Assam Tea Explained: Orthodox, CTC and Blending

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Assam, in summary:** Assam is the strong, malty black from north east India behind most British breakfast blends. Where it grows, why it is so strong, and how to brew it.

Assam is the strong, malty engine room of British tea. It is the backbone of most breakfast blends, the tea most people in Britain actually drink every day, and yet, like Kenyan tea, it is usually doing its work unnamed inside a blend. This page gives Assam the profile it deserves: where it grows, why it brews so strong, and how to get the best from it.

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

What it actually is

Assam is black tea from the Assam region of north east India, the low lying valley of the Brahmaputra river. It is made largely from the large leaved *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*, a different variety from the smaller China type bush used for most Chinese and high grown teas. That plant, plus the place, is the whole explanation for the cup.

Why it is so robust

Assam is hot, humid, low altitude and monsoon fed. The assamica bush thrives in exactly those conditions and produces a leaf that brews strong, brisk, full bodied and distinctively malty, with a deep amber red colour. This is the opposite end of the spectrum from a high grown Darjeeling: where Darjeeling is delicate and floral, Assam is powerful and brisk, and that contrast is the clearest illustration of how much terroir and plant variety decide a tea before anyone brews it.

Its role in the blend

Assam is the foundation of English Breakfast and Irish Breakfast style blends precisely because it is strong enough to be tasted through milk. It gives a blend its body, its briskness and its malt, which is why a breakfast tea stands up to a splash of milk where a delicate tea would simply disappear. Most everyday British teabags lean heavily on Assam, or on Assam blended with brisk African tea, for exactly this reason.

Orthodox versus CTC

Most Assam, like most everyday tea, is made by the CTC method (crush, tear, curl) into small granules that brew fast, strong and dark and take milk powerfully, the ideal teabag filling. Orthodox Assam, made by the

older whole leaf method, is subtler: still malty and full, but with more aroma and a smoother, rounder character, often sold as a single estate loose leaf tea worth seeking out.

Style	Character	Best for
Assam CTC	Very strong, brisk, dark, malty	Builder's mug, breakfast blends, milky tea
Orthodox Assam	Malty but rounder, more aromatic	Single estate loose leaf drinking
Darjeeling	Light, floral, muscatel	Delicate, no milk
Ceylon	Bright, citrus edged, medium	All day, with or without milk

A little history

Assam matters historically as well as in the cup. The discovery of the indigenous assamica plant in the early nineteenth century is what allowed the British to build a tea industry inside their empire rather than relying on China, and Assam became the engine of that industry. The strong, milk friendly cup that defines British tea drinking is in large part a direct result of Assam being the tea the empire could grow at scale. The everyday strong, milky brew is not an accident of taste; it is the taste the supply created.

The second flush and the malty peak

Assam has seasons, or flushes, like other Indian teas. The first flush is lighter and less characterful; the prized one is the second flush, picked in early summer, which gives the fullest, maltiest, most full bodied tea with the richest colour. A single estate second flush orthodox Assam is the best demonstration of what the region can do beyond the anonymous strength of the blend, and it is well worth trying once if you only know Assam from teabags.

How to brew it

Assam is forgiving and wants to be brewed properly strong. Use fully boiling water and a firm steep of three to five minutes; it is built to stand up to milk and is hard to over bitter compared with delicate teas, so timidity is the main mistake. CTC Assam in particular wants strength and milk; an orthodox single estate can take a slightly shorter steep and rewards attention. It also makes a powerful iced tea, in the same way Kenyan does, because its briskness survives dilution.

The estates and the auction

Assam is, like Kenya, largely a commodity supply built around scale and the auction system, with a large number of estates and smallholdings feeding leaf into processing factories and on to the Guwahati auction and the wider trade. Most of that tea is bought by blenders for strength and consistency rather than sold by name, which is why the famous estates that do sell single origin orthodox Assam under their own label are the exception rather than the rule. Knowing this explains why a named single estate Assam costs and tastes noticeably more than the strength hiding in an everyday teabag.

The Assam crisis worth knowing

A frank profile of Assam has to mention that the region faces real pressure: ageing bushes on many estates, rising production costs, climate variability affecting the monsoon the crop depends on, and persistent

concerns about wages and conditions for the very large workforce the industry employs. None of this need stop anyone enjoying the tea, but it is part of why ethically certified and single estate Assam, bought from sellers who name the garden, is a more responsible as well as a more interesting purchase than the cheapest anonymous bulk.

Assam with milk, and why it works

It is worth understanding why Assam and milk are such a natural pair, because it explains the entire British cup. Assam is high in the brisk, full compounds that give body and a malty depth, and those flavours are strong enough to stay clearly present when milk softens and rounds them. A delicate tea has its subtlety erased by milk; Assam has its strength tamed into something smooth and comforting instead. The classic strong, milky, slightly sweet British mug is, in effect, an Assam delivery system, and that is no criticism of either.

Choosing a good one

If you want to move beyond the teabag, look for a single estate orthodox Assam, ideally a second flush, that names its garden, and treat the price as a signal: real single estate orthodox tea is not the cheapest on the shelf. Brew it strong, try it first without milk to taste the malt, then with a little milk to see why the region defines British tea. It is one of the most rewarding inexpensive upgrades in everyday tea drinking.

Reading an Assam label

A few words on the pack tell you most of what matters. "Assam CTC" or an unspecified blend means a strong, dark, milky everyday tea. "Orthodox" signals whole leaf tea with more aroma and nuance. A named estate plus a flush, especially "second flush", signals a characterful single origin worth drinking with attention. A grade code such as those containing the letters TGFOP describes leaf size and appearance rather than quality directly, but on an orthodox Assam it usually accompanies a more carefully made tea. None of this is mysterious once you know the cup follows the words.

Assam beyond the mug

Because it is strong, brisk and stands up to milk and sugar, Assam is also the natural base for several things beyond a plain cup: a proper builder’s tea, a spiced masala chai where it must be tasted through milk and spice, and a strong iced tea that keeps its body over ice. If a recipe calls simply for "strong black tea", an Assam or Assam led blend is almost always what is meant, which makes a bag of it one of the more useful single things in a kitchen.

Common questions

Is Assam the same as English Breakfast? No. English Breakfast is a blend style; Assam is usually its main component, but the two are not identical.

Does Assam have more caffeine? It is a strong black brewed strong, so a cup is firmly caffeinated, but brewing strength matters more than origin alone.

Should I add milk? It is one of the few teas really made for it; milk suits Assam better than almost any other origin.

What is the malty taste? A natural bready, malt loaf like note characteristic of the assamica variety grown in the Assam valley.

Quick take

Assam is the strong, malty engine of British tea: the Brahmaputra valley, the assamica plant, and the monsoon climate produce a black tea built for milk. CTC Assam does its job well in everyday breakfast blends; a single estate, second flush orthodox Assam is a very different cup and worth trying once. Brew it strong, drink the first cup without milk to hear the malt, then with milk to understand why the British cup tastes the way it does. Explore the black tea range or the full tea shop.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

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