The Teabag: History, Formats and Brewing

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Teabags, in summary:** Square mass-market, round Tetley, pyramid premium, mesh whole-leaf, plastic-free certified. The full UK teabag shape and material guide, with verdicts.

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

The tea bag was an American accident, Thomas Sullivan in 1908 sent tea samples in silk pouches; recipients brewed the whole pouch. The bag took until the 1960s to dominate British tea consumption. By the 1990s, 95%+ of UK tea was bag form. Modern tea bags use paper or plant based fibres (some still contain plastic for heat sealing). The format democratised tea brewing.

The accidental invention

1908: Thomas Sullivan, a New York tea merchant, sent tea samples to potential customers in small silk pouches. The samples were intended to be opened and brewed loose leaf. But customers brewed the whole pouch, found it convenient, and asked for more.

The tea bag was born.

The British resistance

Britain initially resisted tea bags. The British tradition of loose leaf and pot brewing was deeply embedded. Tea bags were seen as American convenience that compromised quality.

Adoption timeline:

- **1920s-30s:** Tea bags occasionally available in UK, viewed as novelty.
- **1950s:** Tea bags became more common in UK supermarkets.
- **1960s-70s:** Tea bags increasingly dominant.
- **1980s:** Tea bags overtook loose leaf in UK consumption.
- **1990s onwards:** 95%+ of UK tea is bag form.

Modern tea bag formats

Standard square (most common)

Paper bag, often with single seam. Fits in standard mugs. Cheap to produce.

Round (Tetley innovation, 1989)

Designed to brew more evenly than square shape. Tetley pioneered.

Pyramid (PG Tips innovation, 1996)

Triangular bag with more space for leaf expansion. Mesh material. Brews more like loose leaf.

Drawstring (Tetley innovation, 1995)

String allows easy removal. Convenient for single mug brewing.

Temple bag (Teapigs)

Biodegradable mesh pyramid. Whole leaf format. Premium tier.

Cold infuse bag

Designed for cold water brewing. Larger leaf pieces, faster cold extraction.

String and tag

Standard string with paper tag. Allows easy bag removal.

What tea bags are made of

Paper bags

Most common. Made from cellulose fibre, often reinforced with abaca (banana fibre).

Heat sealing

Many paper bags contain a small amount of plastic (polypropylene or PLA) in the heat seal. The plastic is necessary to keep the bag closed during brewing. This has been a sustainability concern.

Plant based bioplastics

Newer bags use PLA (polylactic acid), a corn derived bioplastic that's biodegradable. Still requires industrial composting; not garden compostable in most cases.

Plastic free bags

Recent innovation. Various brands now use fully plant based bags without plastic seals. Usually slightly more expensive.

Mesh bags (pyramid, temple)

Often made from PET (plastic) or PLA. Mesh structure allows leaf expansion.

Cotton or silk bags

Specialty premium tier. Reusable.

The plastic concern

Around 2018-2019, UK media coverage of "plastic in tea bags" raised consumer awareness. Major brands responded:

- Yorkshire Tea: 2020 announced plant based heat seal.
- PG Tips: gradual transition to plant based bags.
- Tetley: plant based bag rollout.
- Pukka: long term commitment to plastic free.
- Teapigs: plant-based temples for industrial composting.
- Twinings: phased transition to plant based.

Most major UK brands are now plastic free or transitioning.

Composting tea bags

Old paper bags with plastic heat seal: NOT garden compostable. The paper composts; the plastic doesn't.

Plant based bioplastic bags: industrial compostable but slow in home composters. Cut open and remove the bag if home composting.

Plastic free paper bags: garden compostable. Tear open or compost whole.

Mesh PET bags: NOT compostable.

Mesh PLA bags: industrial compostable.

Tea bag vs loose leaf comparison

Convenience

Tea bag wins decisively. No measuring, no straining, no cleanup beyond removing the bag.

Quality

Loose leaf wins by leaf grade. Tea bags use smaller leaf pieces (fannings or dust); loose leaf uses whole leaf.

Flavour

Premium loose leaf is more nuanced; mass market tea bags are simpler. The difference is most apparent for premium tea types (Darjeeling, oolong, gyokuro).

Cost

Mass market tea bags are cheaper per cup than equivalent quality loose leaf. Premium loose leaf is comparable to premium tea bags.

Multi infusion

Loose leaf wins decisively. Tea bags rarely support multiple infusions.

Sustainability

Loose leaf has less packaging waste. Plastic free tea bags are now competitive.

Brewing tea bags correctly

1. 1 bag per 200ml.
2. Just boiled water (95-100°C for black; 70-80°C for green).
3. Cover the cup. Steep 3-5 minutes (longer for stronger).
4. Remove bag (don't leave in, over extraction continues).
5. Squeeze the bag for fuller flavour (some say this introduces tannins; most British drinkers do it).
6. Add milk, sugar, lemon to taste.

The squeeze debate

Should you squeeze the tea bag? Arguments:

- **Yes:** Recovers extra tea from the bag; stronger cup.
- **No:** Releases tannins; harsher cup.

For mass market everyday tea: squeezing is fine and produces stronger cup. For premium tea: squeezing may introduce harshness.

Pyramid vs square performance

Pyramid bags allow leaf expansion. For premium tier whole leaf tea, pyramid format is meaningfully better. For mass market dust and fannings tea, the difference is minimal.

Tea bag pricing

- Supermarket value tier: 1-3p per bag.
- Mass market brand: 4-8p per bag.
- Mainstream premium (Twinings): 5-10p per bag.
- Premium specialty (Pukka): 15-25p per bag.
- Premium temple bag (Teapigs): 20-40p per bag.

FAQ

Who invented the tea bag? Thomas Sullivan, USA, 1908, by accident.

When did UK adopt tea bags? 1960s-70s gradually; 1980s dominant.

Plastic in tea bags? Most UK major brands are now plastic free or transitioning.

Tea bag vs loose leaf? Bags for convenience; loose leaf for quality.

Can I compost tea bags? Plastic free bags yes. Plastic containing bags need bag removal first.

Curator's note: the tea bag is an American accident that transformed British tea drinking. 95% of UK tea is bag form. Plastic free bags are now the norm. The format isn't going anywhere. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge

Wells.

In short: teabags

Format	Leaf grade	Best for	UK price tier
Square bag (mass market)	Fannings and dust (CTC)	Speed, strength, milky black	3-6p per cup
Round bag (Tetley)	Fannings, slightly larger cut	Even extraction in a mug	4-7p per cup
Pyramid bag (Teapigs, Twinings)	Whole-leaf or large broken-leaf	Better cup quality, premium tier	14-25p per cup
String-and-tag mesh	Whole-leaf, larger cut	Single-cup loose-leaf experience without strainer	20-35p per cup
Plastic-free certified	Variable	Compostable bag for environmental reasons	Slight premium across tiers

What to buy now

For everyday speed, a Yorkshire Tea or PG Tips square bag is the British default. For a step up without leaving the bag format, Teapigs whole-leaf pyramid bags deliver loose-leaf-quality tea with bag-convenience. For the plastic-free shelf, certified plastic-free bags from Clipper, Pukka, or specialist independents avoid the polypropylene problem. For the actual upgrade route, loose-leaf tea in a strainer or pot remains the destination.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Tannins and non-haem iron absorption

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Match the tea to the moment. A 6am cup and a 4pm cup do not need to be the same brew.

Teabag reading

For format context see the teabag vs loose leaf guide, the pyramid teabags piece, and the plastic-free teabags overview. For brand context see the Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips, Twinings, and Teapigs deep dives.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea

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- How to make tea properly
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