Is Loose Leaf Cheaper Than Tea Bags? The Maths

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Is loose leaf cheaper, in summary:** Loose leaf is not automatically dearer per cup. Re-steeping often makes it competitive or cheaper than bags, with more quality in the cup. Shelf price is the wrong comparison; do the cost-per-cup maths.

Loose leaf is widely assumed to be the expensive option, and the truth is "it depends, and often not". This sits in the value cluster beside cost per cup.

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

Why the assumption is backwards

The assumption comes from a single misleading signal: a pouch of loose leaf usually carries a higher shelf price than a box of bags next to it, so the eye concludes loose leaf is dearer and stops there. That is the wrong comparison, because you do not drink the packet, you drink cups, and the only meaningful figure is cost per cup: total price divided by how many cups it actually makes. Until you do that division you have not answered the question, you have only compared two packets of different sizes and formats.

The re-steep multiplier

Once you switch to cost per cup the picture frequently inverts, and the lever that does it is re-steeping. A box of bags is engineered for one weak-to-medium infusion per bag and then the bag is spent. Good whole loose leaf, by contrast, gives several good infusions from the same measure, with many quality greens, oolongs and pu erhs improving on the second and third steep, which is the whole point of the re-steeping technique. A leaf that yields three or four cups from one scoop can quietly halve or better its real per-cup cost, so a pouch that looked twice the price of a box of bags can end up the same or cheaper per cup while delivering more in each cup.

Cost per cup by scenario

Scenario	Real cost per cup
Box of bags, one infusion each	Baseline, looks cheap on the shelf
Loose leaf, 3-4 infusions per scoop	Often halved, competitive or cheaper than bags
Loose leaf, single cup, no re-steep	Dearer in fact, you paid the premium for one cup

Scenario	Real cost per cup
Rare/prestige leaf	Dearer per cup, priced for scarcity
Loose leaf bought in bulk	Cheapest per cup of all
Quality at equal cost	Loose leaf delivers more leaf and control

Where loose leaf genuinely is dearer

Candour cuts both ways, and pretending loose leaf is always cheaper would be exactly the one-sided claim this approach exists to puncture. There are real cases where loose leaf costs more per cup: single-cup brewing with no re-steep, where you get one infusion just like a bag but paid the loose-leaf premium for it; rare or prestige leaf priced for scarcity rather than yield; and tiny pouches bought in small quantities, where buying bulk would have changed the maths entirely, as the bulk loose leaf economics guide sets out. So the accurate statement is not "loose leaf is cheaper" but "loose leaf is not automatically dearer, and is often competitive or cheaper once you count cups including re-steeps".

The quality dimension

There is also a quality dimension the pure price question hides. Even at an identical cost per cup, loose leaf typically delivers more: larger leaf with more intact flavour, control over strength and steep, and the option of better origins, so the value is not only "same price" but "more tea for the same price". That is value beyond the arithmetic, and it is why the useful decision rule is not a format prejudice in either direction but a calculation, the same lens the saving money on tea guide applies to every spending question.

A worked example

A concrete example makes the point. Put a box of forty everyday bags next to a hundred-gram pouch of decent loose black tea at roughly double the shelf price. The reflex says the pouch is the expensive choice. Do the division instead: the box gives forty single cups, while a hundred grams at a normal two to three grams a cup gives thirty five to fifty first infusions, and many of those leaves give a good second cup, pushing the real total well past the box. At double the price for more than double the cups, the loose leaf is the same or cheaper per cup, and you drank better tea each time. Reverse it, single-cup loose leaf with no second steep in a tiny pouch, and the bags win, exactly as candour requires. Both outcomes come from the same thirty-second calculation, which is why the cost per cup habit, not a format loyalty, is the real answer.

Common questions

Is loose leaf actually cheaper than bags? Often, once you count cups including re-steeps. Sometimes not. It depends on the specific tea, so do the per-cup maths.

Why does it look more expensive? The pouch usually has a higher shelf price than a box of bags. But shelf price is not cost per cup, which is the figure that matters.

When does loose leaf work out dearer? Single-cup brewing with no re-steep, rare prestige leaf, or tiny pouches bought in small quantities rather than bulk.

Is it worth it beyond price? Usually. Even at equal cost per cup, loose leaf gives larger leaf, more control and better origins.

Run the maths on a real pouch

Compare real per-cup value across the loose leaf range, the black tea range or the full tea shop. Count the cups including re-steeps, not the shelf price, and free UK delivery is over £35.

Browse the tea range

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

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