CTC and Orthodox Tea: Two Methods, Two Jobs

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **CTC and orthodox, in summary:** Two ways of processing the same leaf for two jobs. CTC for fast, strong, milky mugs; orthodox for nuance and re-steeping. Neither is "better" in the abstract, it depends on the use.

CTC versus orthodox is the single most useful manufacturing distinction in black tea, and the headline is that it is a difference of method and intended use, not simply of quality: CTC and orthodox are two ways of processing the same leaf for two different jobs, and "which is better" depends entirely on what you want the tea to do. Understanding the two explains why your teabag and your loose-leaf Darjeeling are so different even when both are "black tea".

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What the two methods actually are

Orthodox processing broadly follows the traditional sequence, wither, roll, oxidise, dry, with the leaf kept relatively whole or in larger pieces, preserving distinct grades and complex flavour. CTC stands for "crush, tear, curl": after withering, the leaf is fed through machines that crush, tear and curl it into small, hard, uniform pellets before oxidation and drying. CTC was developed to make tea that brews fast, strong, dark and consistent, ideal for teabags, mass blends and milky, sweetened tea. They are deliberately engineered for different outcomes from the same plant.

Why CTC dominates teabags

The plain, unsnobbish explanation: CTC's small, uniform particles have a large surface area, so they release colour and strength very quickly, give a strong, brisk cup that stands up to milk and sugar, and are cheap, consistent and easy for machines to handle at huge scale. That is exactly what a breakfast teabag, a builder's brew or a chai base needs to do, brew fast and strong in a mug with milk. The overwhelming majority of the world's everyday tea, including most teabags and most Assam and African tea, is CTC, and for its job it is the right tool, not a failure.

Which is "better"

This is the core of it. Orthodox tea generally preserves more nuance, aroma, distinct grades and re-steeping potential, so for appreciating a single-origin Darjeeling, a fine Ceylon or a tippy Yunnan, orthodox is clearly better and worth the higher price. CTC generally sacrifices nuance for speed, strength, consistency and value, so for a fast, strong, milky everyday mug it is arguably the better, and certainly the more sensible, choice. Neither is universally "better"; orthodox wins on complexity, CTC wins on brisk economical strength, and the answer to "which should I buy" is "for which use?".

How this changes brewing

The practical payoff: CTC brews fast and hard, so a short steep is plenty and over-brewing quickly turns it harshly tannic, which is why a forgotten teabag goes bitter so fast. Orthodox whole leaf brews more slowly and gracefully, rewards a little more leaf and time and often several infusions, and is more forgiving of a slightly longer steep. Knowing which you have tells you how to treat it, and explains why the same brewing habit can produce a great cup from one and a stewed cup from the other.

Does the method change the health story

Only marginally, and not in a way worth chasing. Both are true black tea: caffeine, polyphenols, hydration, no miracle. CTC's fast extraction can give a stronger, more astringent cup more quickly, which changes taste and perceived strength without making either style special for the body, and any claims of that kind are the usual marketing. The reason to understand CTC versus orthodox is matching tea to the occasion and brewing it correctly, not a health ranking.

CTC and orthodox side by side

	CTC	Orthodox
Method	Crush, tear, curl into pellets	Wither, roll, oxidise, dry; leaf kept whole
Brewing	Fast, strong, dark in a minute	Slower, graceful, re-steepable
Character	Brisk, strong, consistent	Layered, aromatic, distinct grades
With milk	Built for it	Often drunk clean
Best for	Teabags, builders, chai base	Single-origin appreciation

The habit worth keeping ties it together: place a black tea on two axes before anything else, where and how high it grew (origin and elevation, which sets the natural character) and how the leaf was made (orthodox or CTC, which sets style and strength), then brew to the leaf and judge the cup rather than the name or the grading string. Match tea to the job and the price, everyday money for a brisk CTC mug, fine money for an orthodox single origin you will actually taste, and the only real mistake is paying prestige money for the wrong one or brewing one as if it were the other. The companion black tea, loose leaf versus bags and tea leaf grades guides develop the same idea, and you can buy either kind in the full tea shop.

If this piece pointed you somewhere, these are the obvious places to land: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Browse the wider tea range; free UK shipping above £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Two or three good bags of CTC or orthodox tea take you to £35, where UK delivery becomes free. Build a small CTC and orthodox order rather than a single splurge.

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