Thomas Sullivan: The Accidental Inventor of the Tea Bag

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Thomas Sullivan and the tea bag, in summary:** A UK guide to Thomas Sullivan and the tea bag: the 1908 silk-pouch story, myth versus record, and how the bag changed British drinking forever.

Almost every cup discussed in this wiki, and almost every product in our shop, is brewed in a format one man is widely credited with stumbling into by accident.

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

The story

Thomas Sullivan was a tea and coffee merchant in New York. Around 1908, the popular account goes, he sent tea samples to customers in small hand-sewn silk pouches to save the cost of tins. Customers, not realising the pouch was just packaging, dropped the whole thing into hot water and brewed through it, then asked for more tea supplied that way. The convenience sold itself. The tea bag, in this telling, was a customer-led accident, not an invention.

Myth versus record

The Sullivan around-1908 story is the widely repeated traditional account and is plausible, but the precise details are not firmly documented and earlier infusion-pouch patents exist. A 1903 patent by Roberta Lawson and Mary Molaren for a "tea-leaf holder" pre-dates Sullivan entirely, so the device was clearly in the air before his silk pouches. What is not in dispute is that the commercial tea bag emerged in early-twentieth-century America, was refined over the following decades (gauze and then paper replacing silk; the rectangular and later round and pyramid shapes), and then conquered Britain in the second half of the century. Treat the "accident" as a good story with a solid core rather than a documented event: the name attached to the moment is Sullivan, the moment itself is composite, and the credit the industry still gives him is roughly fair.

Why it changed everything

The tea bag did to brewing what Lipton did to supply: it removed friction. No pot, no strainer, no measuring, no mess. That convenience is the single biggest reason loose-leaf drinking collapsed to a minority habit in

Britain, a tension we cover clearly in loose leaf versus tea bags. It also created the modern problems of bag plastic and leaf-grade compromise, see plastic in tea bags and the pyramid bag story.

Why he belongs here

Whether or not the silk-pouch tale is exact, the tea bag is arguably the most consequential single change in how ordinary people drink tea in the last century, and Sullivan is the name attached to its origin. You cannot tell the story of the British cup without the bag, and you cannot tell the story of the bag without him.

What you need to know: Thomas Sullivan

Detail	Fact
Active	Early 1900s, New York
Trade	Tea and coffee merchant
Credited with	The modern tea bag (around 1908)
Original material	Hand-sewn silk pouches
Original use	Sample packaging, not an infusion device
Customer reaction	Brewed through the pouch by mistake, asked for more
Earlier patent	1903 Lawson and Molaren "tea-leaf holder" pre-dates him
Material evolution	Silk to gauze to paper to nylon to bioplastic
Shape evolution	Pouch to rectangular to round to pyramid
UK adoption	Mass uptake from the 1950s to 1970s (Brooke Bond, PG Tips)

The material evolution from silk to bioplastic

Sullivan's original silk pouches were expensive and unsustainable for mass commercial use. Gauze replaced silk by the 1920s for cost, paper replaced gauze in the 1930s for cheapness and disposability, and heat-seal paper with a polypropylene mesh became standard from the 1950s and remains the dominant supermarket format. The polypropylene is the source of the modern plastic-in-tea-bag problem; the bag holds together because a thin plastic mesh fuses under heat, but that plastic does not fully break down. Recent industry moves are toward PLA (plant-derived polylactic acid), cellulose, or unbleached paper-only constructions; Clipper, Pukka, Heath and Heather, Brew Tea and Yorkshire Tea's newer bag have all dropped polypropylene over 2018 to 2024. The material has changed every few decades since Sullivan; the convenience trade-off has not.

The British uptake timeline

The tea bag invented in America took roughly fifty years to dominate Britain. The format was niche here through the 1930s and 1940s, and wartime rationing actively favoured loose leaf (cheaper, less packaging). The 1950s and 1960s saw gradual uptake from Tetley and Brooke Bond. The crossover point, when bags outsold loose leaf in the UK, came around 1970, six decades after Sullivan's silk-pouch moment. By 1985 the share was over 80 percent; by 2000 over 95 percent, and it has held there since. Britain went from "tea bags are an American novelty" to "loose leaf is a specialist minority" within two generations. Sullivan, who

died in obscurity in 1936, never saw the British conquest of his accidental invention.

The pyramid bag refinement

The flat rectangular paper bag worked for fannings and dust (the small leaf fragments most supermarket bag tea uses) but compressed whole leaf too tightly to brew well. The pyramid bag, introduced commercially by Lipton in the mid-1990s and popularised by Tetley, PG Tips, Teapigs and Twinings, solved this by giving whole leaves three-dimensional space to unfurl during steeping. This let the bag format carry premium leaf grades for the first time, narrowing the quality gap with loose-leaf brewing. The modern premium-bag market effectively combines Sullivan's convenience with whole-leaf quality, addressing the bag-versus-leaf trade-off his original format created. Whether it fully closes that gap remains contested among tea purists.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The infusion is more important than the shop. A short careful brew can lift a budget bag past a careless premium one.

Tea reading

For the pyramid-bag refinement see the PG Tips pyramid bag story. For the plastic question see plastic in tea bags. For the loose-leaf alternative see loose leaf versus tea bags. For other tea founders see Thomas Lipton and Thomas Twining. For the wider story see the history of tea in Britain, and for brewing basics see brewing loose leaf tea.

The bottom line on Thomas Sullivan

Sullivan did not invent infusion pouches (the 1903 patent pre-dates him) and probably did not deliberately invent the tea bag (the silk-pouch story has a customer-led-accident shape that may be apocryphal). None of that really matters: by the early 1900s in New York he was selling tea in pouches customers brewed through, the commercial format took off, refinements followed, and by the 1970s most British tea was brewed in a bag. Whether the silk-pouch tale is precise or composite, his name is attached to the single biggest behavioural change in modern tea drinking, and that credit is fair.

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