Ceylon Tea: How Elevation Changes the Cup

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Ceylon tea, in summary:** Ceylon tea is Sri Lankan tea, and elevation changes it completely, from strong, dark low-grown to bright, citrus-edged high-grown. Read the district and elevation on the label and the cup stops being a gamble.

Ceylon tea is one of the most familiar names in the tea world, printed on countless packets, yet what it actually means is more specific and more interesting than most people realise. This page explains what Ceylon tea is, why elevation changes it so much, and how to read the label.

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What it is

Ceylon tea is tea grown in Sri Lanka, which was called Ceylon under British rule. The island's industry was built rapidly in the nineteenth century after disease destroyed its coffee plantations, and it kept the export name "Ceylon" even after independence because it had become a globally recognised mark of quality. It is mostly black tea, though Sri Lanka also produces green and white, and at its best it is bright, brisk, clean and characterful, with a distinctive citrus-edged liveliness that sets it apart from the maltier Assam style.

Why elevation is everything

The single most important thing to understand about Ceylon is that it is not one tea. Sri Lanka grows tea at very different altitudes, and elevation changes the cup dramatically, which is why "high grown" is meaningful on a Ceylon pack rather than marketing. High-grown Ceylon from regions such as Nuwara Eliya is prized for a bright, delicate, almost fragrant character; low-grown Ceylon is strong and dark and goes into blends. Same country, same plant, very different cup, decided largely by altitude.

Elevation	Character	Best for
Low grown	Strong, dark, full-bodied	Strong blends, milky tea
Mid grown	Balanced, rich, smooth	Everyday all-rounder
High grown	Bright, brisk, citrus-edged, refined	Single origin, often without milk

The named districts

Beyond the broad low, mid and high split, Sri Lanka has distinct districts each with a recognised house style: Nuwara Eliya, Dimbula, Uva, Kandy and Ruhuna. A single-origin Ceylon that names its district makes the same useful promise as a named Darjeeling garden, telling you roughly what to expect before you buy, a delicate high-grown Nuwara Eliya being a very different cup from a strong low-grown Ruhuna. Reading the district is the difference between predicting the cup and gambling on it.

The "quality season"

Ceylon also varies by season. Certain districts have a recognised "quality season", a window when weather conditions, such as the dry Uva winds, concentrate aroma and produce the most prized, characterful tea of the year. This is the Ceylon equivalent of flush in Darjeeling: the same garden tastes meaningfully different across the year, and the best single-origin Ceylons may state the season as well as the district, a sign of a serious tea rather than a generic blend.

The Lion logo

Authentic Ceylon tea often carries the Sri Lanka Tea Board's lion logo, which signals tea that really is of Sri Lankan origin and packed to its standards. It is a useful authenticity marker in a market where famous origin names are widely stretched, in the same way the Darjeeling name is. It is not a guarantee of a particular flavour grade, but it is a real origin check.

How it tastes, and how to brew it

Classic Ceylon is bright and brisk with a clean, slightly citrus, refreshing quality and a medium body. A high-grown one is lively and refined enough to drink without milk; a low-grown or blended Ceylon takes milk happily. Brew a low-grown or blended Ceylon strong, with fully boiling water for three to four minutes; brew a fine high-grown one a fraction more gently and try it without milk first to taste the bright, citrus-edged character you paid for. Matching the brewing to the elevation, sturdy for low grown, more careful for high grown, is the difference between a good Ceylon and a wasted one, and a good high grown also makes one of the finest clear iced teas there is.

Blends versus single origin

Much Ceylon is bought for blending because its bright, clean briskness lifts a blend, so a great deal of it, like Kenyan and Nilgiri, is drunk unnamed; it has been a pillar of the British blended cup for over a century, the bright note lifting maltier teas. Bought as a single origin that states district, elevation and ideally season, it becomes a far more rewarding proposition: a predictable, characterful tea you choose deliberately rather than a generic strength. Sri Lanka also makes lesser-known green and white teas, including its own silver tips, a reminder that "Ceylon" denotes an origin and a quality tradition, not a single fixed product.

The practical rule pulls the threads together: prefer a Ceylon that states district and ideally elevation and season, look for the lion authenticity mark, and match the style to how you drink, low-grown and blended for a strong milky cup, high-grown for a bright, refined tea often best without milk. The companion black tea, Assam and Darjeeling guides cover the neighbours, and you can choose a named single-district Ceylon from the full tea shop.

On the practical shopping side: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Find more in the tea shop; UK delivery is free over £35.

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