

T.REX's 'Bang a Gong' to teashop's bangers and mash

BY KAREN KRAMER

"I'm sorry to say this," Nicky Perry said boldly, "but the tea in this country is...*filth*. It is horrendous and it doesn't matter where you go."

If Perry has anything to do with it, that will change — at least in a small corner of Greenwich Village. In the middle of her small and quiet teashop — Tea and Sympathy on Greenwich Ave. — Perry, the owner, is anything but reserved and quiet. With her wild curly blond hair, her excited, animated voice and bold way of expressing herself, she is a strong presence against the porcelain teapots and china that are placed lovingly around the shop. Perry says everything with uninhibited enthusiasm and her eyes widen dramatically as she tells stories about her background in England, her involvement with British pop bands and her passion for introducing Americans to English tea and cuisine.

Nicky Perry grew up in southeast London but couldn't wait to get to New York.

"I was madly in love with Mark Bolen [of the rock group T.REX] and I used to read about him constantly being in New York," she said. "So from the age of 14, I became obsessed with reading about things like Max's Kansas City and C.B.G.B., and the whole New York wonderful-exciting-24-hours-anything-goes thing. And for my 21st birthday my mother brought me here for a week's holiday. I came back from that week's holiday and eight months later I returned to New York and I never left."

When Perry first came to New York she lived with a member of the British rock band Squeeze, which meant she had people to show her around and take her to parties. However, her fascination with rock stars and pop music was almost in direct rebellion to the classical music she grew up with.

"I had a classical music background and was not really allowed to listen to pop music," she recalled. "So what did I do? At 16 I started going out with pop stars."

Although Perry doesn't play music herself, her father, Simon Perry — who died 3 years ago — had a classical record label in London, Hyperion Records, that's often been called the most successful small record label in the world. He recorded songs originally written by an 11th-century nun, as well as other obscure music that had never before been recorded.

"He was a very passionate man and it was all about what he loved and what he knew," she said. "And he was in love with what he did. Money wasn't important. I'm very similar to that."

Although most Americans assume that the English know everything there is to ever know about tea, Perry says that while growing up, tea was something she took completely for granted. The first job she ever had was as the "tea lady" at the Stock Exchange in London — one of those charming English customs that Americans find so civilized.

"In England at all the big offices there is a lady, usually elderly, who goes around with a cart at 11 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon handing out cups of tea and chocolate biscuits. Can you image that happening here?" she said wide eyed. "Most of the ladies were wearing polyester uniforms, and I'm wearing skintight jeans rolled up to my knee and big platform boots and tons of makeup and all this wild hair. And all these stockbrokers thought it



Nicky Perry, owner of Tea and Sympathy on Greenwich Ave.

Villager photo by Elisabeth Robert

was the best thing since sliced bread."

In New York, Perry continued working as a waitress — at first as an illegal alien — and worked in every area of the city.

"After I'd been here for about a year I was out with some friends — from the B-52's actually — and one of them said, 'Don't you think it's interesting that there is no English restaurant here and there is nowhere to get a cup of tea AT ALL?' It was then that the light bulb went off and I became obsessed with the idea of opening an English tea shop."

Her father gave Perry a gift of a down payment to open the restaurant. At first there was a partner but "it was an utter disaster," she said. "He was the opposite of me and kept the purse strings tight." Four years later she made a deal to buy out the partner, and nearly all the money she made

for the next several years went to paying him off.

"But it didn't matter because this is mine," she said. "My husband is now my partner."

Starting a small business was tough and when Perry first began there was not enough ready cash to buy her food in bulk from the wholesalers. So she would go over to Balducci's market a few blocks away and buy groceries for the restaurant with her American Express card, bring them back herself to the restaurant and then cook them up. Now she gets her tea from England through a Massachusetts wholesaler.

Many of her patrons become part of the extended family and everything on the walls was given to her as gifts, mostly by customers.

"People come here and tell me stories that make me want to cry," she said with genuine tears forming. "There's a family who used to live in the Village and moved to Connecticut. They drive every Sunday rain, shine, sleet, snow with their two kids to have breakfast."

Perhaps it's Perry's involvement with them that keeps customers keep coming back. They also keep returning for sentimental reasons. There are not many establishments that can boast such a high rate of romance that has blossomed at Tea and Sympathy.

"We've had people get married in here over bangers and mash," she said, referring to the traditional English dish of sausages over mashed potatoes with gravy. "We've had people meet other people at the next table and end up getting married. Twelve of us who have worked here or still work here met their spouse here. My husband was a former customer who used to come twice a

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Nicky Perry

week. The chef met a waitress here and they now have three children. The other waitress who's been here 15 years met her boyfriend here. They've now got twins."

Perry says not everybody loves her, because she has strict rules. One of the rules is that no one may be seated unless their entire party is present.

"We have a VERY strict seating policy that *nobody, nobody, nobody* — not my mother, not my brother, not my cousin, not Rupert Evert or Minnie Driver or the Queen of England — could come in unless they were with their entire party," she said emphatically.

Although there exists a wider variety of English food than most Americans would believe, Perry decided to keep her menu basic, with tea being the biggest draw. Her hope was that Americans would learn to appreciate a good pot of tea. She feels strongly about the food as well, and says passionately, "As far as food, I was enraged by Americans telling me all the time that English food was appalling. It is not appalling; it depends where you go in England. It's like you can go to one hamburger place in New York and it's fabulous and you can go one block and the hamburger is horrible. It's about who's making it, and who cares about it. What I did was I did a very small, very basic, very classic British menu of things that Americans would understand like shepherd's pie, or apple crumble and custard."

Not wanting to offend anyone intentionally or unintentionally, Perry laughs at

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the English double-entendres that have made their way from the other side of the pond.

"I had been open about six months and in those days it was a big gay neighborhood," she recalled. "I did a survey of all my gay customers and I asked them if it would be offensive to make faggots, which is meatballs in England. And I put a sign in the window that said, 'British faggots available here.' I had people standing outside laughing their heads off because of that sign."

And then there is Spotted Dick.

"It's a sticky, spongy dessert made with raisins, which is the spots," she explained. "And Americans just think that is the bees' knees. They love it. At Christmastime people buy

Spotted Dick in cans for their friends' stockings."

Six years ago, an offspring of Tea and Sympathy was born. Perry's husband, Sean Kavanagh-Dowsett, manages the small restaurant next door called A Salt and Battery, created mainly to serve the much-asked-for fish and chips. Sean is the one who also drives the London taxi that the couple uses to deliver food. Perry says they make a good match.

"He's very computer literate which I am *not*. He's Mr. Fix-It, which I am *not*."

There is another member of the family that is keeping her grounded — her daughter Audrey, who turned 2 on Valentine's Day. Perry smiled warmly as she said, "Thank God she is nice and placid like her father. Because I am not placid." She emphasizes the strong feelings she has of how her child should see the world: "I want my child to grow up

in an environment that's mixed. I want her to go to school with people who have gay parents, black parents, German parents, Muslim parents. To think of everyone as equal. I believe that you should talk to the man who's making you your cup of coffee in the deli the same way you would talk to your local congressman or the movie star that you love."

Perry still keeps a connection with England by occasionally reading the British newspapers. But she is also very passionate about American politics, and several years ago became an American citizen. As one would imagine, her politics, like her personality, are far from conservative, and she cares deeply about what happens here.

Her voice relaxing for a moment, she said, "This is my home. And these are the people I am loyal to. I love Americans."