Thompson's (Punjana): Belfast Family Tea Since 1896

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Thompson's Punjana, in summary:** Thompson's Punjana tea reviewed: Belfast family-owned brand since 1896, Irish strong-tea tradition, UK availability, brewing tips.

Thompson’s of Belfast, the family behind Punjana, is one of the genuinely independent family tea firms left in these islands, and a strong tea tradition distinct from the English giants. Buy it on the Thompson's shop page ; this is the story, paired with English vs Irish breakfast.

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

A Belfast family firm

Thompson’s has blended tea in Belfast since 1896, family run across four generations, with Punjana as its best known brand. In an industry now dominated by multinationals, an independent family blender of this age is rare, and it is the core of the brand’s identity, the same heritage value as the oldest English houses but Irish. The continuity has supported long-term choices: sustained quality at the strong-tea positioning, patient brand-building rather than quarterly product churn, and a gradual expansion into UK supermarkets since the 2010s. The family also runs several other Belfast food and drink businesses, so the brand’s Belfast roots are genuine and well documented rather than marketing.

The Irish strong tea tradition

Irish tea culture favours a notably strong, brisk, malty cup, typically Assam-forward and built for milk, distinct from the average English blend, the difference explained in English vs Irish breakfast and black tea by origin. Per-capita consumption is among the highest in the world, often above the UK; the cup is brewed stronger and longer (commonly four to six minutes) with more generous milk. That pattern needs blends robust enough to take the longer brew and heavier milk without going bitter, and Thompson’s sits squarely in it.

The Irish blenders, Bewley’s, Lyons, Barry’s and Thompson’s, all emerged to supply this market and each developed a slight variation on the strong-tea profile: Bewley’s for premium cafe supply, Lyons as the grocery mainstay, Barry’s strong in the south and Thompson’s in the north. For drinkers raised on Irish tea but now living in England, switching to Punjana or Barry’s recovers the cup character they grew up with, where an English mainstream blend pushed Irish-style tends to go harsh.

What they make

Punjana and Thompson’s Signature, Irish and everyday breakfast blends in strong everyday formats, browse the stocked range on the Thompson's shop page. These are milk-and-strong-cup teas, judged against the field in the best British tea bags roundup.

How to brew it

Brew it strong, as intended: fully boiling water, a proper four to five minute steep (longer than mainstream English tea, which is why rushing it at two to three minutes leaves it under-extracted), one bag per 200ml mug, milk to taste. Cover the cup or pot while it brews. The blend takes generous milk well and is built for sugar if you want it, see common brewing mistakes and the water temperature guide. For the fullest cup, warm a pot first, use one bag per cup plus one for the pot and brew five to six minutes. Hard water flattens it like any black, the principle in Yorkshire Tea and hard water.

The Punjana name

"Punjana" derives from Punjab, the Indian region historically tied to tea production and trade. Thompson’s adopted the Sanskrit-rooted name in the early twentieth century to signal the blend’s Indian content and quality, a common convention of the 1900 to 1920 era when many UK tea names referenced Indian regions. It still fits: modern Punjana is built mainly on Indian Assam plus African Kenyan leaf, so the name reflects the actual sourcing rather than just old marketing.

The essentials: Thompson's Punjana

Field	Detail
Brand	Thompson's of Belfast (Punjana flagship blend); founded 1896
Family ownership	Continuous family ownership across four generations
Base tea	Strong Assam-led blend traditionally blended for Irish strong-tea drinking habits
Punjana name	Sanskrit-derived name reflecting Indian tea heritage of the blend
Cup character	Strong, full-bodied, deeply malty, robust enough for Irish strong brewing; takes milk and sugar exceptionally well
Caffeine	40-60mg per cup, standard black tea range
Distribution	Strong in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland; UK supermarkets carry it in growing numbers since 2010s
UK price	Approximately £3 to £5 per 80-bag pack (4-7p per cup)

Who it is for

Thompson’s is for the drinker who wants a strong, traditional, milk friendly cup and values a genuinely independent family blender with a long history. If you find English blends a touch weak, the Irish strong tradition is for you, placed against the giants in the best UK tea brands guide.

What to buy

Buy Thompson's Punjana from Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda or online direct. For other Irish-style cups try Barry's Tea or Lyons Tea; for a UK premium-mainstream comparison, Yorkshire Tea Gold; or explore broader Irish Breakfast blends.

The bottom line on Thompson's Punjana

One of the oldest family-owned tea brands in these islands, blended for Irish strong-tea drinking, with growing UK supermarket distribution since the 2010s. Worth buying if you like a stronger, longer-brewed, milk-friendly black, or if you grew up on Irish tea and want to recover the cup. The family ownership and 130-year continuity are genuine differentiators in a category dominated by conglomerates. Per-cup cost sits slightly above PG Tips and Tetley, and the cup justifies the modest premium for anyone who specifically wants this profile.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Pick what you'll actually drink every day. A tea you reach for is worth more than a tea you admire.

Reference noted

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

Tea reading

For category context see the Irish tea tradition, the black tea fundamentals and the English Breakfast guide. For English competitors see Yorkshire Tea and PG Tips. For technique see how to brew black tea. For the home shelf, browse the English tea range and loose leaf range.

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