Whole Leaf vs Broken: Slow and Nuanced or Fast and Strong

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Whole leaf vs broken, in summary:** Intact leaf brews slowly, with nuance, and re-steeps; broken leaf brews fast and strong. Different jobs, not better versus worse, and a reminder that grade is not quality.

Whole leaf vs broken is the practical heart of grading. This sits in the grading cluster beside fannings and dust.

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

The core difference

The whole thing turns on one piece of physics: extraction speed depends on how much leaf surface the water can reach. Intact leaf has relatively little exposed edge, so it gives up its flavour gradually and keeps something back for a second and third steep, giving a slower, more layered cup. Broken leaf has far more cut surface, so it releases colour, strength and tannin fast, which is exactly what you want for a one-minute mug and exactly what makes it easy to over-steep into bitterness. Neither behaviour is a fault; it is the predictable consequence of leaf size. See tea leaf grades.

	Whole leaf	Broken
Surface exposed	Less, brews gradually	More, brews fast
Cup	Nuanced, layered	Strong, brisk, direct
Re steeping	Several infusions	One, maybe a weak second
Consistency	Varies with the leaf	Very uniform
Cost	Higher per gram	Cheaper, great value
Best for	Tasting, slow sessions, re steeping	Quick strong milky daily cup

Brewing each one

Play to the leaf. Broken leaf and standard bags want a short, single, strong steep and then prompt removal, because leaving them in turns a good strong cup harsh quickly; this is the format engineered for speed and

milk. Whole leaf rewards patience and, above all, re-steeping: a slightly longer first infusion and then several more, each drawing out a different layer. Brewing whole leaf once and binning it wastes most of what you paid for. See how to make tea properly.

Grade isn't quality, and the re-steep economics

Be blunt: the impressive grade vocabulary mostly describes leaf size and appearance, not how good the tea tastes. "Whole leaf" is not automatically delicious and "broken" is not automatically poor, so a tired whole leaf brewed carelessly is worse than a fresh broken tea made well. The other myth worth retiring is that grade acronyms rank deliciousness, which is why the wry trade joke that FTGFOP means "Far Too Good For Ordinary People" exists. The price gap also looks bigger than it is until you count infusions: a good whole leaf gives two, three or more proper cups from one measure, while a broken tea gives one and a pale ghost, so spread across the steeps the per cup price of whole leaf often lands at or below the broken equivalent. See how to judge tea quality.

Spotting which you have, and choosing

You can read this off the dry leaf in seconds. Large, twisted, recognisable pieces that unfurl when wet are whole or nearly whole leaf; small, uniform, granular particles are broken or CTC; fine powder that clouds the water at once is dust grade. Picture the supermarket shelf: a box of standard bags is broken or dust CTC, designed to brew strong and fast in a minute with milk, and it is excellent at exactly that, while a caddy of large leaf is designed to be brewed gently and steeped again, and is better at exactly that. Neither is the "good" one; they are two answers to two different mornings. So choose by the job: whole leaf for detail, ceremony and a slow cup, broken for a fast, strong, cheap, consistent mug. See loose leaf vs tea bags.

Common questions

Is whole leaf always better? No. It has more layers and can be steeped again, but a good broken tea is excellent for a fast strong cup. Different jobs.

Why does broken tea go bitter? More cut surface extracts everything fast, including tannin. Use a short steep and remove it promptly.

Is bagged tea always broken? Standard flat bags usually are, for speed. A larger leaf pyramid narrows the gap but rarely matches good whole leaf.

Does whole leaf save money? Often yes, once you count re-steeps. The higher price per gram spreads across several infusions.

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