



“A girl that worked for me was from up north and loved hot tea, so we started going to tearooms. And it kind of gets in your blood when you start doing it, and then you start looking for tea rooms everywhere you go.

We would go out and have an afternoon tea wherever we went: little finger sandwiches, and of course the scones, and different kinds of courses to go with it. It's relaxing, it's fun—a little different than just the typical lunch.

I was working for the state at the time, helping kids with delays find services to help catch them up. I was also catering out of my kitchen. I thought I could keep doing both and open a tearoom when this place literally fell into my lap.

When this place came open, a friend of mine told me about it. We had started looking when we got back from vacation, and she called me and said, “The bagel shop's moving—that'd be perfect for you.” And it was. Meant to be. God's hands were in a lot of things along the way, and still are.

This place was the perfect size—not too overwhelming to walk into. Because it had been a bagel shop, I figured I could just walk in and get it open without having to do a whole bunch to it, because I wouldn't have been able to afford that.

We opened on May 3rd, 2000. We just celebrated our 25th year.

We do two things. The first one is the Traditional Tea—it's a four-course tea. You start out with your beverage, and then a sort of finger sandwich, scones and tea bread, and dessert. The first thing is savory, and then everything else is sweet. The other one is a six-course tea—it's everything I just mentioned, plus miniature quiche and fruit and cheese. That breaks up all the sweets just a touch. It's a ton of food, both are a lot of food.

We don't do it on tiers like a lot of tea rooms do. We do lunch at the same time, and we like for everything to come out of the oven hot, so we bring it out in courses. We're back there cooking your scones—which we do for lunch, too. We have a cream scone and a pecan scone, and they both come with our Devonshire cream and lemon curd. We make all of those here.

Then we have the lunch menu. A lot of the stuff on the menu are things I grew up with, like the tuna puff—I know that recipe is at least 50-something years old. Not everything on the menu is from my mom's recipes, but a lot is.

We make all the teas here. We have a strawberry tea, a peach tea, and a mint tea. The unsweet teas would be the nasty ones I do for the Yankees that stop in. I did go rogue one time and mixed the peach and the mint together—and it was one of the best decisions I've made. My mama and daddy thought I was absolutely crazy doing this in Florence, South Carolina—bringing a tearoom. But Florence has a history with tea rooms. During World War II, there was a tearoom down in the next block called the Blue Bird Tea Room, and they did it to make money for the war effort. The money left over after the war ended went to establish our museum. Not a lot of people know that, and I've got a piece of the original china from it.

I worked downtown in high school and college. Two doors down was a building that was eight stories tall—the Trust building. There was a shoe store underneath it that I worked at forever. So, I was never afraid down here, but everybody else was afraid back then.

But I never saw problems. Downtown was part of my heart, part of my history. I'm close to it. I believed in it.

25 years later, there are more people, more people out walking, walking around at night, sitting outside.

There were two times I cried. The first Florence After Five, I walked across the street and saw all these people standing in the dirt lot of where the old hospital used to be.

And it felt like other people believed in it, too. That I wasn't the only one, that other people believed that this beautiful community is real—that they wanted it as much as I do. I just stood there and cried.

And then the other was, we went out to eat one night, and it was nine o'clock at night, and we were walking back, and people were still on the street.

Who'd have thought?

I love the people of Florence. They put out strength when they need to, and come together when they need to. During COVID, my customers took care of me. We had to close the inside and just work outside. They were so afraid I would close. But that's what the people of Florence do—if there's a problem, they're going to take care of you.

We have a good city."

—Laurie Crouse, Top Hat Special Teas