Yellow Tea: The Rare Smoothed Green

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Yellow tea, in summary:** Yellow tea is a rare Chinese type: green-like, but with an extra "sealing yellow" step (men huang) that smooths away the grassy edge into a mellow, golden, gently sweet cup.

Yellow tea is the rarest of the main Chinese tea types and the one most people have never knowingly tasted. It is often described as a smoother, mellower green tea, which is roughly right but misses what actually makes it distinct. This page explains what yellow tea is, the step that defines it, why it is so scarce, and how to brew it.

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

What it is

Yellow tea is a lightly oxidised Chinese tea, closely related to green tea but with one extra, defining stage. Like green tea it is not deliberately oxidised to any great degree, so it keeps a fresh, delicate character; unlike green tea it undergoes a slow, gentle "sealing yellowing" step that changes its taste, colour and feel in the cup. It sits between green and the more oxidised types, but it is its own category, not simply a green.

The step that defines it

The defining process is called men huang, often translated as sealing yellow or smothering. After the initial heating that halts oxidation, the warm, slightly damp leaves are wrapped or piled and left to rest under gentle heat and humidity for a period. This slow, careful step mellows the grassy, brisk edge of green tea, turns the leaf and liquor more golden, and gives yellow tea its characteristic smoothness. It is skilled, slow and easy to get wrong, which is central to why the tea is rare.

Why it is so rare

Yellow tea is produced in small quantities by relatively few producers, mostly in specific regions of China, and the extra yellowing step adds time, skill and risk for little extra yield. Through parts of the twentieth century many producers abandoned it for green tea, which is faster and less risky, and real yellow tea became scarce to the point of near extinction in places before a modest revival driven by interest in traditional teas. The practical consequence today is that real yellow tea is scarce, comparatively expensive, and sometimes imitated by lightly processed greens sold under the name, so the source matters more than

for almost any other type.

How it tastes, and how to brew it

A good yellow tea keeps the freshness of a fine green but loses the sharp, grassy, sometimes astringent edge. The cup is smooth, gently sweet, mellow and faintly nutty, with a soft golden colour and a clean, lingering finish, which is exactly why green-tea drinkers who find green a touch brisk often prefer it. Brew it like the delicate thing it is: water well off the boil, around 75 to 80C, and a short steep of one to three minutes, tasting as you go. Boiling water and long steeping bring out bitterness and waste a scarce, expensive tea, while gentle brewing rewards several short infusions that shift subtly across the session.

The famous names and grades

Yellow tea has a long history in China and was historically associated with tribute teas reserved for the imperial court, part of its prestigious, scarce reputation. The classic names to know are Junshan Yinzhen, a celebrated yellow bud tea from an island in Hunan, and Meng Ding Huang Ya from Sichuan. The category is also divided by material: delicate bud-only teas (the most prized and expensive), bud-and-leaf teas, and coarser large-leaf yellow teas, where, as a rule, the more delicate the picking the more refined, sweet and subtle the cup and the higher the price. A bud yellow tea is a contemplative, premium experience; a leafier one is rounder and more everyday, but still smoother than green.

How to recognise the real thing

Because lightly processed greens are sometimes sold as yellow tea, a few signs help. Real yellow tea has a noticeably mellow, sweet, rounded character with none of green tea's sharp grassy bite, a soft golden rather than vivid green liquor, and a seller able to name the type (such as Junshan Yinzhen or Meng Ding Huang Ya) and explain its origin. Scarcity and a corresponding price are part of the picture too; a very cheap "yellow tea" is far more likely to be a green. The cup itself, smooth where a green would be brisk, is the final test.

Yellow tea among the lightly oxidised types

Type	Oxidation	Defining step	Character
Green	Minimal	Heat to halt oxidation	Fresh, grassy, brisk
Yellow	Minimal plus yellowing	Men huang (sealing yellow)	Smooth, mellow, golden, sweet
White	Minimal	Wither and dry only	Delicate, soft, hay-like

Like green tea, yellow tea is delicate and best drunk reasonably fresh, kept airtight, cool, dark and away from strong smells rather than hoarded, since it is not an ageing tea the way white or pu-erh can be. It is the gentle, occasional, quietly special member of the lightly oxidised family: for a green tea drinker who has always wished green were a touch gentler, it can be a small revelation. Because real yellow tea is rare and not always in stock, the green and white teas are the closest readily available cups while you seek out a real yellow from a specialist, all in the loose leaf range or the full tea shop.

Teas that travel well with this article: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; UK delivery is free once a basket passes £35.

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