# Tea Superstitions and Folklore (and Where They Came From)

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **British tea superstitions, in summary:** British tea superstitions explained: bubbles for money, leaves for visitors, tasseography, etiquette rules.

Tea is wrapped in folklore, bubbles, stray leaves, spills, fortunes, and the simple pleasure is enjoying it as culture, not belief. This sits in the history cluster beside tea in literature.

*Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in January 2026.*

## Why tea attracts superstition

A daily, communal, ritual drink naturally accumulates folk meaning; tea superstitions are social custom and storytelling, not phenomena. Its leaf-and-pattern variability is exactly what produces fortune-telling traditions.

## Bubbles and money

Bubbles on the surface "mean money coming" is a classic British tea omen, charming, widespread, and pure folklore tied to luck symbolism.

## Stray leaves and visitors

A floating tea leaf "means a stranger will visit", with elaborations read from its size and behaviour, the kind of detail folklore loves to embroider. The mundane cause is incomplete straining.

## Spilling tea

Spilt tea is variously bad or good luck depending on region and telling, a contradiction typical of folk belief and a sign it is custom, not rule.

## Tasseography

Reading tea leaves left in the cup (tasseography) is a divination tradition, a major Victorian and Edwardian parlour entertainment, and best enjoyed as ritual entertainment, see tea in literature.

## Etiquette "rules" as soft superstition

Many tea "musts" (stir this way, milk first, never leave the spoon) are social signalling dressed as rule, cousins of superstition, see milk first debate.

## Summary

Tea folklore is delightful cultural history, money bubbles, stranger leaves, leaf reading, to enjoy as custom and story, not as fact, see tea in literature.

## Tea superstitions and folklore at a glance

| Superstition | Origin / meaning |
|---|---|
| Bubbles on tea = money coming | Folk belief that bubbles forming on the cup's surface predict financial luck; widespread in UK and Irish traditions |
| Stray tea leaf in cup = visitor | A leaf floating in your cup predicts unexpected guests; the size of the leaf indicates the visitor's importance |
| Spilled tea | Variously: bad luck, depending on direction of spill; some traditions read it as omen, others as just mess |
| Tasseography (tea leaf reading) | Practice of reading patterns in leftover loose tea leaves for divination; widespread Victorian and Edwardian parlour entertainment |
| Milk in first vs last | Historic class signal: gentry poured tea first; servants/working class poured milk first to protect cheap china from cracking |
| Stirring tea with a knife | Folk superstition: stirring tea with a knife stirs up trouble or fights |
| Never let two women pour from one pot | Tradition that two women sharing pot-pouring brings argument or accident to the household |
| Why these persist | Most are harmless cultural memory; they ritualise the act of tea-making with social meaning |

## Try it yourself

For tasseography (leaf reading) you need actual leaves, so loose-leaf tea rather than bags; traditional bone china cups and pots are where much of this folklore grew up. Browse the full tea shop.

**FROM THE CURATOR**

*teas* · Per-cup price is the only price that matters. Loose leaf usually wins; supermarket bags sometimes do too.

## More tea history reading

For broader British tea culture see why the British drink so much tea and British tea culture. For tea-and-class context see the builder's brew tradition. For the proper-cup question see why tea tastes better from a

proper cup.

### 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


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