Tea Vocabulary: A Plain English Glossary

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea glossary, in summary:** A UK tea glossary: oxidation, flush, terroir, CTC, orthodox, astringency, umami, liquor, brisk, malty. Definitions and what they mean in practice.

Tea has a wall of jargon that makes labels and guides feel exclusive. Here is the plain English version of the words that actually matter. This sits in the getting started cluster beside the tasting guide.

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

Oxidation

How far the picked leaf is allowed to react with air, the master variable making green, oolong and black from one plant. Stop it at zero for green or white, around 30% for light oolong, 100% for black, see oxidation explained.

Flush / harvest

The picking round. First flush is early season, bright, delicate; later flushes are fuller and more muscatel. Darjeeling has the best-known flush distinctions, see first vs second flush.

Terroir

The "where" of tea, soil, altitude, climate and day-night swing, that shapes character before processing. Two identical plants in different terroirs give noticeably different cups, see single origin vs blended.

Orthodox vs CTC

Orthodox = whole leaf traditional processing, more aromatic and less brisk; CTC (crush tear curl) = the fast, strong, broken style in most everyday bags, see loose leaf tea.

Astringency vs bitterness

Astringency is a drying mouth feel from tannin binding to mouth proteins; bitterness is a taste from polyphenols. Different things, often confused, and over-brewing increases both, see astringency.

Umami

The savoury, brothy taste of fine shaded green tea, from amino acids; most prominent in shade-grown Japanese green, see umami in tea.

Single origin vs blend

Single origin shows one place and time; a blend is built for consistent flavour every box. Mainstream UK tea is overwhelmingly blended; specialty tea is overwhelmingly single origin, see single origin vs blended.

Tippy, brisk, malty, liquor

Tippy = lots of golden buds (higher grade); brisk = lively astringency (Ceylon, Kenya); malty = Assam-like cereal depth; liquor = the brewed tea itself, its colour and body. Trade words, demystified, see the flavour guide.

Summary

Tea jargon is just shorthand for oxidation, harvest, place, processing and taste. Learn ten words and every label and guide opens up, see the tasting guide.

Tea vocabulary glossary at a glance

Term	Meaning
Oxidation	The enzymatic browning of tea leaves; the master switch deciding category (white, green, oolong, black)
Flush	The harvest season; "first flush" Darjeeling means early spring picking, "second flush" means early summer
Terroir	The combination of climate, soil, altitude, and growing conditions that gives tea regional character
CTC	Cut-Tear-Curl; the machine process producing small leaf particles used in most tea bags
Orthodox	Traditional hand-rolling or larger-leaf machine processing; produces whole-leaf for loose tea
Astringency	The drying mouthfeel sensation; comes from tannin binding to mouth proteins
Bitterness	The taste sensation; comes from polyphenol compounds
Umami	Savoury fifth taste; prominent in shade-grown Japanese green tea
Liquor	Tea industry term for the brewed cup itself (its colour, body, character)
Brisk	Cup descriptor for bright, lively, slightly astringent character
Malty	Cup descriptor for cereal-bread-biscuit notes typical of Assam
Tippy	Leaf descriptor for tea with high proportion of young leaf buds (golden tips)
Mouthfeel	The physical sensation of the cup on the palate; weight, smoothness, body

What to buy to taste the vocabulary

The fastest way to learn the words is to taste across the oxidation spectrum: a white tea (barely oxidised), a green tea (unoxidised but pan- or steam-fixed), and a fully oxidised black such as a Darjeeling to meet "flush" and "muscatel" first-hand. For orthodox versus CTC, compare a PG Tips bag (CTC) against the loose-leaf range (orthodox). Browse the full tea shop; free UK delivery is over £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Start cheap, stay cheap until something stops you. Most rich teas reward patience, not budget.

More tea reading

For oxidation detail see tea oxidation explained. For tasting context see the practical tea tasting guide. For umami specifically see umami in tea. For regional terroir see the tea growing regions. For category basics see the black tea fundamentals and the green tea overview.

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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