is completely vegan, organic, and shamelessly New Age-y, although a hip, friendly staff helps tone down the righteousness. Depending on how you order, Mandala could be on the pricey side, too. (Beware the \$9 breakfast waffle, which is so tasty you'd probably order seconds, if money were no object.) But for a snack or light meal – some curry tofu scramble, a helping of vegan berry crisp, or, perhaps, a plate of fresh fruit with granola – the food here is a fine accompaniment to a pot of tea.

Bottoms up!



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