What Is a Tea Cultivar?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea cultivars, in summary:** A cultivar is a cultivated variety of the tea plant, Camellia sinensis: a named, propagated lineage selected for traits like flavour, hardiness or budding time. It shapes flavour potential strongly, but terroir, harvest and processing decide the final cup as much as the plant does.

"Cultivar" is one of the most clarifying words in connoisseur tea. This anchors the cultivar cluster beside assamica vs sinensis.

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

What a cultivar is

A cultivar is a "cultivated variety": a specific, named, propagated tea plant selected for traits like flavour, hardiness, yield or budding time. All tea is one species, Camellia sinensis, and cultivars are the many selected plants within it, much as apple varieties sit within one apple species. It is worth separating two terms that casual writing blurs. A botanical "variety" (var.) is a naturally occurring subgroup of a species, which is why the two big natural types are Camellia sinensis var. sinensis (the Chinese type) and var. assamica (the Indian type). A cultivar is narrower: a specific human-selected lineage maintained by propagation, such as Yabukita within var. sinensis. So "var. sinensis" is the broad botanical category, and "Yabukita cultivar" is a particular cultivated line inside it. See what counts as tea for the species basics.

Aspect	Answer
What it is	Cultivated variety of tea plant bred or selected for specific traits
Species	Camellia sinensis; all tea cultivars are this single species
Two main subspecies	Camellia sinensis var. sinensis (Chinese type), var. assamica (Indian type)
Number of cultivars	1000+ documented; major commercial cultivars in dozens
Famous Chinese cultivars	Long Jing #43, Da Bai (silver needle parent), Tie Guan Yin, Da Hong Pao
Famous Japanese cultivars	Yabukita (75% of Japan), Saemidori, Okumidori, Asatsuyu
Famous Indian cultivars	Various Assam types, China-Assam hybrids, AV2 (Darjeeling)
Famous Taiwan cultivars	TTES #18 (Ruby), TTES #12 (Jin Xuan), Qing Xin (high-mountain)

Aspect	Answer
How they're made	Field selection, controlled breeding, hybrid crosses, occasional mutation
Cultivar vs variety	"Variety" is botanical natural; "cultivar" is cultivated human-selected
Why it matters	Flavour potential, growing characteristics, regional fit, premium pricing
Caveat	Cultivar matters but is one factor among many (terroir, processing)
Framing	Real knowledge area; useful for buying decisions; not magic differentiator alone

How cultivars are made

Cultivars develop along a few pathways. Field selection is the ancient method: growers notice an exceptional plant for yield, taste or hardiness and propagate it, and most historic cultivars began this way. Controlled cross-breeding pollinates known parents to combine desired traits, producing the hybrid cultivars common in modern breeding. Occasionally a natural mutation throws up a distinctive plant that is then propagated. The critical concept underneath all of this is vegetative propagation: cultivars are propagated by cuttings (clones), not by seed, because seed offspring vary, and that is how a cultivar's identity is held steady over decades. In countries like Japan, formal registration tracks lineage, while traditional naming dominates in China. Developing and validating a new cultivar takes roughly 15 to 30 years from first cross to commercial release.

Famous cultivars by region

Each major region has signature cultivars worth knowing. In Japan, Yabukita dominates over 70% of production for its versatility and hardiness, with Saemidori (early, premium), Okumidori (late, full-bodied) and shade-tolerant types like Samidori grown for matcha. In China, Da Bai is the parent of silver needle, Long Jing #43 is specific to the Longjing style, and Tie Guan Yin is an oolong cultivar that shares its name with the finished tea. India and Sri Lanka rely on Assam cultivars, China-Assam hybrids and AV2 for premium Darjeeling. Taiwan uses the numbered TTES cultivars (#12 Jin Xuan, creamy and distinctive; #18 Ruby) alongside traditional Qing Xin for refined high-mountain oolong. Kenya works with its TRFK selections. Each carries broad flavour expectations when grown well.

Cultivar, terroir and processing

Cultivar provides genetic potential; terroir, harvest and processing convert that potential into an actual cup. The same cultivar grown at different elevation, soil or climate produces a different character: Yabukita in low-elevation Kagoshima is not Yabukita in mountain Shizuoka. Processing matters just as much, because a cultivar that excels as a green tea may make only ordinary black, and some are suited to specific styles (Da Bai for white tea, Tie Guan Yin for partial oxidation). Think of it as a four-legged stool, cultivar, terroir, harvest and processing; change any leg and the cup changes. Marketing that leans on a single factor oversimplifies, and real quality needs all four working together. See tea oxidation for the processing side.

Using cultivar knowledge as a buyer

Treat cultivar as useful supplementary detail rather than the primary buying criterion: cup quality and producer reputation rank higher. As a regional indicator it helps, since "100% Yabukita" signals mainstream Japanese green while "Saemidori" suggests early-harvest premium positioning. As a provenance check, a vendor who specifies the cultivar with real context shows sourcing depth, whereas cultivar names sprinkled as buzzwords without producer detail are surface marketing. It is worth being clear about the limits too: cultivar is not a quality guarantee, because a famous cultivar grown or processed badly still makes mediocre tea; it does not justify a premium on the name alone; and it is often simply not disclosed, which is fine at many price points and does not mean lower quality. Trying the same cultivar from different producers, or different cultivars from one producer, teaches the signatures fastest. Explore Japanese green, Taiwanese oolong or Darjeeling to start.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

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