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TICKET

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A taste for tea

New wave of shops respond to growing appreciation of beverage's finer qualities

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Susan Peterson's operation is a good example. She opened Teaberry's Tea Room in downtown Flemington in 2005. She serves tea in the afternoon and sells loose tea and accessories in her adjoining shop. Her clientele also comes for lunch and a limited Saturday dinner menu. On Sundays and Mondays, she welcomes private groups of 10 or more, but Teaberry's is closed to the general public.

"I knew enough to know that what I was doing was creating an ambience," Peterson says. "People cannot be rushed. I tell people Starbucks helped me a lot because I wanted to be everything they aren't. I just wanted the place to be a refuge. There are no paper cups, biscotti or tie-in marketing of CDs at Teaberry's. Peterson's place is cozy and welcoming, but she knows it's not too frilly to scare away male customers.

"I have a group of attorneys that come here regularly for lunch," Peterson says, "Men are coming usually with a girlfriend, or mother or sister."

Peterson also has tea parties for children 10 and younger.

"We do a lot of birthday parties," Peterson says. "I also see a lot grandparents bringing grandchildren. I was puttering around and I heard Grandma telling a grandchild, 'Now you put your napkin in your lap. Then put your teaspoon behind your cup.' She was teaching her. I love it when we get in four generations at once."

Peterson says white tea is her biggest seller. The tea has the lowest caffeine content and the highest amount of antioxidants. Perhaps Peterson of Teaberry's may have hit on a key reason that more people are seeking out tea and the places it's served. "I think a lot of people are trying to find their third place - the place that's not home or work where they can relax without distractions. I want to stress that my place is not stuffy, but relaxed and comfortable. People feel at home.