Why Did My Parents Tea Taste Better

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Why your parents' tea tasted better, in summary:** Why did your parents' tea taste better? Real changes in UK tea blending, milk, and brewing since the 1980s. Plus the Proust effect explained.

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

"Mum's tea always tasted better" is a near-universal British experience. The reasons: longer brewing, full-fat milk, knowing how the family liked it, the right mug, the tea-and-care combination, and the childhood memory effect. The actual tea is the same Yorkshire/Tetley/PG Tips you brew now. The difference is everything else around the cup.

Why parents' tea genuinely tasted better

Longer brewing

Parents and grandparents typically brewed longer than modern drinkers, 5-6 minutes instead of 3. The fuller extraction gives a stronger character.

Full-fat milk

Older British households used whole milk; modern ones often use semi-skimmed or skimmed. The richness difference is real, whole milk makes a creamier, more satisfying cup.

One-pot brewing

Many parents brewed in a teapot for several cups. Pot brewing gives consistent strength and character; mug brewing is more variable. A tea cosy kept the pot hot for a fuller extraction.

Made with care, in the right mug

They knew exactly how you took it, the right strength, the right sugar, and they used your mug, not the one nearest the kettle. Tea made by someone who cares for you carries a psychological weight that a rushed, self-made cup does not, which is also why a partner's tea is so often better than your own.

The nostalgia effect

Some of it really is memory. Childhood food and drink are encoded with strong emotional context, so the same tea drunk as a child carries associations you cannot reach by drinking it now, the after-school cup, the Sunday afternoon, winter by the fire. This is the Proust effect, named for the madeleine moment in his novel, and it is a real cognitive phenomenon: taste and smell connect almost directly to the brain's memory and emotion centres, unlike most senses. So a 45-year-old drinking the same brand, brewed the same way, will still rate their parents' tea higher, because the childhood association amplifies the cup. That part is unrecoverable: you can match the brand and the method, but not the original context.

What actually changed in UK tea

Three real shifts. First, the blend: most major UK brands have moved toward Kenyan CTC and away from Assam since the 1990s. Kenyan tea is brisk and astringent; Assam is maltier and rounder, so the cup moved toward a brisker, less malty profile. Second, the milk: whole milk was the household standard into the 1980s, but semi-skimmed overtook it around the early-to-mid 1990s and skimmed gained ground after. Tea with whole milk is creamier and more integrated; with semi-skimmed it tastes thinner. Third, the brewing format: pot-brewed loose-leaf for 4-5 minutes was still common in the 1970s and 1980s, while mug-brewed bags for 60-90 seconds became the norm by the 2000s, delivering less body.

Smaller changes add up too: regional water treatment has shifted, kettles boil faster, and modern mugs are larger (300-400ml versus the traditional 200-250ml), so the same bag makes a weaker cup.

What didn't change

The plant is the same Camellia sinensis, the brewing chemistry (hot water, leaf, time) is unchanged, and the basic British routine of boil, brew, milk and sugar is the same recipe. The potential for a great cup is exactly as it was.

How to recreate your parents' tea

For the closest reproduction: use the same brand they used, brew in a teapot rather than a mug (loose-leaf or full-strength bags) for at least 4 minutes, use whole milk rather than semi-skimmed, and add sugar to taste. Freshly drawn cold tap water, boiled and poured straight over the leaves, in a traditional 200-250ml mug rather than a giant modern one. The single biggest lever toward "parents' tea" character is whole milk over semi-skimmed, it changes the cup more than most people expect. And make it unhurried, ideally for someone you love; the care really is part of the flavour.

FAQ

Why does mum's tea taste better? Longer brew, whole milk, the right preferences, made with care, plus nostalgia.

Has tea quality declined? There have been subtle blend changes, not a dramatic decline.

Why does my partner's tea taste better than mine? Made with care, the right preferences, and a bit of psychological warmth.

Can I recreate it? Yes, whole milk, a longer brew, the right mug, and deliberate preparation.

The made-with-love effect? Real. Tea carries the care of the person who made it.

In short: Why your parents' tea tasted better

Factor	What was different
Memory and nostalgia	The "Proust effect": flavours sampled in childhood acquire emotional weight that adult-tasted equivalents can't match
Water	Kettles were used differently; many households boiled freshly drawn cold water from the tap, not reboiled, which improves the cup
Tea quality	Mainstream tea brand blends have shifted toward Kenyan over Assam-heavy blends since the 1990s; cup character changed accordingly
Milk	Whole milk was the household standard; semi-skimmed and skimmed became dominant from the 1990s onwards, changing how tea tastes with milk
Brewing time	Pot-brewed for 4-5 minutes was common; mug-brewed for 60-90 seconds became more common in the 2000s
Receiver	Someone else made it; the "made-with-love" effect is real and adds perceived enjoyment
The mug	The specific cup's thickness, shape, and material shape the drinking experience subtly

Curator's note: your parents' tea often really was better: longer brewed, whole milk, the right mug, made with care, plus all the nostalgia. The actual tea is the same. Everything else changed. Worth recreating those conditions for the cup that feels right. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Judge a tea by how it brews for you, not by its label. Once you know what you like, wander further along the shelf.

Tea reading

For brand context see the PG Tips, Tetley, Typhoo, and Yorkshire Tea pages. For technique see the milk in tea guide, the water for tea guide, and the how to brew black tea guide.

The bottom line on your parents' tea

Some of the difference is real (the blend shift toward Kenyan CTC, milk toward semi-skimmed, shorter brewing), but most of it is the Proust effect, childhood-encoded flavours carry an emotional weight that adult re-tasting cannot reproduce. You can get most of the cup back with whole milk, a longer brew in a pot, and the same brand your parents used. The rest lives in memory, not in technique.

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