

It's high noon for high tea as this afternoon treat gets a modern makeover

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Back in the day, afternoon tea in the summer meant a large Victoria sponge cake and a jug of ice cold orange squash on the lawn. But according to new research by MINTEL this quintessentially English tradition has grown up, as Brits take a new approach to high tea.

Indeed, new blends of better-for-you superfruit cordials with berries are giving conventional squash a run for its money*. Meanwhile, the large family cake has been squeezed out by smaller bitesize cakes, such as mini Bakewell tarts and Battenburg slices, as they mean we can now all enjoy a slice of high tea while out and about.

Brits have their cake and eat it

Sales of full sized cakes have remained stagnant at around Â£334 million for the last five years, while sales of small cakes grew by a sweet 28% between 2003 and 2007 to Â£767 million. We now spend well over twice as much on these individual cakes as we do on large cakes (compared to just one and half times back in 2003).

"While cakes have long been an everyday teatime favourite, today smaller cupcakes or slices are proving ever more popular," comments Harry Foster, senior consumer analyst at Mintel. "Brits are giving the time-honoured tradition of afternoon tea a new twist by making it a much quicker, healthier occasion. These small varieties are considered the better option, as there is not the same temptation of going back for seconds as there is with a large cake and they can also be eaten on the go."

Berry nice

Although cordials still account for only 3% of the market, their healthier image and premium quality has led to sales increasing by a juicy 50% between 2003 and 2007 to the value of Â£12 million. Over the same period, squash sales have declined 7% to Â£423 million.

"Traditional squash such as orange, lemon and blackcurrant have seen sales drop due to the rise in popularity of new cordial blends of fruit with so-called superfruits like pomegranates, blueberries and cranberries," comments Harry Foster.

Last year Mintel reported that another teatime tradition - the good old British cuppa, is under threat from the healthier, more exotic herbal teas. In fact, standard tea sales dipped 16% in the 4 years to 2006, while herbal teas increased by 55% over the same period to Â£37.5 million.

Looking to the future, teatime will continue to develop and evolve as Brits become more health conscious and time pressured. Manufacturers would do well to enrich cordials and even squash with antioxidants such as acai and goji berries. Meanwhile, fortifying cakes with omega-3 or energy boosting ingredients, positioning them as a sweet treat with added health benefits.

* Squash would typically require one part concentrate to four parts water, whereas a cordial would typically be one part concentrate to eight parts water.