Tea Cupping: How the Trade Tastes Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea cupping, in summary:** The standardised professional tasting protocol (ISO 3103) the trade uses to judge tea. A real craft skill, demystified, and genuinely learnable by an engaged amateur.

Cupping is how the trade actually judges tea. This sits in the brewing cluster beside blind tasting.

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

What it is, and the ISO 3103 method

Cupping is a standardised tasting method: a fixed leaf-to-water ratio, a set steep time and identical vessels, tasted side by side. Holding every variable constant means the differences you taste are the tea, not the brewing, which makes it a fair test. The international standard, ISO 3103, specifies roughly 2.8g of tea to 150ml of fresh boiling water, steeped for 6 minutes in a lidded cupping set. That 6 minutes is deliberately past the enjoyable drinking time: cupping over-extracts by design, because a strong, demanding brew exposes faults (smokiness from poor firing, mustiness from bad storage, off-flavours) as well as quality. It is a diagnostic brew, not a pleasant one, used by buyers, factory QC and competition judges to find problems before committing to a large purchase. See how to judge tea quality.

Aspect	Answer
What it is	Standardised professional tea tasting protocol; ISO 3103-based
Origin	Tea trade tradition; standardised by tea industry for buying/grading decisions
ISO 3103 method	2.8g tea, 150ml boiling water, 6 min steep; standard equipment
Cupping set	Standardised cup with lid, bowl; 150ml capacity; uniform shape
Why standardised	Enables fair comparison between samples; eliminates brewing variables
Why often strong	Reveals tea's full character including flaws; deliberately demanding
Professional context	Tea buyers, factory QC, blenders, judges, sommelier training
What's assessed	Dry leaf appearance, brewed leaf, liquor colour, aroma, taste, mouthfeel, finish
The slurp	Aerated sipping that volatilises aromatics; spreads liquid across palate
Spitting	Common at professional tastings; many samples assessed; avoids caffeine load
Tea tasting vocabulary	Brisk, malty, brassy, smoky, vegetal, floral, astringent, hayey, biscuity

Aspect	Answer
Home cupping setup	£20-40 for proper cupping set; £5 for jam jar substitute
Why it's worth learning	Develops tasting precision; transferable beyond tea professional context
Framing	Genuine craft skill; demystified protocol; accessible to engaged amateurs

The slurp, and what's assessed

The audible slurp is there for a reason: sipping while drawing air through the tea aerates it, maximising the retronasal route from mouth to nose and spreading the liquid across the whole palate at once, so you read aroma, sweetness, bitterness, umami and astringency in a single moment. It is technique, not bad manners, and at professional sessions tasters often spit, since many samples are assessed and the caffeine would otherwise mount up. A full cupping evaluates the lot in sequence: the dry leaf (uniformity, size, condition), the wet leaf (even hydration, oxidation colour, whole vs broken), the liquor's colour and clarity, the aroma, the taste balance, the mouthfeel (body and texture) and the finish (how the taste persists). Trained cuppers run through it in 60 to 90 seconds a tea; amateurs take longer at first.

Vocabulary

A shared vocabulary lets you think about tea precisely. For brightness: brisk (clean and lively), bright (clear, not dull), brassy (slightly metallic). For sweetness: malty (the caramel-wheat note common in Assam), biscuity, honeyed. For vegetal character: grassy, seaweed (marine umami in Japanese green), green-bean. For florals: floral, orchid (an oolong note), jasmine. For earthy and woody: earthy (pu-erh), mineral (Wuyi rock tea), smoky (intentional or a fault). For defects: musty (poor storage), stale, flat, tainted, harshly bitter. And for texture: full-bodied, thin, creamy, astringent. The terms are not arbitrary; they develop with practice and transfer to other drinks.

Home cupping, and what it's not

You can cup informally with very little. A proper cupping set runs £20 to £40, but a clean jam jar works for free, plus a gram scale, a timer and a notebook. Use the same ratio and time across three to five teas, ideally blind with the labels hidden, and a weekly session sharpens the palate measurably. It is worth being clear what cupping is not: it is not how to enjoy tea daily, since the deliberately strong protocol is for evaluation, not pleasure; it is not connoisseur theatre, because the slurp and the strong brew have practical reasons; it is not only for buyers, as amateurs gain genuine, transferable tasting skill; and it is not the same as gongfu brewing, which is many gentle infusions for enjoyment rather than one strong assessment brew. See blind tasting for the next step.

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