CTC vs Orthodox: Granules or Whole Leaf

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **CTC vs orthodox, in summary:** Crushed granules for strong, fast, cheap, consistent brewing, versus whole leaf for nuance and re-steeping. Different tools for different jobs, not better versus worse.

CTC versus orthodox is one of the most consequential, least understood processing forks. This sits in the processing cluster beside rolling.

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

The two methods

CTC stands for "crush, tear, curl": machinery shreds the leaf into small, uniform granules that brew fast, strong, consistent, cheap and intensely milk-friendly. Orthodox is traditional processing that keeps the leaf more whole, for nuance and re-steeping. The important reframing is that CTC was not a degradation of orthodox tea but a deliberate twentieth-century engineering answer to a clear demand: a strong, quick-brewing, inexpensive tea producible at vast scale that punches through milk, which is exactly what a mass market drinking strong milky cups by the billion wants. It now dominates everyday black tea in bags for good reasons, and it does that job very well. See tea processing steps for where it sits.

	CTC	Orthodox
Process	Crush, tear, curl into granules	Traditional, leaf kept more whole
Strength	Strong, fast extracting	Slower and more layered
Re steeping	One strong cup	Several infusions
Cost	Cheap, efficient	Higher
Best at	Strong milky everyday bag tea	Nuance, exploring leaf
How to spot	Tiny uniform granules	Visible twisted or whole leaf

Trade-offs, and neither is bad

CTC gives strength, speed, low cost and batch consistency, and gives up nuance and re-steeping in exchange. Orthodox keeps the leaf more whole, which preserves nuance and lets it re-steep several times, at a higher price and with less cup-to-cup uniformity. Neither is better in the abstract; they are different tools for different jobs. The common instinct to rank orthodox above CTC is mostly snobbery: a strong, reliable,

cheap, consistent morning mug is a real achievement, and CTC delivers it better than orthodox ever could, while orthodox delivers a nuance and re-steeping that CTC cannot. Judge by the job you want done, not by prestige. One useful note: this fork changes strength and format, not whether the tea is oxidised, which is a separate axis covered in fermentation versus oxidation.

How to tell, and what tea bags are

The visual tell is reliable: tiny, uniform, granular particles point to CTC, while visible twisted, wiry or whole leaf points to orthodox. Tip out a standard supermarket tea bag and you will see fine granules, which is why it brews strong and fast in the sixty seconds a busy kitchen gives it and takes milk so well. Almost all flat tea bags are CTC by design, and that is the format working as intended, not a defect, with the trade being no real second steep and a narrower flavour because everything comes out at once. A larger leaf pyramid narrows the gap, but the really different product is orthodox loose leaf, the step change the loose leaf guide describes, rather than a dearer bag in the same class.

Brewing each to its strength

Play to what each is for. CTC wants full boiling water and a short, single, strong steep, then milk; it is engineered to be brewed exactly the way most people make a builder's brew. Orthodox wants a touch more care, the right temperature for its type and, crucially, repeated short infusions to draw out the nuance and value it was processed to hold. Brewing orthodox like CTC wastes what you paid extra for; brewing CTC like orthodox just makes a weak first cup with no second. For a strong milky daily mug, an Assam-based CTC or a good everyday bag is the rational, economical pick; for tasting and re-steeping, buy orthodox loose leaf. See Assam for the classic CTC base.

Common questions

Is CTC bad tea? No. It is engineered for strong, fast, cheap, consistent, milk-friendly brewing and is excellent at exactly that job.

Is orthodox always better? No, just different. It offers nuance and re-steeping at higher cost; CTC offers strength and value. Match the tool to the job.

How do I spot CTC? Tiny uniform granules versus visible twisted or whole leaf for orthodox. The look is a reliable giveaway.

Does CTC mean lower-quality leaf? Not necessarily. It is a processing choice about format and use, not automatically a statement about the leaf grade.

Worth keeping on the shelf around this article: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Wander the tea shop for orthodox and CTC teas alike, and UK delivery is free from £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · For CTC and orthodox alike, compare cost per cup and ignore the pack price. Orthodox loose leaf usually wins on that count, though supermarket CTC bags sometimes do too.

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