How to Host an Afternoon Tea Party

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Hosting an afternoon tea party, in summary:** Afternoon tea is a sequence not a buffet: get the tea right first, then serve savoury sandwiches, scones, then sweets in order. No tiered stand needed.

Hosting afternoon tea at home is organisation, not chef skill. This sits at the centre of the afternoon tea cluster beside afternoon tea etiquette.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

Hosting afternoon tea, at a glance

Element	The rule
Tea first	Get the tea right; it is the point, not a backdrop
Food in three	Savoury sandwiches, then scones, then sweet, in that order
The order	Savoury to sweet; it is a sequence, not a pile
Kit	No tiered stand needed; plates work very well
Quantities	Plan per person; generous but not wasteful

Get the tea right first

It is tea in the name, so get that right first. Serve a sturdy, milk friendly black brewed properly in a pot, plus a caffeine free herbal option for anyone who wants one. The tea is the spine of the occasion, not an afterthought, and it is worth more attention than the crockery. See what tea to serve.

The food, in three parts

The food arrives in three movements: finger sandwiches first, light and savoury; then warm scones with clotted cream and jam, the rich middle; then small sweets to finish. Small portions, fresh, crusts off. The order is not arbitrary etiquette but palate logic, savoury before sweet keeps the appetite moving the right way, with the substantial scones while people are still hungry and the richest things last. The famous cream-or-jam-first debate is purely regional and changes nothing but local pride, so do not stress over it. See the three-tier order.

The kit: no stand needed

No tiered stand is required: it is theatre, not a requirement, and ordinary plates serve the three courses just as well. A teapot, decent cups and three plates brought in sequence do the job, and presentation beats expensive china. Spend the effort on the tea and the scones, not the staging. See on a budget.

Timing and quantities

Serve around 3 to 4pm and allow about ninety minutes, brewing the tea fresh as guests sit rather than stewing it in advance. Plan quantities per head rather than by eye: roughly four to five sandwich fingers, one to two scones and two to three small sweet bites per person, with a generous pot share. Over-cater on bread rather than cake, and scale tea by the pot so there is always a fresh one coming rather than a cold one standing.

Make it ahead

Logistics are the easy part once you accept that afternoon tea is forgiving and mostly make-ahead. Sandwiches can be assembled and kept covered and chilled until just before serving, sweets are usually better made the day before, and only the scones really want to be warm and fresh, so on the day your job is brewing tea well and warming scones, not a kitchen marathon. A simple run of show, tea poured first, sandwiches out, scones warmed and brought while people are still on the savoury, sweets last, keeps the sequence intact with no formality. A relaxed host is itself part of the hospitality; guests remember warm scones and fresh tea, not whether the china matched.

What to buy

Get the tea right with a classic English Breakfast or another sturdy black tea, plus a caffeine-free herbal from Pukka. Browse the full tea shop for the rest.

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