Tea Culture Around the World

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **World tea cultures, in summary:** British milky black, Chinese gongfu, Japanese matcha, Indian chai, Moroccan mint, Turkish small-glass, Russian samovar, Tibetan butter. Eight cultures.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in February 2026.

Tea is the world's second most consumed beverage after water, 5+ billion people drink it daily across dramatically different cultural traditions. China invented tea; the British shaped global tea trade; Japan formalised tea ceremony; India built chai culture; Morocco perfected mint tea ritual. Each tradition has its own logic, equipment, and meaning.

The major tea cultures

Chinese tea culture

The original tea culture. 4,000+ years of history. Six main tea categories (green, black, oolong, white, yellow, pu erh). Gongfu cha brewing tradition. Massive regional variety. Tea as poetry tradition.

Japanese tea culture

Imported from China 12th century; developed distinctly. Chanoyu (tea ceremony) for matcha; everyday sencha drinking. Steam fixed green tea tradition. More on Japanese tea.

British tea culture

~100 million cups daily. Class spanning daily ritual. Strong black tea + milk + sugar. Hospitality and social glue. More on British tea culture.

Indian tea culture

Chai walla street drinking. Pan brewed masala chai. Tea as universal social drink across linguistic and class lines.

Russian tea culture

Samovar tradition. Strong concentrated tea + hot water dilution. Tea + jam (varenye). Lemon traditional.

Moroccan / North African

Sweet mint tea ceremony. Gunpowder green + spearmint + heavy sugar. Pour from height. Three glasses (bitter as life, strong as love, gentle as death).

Turkish tea culture

Strong black tea (çay) in tulip shaped glasses. No milk; sugar cubes held between teeth. Universal Turkish social drink.

Iranian / Persian

Strong black tea similar to Turkish. Sometimes flavoured with cardamom.

Tibetan

Butter tea (po cha), black tea + yak butter + salt. High altitude calorie dense traditional drink.

Argentinian / Uruguayan / Paraguayan

Yerba mate culture. Shared gourd and bombilla (metal straw). Highly social ritual.

South African

Rooibos (red bush tea) tradition. Cape Chai (rooibos + chai spices). More on rooibos.

Caribbean

Soursop, cerassie, sea moss tea traditions. Diaspora communities maintain in UK and elsewhere.

American (USA)

Iced sweet tea (Southern). Coffee dominant generally; tea as wellness drink in coastal urban areas.

Vietnamese

Lotus scented green tea; fresh herbs alongside tea; jasmine tea common.

Thai

Thai iced tea (with condensed milk and orange colour); jasmine green tea common.

Korean

Green tea, barley tea (boricha), corn tea. Light teas alongside Korean cuisine.

Different equipment, different rituals

Gaiwan (China)

Lidded cup for gongfu brewing. Multiple short infusions.

Yixing teapot (China)

Purple clay teapot; develops "memory" of one tea over years.

Chasen / Chawan (Japan)

Bamboo whisk + wide bowl for matcha. More on matcha.

Kyusu (Japan)

Side handled teapot for sencha brewing.

Samovar (Russia)

Large urn for boiling water + small teapot for concentrate.

Moroccan teapot

Curved metal pot with long spout; for pouring from height.

Mate gourd + bombilla (South America)

Shared drinking from one gourd through metal straw.

British teapot + mug

Standard British equipment. Mug only is everyday default.

The drink with others tradition

Tea is genuinely social across cultures:

- Chinese gongfu sessions: drinking together for hours
- Moroccan mint tea: three glass tradition shared with guests
- Argentine mate: shared gourd
- British "cup of tea?": hospitality default
- Russian tea: samovar gathering
- Japanese chanoyu: formal ceremony for hosts and guests

Solo tea drinking is a modern minority. Shared tea drinking is the global tradition.

Production and consumption regions

Top tea producers

- China (~50% of global production)
- India (Assam, Darjeeling, Nilgiri)
- Kenya (largest tea exporter)
- Sri Lanka (Ceylon)
- Turkey
- Vietnam
- Indonesia
- Argentina
- Japan

- Iran

Top tea consumers (per capita)

- Turkey (~3kg per person annually)
- Ireland
- UK
- Russia
- Iran
- Morocco
- Japan

How global tea cultures are connected

Despite enormous variety, common threads run through:

- Hospitality and welcoming
- Social ritual and connection
- Comfort and care expression
- Pause and slowness in daily routine
- Health and wellness association

The specific cup varies dramatically; the role tea plays in human social life is remarkably consistent.

FAQ

How many people drink tea globally? Roughly 5+ billion regularly drink tea, roughly 60%+ of the world population.

Where did tea originate? China, about 4,000+ years ago.

Which culture has the most formalised tea ritual? Japan, chanoyu (tea ceremony) is the most elaborate.

Highest tea consumption per capita? Turkey, then Ireland, then UK.

How is tea social across cultures? Universally a shared drink, across cultures, drinking tea alone is unusual; sharing tea is the norm.

Curator's note: tea is the world's most consumed beverage after water. The ways people drink it vary enormously, but the social and ritual functions are remarkably consistent. Worth knowing about beyond your daily Yorkshire or PG Tips. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

What you need to know: tea culture around the world

Country/region	Cultural form	Signature tea
UK	Milky black with biscuits; afternoon tea ritual	English Breakfast, Earl Grey, builders' brew

Country/region	Cultural form	Signature tea
China	Gongfu brewing; multi-infusion appreciation	Green (longjing), oolong (Tieguanyin), pu-erh
Japan	Chado (way of tea) ceremony; everyday sencha	Matcha, sencha, gyokuro, hojicha
India	Masala chai (spiced milk tea); street culture	Assam-based chai, Darjeeling for export
Morocco/Maghreb	Mint tea poured high; hospitality ritual	Gunpowder green with fresh mint and sugar
Turkey/Iran	Strong black in small glasses; sugar cube on tongue	Rize tea (Turkey), Lahijan (Iran)
Russia	Samovar brewing; jam and lemon	Strong black with sugar, lemon, and jam
Tibet/Mongolia	Salty butter tea; calorie-dense altitude staple	Pressed pu-erh or dark tea with yak butter and salt

What to buy now

To taste the world's tea cultures from a single afternoon, brew a quality English Breakfast, a Japanese matcha, a masala chai, and a Moroccan gunpowder green with fresh mint. Brew each in sequence, drink each in its traditional vessel where you can (Japanese tea bowl for the matcha, small glass tumbler for the gunpowder, large mug for the English Breakfast, small clay cup for the chai), and the wider tea world becomes audible.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Spend less on prestige, more on freshness. A two-month-old supermarket bag still beats a three-year-old gift tin.

World tea cultures reading

For specific traditions see the British tea culture piece, the Chinese tea culture overview, the Japanese tea culture guide, the Indian tea culture piece, the Moroccan mint tea guide, and the Tibetan butter tea overview.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea

- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

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