Tea Adulteration: Then and Now

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea adulteration, in summary:** A serious 19th-century problem, now heavily regulated. The modern concerns are mislabelling (fake Darjeeling, fake ceremonial matcha) and origin claims, rather than dangerous contaminants. Here is how to protect yourself.

Tea has a long history of adulteration, and modern mislabelling still exists. This sits in the grading cluster beside how to judge tea quality.

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

The historical problem

The history is genuinely shocking. Tea was a high-value imported commodity, and adulteration meant higher margins for unscrupulous sellers, so an estimated 60 to 80% of cheap UK tea in the early 1800s contained substantial adulterants. Documented practices included used tea leaves dyed and resold as fresh, sheep dung and tree leaves padding the quantity, ash and sand for weight, ferrous sulphate for colour, and copper sulphate for a bright green appearance, a literally toxic colouring. Some of these were directly harmful; others simply cheated the buyer. The Lancet's investigations of 1851 to 1854 exposed the scale of food adulteration and spurred public outrage, leading to the 1875 Food Act, the first UK food safety legislation, which still traces directly to those Victorian scandals. See tea history.

Aspect	Answer
What it is	Substitution, contamination, or misrepresentation of tea for commercial gain
Historical scale	Significant historical problem; 19th-century UK tea contained many adulterants
Historical examples	Used leaves redyed; sheep dung; sand; iron filings; colour additives
Modern UK regulation	Tea (Food) Regulations 1990, food labelling regulations; protective framework
Modern incidents	Greatly reduced in UK; international supply chain issues continue elsewhere
"Fake Darjeeling"	Most-common modern adulteration: non-Darjeeling tea sold as Darjeeling; GI-protected
"Fake matcha"	Powdered non-shaded green tea sold as ceremonial-grade matcha
Flavour additives	Legal but should be disclosed; "natural flavouring" varies in quality
Colour additives	Illegal in UK for tea; historically common in cheap green tea

Aspect	Answer
Origin mislabelling	Misrepresenting origin (e.g., "Ceylon" for Indian tea); reduced but persists
Pesticide residues	Not adulteration but related safety concern; some imports fail EU tests
Heavy metal contamination	Some tea regions show elevated lead/cadmium; reduced but variable
Framing	Modern UK tea is generally safe; verify provenance for premium GI-protected products

Modern UK regulation

Modern UK rules substantially protect tea drinkers, even if gaps remain. The Tea Regulations 1990 specifically govern tea sold in the UK, requiring accurate labelling, prohibiting adulterants and setting quality minimums, while the Food Safety Act 1990 provides the broader framework and local Trading Standards officers test market tea and prosecute violations. Imported tea is checked against pesticide maximum residue limits at port, with loads over the limit rejected, and Darjeeling carries Geographic Indication protection, so there is legal recourse against fake-Darjeeling sellers. The upshot is that gross adulteration of UK retail tea is now rare; the live concerns are specific premium categories rather than dangerous contaminants.

Fake Darjeeling and fake matcha

Two premium categories attract most modern fakery. The Darjeeling maths tell the story: genuine production is around 10,000 tonnes a year, yet several times that volume is sold worldwide as "Darjeeling", much of it climatically similar Nepalese Ilam tea substituted or blended in. The defence is to look for the Darjeeling Tea Board GI logo, an estate name, and a flush specification (first or second flush); very cheap "Darjeeling" is mathematically unlikely to be genuine. Matcha has the same problem: regular green-tea powder, not shaded or stone-ground, is widely sold as "ceremonial" matcha, sometimes cut with rice flour or sugar. The tells are sensory and economic, a vivid jade colour, a talc-fine texture, a pronounced umami sweetness, and a sane price (genuine ceremonial grade is rarely below about GBP 40 per 30g). See matcha.

Flavourings, pesticides and metals

Beyond mislabelling, three related issues are worth knowing. Flavourings are legitimate when properly disclosed: natural, nature-identical and artificial flavours are all legal in the UK with correct labelling, though "natural flavouring" covers everything from a cheap mass extract to a single-source ingredient, so reading the ingredients list matters, especially where non-tea fillers or sweeteners have been added. Pesticide residues are a genuine concern for some imports, since tea is a relatively pesticide-intensive crop; the EU maximum-residue-limit framework (retained post-Brexit) rejects loads over the limit, and organic certification side-steps the issue for concerned buyers. Finally, some tea regions show elevated lead or cadmium, variable but reduced, which again favours buying from transparent, well-sourced suppliers.

How to protect yourself

Informed buying defeats most of the risk. Source from reputable specialist retailers who maintain supply-chain controls; verify GI-protected products through the Darjeeling Tea Board logo and estate or flush attribution; check matcha credibility through an established Japanese producer, a sane price, and the colour and flavour signals above; and choose organic certification if pesticide residues concern you, since it is audit-verified for a modest premium. Read ingredients lists on flavoured teas, and treat any suspiciously cheap premium claim, "Darjeeling", "ceremonial matcha", "rare", with scepticism, because pricing that is inconsistent with the category's economics is the clearest warning sign. See how to judge tea quality.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Tannins and non-haem iron absorption

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