Tea Leaf Grades: Size, Not Quality

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea leaf grades, in summary:** Grades like FTGFOP, BOP and the Pekoe family describe leaf SIZE and form, not absolute quality. A useful hint about leaf style and brewing behaviour, and one signal among several.

Tea grading is one of the most misunderstood things in tea. This anchors the grading cluster beside orange pekoe.

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

What grading actually is

Leaf grades mostly describe the size, style and intactness of the leaf, not how good it tastes. The basic hierarchy runs from large, intact whole leaf down to tiny particles: whole leaf (largest, orthodox, premium positioning), broken leaf (smaller deliberate fragments, quicker brewing, reasonable quality), fannings (small particles from sieving, common in tea bags), and dust (the finest particles, mass-market bags). Smaller grades brew faster and stronger, larger grades more slowly and with more nuance. The processing matters here: whole-leaf orthodox production aims to keep the leaf intact, while CTC deliberately makes small, uniform particles instead. See whole leaf vs broken.

Grade level	Answer
What grading is	Sorting system based on leaf size, shape, and quality of broken pieces
Core point	Grade describes leaf SIZE, not leaf QUALITY in absolute terms
Whole leaf	Largest size; orthodox processing; premium positioning
Broken leaf	Smaller pieces; deliberate breaking; quicker brewing; reasonable quality
Fannings	Small particles from sieving; tea bag use; reasonable quality at price point
Dust	Finest particles; tea bag use; mass-market positioning
Pekoe (P)	"White hair"; refers to tender shoots; whole leaf grade
Orange Pekoe (OP)	"Orange" refers to royal Orange family (Holland); not flavour or colour
FTGFOP	"Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe"; top whole-leaf orthodox grade
BOP	"Broken Orange Pekoe"; broken whole-leaf grade; common quality
CTC grades	"Crush, Tear, Curl" machine processing; different grading vocabulary

Grade level	Answer
Indian grading	Most-elaborate; FTGFOP1 highest down through fannings, dust
Ceylon grading	Similar to Indian; OP1, OPA designations; OP-FOP-FBOP-BOP hierarchy
Chinese grading	Different traditions; often producer-specific designations
Framing	Useful information about leaf form; not absolute quality indicator

The Pekoe family decoded

The Pekoe-based vocabulary is the most elaborate in tea grading, and it is mostly an orthodox black tea system from India and Sri Lanka. "Pekoe" derives from the Chinese pek-ho, meaning "white hair", a reference to the tender, white-haired buds, while "Orange" reportedly nods to the Dutch House of Orange from the early tea trade rather than to any flavour or colour. From there the prefixes stack up: P (Pekoe, unbroken whole leaf), OP (Orange Pekoe, longer leaves), FOP (Flowery, tip-rich), TGFOP (Tippy Golden Flowery, with golden tips), FTGFOP (Finest, the top whole-leaf orthodox grade), then FTGFOP1 and SFTGFOP1 for the very peak. Each prefix marks a further refinement, though not all tea uses the elaborate system, and CTC uses a separate numbered vocabulary.

Grade isn't quality

This is the distinction most often missed: a grade describes leaf size and form, not whether the tea is good. FTGFOP designates whole-leaf orthodox processing with golden tips, but it does not guarantee the underlying tea is excellent, because cultivar, terroir, growing skill, harvest timing, processing and storage all shape the cup independently of leaf size. A poorly grown FTGFOP can be beaten by a well-made BOP from a quality producer, which is exactly why sellers who wave an impressive grade as proof of quality should be checked against the cup. The relationship is not zero, though: a very low grade like dust or fannings genuinely does signal commodity positioning at commodity pricing. Treat grade as one signal among several. See how to judge tea quality.

Different systems, and common confusions

Major regions grade differently. India (Assam, Darjeeling, Nilgiri) uses the most elaborate Pekoe system, with a parallel numbered scheme for CTC; Sri Lanka uses a similar Pekoe system with OP1 and OPA designations plus sub-region suffixes; China mostly uses producer-specific quality tiers; and Japan grades by tea type (ceremonial vs culinary matcha, first-flush vs later sencha). So "high grade" means different things in different traditions, and applying Indian vocabulary to a Chinese oolong is misguided. The single biggest confusion is "Orange Pekoe": it is a grade, not a flavour or a tea type, yet it is so widely misread that some vendors market it as a variety. "Pekoe" alone is just the base whole-leaf designation, not a premium signal, and CTC grades like PD (Pekoe Dust) do not map onto orthodox letter grades.

Using grades as a buyer

In practice, grade tells you two useful things: the leaf form (which guides how you brew it, since different sizes want different handling) and the rough price-quality tier within a tradition. A vendor who states a precise grade (FTGFOP1 rather than a vague "premium") is showing some sourcing depth, while loose

grade language is often marketing surface. The sensible approach is to learn the grading vocabulary for the regions you buy from, treat grade as one factor alongside cultivar, producer, harvest year and your own tasting, and not pay a premium for an impressive acronym alone. Used accurately it is a genuinely helpful tool; misunderstood ("Orange Pekoe is a type") it just leads to confused buying.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

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