

HATS OFF TO THE TEA MAKER

WHEN COVID CURTAILED HER MILLINERY
BUSINESS, POLLY SINGER IMMERSSED
HERSELF IN ANOTHER PASSION

Many Kentuckians know **Polly Singer** as one of the Commonwealth's most talented designers of couture hats. Her stunning creations have graced the heads of Kentucky Derby patrons, wedding guests and Easter service attendees for decades. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there wasn't much demand for hats, so Singer turned her attention to another passion—tea—about which she blogged.

"I'd been posting about tea online, and a lady called me from California. She said, 'Have you ever thought about doing tea etiquette?' " Singer recalled about the February 2021 conversation. The woman was **Nancy Hoogenboom**, the CEO of

Daily Etiquette, Southern California School of Etiquette & Protocol. "And I said, 'No, but it would be interesting.' I was stuck at home. There was a pandemic and an ice storm, and my Jeep was stuck in ice, so I couldn't go anywhere."

Singer, a devotee of afternoon tea parties, decided to dive into tea etiquette training. "We did it all via Zoom," she said. "[Nancy] looked at my table, and I had to present to her how I would serve tea. It was about 10 hours of training—very involved."

Singer became certified as an Afternoon Tea Etiquette Trainer and began doing presentations.

After posting online about tea etiquette, Singer was thrilled when central Kentucky restaurateur **Ouita Michel** contacted her around the same time. The owner of Midway's

Holly Hill Inn and other restaurants throughout the Bluegrass asked Singer if she might be interested in partnering in an afternoon tea at Holly Hill Inn. Michel mentioned that she loved tea, and that Holly Hill had done teas in the past, but they were incredibly labor intensive. "There are lots of little pieces" in hosting a tea, Singer explained. "There are the soup and the salad, the sandwiches and scones and the desserts—so there are a lot more plates, a lot more service."

The pair collaborated on a public afternoon tea at Holly Hill in April 2021. "The food was amazing; it was off the charts," Singer said. "[Ouita] was so encouraging about it ... I had gone through the pandemic and making hats with no events for people to wear them to. I had gone through a year and a half of being





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depressed. It was hard.”

The tea’s success snapped Singer out of the pandemic doldrums. “It was the first event for many people in a year and a half. So, people who attended were thrilled, and it was just so much fun to see people getting together, trying on hats, having tea,” Singer said about the get-together, which included her hats for sale.

THE MAKING OF A MILLINER

A native of Georgetown, Singer graduated from Scott County High School before attending Hollins

College in Roanoke, Virginia. In 1985, her senior year, she moved to New York City for an internship at Columbia Records. “I liked the music business, but I really missed working with my hands and being creative,” she said. “I worked as an assistant to the CEO, and I thought that I really liked this ... but I needed a creative outlet.”

While recuperating from a broken foot in the summer of 1993, Singer picked up a little straw hat and hot-glued some dried flowers to it. It was the beginning of her journey into millinery. “I grew up doing 4-H

sewing and then style shows,” she said. “I always loved sewing. My grandmother from Eubank [on the border of Pulaski and Lincoln counties] taught me how to sew.”

She enrolled in New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology and graduated with a degree in millinery.

Singer returned to her home state in 1998 and lived in Lexington, where she met her now-husband, **Keith**. The couple found an older house for sale in Georgetown and purchased the charming 1890 Victorian home in 2010.

NEW CREATIVE VENTURE

Singer has been a member of a local tea group since 2008. The tea aficionados meet monthly at a member's home to enjoy each other's company and an afternoon tea. "It's our little bonding time," she said. "Because tea is kind of an escape to me, by having a tea group or a friend over for tea, it's a special time."

While she was taking a neighborhood stroll in September 2021, a thought occurred to Singer: With her love of tea and hosting teas—and following the success of her collaboration with Michel—why not develop her own line of artisan teas? "I'm in a group of businesswomen, and I posted online, 'What do you all think of this?'" she said. The response was positive and encouraging.

Singer reached out to master tea blender, writer and historian **Bruce Richardson**, who owns Elmwood Inn Fine Teas in Danville, about working together. "I was looking at companies to work with. I always liked the quality [of the Elmwood Inn products], so I reached out to them and went down and did a tasting," she said. "[Richardson] is very talented. I wanted a Kentucky company, and I wanted somebody that had the quality."

"This has been such a fun collaboration," Richardson said. "Polly came to our shop in true Polly Singer fashion, wearing a long floral dress and an original Polly Singer couture camel color fedora. She tasted several tea blends to make sure the colors and tastes of the teas met her vision."

The Singer private-label teas are blended and packaged by the Elmwood Inn facility, with high-quality ingredients sourced from all over the world. Singer has a hand in blending the teas, custom tailoring them for specific events or hat designs. "Polly is lovely to work with," Richardson continued. "She has a very good eye for color and a sophisticated palate. She is always willing to try new blends and flavors. This collaborative project was a great way to blend two things that go hand in hand—hats and tea."

The artisan tea line became a reality the following January with the release of Singer's first teas. Her

creativity extends to them—not only in the flavors and blends, but also in their names, which are reflective of her background as a hat-maker. The initial blends released were Earl Grey's Top Hat, a classic black Earl Grey; Audrey's French Beret, a black tea similar to Earl Grey but light on the bergamot oil, with hints of vanilla and citrus; Jane's Blueberry Bonnet, a fruity herbal blend brimming with antioxidants; Belle's Blue Butterfly, a purple-hued herbal with butterfly blue pea flowers and notes of anise, licorice and fennel; and Rose's Cherry Cloche, a green tea blend with rose

petals and cherries.

In July, the teas were certified as Kentucky Proud products.

Singer plans to release new tea blends each season. For autumn, tea lovers can enjoy Paula's Pumpkin Fedora, a black blend with the rich fall flavors of cinnamon, apple, orange and, of course, pumpkin ('tis the season!); Charlie's Chai Cartwheel, a rooibos—or red tea—with ginger, cardamom and cinnamon; and Vanessa's Vanilla Halo, another rooibos with almond bits and calendula petals. The original lineup of teas remains available for purchase year-round.

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POLLY'S TIPS FOR HOSTING AN AFTERNOON TEA



1. Choose a theme and time. You can choose a holiday theme, such as Valentine's Day or Christmas. Other possible themes include **Queen Elizabeth II**, **Beatrix Potter**, Steampunk, Bridgerton and **Jane Austen**. A theme helps determine the type of tea you will serve as well as decorations, food and clothing options. Have fun with this!
2. Invite guests via email or text—or tap into your own creativity and design an invitation using the free online tool Canva at [canva.com](https://www.canva.com).
3. Make the tea a potluck. This allows your guests to incorporate their own unique food choices. For a Jane Austen tea with my group, a guest once brought syllabub, a dessert popular during the Regency period.
4. Ask guests to RSVP so that you can plan how many place settings you will need. I like to set the table the night before to make things easier on “tea day.”
5. Decide which china to use. I love to use matching plates and let guests select teacups from my collection. It makes the setting a bit whimsical.
6. Surprise everyone with a lovely floral arrangement. You can use a vintage teapot, a silver teapot or even a few teacups with the floral design.
7. Try to serve a show-stopping cake. If you don't have time to bake one, visit your favorite bakery! There is no rule that you must prepare all of the food.
8. Get everything ready one hour ahead of time so that you can relax and enjoy your tea and your guests.

As **Maya Angelou** said, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” As a hostess, the most important thing is that all your guests feel valued and loved. Afternoon tea is a time of R&R (renewal and relaxation) with others.



Hatmaker and tea maker Polly Singer and one of her stunning chapeaus



Singer pointed out that tea events are becoming more prevalent. “A lot of people are doing bridal teas or birthday teas,” she said. “I recently read an article about a tea as kind of the new happy hour, because a lot of people don't drink or are watching how much they drink.”

Afternoon teas provide an opportunity to gather with friends and to bring out some of the

dressy attire that may have been stashed away since the beginning of the pandemic. “I hear from women, ‘Oh, I really love to dress up, and I don't have the chance to.’ Or, ‘I'd really like to wear the hat because I don't often have the chance to,’” Singer said. “This is an event where people can dress up and have that avenue to do it, and be with a group of other people who are dressed up.” 🐾