Earl Grey Tea Explained: Bergamot and Flavoured Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Earl Grey, in summary:** Earl Grey is a flavouring, not a plant: a black base scented with bergamot. The one rule that decodes every flavoured and scented tea.

Earl Grey is one of the most recognised tea names in the world, and also one of the most misunderstood. It is not a type of tea plant, not a region and not a processing style. It is a flavouring applied to a base: black tea scented with oil of bergamot, a small, fragrant citrus grown mainly in Calabria in southern Italy. Everything that makes an Earl Grey good or disappointing comes from two independent choices, the quality of the black tea underneath and the quality and quantity of the bergamot on top, and a useful guide keeps those two things separate rather than letting the famous name imply quality on its own.

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

What Earl Grey actually is

The base is almost always black tea, frequently a Ceylon, an African black, or a blend chosen to be brisk and to carry citrus cleanly. The flavour comes from bergamot, whose oil is sharp, floral and slightly bitter in a pleasant way. In a well made Earl Grey the bergamot sits with the tea rather than burying it; you should still taste brewed black tea, with the citrus lifting it rather than replacing it. The single biggest quality divide is whether the bergamot is natural cold pressed oil or a cheaper synthetic bergamot flavouring. Both are legal and common, but natural bergamot is rounder and more complex while synthetic versions can taste soapy or one dimensional, and the label rarely makes the distinction obvious, so taste is the real test rather than the words on the box.

The variations

Earl Grey has spawned a family. Lady Grey adds extra citrus peel and sometimes cornflower for a lighter cup. Earl Grey blue flower is the same idea with cornflower petals for looks rather than taste. Russian Earl Grey or smoky Earl Grey adds citrus and sometimes a little smoke. Decaf Earl Grey is decaffeinated black tea with the same scenting; it behaves like other decaf, slightly softer in body but recognisably the same drink. Rooibos Earl Grey and green Earl Grey swap the base entirely, which changes the drink significantly: a rooibos version is a caffeine free tisane wearing the bergamot, not true tea, and that is fine as long as it is named accurately rather than sold as if it were the original.

How to brew it well

Treat it as the black tea it is: water just off the boil, around three to four minutes, milk optional. Earl Grey is one of the few flavoured black teas that takes milk reasonably well, though many drinkers prefer it black with a slice of lemon, which doubles the citrus. Over brewing exaggerates both the tea tannin and the bergamot bitterness, so if your Earl Grey tastes harsh the fix is usually a shorter steep or slightly cooler water rather than a different tea. A green or white based Earl Grey should be brewed cooler and shorter, like the base it uses.

Is Earl Grey good for you

It is black tea, so it carries the same modest, real story: caffeine, polyphenols, hydration, no miracle. Bergamot oil itself has been studied for cholesterol in concentrated supplement form, but the trace of flavouring in a cup of tea is not a supplement dose, and it would be misleading to sell Earl Grey as a cholesterol treatment. One real, specific caution is worth stating: bergamot contains a compound that can affect potassium handling, and very high intakes of bergamot scented tea have been linked to muscle cramps in a few documented cases. This is an edge case at extreme consumption, not a reason for normal drinkers to worry, but it is the kind of clear detail a real guide includes rather than hides.

Choose Earl Grey for the flavour, which is the only clear reason to choose it. A good one, natural bergamot over a decent brisk black tea, is a lovely cup and a British classic. A poor one is over scented synthetic citrus over dusty tea, and the prestigious name does nothing to fix that. Buy on taste, brew it like the black tea it is, and enjoy it as a flavour choice rather than a health one.

The flavoured-tea rule, at a glance

If the cup is...	Read it as...	The check
Cheap and sharp/soapy	Poor base + synthetic flavouring	Sip it black: dusty tea behind a perfume
Balanced and layered	Real base + natural flavouring	A tea you would drink unscented anyway
"Lady/French/cream/smoky" Grey	Same idea, dialled differently	Citrus, vanilla or Lapsang on a black base
Claims about the body	It is flavoured black tea	Benefits are the tea base, not the scent

How to buy flavoured tea without being misled

The bottom line is that one rule decodes every flavoured and scented tea, not just Earl Grey: the cup is only as good as the base leaf under the flavouring, and the flavouring is only as good as whether it is natural and proportionate. Earl Grey is simply the most famous worked example, a black base scented with bergamot, and once you can read it that way you can read jasmine green, vanilla black, a chai or any heavily marketed infusion the same way, base first, flavour second, claims last. The buying habit follows directly: smell the dry leaf, take the first sip without milk, and ask if you would happily drink the base unscented; if yes, the flavouring is a bonus, and if the base is hiding behind a sharp perfume, no branding rescues it. This is the explainer companion to the definitional what Earl Grey is page. Compare the base tea in the black tea range, or browse the full tea shop, the eyes-open standard the wider wiki applies to every flavoured tea.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Green tea catechins and human health

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The steep outweighs the brand on the box. A budget Earl Grey brewed with care can overtake a careless premium one.

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