Black Tea Grades: OP, FTGFOP and What They Really Mean

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Black tea grades, in summary:** OP, BOP, FTGFOP and the rest describe leaf size and tip content, not cup quality. They set expectations for how a tea will brew; the cup, garden and season decide whether it is good.

Black tea grading is the most intimidating-looking jargon in tea, strings like OP, BOP, FTGFOP, SFTGFOP1, and the single most liberating fact is that these codes mostly describe leaf size and appearance, not taste quality, and certainly not a guarantee of how good the tea is in the cup. Decoding them clearly removes their power to intimidate or to oversell.

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

What the grades actually describe

For orthodox black tea (mainly Indian and Ceylon style), the letters classify the processed leaf by size, wholeness and how much "tip" (downy bud) it contains. "Orange Pekoe" (OP) does not mean orange-flavoured or a quality stamp; it is a leaf-size grade for a particular whole-leaf style. "B" usually means Broken (smaller pieces), "F" Fannings (smaller still), "D" Dust (smallest, common in teabags). The longer prestige strings add descriptors read one letter at a time: "T" tippy, "G" golden, "F" finest, "S" special, so FTGFOP roughly reads "Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe", with a trailing "1" meaning the top sub-grade. They describe the look and make-up of the leaf, not its flavour directly.

What the grades do not tell you

This is the core frankness. A high-sounding grade indicates a whole, tippy, well-made leaf, which often correlates with a more refined tea, but it does not guarantee the tea tastes good: a beautifully graded leaf from a poor garden or a bad year can still be a mediocre cup, and a humble broken grade from a great estate can be delicious. Grades are also not standardised or policed identically everywhere, and a producer can use an impressive string fairly loosely. The letters are a useful description of leaf style, not a substitute for tasting or for knowing the garden and season.

Orthodox grades versus CTC grades

A useful clarification: this elaborate lettering mainly applies to orthodox tea. CTC tea is graded much more simply by particle size (various leaf, broken and "dust" or fannings grades suited to teabags), because CTC exists to make uniform small grain for the bag, not whole-leaf appearance. So a daunting FTGFOP string is an orthodox whole-leaf phenomenon, and its very absence on your everyday teabag is not a downgrade, it just means a different kind of tea built for a different job. Reading the code tells you which world you are holding before you even brew.

How to use grades

Use them as a description, not a verdict. The grade tells you roughly what the leaf looks like and therefore how it may behave: whole, tippy grades extract more slowly and hold delicate, aromatic, sweeter notes that survive several infusions, so they reward gentler water and a shorter steep and are wasted stewed; broken and dust grades present far more surface area, give up colour, strength and tannin fast, and are exactly what you want for a brisk milky mug. Combine that with the things that really are informative, origin, garden, flush and the cup itself, and the jargon becomes a helpful shorthand. The rule, as ever: the letters set expectations, the cup decides.

Do grades change the health story

No. Leaf size and tip content slightly affect extraction speed and strength but not the fundamental fact that this is true black tea: caffeine, polyphenols, hydration, no miracle. A loftier grade is a flavour-and-appearance signal, not a health upgrade, and any claim otherwise is marketing. The reason to understand grades is buying and brewing intelligently, not a health hierarchy.

The grade string, decoded

Code	What the letters mean	Leaf character	Typical use
OP	Orange Pekoe, a whole-leaf size grade, not a flavour or quality stamp	Whole, larger leaf	Loose orthodox everyday
BOP	Broken Orange Pekoe	Smaller broken pieces	Brisk, stronger, faster brew
FOP / TGFOP	Flowery, Tippy, Golden, more bud included	Whole leaf with golden tips	More refined orthodox
FTGFOP / SFTGFOP1	Finest (Special) Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe; trailing 1 = top sub-grade	Very tippy whole leaf	Prestige orthodox
F / Fannings	Fannings, smaller still	Small particles	Bags, fast strong cup
D / Dust	Dust, smallest	Finest particles	Standard teabags

The practical rule for buying is to let the grade set expectations and the price set suspicion: a long FTGFOP style string on a very cheap tea is a sign the name has outrun the leaf, while a modest broken grade from a respected origin can be the better buy. Match the grade to the job, brisk broken or CTC for the daily milky mug, finer whole-leaf orthodox for the cup you brew with care and actually taste, and you spend where it

shows. You can compare the two ends directly, a strong Assam-led everyday blend such as Yorkshire Tea against single-origin Hyson Ceylon, in the black tea range, and let the per-cup price, not the lettering, settle it. The how to judge tea quality guide develops the same eye.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The grade you finish drinking is the grade for you. Add other grades once that one is decided.

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