



Tea at the Palace

Leave aside the humdrum snatched cappuccinos and mass-produced ugly pies that are the ubiquitous afternoon fare at cafes all over the island, and go instead to that glamorous oasis, Palazzo Parisio in Naxxar, for tea as it is meant to be.

Cake recipes: Christiane Ramsay Scicluna, Baroness of Tabria

Photography: Palazzo Parisio

Text: Daphne Caruana Galizia

I can say with certainty that Palazzo Parisio is my favourite place for breakfast, pre-lunch drinks, lunch, cocktails, dinner and now, at last, tea in the afternoon. Real tea, proper tea, tea with tiny bite-sized sandwiches made with classic fillings like egg and cheese and cucumber. Tea with minuscule perfect cakes on one of those three-tier porcelain stands that all we 1980s brides received as gifts and then promptly gave away again. How many of us entertained with formality in the afternoon, rather than with a hasty mug and a couple of teabags, amid the morass of screaming babies, weeping friends, and tasks left unfinished?

But oh, what bliss this is. Those who know me well know that I have an absolute horror of ugly places. In an ugly room or a shabby restaurant, where things are off-kilter, service is offhand and the table gracelessly set, I will become exceedingly sulky and bad-tempered. I'm a visual person, and ugliness, gracelessness, lack of attention to detail, absence of style - all those things are as offensive and intolerable to me as a sonata played right off-key is offensive to a musically literate, aural person.

That's why I'm invariably happy and at ease at Palazzo Parisio, in the gardens, in the restaurant, in the gloriously glamorous and high-camp but in the most effortlessly stylish of ways - cocktail bar, or eating naughty sandwiches and cakes off beautiful plates, with superb cutlery and drinking tea out of Limoges cups that I so badly want to take home with me and adopt as my own. They're in assorted colours, and with little Chinese motifs painted on them. They are anything but boring. They are special. They are so special that Christiane Ramsay Scicluna, whose sense of style pervades the place and who has been the key driver in turning this magnificent piece of family property into Malta's most prestigious restaurant, tells me that she has to resist the urge to rush into the kitchen and insist on washing them up herself. Most times, she doesn't resist the urge. She dashes in and washes those cups.

Matty Cremona chooses jasmine tea. I take rose. Matty holds out her cup, so that the scent of what I am missing wafts me back to some place in the past, to some unremembered garden and hot August nights thick with the scent of those



powerful little white flowers. My rose tea is equally lovely. This is a departure for me: I am a black tea with milk kind of girl, builder's tea, dark and strong and sweet with sugar.

Christiane Ramsay Scicluna talks about the tea and how she has chosen it, and I see that she has carried her search for perfection in the details even into this area. The tea is the best there is, brought in from Ronnefeldt, where Palazzo Parisio has been ranked as a VIP client. Ronnefeldt was founded as a tea wholesaler in Germany in 1823 and went on to become a tea specialist for the international hotel and hospitality industry. More recently, it has begun to sell its teas - more than 200 of them - to private customers. Those who fall in love with their Assam while taking tea at the palace can buy some of their own, to take home with them.

No teabags are permitted at Palazzo Parisio's Café Luna. Staff have been trained to make tea properly, using leaves and a pot, brewing it for the correct amount of time. When the pot is set down before you, you are told that it has been brewed for four minutes, three minutes - it is strained so that it doesn't stew.

Matty and I struggle against the urge to eat all the cakes and sandwiches. Fortunately, we are not lettuce-leaf sorts and do not police each other. I eat all the scones, and feel just like a girl taken out of school for the afternoon for a special treat. This sort of teatime spread, the environment at once timeless and contemporary, provokes that sort of sentiment. Teatime spreads are for spoiling. They're for little piggies who eat all the scones and even scoop rich jam onto them.

Now that the weather is fine, and tea can be taken in the beautiful garden, there're even more spoiling involved. Sitting out there, with our porcelain cups and our cakes and sandwiches from a bygone and much-missed era, we might as well be a whole world away from the packed coffee-shops of our crowded town centres, where things are shabby and noisy, people are loud and badly dressed, your coffee arrives with streaks down the side of the cheap white catering-standard cup, and tea is a bag shoved straight into a cup with hot water poured on top and the tag hanging over the side.

I love this place. And I absolutely adore the cakes, which are made to Christiane Ramsay Scicluna's recipes, three of which we are giving here. →

Recipes from Palazzo Parisio's kitchen



Pineapple and carrot cake

You will need:

175G OF FINELY GRATED CARROTS • 100G OF CHOPPED WALNUTS
450G OF CRUSHED OR CHOPPED PINEAPPLE (IN A CAN) • 300G OF NORMAL FLOUR
175G OF LIGHT BROWN SUGAR • ONE TEASPOONFUL OF BAKING SODA
TWO TEASPOONFULS OF BAKING POWDER • 175G OF OIL • THREE EGGS (WHOLE)

For the cream filling, you will need:

250G OF PHILADELPHIA CHEESE (SOFTENED) • 110G OF BUTTER (SOFTENED)
350G OF ICING SUGAR • ONE TEASPOONFUL OF VANILLA EXTRACT

Put the carrots and walnuts in the bowl of an electric beater. Drain the chopped pineapple and add it to the rest of ingredients in the bowl, then add the sugar and eggs. Beat them together. Sift together the flour, baking soda and baking powder. Add this to the mixture in the bowl then add the oil and beat thoroughly until well blended.

Pour this into a 16cm baking tin. Preheat the oven to gas mark 4/170C and bake the cake for 50 to 60 minutes, until it has risen well and a skewer inserted in the centre comes out clean.

To make the frosting and filling: *In a bowl beat the Philadelphia cream cheese with the softened butter, icing sugar, and vanilla essence until you obtain a smooth cream. Spread this over the cake and decorate with mini marzipan carrots.*

Pear and ginger cake

You will need:

SIX EGGS • SIX PEARS (DICED AND PARED) • 200G OF BUTTER • 350G OF SUGAR
400G OF FLOUR • TWO TEASPOONFULS OF BAKING-POWDER
ONE TABLESPOONFUL OF POWDERED GINGER
100G OF DICED CRYSTALLIZED GINGER

Thoroughly beat together the butter and sugar, so that the sugar crystals are broken down. Gradually add the eggs. Beat the mixture until it is pale and fluffy. Sift the flour, baking powder and powdered ginger and add it to the egg, butter and sugar mixture.

Remember always to fold in the dry ingredients correctly. This will help your cake to have a light consistency. To this mixture now add the finely chopped crystallized ginger and the diced pears. Place the entire mixture into a large cake tin. Slice another pear and set it on top of the raw mixture in a fan like manner. Preheat the oven to gas mark 4/170C and bake the cake for about one hour. Push a skewer through the centre and if it comes out clean, the cake is done.

Moist chocolate cake

You will need:

250G OF 70% DARK CHOCOLATE, PREFERABLY LINDT • EIGHT EGGS (SEPARATED)
180G OF SUGAR • 50G OF FLOUR • 125G OF BUTTER
ICING SUGAR (TO SPRINKLE ON TOP OF THE FINISHED CAKE)

Melt the chocolate and the butter in a bain marie until you obtain thick cream-like texture. Separate the yolks from the whites of egg. Beat the whites until you reach thick peaks and remember to add a pinch of salt. In another bowl, mix the egg yolks together with the sugar until you obtain a pale yellow thick ribbon-like consistency. The mixture must be practically white in colour. Add the mixture to the whites of eggs and fold in. Next, add the warm chocolate and butter mixture and fold in gently until you obtain a light mousse. To conclude, sift the flour into the mixture and fold it in very lightly in order to keep the raw mixture fluffy. Preheat the oven to gas mark 3/160C. Butter and flour a 25cm-diameter shallow, spring-form, cake tin, pour in the mixture, and bake it in a pre-heated oven at gas mark 3/160C for 25 minutes. This cake needs to remain moist and therefore doesn't need to pass the skewer test. When cool, sprinkle it with icing sugar and serve it. It is perfect served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. ■

Palazzo Parisio's Café Luna is open for lunch and for afternoon tea every day of the week, including Sunday. It is open for dinner from Wednesday to Saturday. The bar, Luna di Sera, opens Wednesday through to Saturday, too. For reservations, ring 21 412 461.