

There is still time for Afternoon Tea Service before the Queen Elizabeth Hotel makeover

By Mike Cohen

With a major \$140 million renovation project planned for Montreal's preeminent downtown hotel, there are plenty of reasons to spend some time at Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth before it closes for 11 months in mid-June.

Presently, the history of the hotel is being celebrated one decade per month. In February, the 60s were featured while March is reserved for the 70s. There is an exhibition in the lobby, a Wall of Fame highlighting staff members' most marking moments, special items on the menus, cocktails from the different eras and more.

For years I have wanted to dine at Le Montréalais Bistro-Bar, a favourite of the downtown crowd for its tantalizing menu featuring sunny Mediterranean cuisine, popular Sunday Brunch and refined Afternoon Tea service. In fact, it is the latter that particularly appealed to my family after having first experienced it less than two years ago when in London, England.

The tea experience at Le Montréalais restaurant takes on a festive ambiance! The Royal Delight Afternoon Tea costs \$35, including a flute of Orpailleur Brut sparkling white wine. It is \$25 each minus that feature. Tea Service takes place Monday to Saturday from 2:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from 3:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.

According to legend, one of Queen Victoria's (1819-1901) ladies-in-waiting, Anna Maria Stanhope (1783-1857), known as the Duchess of Bedford, is credited as the creator of afternoon tea-time. Because the noon meal had become skimpier, the Duchess suffered from a "sinking feeling" at about four o'clock in the afternoon. At first the Duchess had her servants sneak her a pot of tea and a few breadstuffs. Adopting the European tea service format, she invited

friends to join her for an additional afternoon meal at five o'clock in her rooms at Belvoir Castle. The menu centered around small cakes, bread and butter sandwiches, assorted sweets, and, of course, tea. This summer practice proved so popular, the Duchess continued it when she returned to London, sending cards to her friends asking them to join her for "tea and a walk in the fields." The practice of inviting friends to come for tea in the afternoon was quickly picked up by other social hostesses.

Tea service starts by being seated in the very comfortable Le Montréalais dining room. Maitre `D Jacques Marmoud showed us to a comfortable second floor table. There is a nice variety of tea choices available. To assist us in the selection, our server Veronique brought over a large tray with about a dozen options. By sharing the scent of each one our party narrowed down the choice to Buckingham Palace (a favorite tea with medium body, delicate Earl Grey, jasmine notes, and a bright golden coppery color), Vanilla Chai (an invigorating and subtle, lightly spiced Indian tea enhanced with Madagascar vanilla and a candied cardamom finish) and the Fairmont Earl Grey Organic (a very aromatic bergamot Earl Grey; a classic blend that is piquant and refreshing, stemming from the long leaf, high grown Ceylon tea).

After enjoying our glasses of sparkling wine, the tea arrived in fine bone china teapots. This was followed by the traditional three level cookie stand containing the absolutely delicious finger sandwiches (turkey, smoked salmon and cucumber), to die for fresh scones (with Devonshire cream and assorted jams) and dessert (a macaron, a chocolate mousse and a custard cream pastry). This is not a service offered in too many places in Montreal. It represents a truly "fun" dining experience.



A look at the delicious Le Montréalais Afternoon Tea Service selections

For children aged 12 and younger, there is a choice of herbal tea or hot chocolate. For Tea Service, reservations are recommended by calling 514-954-2261.

Fairmont Queen Elizabeth – the renovation project

As for the renovation project, a grand reopening is set for June 2017. All of the common areas and about 500 guest rooms will be ready for the celebrations marking the 375th anniversary of Montreal and the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation. The remainder of the rooms will be completed by December 2017.

"This transformation will mark the hotel's return as Montreal's leading business destination and preferred venue for international events and global business conferences," said Daniel Fournier, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Ivanhoé Cambridge. "We are extremely proud to invest in downtown Montreal, our economic, commercial and cultural heart. This project is an exceptional opportunity to innovate and to write a new chapter in the history of our great city."

Kevin Frid, president of the luxury hotel brand's parent company FRHI Hotels & Resorts, said: "Ivanhoé Cambridge is a trusted and committed partner and we look forward to working closely with them on this very exciting revitalization project. From royal visits and John and Yoko's Bed-in to being a key meeting place during F1 celebrations, Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth has a history unlike any other hotel in the city. We look forward to adding to the hotel's remarkable legacy by restoring and renovating this landmark building for future generations to enjoy."

After its transformation, the hotel will offer an innovative business campus developed by the creative teams at Sid Lee. This will include a set of interconnected and accessible public meeting and multifunctional spaces

where businesspeople will be able to engage in creative, collaborative and innovative experiences.

The hotel will offer an array of impressive restaurants and bars, as well as an urban market that will be unique in downtown Montreal. Its new open spaces will host varied cultural and commercial events and activities featuring a variety of programming. Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth will continue to be, along with Place Ville Marie, the epicentre of Montreal's underground city shared by more than 19 million people a year.

Ivanhoé Cambridge and its partner Fairmont Hotels and Resorts chose to execute the work over as short a period of time as possible to minimize the impact on the hotel operations, its guests and the city. The closing will impact more than 600 employees, the vast majority of whom will be laid off temporarily for a period of about nine to 12 months. A small transition team, consisting of sales, marketing and essential services personnel, as well as outside catering services, will be maintained.



A unique kitchen marketplace will serve guests and residents of the nearby condo towers

It is estimated that ultimately, the new concepts will lead to an increase in the total number of employees at the hotel. A comprehensive personalized support program has been implemented to ease the transition. Employees will have the opportunity to be relocated to other area hotels and establishments managed by the Fairmont brand. With the new experiences of all kinds to be introduced at the property, a major employee training program will be undertaken by Fairmont during the final months of the work.

To learn all about the renovation project see this video www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExYLgX3jk48