Milk Oolong: Natural Jin Xuan or Flavoured Imitation

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Milk oolong, in summary: Milk oolong is the Jin Xuan cultivar, not a milk infusion. The best examples are naturally creamy and buttery with no dairy involved; cheaper ones are ordinary oolong sprayed with flavouring, so read the back of the pack to tell the two apart.

Milk oolong is the tea that smells of cream and butter without a drop of milk in it, and it is also one of the most quietly faked teas on the market, which makes a clear guide unusually useful. The one fact a buyer needs is this: real milk oolong is the Jin Xuan cultivar, which produces a soft, milky, slightly buttery note when grown and made well. A large share of the "milk oolong" on sale is ordinary oolong sprayed with milk or cream flavouring to fake that note cheaply. Both sit on the shelf under the same name, so the real task is learning to taste the difference rather than trust the label.

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

What milk oolong actually is

True milk oolong is made from Jin Xuan, also called Golden Lily or Taiwan Tea Research Institute cultivar #12, bred in Taiwan in the 1980s. Grown and processed well it gives a creamy, smooth, lightly floral cup with a soft mouthfeel and a pale gold liquor. The creaminess is subtle and woven in; it is a suggestion of cream and silkiness, not a milkshake. The leaf is lightly oxidised (around 15 to 25%) and tightly rolled, which makes it a gentle, rounded gateway oolong that opens slowly over several steeps.

Natural Jin Xuan versus flavoured imitation

This is the heart of it, because the price gap is wide and the cup is really different. Natural Jin Xuan is pure unflavoured leaf; the back of the pack lists only "oolong tea" or "Jin Xuan oolong" and nothing else, and a UK speciality seller typically charges £20 to £50 per 100g for hand-plucked Taiwanese production. A flavoured milk oolong is any oolong, often lower grade and from outside Taiwan, sprayed with milk-aroma compounds during a scenting step; the label carries a separate "milk flavouring" or "natural flavour" entry and the price drops to roughly £5 to £15 per 100g.

You can also taste the difference. A flavoured cup hits you with loud, sweet, almost custard-like cream the moment you open the bag, and that note sits on top and can turn synthetic or soapy as the cup cools. A real Jin Xuan is far subtler: the creaminess lives in the texture and aftertaste more than the aroma, and it holds

together as the tea cools. Trust the cooled cup over the smell off the bag. Flavoured milk oolong is not a swindle if you enjoy it and pay flavoured-tea money for it, but it should never be sold or priced as the natural cultivar. The same know-what-you-are-buying habit runs through the wider how to judge tea quality guide.

Why the cup tastes creamy

The creaminess is chemistry, not marketing. Jin Xuan was bred by crossing several Taiwanese cultivars to get a hardy, high-yielding plant suited to the high mountains; the celebrated side effect was a leaf unusually rich in lactones and other lipid-derived aromatic compounds that the palate reads as buttery and milky. High-mountain growing above 1,000m, with cool misty air and slower growth, concentrates those compounds further, which is why Taiwanese Jin Xuan tastes meaningfully creamier than the same cultivar grown at lower elevations in Vietnam, Thailand or southern China. Some Taiwan packs print "TTRI #12" as a quiet signal that the leaf is the real thing, the same cultivar-led standard the Okumidori cultivar guide applies to Japanese tea.

Brewing it well

Treat it as the lightly oxidised oolong it is, and never add milk; the cup is already doing that for you. Western style, use about 5g of leaf per 250ml of water at 85 to 90C for a short first steep, then re-steep once or twice with slightly longer pours. Gongfu style, put 5g in a 100ml gaiwan and run short 15 to 30 second infusions across five to seven rounds, each one revealing a slightly different layer. It also cold brews beautifully: 5g in 500ml of cold filtered water for six to eight hours in the fridge gives a properly creamy iced tea. Too-hot water or too-long a steep pushes a real Jin Xuan toward bitterness and a flavoured one toward cloying, and adding milk or sugar simply buries the note you bought it for.

What you need to know

Aspect	Note
What it is	Jin Xuan cultivar oolong, naturally creamy
Where it grows	Mostly Taiwan (Alishan, Lugu, Nantou); some Vietnam, Thailand
Oxidation	Lightly oxidised, around 15 to 25%
Cup character	Soft, creamy, buttery, slight floral; no dairy involved
Natural version	Pure Jin Xuan leaf, no added flavour, £20 to £50 per 100g
Flavoured version	Cheaper leaf sprayed with milk-aroma compounds, £5 to £15 per 100g
Brewing	85 to 90C, short steeps, several rounds; never add milk

Milk oolong is ordinary true tea in the body: caffeine and some polyphenols, no miracle. The creaminess, natural or added, is flavour and texture and contributes nothing clinical, so treat any claim about the body pinned to milk oolong as marketing on top of a pleasant cup. The companion oolong tea, Dan Cong and oolong oxidation guides cover the rest of the family, and you can source real milk oolong from the brand directory or the full tea shop.

Worth keeping on the shelf around this article: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. More in the tea shop; any basket over £35, milk oolong included, ships free in the UK.

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teas · If it smells like a milkshake through the bag, it's flavoured. Real Jin Xuan is subtle; decide which you actually want before you pay.

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