Sebastian Pole and Tim Westwell: The Herbalists Behind Pukka

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Pukka Herbs founders, in summary: A UK guide to the Pukka Herbs founders: Bristol 2001, qualified herbalist Sebastian Pole, an organic Ayurvedic mission, the Unilever acquisition and the B Corp status it lost in 2024.

Our Pukka deep dive and organic and B Corp page cover the brand and its badges; this is the pair who built it and why the herbalist detail genuinely matters.

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

Bristol, 2001

Sebastian Pole and Tim Westwell founded Pukka Herbs in Bristol in 2001. The mission was specific: bring organic Ayurvedic herbs into modern British wellness, sourced direct from organic farmers in India, Sri Lanka and beyond. It started as a herbalist-led organic tea company, not a marketing company that later added herbs.

The herbalist difference

The detail that sets the founding apart: Sebastian Pole is a qualified practising herbalist, and the Pukka recipes were built from the herbalist tradition rather than blended to chase flavour trends. That is the real differentiator from most of the herbal tea shelf, where blends are often designed by brand and flavour first. Whether or not you weight traditional herbalism heavily, the structural fact, recipes from a practitioner's framework, not a focus group, is unusual and worth knowing.

Organic as structure, not slogan

From the start Pukka built fair-trade pricing into the cost model and committed to organic-only sourcing as a structural position rather than a marketing claim. It became a certified B Corp, last recertified in 2019. The brand was acquired by Unilever in 2017, which gave it capital and reach, and the organic-only commitment was kept; after Pukka was fully integrated into Lipton Teas and Infusions in late 2023, it lost its B Corp certification (The Grocer, 12 April 2024). We treat what those badges actually certify, and what they do not,

in Pukka, organic and B Corp.

Why they belong here

Pole and Westwell are a good example of founders whose personal expertise is visible in the product years later: a herbalist's fingerprints on a supermarket tea range. For a wiki trying to be genuinely useful about herbal tea, the people who built the recipes from a tradition rather than a trend are exactly who readers should know about, alongside Bruce Ginsberg on the organic side.

Quick reference: Pukka founders

Detail	Fact
Founders	Sebastian Pole and Tim Westwell
Founded	2001, Bristol, UK
Mission	Bring organic Ayurvedic herbs into modern British wellness
Pole credential	Qualified practising herbalist
Westwell role	Business and brand co-founder
Sourcing	Direct from organic farmers in India, Sri Lanka, beyond
Certifications	Soil Association organic, Fair for Life, FairWild; no longer a B Corp since 2024
Acquired	2017, by Unilever (founders + organic commitment retained)
Approach	Recipes from herbalist tradition, not market research

Sebastian Pole's herbalist background

Sebastian Pole trained as a herbalist with practical clinical experience before co-founding Pukka. His formal qualifications cover Ayurvedic medicine and Western herbal medicine, and he was registered with the relevant UK herbalist professional bodies. The clinical background matters because it gives the recipe-design process a different starting point. A flavour-led blend asks "what tastes nice together"; a herbalist-led blend asks "what herbs combine well functionally, with established safety records, and which support the intended outcome". Pukka's blends are tasted and refined for palatability after the herbalist-design phase rather than before it; this sequence is the reverse of how most herbal brands operate. Whether the resulting product is "more effective" is a separate question; the structural fact is that the recipe origins differ.

Why "Pukka" was chosen as the name

"Pukka" is a Hindi/Urdu word imported into English via the colonial era, meaning genuine, authentic, properly done, the real thing. The choice was deliberate signposting: the brand wanted to position itself as the authentic, properly sourced, real version of herbal tea, against a herbal-tea shelf the founders saw as full of marketing-built flavoured-bag products with little authentic herbalism behind them. The Hindi/Urdu origin also nodded to the Ayurvedic-Indian sourcing focus that defined the early product range (turmeric, tulsi, ginger, ashwagandha). The name has aged well; "pukka" remains recognisable to British consumers as meaning genuine, and the brand positioning has stayed consistent with that promise across 25 years. Brand-name choice is rarely this aligned with brand identity; Pukka is a textbook example.

The fair-trade and supplier model

Pukka built supplier relationships from the start around fair-trade pricing and long-term contracts rather than spot-market purchasing, which is the norm in commodity herbal sourcing. The brand sources ingredients from over 50 countries, with key partnerships in India (turmeric, ginger, tulsi), Sri Lanka (cinnamon, ginger), Egypt (chamomile, peppermint), and across Europe and the Americas. The fair-trade model adds cost but builds supply stability and quality control over time; the same farms supply Pukka year after year, allowing organic conversion programmes and harvest-timing collaboration. This is the structural reason Pukka's blends are more expensive than supermarket herbal alternatives; the supply chain costs more by design.

Pukka's growth trajectory

Pukka grew slowly through the early 2000s, building distribution through health-food stores before mainstream supermarket presence came from the mid-2000s as wellness moved up British consumer priorities. By 2010 Pukka was established in major UK supermarkets, and by 2015 it was the largest UK organic tea brand in Britain. That trajectory, slow health-food-store build first and broad supermarket reach second, is the same pattern seen across the credible organic herbal brands.

The B Corp question

Pukka was a certified B Corp, a third-party certification of social and environmental performance that covers governance, workers, community, environment and customers and has to be renewed every three years. Pukka was last recertified in 2019. After Pukka was fully integrated into Lipton Teas and Infusions in late 2023, B Lab confirmed in April 2024 that Pukka Herbs is no longer a B Corp (The Grocer, 12 April 2024). Its organic and Fair for Life certifications are separate schemes and still appear on its packs (Pukka's certifications).

The Unilever acquisition and brand continuity

Pukka was acquired by Unilever in 2017, which gave the brand significantly larger distribution reach (Unilever's logistics network) and capital for product development. The acquisition preserved both founders in leadership roles and the organic-only sourcing commitment. The Pukka product range continued to expand under Unilever ownership, with new functional blends and the launch of Pukka in additional international markets. Critics of the acquisition noted that B Corp principles are harder to maintain inside a multinational FMCG conglomerate, and in 2024 Pukka did lose its B Corp certification, after it was integrated into Lipton Teas and Infusions. The acquisition is a real test case for whether brand integrity survives acquisition by a global parent.

Reference noted

- Soil Association organic standards

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 Pukka brand profile see the Pukka deep dive. For Pukka certification detail see Pukka organic and B Corp. For Bruce Ginsberg's comparable founder story see Bruce Ginsberg. For Teapigs founders see the Teapigs founders. For organic certification context see the organic tea guide.

The bottom line on the Pukka founders

Pole and Westwell built a herbal-tea brand from a herbalist's framework rather than a marketing framework, and the discipline shows in the product 25 years later. The Bristol 2001 founding was contrarian commercially (organic, fair trade, herbalist-designed) but produced one of the UK's most credible herbal tea brands. The Unilever acquisition, the continued organic-only commitment and the B Corp certification lost in 2024 make this a reasonable test case for whether ethical founding principles survive at scale. For readers who care about whether their herbal tea has an actual herbal-tradition logic behind it, Pukka is the obvious starting point.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/