

ST. THOMAS SOURCE

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BY DAVID KNIGHT JR. — AUGUST 2, 2015

@Work: Tea, Anyone?



[1]From the popular Chinese oolong to the more obscure South African rooibos, Judith Watlington-Edwin knows her teas.

“There are so many places that celebrate tea and its serving,” said the owner of E’s Garden Tea House and Things, gesturing to her collection of tea pots from around the world. “And we always associate tea with a little bit of sophistication.”

Mondays through Saturdays, Watlington-Edwin and her employee, Monique Maduro, can be found bringing that sense of sophistication to Garden Street. There they serve up a wide variety of teas and herbal blends, both steaming hot and ice cold, along with home-made sweets such as passion fruit cake and guava scones.

Watlington-Edwin opened E’s Garden Tea House and Things (the E is in honor of her mother, Elesá) in April after leaving her job at the University of the Virgin Islands, where she worked for 20 years, most recently as vice-provost of access and enrollment.

“I wanted to move away from academia,” she said. “Not that I didn’t like it. I just wanted to do something different, something creative.”

A three-week trip to China with friends in 2011 sparked some ideas about what to do next, Watlington-Edwin said. After visiting tea houses in seven different Chinese cities, and witnessing how passionate people were about the beverage and its service, she said she began to wonder if a tea house would be successful in the Virgin Islands, another traditional tea-drinking culture.

“I just fell in love with tea all over again,” she said.

Growing up on Palm Strade, not far from where E’s Garden Tea House and Things is today, Watlington-Edwin said she drank tea frequently during her childhood, including herbal remedies when she was ill.

“My grandmother always had us drink tea. If you had an ailment, she had a tea for that,” she said.

While planning her new business, Watlington-Edwin decided she wanted to emulate the apothecary look of the tea houses she had seen in China, while also serving teas native to the V.I. -- lemongrass, balsam, soursop – which she said technically fall under the category of herbals since they are not made from the *Camellia sinensis* plant.

The question was, where on St. Thomas would a tea house business have the opportunity to thrive?

The answer came when Watlington-Edwin looked into government incentives being offered to business owners in the territory’s designated enterprise zones, one of which is the area of Garden Street-UpStreet in Charlotte Amalie, Watlington-Edwin’s home turf. The goal of the enterprise zones is to re-inject some economic life into once-thriving areas of town.

[2]“The revitalization of the Garden Street area was one reason I wanted this to be here,” she said. “When I was growing up this was a vibrant area. I walked to Catholic School every day from kindergarten to 12th grade. I don’t like to see what has happened to it.”



By 2013, Watlington-Edwin had settled on a location for her tea house just a few steps away from Post Office Square. The building she chose, which had previously been divided into a grocery store and restaurant, is in a prime location to attract visitors and locals alike, she said, and it even has parking, a rarity in downtown Charlotte Amalie.

After two years of renovation work on the building, which was in rough shape in 2013, Watlington-Edwin now has a home for her dream business, and so far, she said, things have been going well.

“Tea is the second highest selling beverage in the world today after water,” she said, noting that many of the most populated countries in the world, including China and India, have tea-drinking cultures. But the beverage is also rising in popularity in countries not typically associated with tea, such as the United States, she said.

One reason that tea drinking is becoming more fashionable, she suggested, is that it is associated with health and wellness.

Although some teas that Watlington-Edwin serves have caffeine, her herbals and “bush teas” do not. She also keeps all of her teas, more than 30 varieties, sugar-free, although sweeteners are offered for those who want them.

Watlington-Edwin also sells packages of medicinal teas grown in Puerto Rico, which naturopathic doctors suggest can help treat asthma, hypertension, kidney problems and other disorders.

“A lot of our folks in the V.I. are still very interested in alternative medicine,” Watlington-Edwin said, although she is cautious to remind customers that she is not a medical doctor.

Apart from being a place to relax, and even heal, E’s Garden Tea House and Things has also been exhibiting works by local artists and hosting community events since its spring opening.

The work of St. Thomas painter Roy Hansen is on display at the moment, and in September Crucian artist Lucien Downes will be featured in the large portion of the tea house set aside as an exhibition space.

On the second Friday of every month, the tea house hosts the Rock Lounge spoken word and poetry open mic. Every Wednesday the business opens its doors to yoga classes with instructor Jane DiCola. Various other non-profits and organizations have also used the space.

And there’s more planned, said Watlington-Edwin.

“We’re thinking of a block party on Garden Street. We’re going to help host that with Economic Development Authority. And then we want to do an ice tea competition, get everyone to come together who thinks they make the best iced tea.”

E’s Garden Tea House and Things is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday.

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