Tea Loaf Recipe: Fruit Soaked in Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea loaf recipe, in summary:** A tea loaf is the British fruit cake made by soaking dried fruit overnight in strong builder tea; lighter than Christmas cake and improves over days.

The tea loaf is the one cake where tea is an ingredient, not just the accompaniment: dried fruit soaked overnight in strong brewed tea. This sits in the tea culture cluster beside tea cakes explained.

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

What a tea loaf is

A tea loaf is a dense, moist, lightly spiced fruited loaf in which the dried fruit is plumped overnight in strong brewed tea; barm brack, bara brith and plain tea bread are all relatives. The soaking is the whole point. Strong tea rehydrates and flavours the fruit, adding tannic depth and moisture without extra fat or sugar, which is why a tea loaf is traditionally lower in both than a Christmas cake while staying every bit as moist. See strong black tea.

Tea loaf at a glance

Aspect	Note
What it is	British fruit cake with dried fruit soaked overnight in tea
Tea used	Strong builder black tea (Yorkshire, English Breakfast, Assam)
Why soak	Tea tannins plump the fruit, deepen flavour, replace eggs/fat
Sugar/fat	Lower sugar and lower fat than traditional fruit cake
Keeps well	Wrapped, keeps 7-10 days; flavour improves over 2-3 days
Serving	Sliced, with butter; a cup of strong tea alongside
Variations	Bara Brith (Welsh), Selkirk Bannock (Scottish), Yorkshire Tea Loaf

Ingredients and method

This makes a 2lb loaf, eight to ten slices, for about £2 of ingredients and roughly ten minutes of active work spread over two days.

- 300g mixed dried fruit (sultanas, raisins, currants, mixed peel)

- 200ml strong hot black tea (Yorkshire Gold or English Breakfast: 2 bags or 4g loose in 250ml boiling water, steeped 4 minutes)
- 100g soft light brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- 225g self-raising flour
- 1 tsp mixed spice

1. The evening before, stir the dried fruit and sugar into the hot tea, cover, and leave to soak overnight (8 to 12 hours).
2. Next day, heat the oven to 160C fan (180C conventional) and line a 2lb loaf tin with parchment.
3. Beat the egg into the soaked fruit.
4. Sift in the flour and mixed spice and fold gently, just until combined; do not overmix.
5. Spoon into the tin, level the top, and bake 60 to 75 minutes until a skewer comes out clean (cover loosely with foil if the top browns too fast).
6. Cool in the tin for 10 minutes, then turn out onto a wire rack to cool fully before slicing.

It keeps wrapped in greaseproof for seven to ten days and is genuinely better on day two or three, so the traditional move is to bake on Saturday for Sunday tea.

Which tea to use

A robust black gives the best depth: builder's-strength Assam, English Breakfast or Yorkshire Gold. A weak, thin tea simply will not flavour the fruit, and the loaf ends up tasting like a generic fruit cake instead of a tea loaf. Earl Grey adds a citrus note that some people love. See English Breakfast.

Regional variations

Each region has its own version. Bara brith (Welsh, speckled bread) is the best-known, using strong Welsh tea and overnight-soaked fruit, often with marmalade or honey for a denser, more bread-like crumb, served sliced with salted butter. Selkirk bannock (Scottish Borders) is an enriched, yeast-leavened sweet bread with sultanas and butter, less tea-soaked but traditionally taken with strong breakfast tea. The Yorkshire tea loaf is the standard, slightly lighter, entry-point version. And Irish tea brack (barmbrack) is the most fruit-heavy, served at Halloween with charms baked in, a ring for marriage, a coin for wealth, more an occasion cake than a routine bake.

Common mistakes

Most disappointing loaves trace to a handful of errors. Skipping the overnight soak leaves hard fruit and a dry crumb; the fruit needs the full eight to twelve hours. Using a weak tea fails to flavour the fruit at all. Over-mixing the flour develops gluten and turns the crumb tough, so fold just until it disappears. Over-baking dries it out; seventy-five minutes is the maximum for a 2lb loaf at 160C fan. Slicing while warm makes it crumble, so let it cool fully first. And skipping the rest day means missing the point: it is better on day two.

Serving it

Slice it about a centimetre thick with a serrated knife so you do not crush the crumb, and spread thinly with cold butter, salted in the Welsh tradition, unsalted in the Yorkshire one, so the loaf's own character comes through. Drink a strong builder's tea alongside (Yorkshire Gold, English Breakfast or Assam with a splash of milk), ideally matching the tea you soaked the fruit in. Avoid jam, which doubles up on fruit, sweet spreads that bury the flavour, and chilled service, which turns the crumb claggy. See tea with cake.

What to buy

For the soaking liquid and the cup alongside, buy a strong builder's black: Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips, English Breakfast or Assam. Browse the full tea shop for more.

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