Thompson's Irish Tea: The Taste of Belfast

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Thompson's Irish Tea, in summary:** Thompson's is one of Belfast's two defining tea brands: Assam-led, strong, milky-Belfast cup since 1896. How it compares to Punjana and Irish Breakfast.

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

Thompson's Irish Tea is one of the most loved Northern Irish tea brands, a strong Belfast style black tea blend that's been fuelling Ulster tea drinkers since the 19th century. Stronger and maltier than mainstream British tea, designed for milk and sugar drinking, the proper Northern Irish breakfast tea. Available widely in Northern Ireland; specialty stockists across the UK.

The brand history

Thompson's Family Teas has been operating from Belfast since 1896. The company is one of Ireland's longest established tea brands and remains family owned. Specialises in strong character black tea blends suited to Northern Irish tea drinking traditions.

The Northern Irish tea tradition

Northern Ireland has the strongest tea drinking tradition in the UK by per capita consumption. Distinctive features:

- Strong black tea is the standard.
- Multiple cups daily (4-6+).
- Always with milk; usually with sugar.
- Pot brewing common in households.
- Tea is foundational to social life.

Thompson's is positioned for this tradition.

The Thompson's range

Thompson's Family Tea (the workhorse)

The standard Belfast style strong black tea blend. Strong, malty, milk friendly.

Thompson's Punjana

Premium tier blend. Stronger character; slightly more refined.

Thompson's Decaf

Decaf version of the standard.

Thompson's Earl Grey

Bergamot flavoured Belfast style tea.

Thompson's Special Reserve

Premium specialty blend.

How it tastes

- **Aroma:** Strong, malty, robust black tea.
- **First sip:** Full body, substantial mouthfeel.
- **Mid cup:** Maltiness with mild tannin grip.
- **Finish:** Long, satisfying.
- **With milk + sugar:** Northern Irish breakfast tea perfection, strong, comforting, energising.

Curator Rating: 4.9/5 in the strong tea category.

How to brew Thompson's properly

1. 1 tea bag in a 200-250ml mug.
2. Just boiled water.
3. Steep 4-5 minutes (Belfast tradition is long brew).
4. Squeeze the bag.
5. Add splash of whole milk + 1-2 sugars.

Pot brewing for multiple cups

1. 1 bag per person + 1 for the pot.
2. Just boiled water.
3. Steep 5 minutes covered.
4. Pour and serve with milk + sugar.

Compared to mainstream British tea

vs Yorkshire Tea

Yorkshire is fuller bodied; Thompson's is comparable strength but with distinctive Belfast character. Both excellent.

vs Tetley

Tetley is brisker and lighter. Thompson's is meatier and more traditional.

vs PG Tips

PG Tips is more tannic. Thompson's is fuller bodied and more rounded.

vs Punjana

Punjana is similar Northern Irish positioning. Punjana is slightly more refined; Thompson's is more workhorse oriented.

Cultural significance in Northern Ireland

Thompson's is one of Northern Ireland's iconic brands. Beyond tea:

- Cultural marker, drinking Thompson's is a Northern Irish identity statement.
- Available everywhere in NI supermarkets and corner shops.
- Featured in NI culture (TV, film, literature).
- Family households often have multiple Thompson's variants.

Where to buy in mainland UK

Thompson's availability in Britain:

- Specialist Northern Irish food shops.
- Some larger supermarkets in areas with NI populations.
- Online specialty retailers.
- Direct from Thompson's website.
- Asda Northern Ireland sections.

Mainland UK availability is limited but growing. Worth seeking out for those wanting Northern Irish character.

Caffeine

50-60mg per cup, slightly higher than mainstream British tea. The strong brew tradition produces meaningful caffeine.

Vegan

Yes, pure black tea, plant based.

Pricing

Specialty tier in mainland UK, typically more expensive than Yorkshire Tea / Tetley due to import distribution. Comparable to Yorkshire Gold pricing.

Pairings

- Ulster Fry breakfast.
- Soda bread (Northern Irish staple).
- Wheaten bread.
- Boxty (Irish potato bread).
- McVitie's Digestives.
- Belfast bun.
- Tea brack.
- Champ (mashed potato with spring onions).

Use cases

Northern Irish breakfast

The flagship use. Strong tea + Ulster Fry = Northern Irish morning.

Belfast workplace

Construction sites, factories, offices. The local workplace tea.

Family tea

Multiple cups daily for households.

Ex pat comfort tea

Northern Irish people living elsewhere often import Thompson's for nostalgia.

Distinctive British tea

For anyone wanting a stronger, maltier alternative to Yorkshire/Tetley/PG Tips.

The Belfast tea tradition

Belfast tea has distinct character compared to other British tea cities:

- Stronger brewing.
- More milk and sugar.
- Larger pot brewing tradition.
- Tea and bread combinations central to meals.
- Higher per capita consumption.

Thompson's vs Punjana

The two iconic Northern Irish tea brands:

- **Thompson's:** Slightly more workhorse oriented; family style strong tea.
- **Punjana:** Slightly more refined positioning; specialty tier.

Both excellent. Northern Irish households often have both.

The export market

Thompson's exports to:

- Republic of Ireland.
- Northern Irish diaspora communities (USA, Australia, Canada, UK mainland).
- Specialty UK retailers.

FAQ

Where is Thompson's tea from? Belfast, Northern Ireland. Family company since 1896.

How does it compare to Yorkshire Tea? Comparable strength; distinctive Belfast character.

Caffeine? 50-60mg per cup.

Where to buy in UK mainland? Specialty Northern Irish food shops, online specialty retailers.

Vegan? Yes (with plant milk).

Curator's note: Thompson's Irish Tea is the proper Belfast style strong black tea, meatier and more traditional than mainstream British tea. Worth seeking out for the distinctive Northern Irish character. The Ulster Fry's natural partner. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

What you need to know: Thompson's Irish Tea

Field	Detail
Founded	1896 in Belfast, Northern Ireland
Blend	Predominantly Assam-led, 60%+ Indian leaf, balanced with African
Cup character	Malty, deep, takes milk well; classic Belfast strong black tea
UK availability	Strongest in Northern Ireland; some mainland UK and online
Best for	Strong-tea drinkers wanting Belfast/Irish style, breakfast cup, Belfast-diaspora drinkers

What to buy now

Buy Thompson's Irish Tea for the Belfast-strong cup. Compare with Punjana for the rival Belfast brand, Irish Breakfast tea for the wider Irish category (often Bewleys, Lyons, or Barry's), and a quality Assam single origin to taste what the malty base actually is.

Pull in from the English tea range and loose leaf range.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

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.

Irish tea reading

For category context see the Irish Breakfast guide, the English vs Irish breakfast comparison, and the Assam tea overview. For brand context see the Punjana piece and the Yorkshire Tea deep dive.

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