Tea Tasting Notes: Real Vocabulary, Not Snobbery

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea tasting notes, in summary:** Notes like "malty", "muscatel" and "marine" are mostly real, useful shorthand for genuine sensory impressions, not invented snobbery. A dozen core words cover most of tea, and tasting well is attention and reference practice, not a gifted palate.

Tea tasting notes, "malty", "muscatel", "marine", "stone fruit", "orchid", sound like wine-world pretension, and the single most useful fact is that they are mostly real, useful shorthand, not invented snobbery, though they describe genuine sensory impressions rather than literal added ingredients. Understanding what tasting notes are for, and what they are not, lets you use them confidently and ignore the genuinely pretentious fringe.

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

What tasting notes actually are

A tasting note is a comparison: it says this tea's aroma or flavour reminds a taster of a familiar reference (malt, honey, hay, grass, citrus, cocoa, smoke, flowers). Tea genuinely contains hundreds of aroma compounds, many shared with fruits, flowers and roasted foods, so when a Darjeeling is called "muscatel" it is because it really does carry an aromatic impression close to muscat grapes, not because anything grape was added. Notes are an attempt to make an invisible, complex experience communicable, the same tool used for wine, coffee and whisky.

Why they are real, not pretentious

The defence: blind tasters, given the vocabulary, agree on broad notes far more than sceptics expect, malty Assam, smoky Lapsang, grassy sencha, floral oolong are reliably identifiable, which is exactly why these particular words recur across the industry. The recurrence is evidence the notes track something real in the leaf, not a shared affectation. Where it does tip into pretension is hyper-specific single-reference claims ("crushed wild Alpine raspberry on the third infusion only"), which outrun what most palates can reliably detect, and a clear guide separates the dependable core vocabulary from that fringe rather than mocking or swallowing the whole thing.

The core vocabulary worth knowing

A small, high-value set covers the vast majority of tea description. Malty is the rounded, biscuit-and-malt depth of Assam and many breakfast blacks; brisk or astringent is the lively, slightly drying quality of a good black tea; muscatel is the grapey, aromatic signature of fine Darjeeling; marine, umami or grassy is the savoury, vegetal character of Japanese green; roasted, toasty or nutty describes pan-fired Chinese green, roasted oolong and hojicha; floral or orchid belongs to aromatic oolongs and some greens; smoky is Lapsang and smoked styles; honeyed suits tippy Chinese blacks like Dian Hong; and earthy or woody is shou pu-erh and aged dark tea. Knowing that dozen or so words is most of the skill.

How to taste tea properly yourself

The method needs no special talent. Brew the tea correctly first, because a badly brewed tea gives false notes. Smell the dry leaf, the wet leaf and the liquor, since much aroma is perceived through the nose. Take a slightly larger than normal sip and let it move across the whole mouth; note the first impression, the body and texture, and the aftertaste (the "finish"), which often differs from the first taste. Compare with the core vocabulary, then taste across re-steeps, since notes evolve from infusion to infusion. The skill is attention and reference practice, not a gifted palate.

Do tasting notes change the health story

No. Tasting notes are about flavour and communication, not nutrition; the tea is still ordinary true tea, caffeine, polyphenols, hydration, no miracle, and naming a "honeyed" or "marine" note tells you nothing about health. The only real benefit is enjoyment: a small vocabulary genuinely deepens the pleasure of drinking and makes buying more reliable, which is reason enough without any wellness framing.

The core tasting vocabulary

Note	What it means, and where you meet it
Malty	Rounded biscuit-and-malt depth; Assam, breakfast blacks
Brisk / astringent	Lively, slightly drying; a good black tea
Muscatel	Grapey, aromatic; fine Darjeeling
Marine / umami / grassy	Savoury, vegetal; Japanese green
Roasted / toasty / nutty	Pan-fired Chinese green, roasted oolong, hojicha
Floral / orchid	Aromatic oolongs and some greens
Smoky	Lapsang and smoked styles
Honeyed	Tippy Chinese blacks like Dian Hong
Earthy / woody	Shou pu-erh and aged dark tea

So treat tasting notes as a shared shorthand, not a test: learn the dozen core words, taste deliberately across leaf, liquor and finish, and ignore the hyper-specific fringe. The tea tasting for beginners guide takes it step by step, and a varied set of leaf to practise on is in the full tea shop or the loose leaf range.

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