Fannings and Dust: Small Grades, Not Bad Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Fannings and dust, in summary:** They sound like rubbish but are particle-size grades, not quality grades. Good leaf milled small makes a strong, fast, thoroughly decent cup, which is exactly why it fills a tea bag.

"Fannings" and "dust" sound like rubbish; the picture is more mixed than that. This sits in the grading cluster beside whole leaf vs broken.

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What they are

Fannings and dust are the smallest particle grades: fannings are small broken pieces, dust is the finest particles, and together they are the typical fill of a tea bag. The reason is physics: small particles have a high surface area, so they brew fast, strong and consistent, which is exactly what a quick, milky everyday bag needs when it has seconds rather than minutes in the cup. See loose leaf vs tea bags for the format question.

Grade	What it is	The read
Whole leaf	Intact or large leaf	Slower, more detailed; loose leaf territory
Broken	Smaller pieces	Brisker, stronger; many quality bags
Fannings	Small particles	Fast, strong; the standard tea-bag grade
Dust	Finest particles	Very fast, very strong; not automatically bad
CTC	Crush, tear, curl pellets	Built for a quick, strong, milky cup

Not bad, just small

These are particle-size grades, and size governs the speed and strength of extraction, not quality. Good leaf milled small makes a fast, strong, solid daily brew, while poor leaf is poor at any size, whole or dust. The real trade off is detail versus speed and strength: fannings and dust extract fast (so they are easy to stew too long), offer less subtlety and rarely give a second steep, giving strength over delicacy. CTC granules and broken-orthodox fannings are produced differently but share the same small-particle, strong-brew logic. See CTC vs orthodox.

Grade is leaf size, quality is the cup

The single most useful idea in the whole grading subject is that grade describes the physical leaf, its size and which part of the shoot it came from, and says almost nothing on its own about how the tea tastes. What actually decides quality is the garden and the season, the freshness, the care in processing and, above all, the cup in front of you, none of which is printed on a grade stamp. A high-grown single estate picked at the right moment will make a better cup as fannings than a tired, stale tea will as immaculate whole leaf, because freshness and origin outrank particle size every time. The imposing orthodox ladder (FOP, TGFOP, FTGFOP) is the same point in fancier dress: it describes how tippy and carefully plucked the leaf is, not how good the cup will be.

The buyer's shortcut

Read the grade to predict the cup, fast and strong from fannings, dust or CTC, slower and more detailed from broken or whole leaf, then ignore the prestige of the term entirely and judge the actual brew: is it fresh, is it clean, does it taste of what it should? If yes, it is good tea at whatever grade; if no, no acronym rescues it. Match the grade to the job, fannings or CTC for a quick strong builder's mug, broken or whole leaf for a slower, subtler session, and do not pay a premium for an impressive grade word, which buys a description of the leaf rather than a better cup. Reassuringly, you do not need to learn the acronym ladder at all: "small particles brew fast and strong, large leaf brews slower and subtler, and the cup is the only judge" is enough to buy well for life. See how to judge tea quality.

Want to buy a good one?

Buy by the cup you want, not the grade. Browse the black tea range or the full tea shop, pick by the cup and what each cup costs rather than the pitch, and bear in mind that free UK delivery kicks in over £35.

Round it off with the English tea range and loose leaf range.

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teas · A few dependable bags beat a drawer of fancy leaf. Pick two or three grades you like and rotate them.

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