Afternoon Tea Etiquette

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Afternoon tea etiquette, in summary:** Afternoon tea etiquette is mostly logic once you know the why: pinky down, host pours, eat savoury to sweet, break the scone, relax about the milk order.

Afternoon tea etiquette sounds intimidating and is mostly logical once you know the why. It belongs with our other afternoon tea guides, alongside how to host.

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

The etiquette, and the why

Rule	The reason it exists
Pinky down	Sticking it out was never elegant; hold the handle naturally
The host pours	A courtesy; cups filled three quarters to leave room for milk
Eat in sequence	Savoury to scone to sweet so the palate climbs salty to sweet
Break the scone	Break, do not cut; top each bite, never sandwich it
Milk order	Milk first once protected bone china; now personal preference

Etiquette is logic, not snobbery

Afternoon tea etiquette sounds intimidating but is mostly common sense once you know the why. Almost every rule has a practical origin rather than a class test: the three-tier order, the three-quarter pour, the host pouring as a courtesy, all follow from heat, palate and hospitality. Knowing the reason makes each rule easy to remember and easy to relax appropriately. See how to host.

Holding the cup, and the host pouring

Pinky down: sticking the little finger out was never elegant, so hold the cup naturally with your fingers through or pinching the handle. The host pours, which is the courtesy at the heart of the occasion, filling cups about three-quarters full to leave room for milk and sugar. As a guest you do not pour your own; you wait to be topped up, and signal no more by placing the spoon across the cup. See serving order.

Eat in sequence, and the scone

Eat in sequence: savoury sandwiches first, then scones, then sweets, the palate climbing from salty to sweet and mirroring the stand. With the scone, break it rather than cutting it, and top each bite rather than sandwiching the halves back together, which is the one real scone mistake. The jam-or-cream-first question is regional identity, not right or wrong, so do not stress over it. See jam or cream first.

The milk question

The famous milk-first custom began as a way to stop hot tea cracking fragile bone china, not as a class signal, so today the order is simply preference. Two myths are worth retiring: pinky-out is not refined, it is a cartoon; and the milk order is not a class test. Drop both and most of the intimidation goes with them. See milk first vs tea first.

Napkin, stirring and the spoon

The small mechanics are courtesies, not tests. The napkin goes across the lap, never tucked into the collar. If milk and sugar are involved, stir gently back and forth, roughly twelve-to-six, rather than swirling and clinking the spoon round the cup, then rest the spoon on the saucer behind the cup rather than leaving it standing in it. These exist so the cup is pleasant to share, not to catch anyone out.

What never to do

A short list of real lapses, not invented ones: do not blow on the tea (wait if it is too hot), do not slurp at a formal table, do not leave the spoon in the cup, do not dunk biscuits (a home comfort, not a hotel move), and do not sandwich the scone halves back together. Order coffee at elevenses, not at afternoon tea. Everything else, the milk order included, is preference. The surest sign you have it right is that the staff simply top up your tea without comment.

The takeaway

Formal afternoon tea is a performance, and knowing the rules makes it more fun, not less; a pinky-out slip earns a quiet smile, not a beheading. None of it is required to host a relaxed version at home, where warm scones, fresh sandwiches and good tea matter far more than the cutlery. Etiquette here is charm, not law.

What to buy

Browse afternoon tea blends, a classic Darjeeling or Earl Grey, or the full tea shop.

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- About afternoon tea
- How to host afternoon tea
- Jam or cream first
- Devon vs Cornwall cream tea

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- Black tea
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