Astringency in Tea: What It Is and Why It Matters

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Astringency in tea, in summary:** Astringency in tea is a drying, puckering feel from tannin, not bitterness. Desirable as briskness in measure, a brewing fault in excess.

Astringency is one of the most misunderstood words in tea, routinely confused with bitterness. Getting it right changes how you taste and brew. This sits in the tasting cluster beside mouthfeel concepts.

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What astringency actually is

Astringency is a tactile drying, puckering sensation, not a taste, caused by polyphenols (tannins) binding proteins in saliva. It is the same feeling as a strong red wine or unripe fruit, sensed as texture.

Astringency is not bitterness

Bitterness is a taste on the tongue; astringency is a feel across the mouth. A tea can be astringent without being bitter and vice versa. Separating the two is a key tasting skill, see how to taste tea.

It is not automatically a fault

Controlled astringency gives black tea its brisk, refreshing structure, the quality that makes it cut through milk and food. Briskness is prized; harsh, gripping astringency from bad brewing is the fault, see faults.

What increases it

Hotter water, longer steeps, more leaf and harder water all raise astringency. It is largely a brewing variable you control, see the temperature guide and water.

By tea type

Brisk Assam and strong Ceylon are deliberately astringent; fine green and white are low; well made oolong balances it. It is built in by variety and processing, with oxidation the master switch, then pulled out more or less by your brewing, see black tea and oxidation explained.

Astringency and milk

Milk proteins bind astringency, which is exactly why strong black takes milk well and delicate tea does not need it, see milk in tea.

Astringency versus bitterness

	Astringency	Bitterness
What it is	A tactile drying, puckering feel	A taste on the tongue
Cause	Polyphenols (tannins) binding saliva proteins	Bitter compounds detected by taste
Sensed as	Texture across the whole mouth	Flavour, mainly back of tongue
Desirable?	Yes, in measure (briskness)	Usually a fault in excess
Analogy	Strong red wine, unripe fruit	Over steeped, scorched leaf

Common questions

Is astringency the same as bitterness? No. Bitterness is a taste; astringency is a drying feel from tannins binding saliva proteins. A tea can have one without the other.

Is astringency bad? Not in measure, it is the brisk structure that makes black tea refreshing. Only harsh, gripping astringency from bad brewing is a fault.

How do I reduce it? Cooler water, shorter steep, less leaf, softer water, or a splash of milk to bind the tannins. It is largely a brewing lever you control, not a fixed flaw.

Why does milk help? Milk proteins bind the tannins and soften astringency, so strong black tea welcomes milk while delicate tea can go without.

Quick take

Astringency is a drying texture from tannin, distinct from bitterness, desirable as briskness in measure and a brewing fault in excess. Naming it correctly sharpens both tasting and technique. Browse a brisk black tea, a malty Assam or the wider loose leaf range at teas.co.uk, or the full tea shop. When buying, think about the cup and description, what each cup costs, and the free UK delivery over £35.

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