How to Make Sweet Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Sweet tea, in short:** Southern sweet tea is strong black tea sweetened hot and served very cold: brew double strength, dissolve sugar warm, chill fast.

Sweet tea is the classic American South iced drink: strong black tea, sweetened while hot so the sugar dissolves fully, then chilled and served over ice. It is delicious and very sweet, and a clear recipe gives you both halves of the picture: how to make a proper one, and a frank look at exactly how much sugar that traditionally means so you can decide your own level.

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

What you need

For about a litre: 6 to 8 black teabags (or 3 to 4 tablespoons loose black tea), a litre of water, and, traditionally, anywhere from a half to a full cup of sugar, that is the usual range a classic recipe uses, plus ice and optional lemon. The tea base should be brewed strong because the ice will dilute it.

How to make it, step by step

Boil the water, remove from heat, add the tea and steep 4 to 6 minutes for a strong base (a short pinch of bicarbonate of soda is a traditional trick to reduce bitterness from the long, strong steep). Remove the tea. While the tea is still hot, stir in the sugar until fully dissolved, doing this hot is the whole technique, sugar will not dissolve properly in cold tea. Top up with cold water if needed, cool, refrigerate, and serve over plenty of ice with lemon.

How to make it genuinely good

Good sweet tea is about a strong, smooth, not stewed base and full sugar dissolution. Use a decent sturdy black tea, do not over steep into harshness (the bicarb trick or a slightly shorter steep helps), and chill it properly so it is bracingly cold over lots of ice. Fresh lemon lifts it. A "simple syrup" (sugar pre dissolved in water) lets you sweeten to taste glass by glass instead of committing the whole jug.

A plain note

The note this whole wiki insists on applies here too: traditional sweet tea is, by design, a high sugar drink, a full sugar recipe can rival a soft drink, and the iced, refreshing format makes it slip down fast. That is fine as

an occasional treat made knowingly, the sensible move is simply to know the number and that it is entirely yours to set. You can make lovely sweet tea at a fraction of the classic sugar, or use a syrup so each glass is your choice; the tea and the method stay exactly the same, only the sugar is dialled to where you actually want it.

Sweet tea, at a glance

Element	Short rule
What it is	Strong black tea, sweetened while hot, served very cold
Brew strong	Double strength; ice will dilute it heavily
Sweeten warm	Sugar dissolves in hot tea, not iced; syrup works too
Chill fast	Over plenty of ice or quickly in the fridge
Clear note	It is a sweet drink by design; the sugar is a choice, own it

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