Orange Pekoe: A Grade, Not a Flavour

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Orange pekoe, in summary:** A black-tea leaf-grade name for whole-leaf tea, not an orange-flavoured tea. The "orange" most likely comes from the 18th-century Dutch House of Orange-Nassau, not the fruit.

"Orange Pekoe" causes more confusion than any other tea term. This sits in the grading cluster beside tea leaf grades.

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

What it is, and isn't

Orange pekoe is not an orange flavour, not orange-scented, and not a quality rating, which are the three most common myths. What it actually is, is a grade describing a particular size and style of whole-leaf black tea: a wiry leaf, typically without the golden tips of the higher grades. "Pekoe" itself is the anglicisation of the Chinese "bai hao", meaning "white down" or "white hair", a reference to the fine silvery hairs on young tea buds. Knowing that OP is a leaf grade stops you assuming a flavour or quality the term never promised; it describes leaf style, and you still judge the actual tea. See tea leaf grades for the full system.

Question	Answer
What it is NOT	Not orange-flavoured tea; no oranges involved
What it IS	A leaf-grade name (OP) for whole-leaf black tea
Origin of "orange"	Likely Dutch House of Orange-Nassau, royal marketing 1700s
Position in grade system	OP is a whole-leaf grade; smaller grades cascade below
Common grade letters	OP, BOP (broken), FOP (flowery), FBOP, FBOPF, dust grades
What it means for cup	Whole leaf, slower extraction, more layered character
Misconception	OP is not automatically high quality; size is not quality
Used by	Mostly Sri Lankan and Indian black tea producers

The grade ladder

The grade vocabulary on a label can look bewildering, so it helps to see the ladder. At the top, whole-leaf grades run OP (orange pekoe), OP1 (the longest, most twisted leaves), then FOP (flowery, with golden tips),

GFOP (golden flowery, more tips), TGFOP (tippy golden flowery), FTGFOP (finest, the top of the ladder) and SFTGFOP (super finest, used for the most prized Darjeeling first flush). Broken grades cascade below: BOP (broken orange pekoe), FBOP, GFBOP and so on. Then come the small particle sizes: fannings (used in better tea bags) and dust (the smallest, in standard bags). The cup follows the size: whole leaf extracts slowly with complex character, broken grades faster with stronger, more straightforward flavour, and fannings and dust fastest of all. Those last two are not insults but functional choices for the bag-in-mug market, which needs a strong cup fast. See FTGFOP.

The "orange" origin, and size isn't quality

The prevailing account is that "orange pekoe" entered the English tea trade in the early eighteenth century, with the "orange" referencing the Dutch royal House of Orange-Nassau, used as a patronage signal in marketing premium whole-leaf black tea; an alternative theory traces it to the orange-tinged down on young buds, but the royal-marketing story is the more widely cited. Either way, it has nothing to do with the fruit. The more important clarification is that size is not quality. The grade letters describe leaf size and tip content, not flavour, so a poorly grown TGFOP Darjeeling can be meaningfully worse than a carefully grown standard OP Ceylon at the same price. Read the label, taste the cup, and treat the grade as a navigation aid rather than a verdict. See how to judge tea quality.

Brewing it, and common myths

Orange pekoe is forgiving but rewards a few rules. Use one heaped teaspoon of whole-leaf OP per 200ml of just-boiled water; a rolling boil is fine, since this is black tea and not the cooler-water approach of green or white. Steep four to five minutes for a full cup, or three for a lighter one, and a good OP will re-steep, which makes it more economical than a bag. Brew it in a pot rather than a cramped infuser ball, because the whole leaves need room to unfurl (wet leaf is roughly four times the dry volume). Drink it neat for the cleanest character, or with a small splash of milk. Three myths are worth clearing: "OP means premium" (no, it is a size grade, and the premium signal is producer, origin and season); "broken grades are bad" (no, BOP and FBOP are exactly right for strong, milky cups, which is why many good supermarket black teas are FBOP); and "fannings and dust are inferior" (no, they are the appropriate grade for tea bags, and a quality fannings from a good producer beats a careless OP).

Buying it in the UK

Orange pekoe is widely available if you look in the right places. Speciality online tea sellers, including teas.co.uk, carry single origin OP from Ceylon (Dimbula, Uva, Nuwara Eliya), India (Nilgiri, Darjeeling, Assam) and occasionally African sources, with prices typically £8 to £30 per 100g, the upper end covering really premium harvests rather than just packaging. Supermarket OP is harder to find, because most British supermarket black tea is fannings or dust grade for bags, though the premium loose-leaf ranges sometimes stock a Ceylon or Darjeeling OP. A £15 to £20 pouch of carefully chosen Ceylon OP is one of the most rewarding small upgrades a British black-tea drinker can make from bag tea.

Shop the range: browse the English tea range and loose leaf range.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Buy Orange Pekoe on the cup, not on the grade label. Explore other grades once you know which OP you like.

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