# The Afternoon Tea Three Tier Order

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The afternoon tea three tier order, in summary:** The afternoon tea three tier order: savoury bottom, scones middle, sweets top, eaten bottom to top, for real heat and palate reasons. The stand is logic.

The tiered stand has a correct order and a real reason for it. Read it with the other afternoon tea guides, such as etiquette.

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

## The order, and why it is that way

| Tier | Contents | Why there |
|---|---|---|
| Bottom | Savoury finger sandwiches | Sturdy; anchors the stand; eaten first |
| Middle | Scones with cream and jam | The warm centrepiece, eaten second |
| Top | Small sweets and pastries | Most delicate; kept away from rising warmth |

## Why heat and palate set the order

The stand is logic, not decoration. Rising warmth from the room and the hands must not soften the most delicate items, so the sweets sit on top while the sturdier savoury anchors the bottom. You then eat bottom to top, sandwiches, scone, sweet, so the palate climbs salty to rich to sweet, the same reason a meal runs starter to pudding, applied in miniature. See how to host.

## How to serve it, no stand needed

The tower is not the point; the order is. Three labelled plates in sequence work just as well, which is exactly why a tiered stand is one of the things you can skip on a budget. The serving flow follows naturally: warm the pot and pour the first cups, let guests start on the savoury tier, bring the scones warm at the scone stage with cream and jam offered separately, and finish with the sweets and a fresh top up. The jam-or-cream choice is regional identity, not an order error, see jam or cream first.

## Common mistakes the order prevents

Three predictable failures all trace to ignoring the order: delicate sweets softening because they were put on the bottom near rising warmth; scones served cold because they were not timed to the scone stage; and everyone diving for cake first, which leaves the savoury untouched and the palate jumping straight to sugar. The bottom-to-top rule prevents all three at once.

### Why this beats a free-for-all

It is worth saying why the order is kept at all rather than letting everyone graze. A structured sequence does three quiet jobs: it protects the most delicate food from heat and crushing, it paces the meal so it stays the elegant pause it is meant to be rather than a scramble, and it gives the palate a deliberate arc from savoury through rich to sweet so each tier tastes of itself. Think of the stand as a one-glance instruction sheet: anyone, including a guest who has never done this before, can look at it and know what to eat and in what order, which is precisely why the convention has survived unchanged for over a century. Whatever you serve it on, savoury then scone then sweet, eaten bottom to top, is the bit that makes the whole thing work, see the tradition.

### What to buy

Build the afternoon tea around the cup: a delicate Darjeeling or the wider loose leaf range, with a brisk black tea to cut the cream. Browse the full tea shop; free UK delivery over £35.

**FROM THE CURATOR**

*teas* · A short list of trusty teas beats a big curious stash. Rotate two or three teas that you really rate.

### Afternoon-tea reading

- How to host an afternoon tea
- Afternoon tea menu ideas
- Jam or cream first
- About afternoon tea

### 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


## Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

**+100 pts**

**Create your free account**

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



**100 pts = 1 tree**

**Plant a tree in Scotland**

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/