How to Judge Tea Quality

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Judging tea quality, in summary:** Quality is judged in the cup and the wet leaf, not on the box: appearance, aroma, liquor, re-steep behaviour and the spent leaf. Grade letters mean little.

If grades do not tell you quality, what does? Here is the practical method. This anchors the grading cluster beside tea leaf grades.

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

The five signals

Five things, in order, tell you most of what you need. Appearance: look at the dry leaf for consistency, intactness, colour and the ratio of stalk or dust relative to what the style should be. Aroma: a quality tea smells lively, clear and characterful both dry and wetted, while flat, dusty or off smells are warnings. The liquor: it should be bright and clean, with a colour appropriate to the type and a balanced taste, not harsh, bitter or hollow. Re-steep behaviour: good whole-leaf tea typically gives several worthwhile infusions, and collapsing after one suggests lower quality or a broken grade. And the spent leaf: opened up, whole, supple, even leaf is a good sign, while shredded, brittle, very mixed material is not.

Signal	What it tells you
Appearance	Even, intact, consistent leaf vs broken dusty mix
Aroma	Lively, clear and characterful vs flat or musty
The liquor	Bright and clean vs dull or cloudy
Re-steep	Good leaf gives several worthwhile infusions
Spent leaf	Unfurls whole and supple vs shredded and brittle

The wet leaf is the one thing marketing can't fake

Reliable judgement means moving your attention from the box to the two places marketing cannot stage: the brewed liquor and the spent leaf. The dry leaf gives the cheap first signal and the aroma the clearest one, but the two tests amateurs skip and buyers never do are the re-steep (because good leaf has the substance for several worthwhile infusions while poor leaf collapses after one) and the spent leaf itself. Tipped out of the pot, it should look like recognisable, supple, reasonably whole leaf rather than a brittle, shredded mush.

The wet leaf is the single most revealing thing in the whole process and the hardest to fake, so if you only ever check one signal, make it this one. See how to taste tea.

Why grades and romance mislead

Set against those signals, the things people lean on hardest are the least reliable. Grade letters (OP, FOP, TGFOP, FTGFOP, and at the other end fannings and dust) describe leaf size, wholeness and how much tip is present, not how good the tea tastes. A high grade signals careful plucking and intact leaf, which correlates loosely with care, but a modest grade from a good garden, brewed well, can comfortably beat an impressive-looking grade from a poor one. "Fannings" and "dust" are not insults either, just small particle grades that make a thoroughly good strong everyday brew, which is why most tea bags use them. And the romance on the front of the pack is, by construction, the part with the least information in it. Treat grade as a description of format, never as a quality score. See tea leaf grades.

The buyer's shortcut

For everyday buying you can skip a full tasting session every time. Read the label for the few facts that tell you something, origin, type, a real description of taste and aroma and a sane date, then let the cup be the final judge on the second purchase. The first buy is a hypothesis; the cup confirms or rejects it, and a tea that brews bright, smells alive, re-steeps and leaves a supple leaf has earned a repeat regardless of what its grade letters or price implied. Anyone can read these signals with attention rather than expertise, which is the whole point. See how to choose tea.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

Stock up via the English tea range and loose leaf range.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Freshness beats provenance for most drinkers. Buy a smaller bag more often.

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