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Tea Time

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Photo by Bonnie Schultz

Mike Carnevale and Mary Fritschie love tea and want you to love it too. It was their love of tea and spices that led them to open [infini-T Café](#) and [Spice Souk](#) in Palmer Square.

The café has been open for two and a half months,

occupying the below-ground former site of The Underground Café, and has garnered a positive reception from the Princeton community. Early on a Thursday morning, a new customer named AJ, who works at Little Taste of Cuba, entered the café to buy some tea because “my friend said it was the greatest place ever.”

In their past experience, Carnevale worked as a tax lawyer and CPA, a partner with [Deloitte](#), and Fritschie comes from a retail family that owned various retail businesses in New Jersey. She has also worked in venture capital in New York City. Together they traveled extensively in the Middle and Far East and decided to open the café because there was no existing tea house in Princeton, and they thought it would be fun for the community.

“[Tea is the second most consumed beverage](#) in the world, after water,” says Carnevale.

Throughout the Middle and Far East, tea’s popularity is everywhere. India is the largest producer of tea in the world, according to Carnevale, and when entering an Egyptian household, [tea is customarily the first beverage offered by the host](#). In much of Asia, a strong [tea culture](#) exists, with tea houses serving as social gathering places due to tea’s immense popularity

and religious significance.

Fritschie recalls with fondness her first backpacking trip to London as a young woman. She met some English ladies who invited her to stay with them and served her Assam tea. Years later, at age 47, she had the opportunity to go to Assam, India, and drink the same tea offered to her three decades earlier in England.

Fritschie and Carnevale sell organic and fair trade tea and spices, which is why they travel frequently to India. “We visited Assam,” says Fritschie, “not only to see the tea, taste it and obtain the best quality tea, but to see how the workers are treated. On my first trip to India, we visited a tea estate in Khongea. It is an example of a plantation where the pickers are treated well. I played with the children, they are in school, and there are hospitals. We made sure to see people at work and in their homes, and they were treated wonderfully. “

“There was such extreme poverty in Calcutta,” says Fritschie, “whereas in Khongea we saw colorfully-painted homes with nice neighborhoods. It is very important to us to promote a place that has sustainability and fair trade.”

Some of the more unusual teas sold at the café are [chrysanthemum tea](#) and [lavender](#) tea. The café also serves authentically-made [Turkish coffee](#), various kinds of [chai](#), vegetarian offerings and unusual edibles such as [tea eggs](#).

For cooks, there is a good variety of high quality and fair trade spices available for sale. Some of the spices, which include [star anise](#) and dried lemon, are not easy to find elsewhere, and Carnevale says that by eliminating a “middle man,” infini-T Café is able to offer spices that are considered luxurious (such as saffron) at reasonable prices.

The café also sells handmade crafts that Fritschie and Carnevale have brought back from their travels in Asia.

When designing the café, both Fritschie and Carnevale felt that the proper setting was vital for a tea house. Due to Fritschie’s efforts, the café has a bohemian, Middle Eastern souk ambiance. Carnevale says, “We wanted to make sure the international aspects of tea were displayed in the shop,” which includes serving specialty teas with a tea set appropriate for the country of origin. “For example, we serve Moroccan mint tea in an authentic Moroccan teapot, [mate](#) in a gourd cup, [matcha](#) in a matcha bowl, Hunan

tea in a clay tea pot, and English tea in an English teapot.” Other additions to the multicultural decor include a Moroccan screen, Afghan window shutter, Afghan/Iranian tribal tent ropes and a kiln bench from Turkey.

Along with selling teas and spices, infini-T Café hosts live music on Friday nights. [Andy Akiho](#), who has a PhD in music composition from Yale, is a post-doctoral student at Princeton University who performs original compositions on steel pans, and has been playing every Friday night. Other visiting musicians include special guests Akiho has invited from New York City, [Paul Hofreiter](#) from [Westminster Choir College](#), who plays upright acoustic bass, and on the café’s opening day, the Latin jazz band [Trio Velez](#) performed.

Princeton has warmly received infini-T Café since it opened, with a lot of repeat customers, according to Fritschie. One of their main challenges remains making the public aware that the café exists. After two and a half months, Fritschie feels that word is finally getting out about the café. “Every week,” says Fritschie, “more people are finding us, and we’re getting busier.”

About the Author »



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Bonnie Schultz has worked as a technology and marketing writer in the Boston area. She moved here in 1997 and is the mother of two boys. Since 2007, Bonnie has been blogging about food and community happenings in the Princeton area.

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