What Time Is Tea? The Two Meanings, Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **What time is tea, in summary:** "Tea" means two things: the mid-afternoon sandwiches-and-cake occasion, or the evening meal, largely a North-South and class signal.

"What time is tea?" has two completely correct, completely different answers. It links to our other tea calendar pages, such as tea times of the day.

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

What time is tea, at a glance

Meaning	The answer
Two meanings	"Tea" = afternoon tea (~3-5pm) OR the evening meal (~5-7pm)
Afternoon tea	The mid-afternoon sandwiches-scones-cake occasion
"Tea" as dinner	The main evening meal, common in the North and Scotland
North-South divide	Largely class and region: "tea" vs "dinner" vs "supper"
Read the signal	"Come for tea" = ask; it could be cake or a full dinner

The two meanings, and how to read the signal

"What time is tea" really does confuse people, including Britons, because "tea" is two different things and the speaker rarely says which. Meaning one is afternoon tea: the mid afternoon (roughly three to five) occasion of sandwiches, scones and cake with a pot, historically an upper and middle class custom and now also a hotel treat, see afternoon tea tradition. Meaning two is "tea" as the evening meal: the main cooked meal of the day eaten in the early evening (roughly five to seven), the ordinary everyday sense across much of the North of England, Scotland and many working-class households, where "dinner" may mean the midday meal and "supper" something later, see tea times of the day. So the same three-letter word points at a dainty spread or a full plate of dinner depending on who is speaking and where they are from. How to read it: "come round for tea" from a Southern host around 4pm probably means cake; the same phrase from a Northern or Scottish friend for 6pm almost certainly means dinner. When in any doubt the clear advice is simply to ask "what time, and should I have eaten?", which is far less awkward than guessing wrong.

The social history behind it

The two meanings are not a random quirk but a fossil of class and industrial history, and knowing that makes the ambiguity legible. Afternoon tea, the dainty mid-afternoon spread, was a nineteenth-century upper- and middle-class invention to bridge a long gap before a late, formal dinner, leisured by design. "Tea" as the evening meal comes from the opposite end of the same society: for working households, especially in the industrial North and Scotland, the substantial meal came when workers got home in the early evening and took the name of the drink that accompanied it. So "dinner", "tea" and "supper" map onto region and class as much as onto the clock, and "high tea", now misused by hotels to mean a fancy afternoon spread, historically meant exactly that substantial early-evening working meal eaten at a high (dining) table. The vocabulary never standardised because the social structures it encoded never did, which is why a single word still does two jobs, see history of British tea.

What to buy

Whatever "tea" means in the invitation, a good cup helps: a strong black tea or a classic English Breakfast from the full tea shop; free UK delivery over £35.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (beverage)

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