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Gypsy Tea Party Leaves Guests 'Tea Drunk'

Zhena Muzyka Celebrates 'Life by the
Cup'

By
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Several types of tea at a gypsy tea party to celebrate the publication of Ms. Muzyka's new book, 'Life by the Cup.' *Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal*

A dozen years ago, when Zhenya Muzyka was starting her line of teas, she didn't have much money to promote the fledgling brand, let alone pay the rent on her cabin in Ojai, Calif.

At the time, she was writing a book, still unfinished, about her gypsy grandmother. While researching the culture, "I took note that the gypsies would show up every time there was a birth or a wedding," Ms. Muzyka said. "They just showed up to celebrate everything."



Belly dancer Kaeshi Chai entertains guests at the event. *Ramsay de Giv* for *The Wall Street Journal*

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She had a vision to throw a gypsy tea party. "It made all the sense in the world to me," she said, "but I knew I had to generate a lot of energy."

Ms. Muzyka asked friends who were artists to bring their paintings, musicians to bring their instruments. She invited tarot-card readers and a belly dancer.

In a town of 8,000 permanent residents, Ms. Muzyka said, almost 300 people showed up. She sold \$1,000 of tea, which she had bagged herself, featuring her grandmother's sayings in the bags. As for the belly dancer, she couldn't pay her with cool, hard cash, so she paid her with tea.

"She still talks about it," said Ms. Muzyka. "She liked the tea so much she said, 'I'll take tea as payment anytime.'"

Over the years, as the tea company grew, she used gypsy tea parties to promote the brand at grocery stores, buyers' homes and trade shows. They usually featured tarot-card readers, tea-leaf readers, palm readers, a mixologist making tea cocktails, tea-infused desserts, perhaps a transformational work session, and, of course, a belly-dancing performance and lesson.

The practice fizzled as Ms. Muzyka's company grew and budgets tightened. The last one she threw in New York was in 2004 with Eve Ensler, when Ms. Ensler was performing in her show "The Good Body." Ms. Muzyka had 40 belly dancers of all shapes, sizes and backgrounds come and dance.

"The thing about belly dancing is it's so healing for women," Ms. Muzyka said. "The gypsy tea parties were a way that women could walk away from their stress."



Judith Curr, Maryam Banikarim and Zhena Muzyka *Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal*
Ms. Muzyka is promoting her new book, "Life by the Cup: Ingredients for a Purpose-Filled Life of Bottomless Happiness and Limitless Success," which has given her reason to resurrect the gypsy tea party. Recently optioned by Mark Wahlberg's production company for a potential television series, "Life by the Cup" is part-memoir, part-cookbook and part-self-help, detailing Ms. Muzyka's journey from that Ojai cabin to tea entrepreneurship.

"It's a crazy interesting feel-good story, that you could actually start a business around teas and belly-dancing," said Maryam Banikarim, the chief marketing officer of Gannett, who met Ms. Muzyka this spring at a book party for the actress Marlo Thomas. (Ms. Muzyka and Ms. Thomas share a publisher.)

After they spoke for a bit, Ms. Banikarim offered to host a gypsy tea

party for Ms. Muzyka at her West Chelsea home with her friend Judith Curr, the president and founder of Atria Books.

"It seemed like a good thing to do in late July," Ms. Banikarim said.

There were no tea cocktails at this gathering, only wine. "I didn't want to get everyone too drunk since this was only a two-hour affair," said Ms. Muzyka.

Instead, she brewed five high-quality teas for guests such as Lisa Shalett of [Goldman Sachs](#), Seventeen magazine editor Ann Shoket, Frida Torresblanco, a producer of the film "Pan's Labyrinth," and Soraya Darabi, the co-founder of [Zady.com](#).



The brew is served. *Ramsay de Givie for The Wall Street Journal*

"I always start with white teas, and then move into green and then black and then Pu'er," said Ms. Muzyka, referring to a particularly medicinal

kind of tea. "You get energy from the tea. By the second or third cup of tea, they're usually what I call 'tea drunk.' "

To accompany the buzz and "happy uplift" from the tea drinking, an expert did "roving readings" from tarot cards because there were so many guests, and, naturally, there was also a professional belly dancer. "If it was a three-hour affair, I would have had everyone else belly-dancing too," Ms. Muzyka said. (Only a few in the nearly all-female crowd obliged.)

Anyone can throw a gypsy party at home, Ms. Muzyka said, with or without tea and belly dancers. "Even if you live in a studio, you can make a big pan of paella, get some bottles of red wine and have some friends play music. It's really about leaving your troubles at the door."