Twinings Earl Grey: The Origin of a Classic

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Twinings Earl Grey origin, in summary:** Twinings Earl Grey origin explained: the truth behind the Earl Grey mandarin myth, bergamot oil, brewing tips, UK product picks.

Our Earl Grey guide and Twinings deep dive both touch this story; it deserves a focused page because Earl Grey is equal parts history, legend and bergamot, and people deserve the clear split.

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

What Earl Grey actually is

Earl Grey is black tea flavoured with oil of bergamot, a fragrant citrus grown mainly in Calabria. That is the whole definition. Everything else, the base tea, the strength of the bergamot, added cornflower or lemon, is house style. It is the bergamot, not a region or a leaf, that makes an Earl Grey an Earl Grey.

The legend

The popular story ties the blend to Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey and British Prime Minister in the 1830s, with various tales of a gift, a diplomatic favour, or masking the taste of mineral heavy water at the family seat. The clear position is that these origin stories are not well documented and are probably embellished: Earl Grey never visited China, the tale appears in 20th-century marketing rather than 19th-century sources, and bergamot is an Italian citrus, not a Chinese one. What is clear is that the Grey name became attached to a bergamot scented black tea in the nineteenth century and stuck. Twinings, trading from the Strand since 1706 (see the deep dive), is among the houses that has long claimed a direct line to an original Grey family recipe, a claim that is part heritage marketing and part genuine longevity. Treat the romance as romance and the bergamot as the fact.

Why Twinings is central to the story

Twinings did not necessarily invent Earl Grey, but as one of the oldest continuously operating tea houses in the world, with the historical proximity to the London tea trade and the Grey era establishment, it is one of the brands most credibly woven into the blend becoming a household name. Its long running Earl Grey is, for many UK drinkers, the reference point against which other Earl Greys are judged, much as our Earl Grey vs Lady Grey comparison assumes.

What is in the cup

A classic Earl Grey is a medium black base lifted by bright, floral, slightly bitter bergamot citrus. Modern variations abound: stronger "Earl Grey Strong" blends, Lady Grey (lighter, with added citrus peel and cornflower), Russian and French riffs, and decaf versions. The base quality matters more than people think; a thin base hides behind the bergamot, a good base carries it. For neutrality, Twinings' own range and history are documented on twinings.co.uk, and we stock the range at our Twinings page.

How to brew it

Treat it as the black tea it is: freshly boiled water, three to four minutes, covered to keep the volatile bergamot in the cup. It is excellent black, with lemon, or as the base of a London Fog. Milk divides people; a splash works with a robust Earl Grey, but it mutes the bergamot that is the entire point, so try it black first (and never milk and lemon together, as lemon curdles milk).

The essentials: Twinings Earl Grey origin

Field	Detail
Named after	Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey (British Prime Minister 1830-1834)
First Twinings commercial sale	Mid to late 19th century; the brand has marketed the "Earl Grey" blend under that name continuously since
The origin myth	Story of Earl Grey receiving the recipe from a grateful Chinese mandarin is undocumented and almost certainly invented marketing
What the blend actually is	Black tea scented with bergamot oil from Citrus bergamia, traditionally Chinese keemun base; modern Twinings uses Indian and African black tea
Bergamot	Citrus bergamia, a small bitter Italian citrus grown mainly in Calabria, southern Italy
Cup character	Bright citrus-floral bergamot top over a malty black tea base; iconic British "polite tea" identity
UK availability	Every UK supermarket, Twinings.co.uk, the Strand flagship store
UK price	Approximately £3 to £4.50 per 50-bag pack (6-10p per cup)

Why bergamot

Bergamot oil is extracted from the peel of Citrus bergamia, a small bitter citrus grown mainly in the Reggio Calabria region of southern Italy. The fruit itself is too bitter to eat; the oil from the peel is the valuable product, used in perfumery, in flavouring confectionery and tea, and in traditional Italian liqueurs. The flavour profile is unmistakable: bright citrus-floral with a slight bitter edge that distinguishes it from sweeter citrus oils. The pairing with black tea works because bergamot's bright top note lifts the maltier base of fully-oxidised tea without competing with it, and bergamot-scented black tea predates the "Earl Grey" branding by decades or longer.

Calabrian bergamot today

Modern bergamot oil is overwhelmingly produced in the Reggio Calabria region, where the climate suits the citrus and production has been concentrated since the early 20th century. The fruit is harvested between November and February; the peel is mechanically scraped and the essential oil collected, with around 100kg

of fruit producing 0.5kg of oil. Calabrian bergamot has IGP (Protected Geographical Indication) status under EU law, the same kind of protection that covers Parma ham and Champagne. Twinings and other premium Earl Grey blends use real Calabrian bergamot oil; cheaper supermarket Earl Greys often use synthetic bergamot flavouring, which delivers a recognisable but less complex citrus profile.

Related on the wiki: Best Earl Grey Tea UK, English Breakfast vs Earl Grey, Lady Grey.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

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.

Tea reading

For ingredient context see the bergamot ingredient guide and the black tea fundamentals. For broader Earl Grey context see the Earl Grey tea guide. For brand context see the Twinings brand wiki. For variants see the Lady Grey wiki and the Williamson Earl Grey. For brewing technique see the how to brew black tea.

The bottom line on Twinings Earl Grey origin

The mandarin-rescue origin story is almost certainly invention; the actual history is that Twinings commercialised an existing bergamot-scented black tea tradition under the Earl Grey name in the mid-to-late 19th century. The cup is real, the heritage is genuine, the mythology is marketing. Worth knowing if you enjoy the cup and want to be unimpressed by the story; doesn't change the fact that Twinings Earl Grey at £3-£4.50 per 50-bag pack is the affordable benchmark for the category and a good everyday afternoon tea.

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