What Is a Tea Sommelier?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The short version:** A UK guide to tea sommeliers: certified specialists in hospitality and retail. UK Tea Academy training, what they do, sommelier vs tea master.

"Tea sommelier" sounds grand and has a real, definable meaning. Sommeliers belong with our tea people pages, next to Jane Pettigrew.

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

Information based on public sources, accurate as of May 2026. Training-body details and salaries change; check current providers for the latest.

Tea sommelier at a glance

Detail	Fact
Definition	Certified tea specialist; tea equivalent of wine sommelier
Working in	Hospitality, retail, consultancy, tea trade buying
Major training body (US)	The International Tea Masters Association (ITMA)
Major training body (Canada)	Tea and Herbal Association of Canada (THAC), which runs the TAC Tea Sommelier Programme
UK training	UK Tea Academy (London-based, sommelier diploma)
European training	Tea Sommelier Academy Hamburg, France's ITC, others
Typical training duration	6 months to 2 years across multiple modules
Core curriculum	Classification, processing, origins, brewing, tasting, pairing
Career applications	Hotels, restaurants, tea shops, brand consulting, supply chain
Salary range	GBP 25-50k+ depending on role and seniority

The definition, and why the role exists

A tea sommelier is a professionally trained tea specialist who sources, evaluates, brews and pairs tea, the tea equivalent of a wine sommelier, usually through formal courses and certification. The role exists for the same structural reason: a complex beverage category needs trained people to handle it at professional level. Premium hospitality (luxury hotels, fine dining, high-end tea retail) generates real demand for expertise

beyond casual brewing, and the certification gives employers a verifiable competency standard. It is real professional development with demand in the jobs market, not status inflation: UK hotels like Claridge's, the Savoy and the Connaught, and retailers like Fortnum and Mason, employ qualified tea specialists.

What they actually do

The work spans several settings. In hospitality, a tea sommelier curates the tea menu, trains wait staff in brewing standards (water temperature, leaf measurement, timing, service), runs food pairings for tasting menus, and fields customer questions. In retail, they source and evaluate tea, decide the range, train shop staff and advise customers. In consultancy, they design tea menus for hotel groups and brands; and in the supply chain, they evaluate tea for buying decisions at trade level. The common thread is professional-grade tea expertise applied commercially. See tea and food pairing.

Training programmes

Several established programmes operate worldwide, and most cover the same core: classification (the six types), processing (oxidation, withering, firing), origins, brewing (water, temperature, time, ratio), structured tasting (cupping) and pairing. The Tea and Herbal Association of Canada's Tea Sommelier programme is widely respected; the International Tea Masters Association runs US-based training; and in the UK the London-based UK Tea Academy offers a Tea Sommelier Diploma that is the accepted UK standard, with graduates working in major London hotels and premium retailers. Courses run from around six months to two years, varying in assessment but converging on similar competencies. See the tasting guide.

Sommelier versus tea master

The two terms are not interchangeable. Tea sommelier usually implies formal modern certification through a programme like the UK Tea Academy, THAC or ITMA. Tea master is older terminology, used loosely in the West but with specific meaning in East Asian traditions: the Chinese tea-master path involves years of apprenticeship, and the Japanese sense implies chanoyu ceremonial expertise certified through a teacher-student lineage. A modern sommelier may have chemistry-and-processing knowledge a traditional master never studied; a traditional master may have ceremonial depth no Western certification covers. Both are legitimate, but they name different things. See the tea ceremony.

Is the certification worth it?

For hospitality and trade professionals, the certification is well worth it: it provides a verifiable competency standard that helps with career progression and opens specific roles (hotel tea service, premium retail buying, brand consultancy) that often require a formal credential. For a serious hobbyist, it is not strictly necessary, since the same underlying knowledge is available through books (Tony Gebely, Jane Pettigrew), online resources and self-directed tasting practice. The certification is valuable as a professional qualification; the knowledge behind it is reachable other ways. See best tea books.

The afternoon-tea application

The single biggest professional application in the UK is hotel afternoon-tea service. Premium London hotels (Claridge's, the Savoy, the Ritz, the Connaught, the Dorchester and others) run dedicated afternoon tea programmes at around GBP 75 to 200 a head, and each needs sommelier level expertise to justify the price: a menu of fifteen to thirty selected teas, brewing standards consistent across hundreds of daily covers, trained staff, and food pairing across the three stages of the service. Without that expertise the service drifts into a generic tea-bag operation that cannot support premium pricing, which is exactly why hotel groups value the credential.

What to buy to taste at sommelier level

For single-origin tea buy single-origin loose-leaf, Darjeeling single-estate or Ceylon single-estate. For premium Japanese tea buy gyokuro or premium sencha. For premium Chinese tea buy Longjing, oolong or aged Pu-erh. For the kit to apply the technique buy a gaiwan or a tea-tasting set.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Borrow one simple sommelier habit from this page that suits your routine. Flights, cupping and pairings can wait until week two.

More tea reading

For the tasting framework see the tea tasting guide. For comparable tea-people figures see Jane Pettigrew, Tony Gebely and Tim d'Offay. For traditional ceremony context see the Japanese tea ceremony. For pairing see the tea pairing chart. For education books see the best tea books.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
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