Tieguanyin: The Iron Goddess Oolong

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tieguanyin, in summary:** Tieguanyin is Anxi's floral orchid-noted oolong, the gateway tea into Chinese oolong for UK drinkers.

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

Tieguanyin (???, "Iron Goddess of Mercy") is one of China's most celebrated oolong teas, partial oxidation Chinese black tea from Anxi County, Fujian Province. Floral, orchid like aroma, smooth mouthfeel, and the ability to be re infused 6-8 times. The defining premium oolong for tea enthusiasts. Worth investing in proper brewing equipment to appreciate fully.

Tieguanyin basics

- **Origin:** Anxi County, Fujian Province, China.
- **Type:** Oolong tea (partial oxidation).
- **Cup colour:** Pale yellow green to golden.
- **Flavour:** Floral, orchid like, slightly sweet.
- **Caffeine:** 30-50mg per cup.
- **Best brewing:** 90-95°C, gongfu style.
- **Multi infusion:** 6-8 infusions possible.

The history

Tieguanyin originated in Fujian during the Qing Dynasty (17th-18th century). Two origin legends:

The Wei legend

A poor farmer named Wei discovered an abandoned shrine to Guanyin. He cleaned and tended it. Guanyin appeared in a dream and showed him a tea plant. The resulting tea was named for the goddess.

The Wang legend

An imperial scholar named Wang discovered a special tea plant near the temple of Guanyin. The Emperor named it after the goddess.

Both legends emphasise the spiritual association with Guanyin (the Goddess of Mercy). The "Iron" element refers to the dense, heavy leaves.

The character

Tieguanyin's distinctive features:

Floral aroma

The orchid like aroma is the defining feature. Sometimes compared to lilac, violet, or tropical fruit.

Smooth mouthfeel

Less astringency than green or black tea. Round, satisfying body.

Slight sweetness

Natural sweetness from the partial oxidation. Doesn't require added sugar.

The "huigan" effect

The aftertaste, a sweet, slightly cooling sensation that lingers in the mouth and throat. The Chinese call this "huigan" (??), "returning sweetness."

The two main styles

Modern green style Tieguanyin

Less oxidation (10-30%); brighter, more floral, vegetal undertones. Popular in mainland China.

Traditional roasted Tieguanyin

More oxidation (30-60%) plus charcoal roasting. Darker, richer, toasty character. Less common but premium.

How to brew Tieguanyin

Gongfu style (the proper way)

1. 5-7g loose leaf in a 100-150ml gaiwan or small teapot.
2. Rinse: pour 90°C water over leaves, immediately discard.
3. First infusion: 30 seconds at 90-95°C.
4. Second infusion: 30 seconds.
5. Third infusion: 35 seconds.
6. Fourth infusion: 45 seconds.
7. Fifth+ infusions: 60+ seconds, increasing.

Each infusion reveals different aspects. Most flavour in infusions 2-4.

Western style brewing (less ideal)

1. 1 heaped tsp per 200ml.
2. 90-95°C water.
3. Steep 2-3 minutes.
4. Single infusion.

Workable but doesn't show Tieguanyin at its best.

Bag form (mass market alternative)

1. 1 bag in 200ml.
2. 90°C water.
3. Steep 2-3 minutes.

The bag form is rarely high grade; for proper Tieguanyin experience, loose leaf is essential.

Equipment

- **Gaiwan** (Chinese lidded bowl), the traditional brewing vessel. £15-50.
- **Small teapot:** alternative to gaiwan. £20-40.
- **Variable temperature kettle** for the 90-95°C target. £30-60.
- **Tasting cups:** small porcelain cups for sipping. £5-15.
- **Tray:** for catching spillage during gongfu pouring. £15-30.

Tieguanyin grades

Premium specialty (£15-30+ per 100g)

Single estate, hand picked, traditional processing. The proper experience.

Mid tier specialty (£8-15 per 100g)

Good quality from established Anxi farms. Reliable.

Standard supermarket loose leaf (£3-7 per 100g)

Mass market; less character.

Bag form (£3-5 per 50 bags)

Convenient but rarely exceptional quality.

Where to buy in UK

- Mei Leaf, Postcard Teas (specialty, premium).
- Whittard (mid tier).
- Chinese tea specialty shops.
- Online direct importers.

- Holland & Barrett (mass market loose leaf).

How to tell good Tieguanyin

Dry leaf appearance

Tightly rolled into ball shape. Dark green blue with slight reddish brown edges.

Aroma when dry

Floral, slightly fruity. No staleness.

Aroma when steeped

Strong orchid notes. The aroma should fill the room.

First infusion character

Should be clean, smooth, with floral character.

Multi infusion performance

Premium Tieguanyin holds character across 5-7+ infusions.

Pairings

- Light Asian dishes (dim sum, light Cantonese).
- Plain rice dishes.
- Mild cheeses (mozzarella, ricotta).
- Light desserts (almond cookies, white chocolate).
- Stone fruit (peach, apricot, matches the floral character).
- Almond and floral pastries.

Caffeine

30-50mg per cup. Multi infusion means caffeine extracts across multiple infusions; cumulative caffeine across a session is meaningful.

The Tieguanyin tasting experience

Drinking Tieguanyin properly is an event:

1. Brew gongfu style.
2. Smell the lid (gaiwan tradition, the lid catches aromatic compounds).
3. Sip slowly from small cup.
4. Notice flavour evolution.
5. Re infuse and compare.
6. Take notes on multi infusion progression.

The whole session can take 30-60 minutes. Tea as meditation.

Storage

Airtight tin, away from light, moisture, and strong odours. Best within 12-18 months. Tieguanyin is delicate and loses character with age.

FAQ

What is Tieguanyin? Premium Chinese oolong from Anxi, Fujian. Floral character.

Best brewing? Gongfu style with gaiwan, 90-95°C, multiple short infusions.

Caffeine? 30-50mg per cup.

Vegan? Yes, pure tea, plant based.

Where to buy? Specialty tea retailers; Chinese tea specialty shops.

Curator's note: Tieguanyin is one of the great oolong teas, orchid floral, smooth, multi infusion friendly. Worth the investment in proper brewing equipment (gaiwan + variable kettle) for committed tea enthusiasts. The defining premium Chinese oolong. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Tieguanyin at a glance

Field	Detail
Origin	Anxi County, Fujian Province, China
Type	Lightly-oxidised oolong (10-25% oxidation)
Cultivar	Tieguanyin cultivar (translates as "Iron Goddess of Mercy")
Cup character	Floral, orchid, creamy texture, lingering sweet finish
Brewing	Gongfu: 5g leaf, 110ml gaiwan, 95C water, 20-30 second infusions across 6-8 brews
UK availability	Specialist Chinese tea retailers (teas.co.uk, with friends Mei Leaf and Postcard Teas), some independents

What to buy now

Buy a quality Tieguanyin (modern style) from a specialist for the orchid-floral introduction. Add a Da Hong Pao (Wuyi rock oolong) for the contrasting roasted-mineral style, and a Alishan high-mountain oolong from Taiwan for the comparison. A porcelain gaiwan at 110ml is the brewing vessel; gongfu-style multi-infusion is the technique.

Stock up via the English tea range and loose leaf range.

Reference noted

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

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Freshness beats provenance for most drinkers. Buy a smaller bag more often.

Oolong reading

For category context see the oolong tea guide and the Fujian province piece. For comparable oolongs see the Da Hong Pao guide and the dancong oolong piece. For brewing see the gongfu brewing overview.

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