Dark tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Dark tea, in short:** Dark tea (hei cha) explained: post-fermented pu-erh, liu bao, fu brick, how it tastes, brews and ages, and why it is not black tea. UK tea guide.

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

Dark tea (*hei cha*) is the sixth and least understood class of tea: deliberately aged under microbial fermentation. It is not the same as black tea, despite the naming chaos where the West calls black what China calls red. Dark tea is its own thing, and once you have had a good one the difference is obvious.

What "post-fermented" means

Most tea is oxidised, an enzyme reaction in the leaf. Dark tea goes a step further: after an initial green-tea-style processing it is aged, often with controlled microbial activity, which mellows astringency and builds deep, earthy, sometimes woody or sweet notes. Time, humidity and microbes do the work.

The main styles

- **Pu-erh**: from Yunnan. *Sheng* (raw) ages slowly over years; *shou* (ripe) is fast-fermented to mimic decades in months.
- **Liu Bao**: from Guangxi, smooth, betel-nut and earth.
- **Fu brick (Fu zhuan)**: compressed, prized for "golden flowers", a benign fungus that adds a mellow sweetness.
- **Anhua dark tea**: Hunan, the classic border-trade brick teas.

The naming confusion, settled

"Dark tea" is post-fermented hei cha. "Black tea" in English is fully oxidised tea, which the Chinese call red tea. They are different categories. Our explainer on black vs red vs rooibos untangles the rest.

How it tastes and brews

Expect smooth, low-astringency liquor with earthy, woody, sometimes sweet or mineral depth, and very little bitterness in a good one. It takes near-boiling water, a quick rinse of the leaf, and rewards many short infusions; a single cake or brick re-steeps far more than ordinary tea.

Why people keep it

Quality dark tea, raw pu erh above all, is one of the only teas that really improves with age, which is why it is collected and stored. It is also the easy-drinking, low-bitterness option for people who find green sharp and want something rounder than a builder's black.

The essentials: dark tea (heicha)

Question	Short answer
What is dark tea?	Post-fermented tea, processed with deliberate microbial fermentation. The category includes pu-erh, Liu Bao, Anhua heicha and Fu Cha.
How is it different from black tea?	Black tea is oxidised (an enzymatic reaction). Dark tea is fermented (microbial action). Different chemistry, very different taste.
What does it taste like?	Earthy, woody, sometimes mushroom-like, often deeply complex. Mellow and round with aged versions.
Caffeine?	Moderate. Similar to black tea, 30-50mg per cup. Some claim aged dark teas have less caffeine; partly true.
Can it be aged?	Yes, for years or decades. Sheng (raw) pu-erh in particular improves with age; some 30-year-old pu-erh sells for thousands of pounds.
Where does it come from?	Mainly Yunnan (pu-erh), Guangxi (Liu Bao), Hunan (Anhua heicha). All in southwest China.
How to brew it?	Multiple short infusions in a gaiwan or Yixing pot. Rinse the leaves first; first infusion at 90-95 degrees for 10-30 seconds.
Best entry point?	Cooked (shou) pu-erh from a reputable supplier. Smoother and more accessible than aged sheng for beginners.

Reference noted

Tea history and classification draws on Britannica: Tea.

FROM THE CURATOR

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