In the Victorian era, a rite of passage for wealthy Britons was a grand tour of Europe, where young people could soak up the splendors of the classical world, read romantic poets, and sample gustatory delights unlike anything back home. But a decent cup of tea? On her tour, Isabel Cargill discovered that the brew in Italy—where it was considered a medication and sold in pharmacies—wasn’t up to snuff. So in 1893, she and a friend, Anna Maria Babington, packed their steamer trunks with hats, dresses, and crates of tea and embarked for Rome to fix that problem.

Fast forward 125 years, and while it’s easy to find a cuppa at cafes across Italy, Babingtons Tea Rooms is still serving up pot after pot at the bottom of the Spanish Steps. The founders “were quite brave, very modern, and independent to dash off to a foreign country where they knew nobody,” says Chiara Bedini, who runs the teashouse with her cousin Rory Bruce, both of them among Cargill’s 13 great-grandchildren. “Isabel was abandoned at the altar in England,” Bedini says, “but she built a new life here.”

The bustling eatery is a testament to the will of the founders’ descendants to keep the business in the family through four generations and two world wars. Every few decades, one or two heirs step up to manage the teashop and retail space in the restaurant where they sell 100-plus varieties of tea along with ancillary products such as mugs, place mats, and bags with the restaurant’s feline logo. Next up is a line to sell in specialty stores abroad, and maybe tearooms in other cities.

Among the family’s successful quirks is its knack for keeping its British-Italian identity. Babington had no children, but Cargill married an Italian artist. Their only daughter married a count and had four children—including Bedini’s father and Bruce’s mother—all of whom found spouses in Britain. “Our generation has mixed things up a bit,” Bruce chuckles. “Chiara’s children are Russian-Italian-English, and mine are Italian-Scottish with a touch of Belgian.”

One of the challenges has been deciding who will oversee the tearooms and how to divide the spoils. Bruce recalls family members using the cash register as an ATM and says there was a time when nobody wanted to work weekends. As Bedini and Bruce assumed leadership in the 1990s—eight other descendants still own stakes but aren’t directly involved in management—they made professionalizing the business their goal. “It was run in a friendly family way, which made it cozy and charming,” Bruce says. “But as times changed, the big transition was to make it into a modern company with clearly defined roles.”

The secret sauce of a business like Babingtons is giving Romans and tourists alike a sense of the history of the place, from the grand tour era to the 1930s, when the rise of fascism and war against Britain put the “un-Italian” enterprise at risk. German officers and government officials came for tea even as members of the resistance met clandestinely in the back, prepared to escape through the kitchens. During the darkest years, the family had to evacuate to northern Italy, but three staff members kept the tearooms open, sometimes using their own rations to make chickpea-flour scones or potato-flour bread.

After the war, Bruce’s mother took on a key role and Babingtons changed again. Bedini’s father designed the logo—modeled after a cat named Mascherino who frequented the place in the early years—and traveled to London with water from the Roman aqueducts to ensure the taste of a new tea blend was just right. The 1950s and ’60s brought hamburgers to the menu and Hollywood stars such as Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor to the tables as Rome’s Cinecittà studios churned out the likes of Roman Holiday and Cleopatra. In the 1980s the Metro arrived just outside the door, bringing in more young Italians for a taste of Victorian England. “It’s a quintessentially Roman establishment that’s steeped in British tradition,” Bruce says. “That mix makes the magic.” —Alessandra Migliaccio

A Victorian Relic Thrives in Rome

Under family management, an English teahouse founded in 1893 is prospering