Brewing Loose Leaf Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The short version:** The full loose leaf reference: equipment, water, ratio, time, multiple infusions and storage, family by family. The cheap upgrade that works.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team on 8 August 2026.

Loose leaf tea brewing is the simplest upgrade most British tea drinkers can make to their daily cup, and one of the most undervalued. The same plant as the stuff in supermarket teabags (*Camellia sinensis*), but the difference is what's been done to it before it reaches your cup: bags use small broken grades that brew fast and hard; loose leaf uses whole or half leaf material that takes longer but rewards you with more nuance, more flavour complexity, and the option to brew the same leaves two or three times. The equipment is minimal, the technique is straightforward, and the cup quality lift is real.

This guide covers everything you need to know about loose leaf brewing: equipment, water, temperature, leaf quantity, brewing time, multiple infusions, and family by family specifics. By the end you'll be able to brew any tea family confidently and get the best possible cup from any leaf you buy.

Why loose leaf instead of tea bags

The case for loose leaf brewing comes down to leaf size. Tea bags require small cut leaves (or "fannings" and "dust") because whole leaves can't expand properly in a flat or pyramid bag. The smaller leaf size has practical effects:

- **Faster infusion** but also faster bitterness extraction; cup quality is harder to control
- **More tannin extraction** per minute, producing astringency more quickly
- **Less complex flavour:** the small leaf surface releases compounds in less balanced ratios
- **Limited variety** as tea bags only accommodate certain leaf grades and types
- **Higher per cup cost** at the premium end as bags cost more to produce per gram of leaf

Loose leaf brewing addresses all of these by using whole or larger piece leaves with proper room to expand and release flavour gradually. The quality difference is most noticeable at the premium end (a £30-per-100g loose leaf Darjeeling is dramatically better than the same brand's tea bags), but it's still meaningful at the everyday end (loose leaf Yorkshire Gold is a noticeable upgrade over the bagged version).

The kit you actually need

A vessel to hold the leaves so they can swell without escaping into your cup, and a way to heat water. That's it.

A teapot or single cup infuser. The classic British teapot (1 to 1.5 litre capacity) handles 4 to 6 cups; a single cup infuser (basket style or ball style) handles single cups. Either works. The teapot approach is more traditional and produces slightly better cups for multi cup brewing; the single cup infuser is more practical for a single drinker.

- **Teapot with built in strainer:** the cleanest option; leaves swim in plenty of water, you pour through the spout filter into a cup. Cast iron, ceramic and glass all work; glass lets you see the colour
- **Mesh ball or basket infuser:** drops into a mug if you only want one cup. Pick one with room; leaves expand 3 to 4 times when wet and a tight ball gives a weaker cup
- **Gaiwan** (a small lidded Chinese cup), the gongfu route; many short, intense infusions of the same leaves. Fiddly at first, brilliant once it clicks. Particularly suited to oolong and pu erh

A fine mesh strainer. For pouring from a teapot without an internal infuser, you need a small fine mesh strainer to catch leaves at the cup. A simple stainless steel strainer costs £3 to £5 and lasts forever.

A measuring spoon or scale. Tea is measured by volume (teaspoons) for everyday brewing or weight (grams) for precision. A standard tablespoon sized measuring spoon works for everyday use; tea enthusiasts often use a small kitchen scale for gram level precision (3 to 5g per cup is the typical range).

Optional: a kettle thermometer or temperature control kettle. For green, white, and oolong teas where water temperature significantly affects cup quality, a thermometer (£10 to £15) or temperature control kettle (£40 to £100) gives precise control. For black teas where boiling water is fine, this is unnecessary.

That's the entire kit. Total cost: £10 to £25 for everything you need. No specialty tea shop equipment required. See the teapots and infusers guide for the broader equipment context.

Water quality and temperature

Water is half the cup. The quality and temperature of the water matters as much as the tea itself.

Use freshly drawn cold water and bring it to the boil only once. Re boiled water has lower dissolved oxygen content, which dulls the cup. Hot water sitting in a kettle for hours, then re boiled, produces a flatter brew than freshly drawn water boiled once.

Filtered or low mineral water improves the cup in hard water areas. Hard water (high in calcium and magnesium, common across southern and eastern England) dulls tea and produces the visible scum film on top of the cup. A simple jug filter is cheap and effective; filtered water makes a meaningful difference to the cup in hard water postcodes. For mass market black tea drinkers in hard water areas, Yorkshire Tea Hard Water is a brand level alternative.

Water temperature varies by tea family. Very hot water can extract bitterness and astringency quickly from delicate green, white and yellow teas; cooler water often gives a more balanced cup. Black tea, many oolongs and many herbal infusions are commonly brewed hotter. The complete family by family map:

Tea family	Ideal water temperature	Why
White tea	70 to 75°C	Delicate flavours; cooler water limits harsh extraction

Tea family	Ideal water temperature	Why
Green tea	70 to 80°C	Sweet and umami balance is easier to retain with cooler water
Yellow tea	75 to 80°C	Similar to green tea
Oolong tea	85 to 95°C	Often cleaner below boiling
Black tea	95 to 100°C	Fully oxidised; requires near boiling water for full character extraction
Pu erh tea	95 to 100°C	Full extraction needs hot water
Herbal infusions	95 to 100°C	Most herbs need boiling water for full compound extraction
Rooibos	95 to 100°C	Doesn't go bitter; can take extended brewing
Matcha	70 to 80°C (whisked, not steeped)	Whole leaf consumption; hot water turns the powder bitter

For the dedicated water guide see the ideal water temperatures guide.

The leaf to water ratio

Standard ratios for loose leaf brewing:

- **Black tea** 1 teaspoon (about 2 to 3g) per 200ml cup, plus an extra teaspoon for the pot if brewing multiple cups
- **Green tea** 1 teaspoon (about 2g) per 200ml cup; less leaf is needed because the lighter flavour shows through
- **White tea** 1 to 2 teaspoons (about 2 to 3g) per 200ml cup
- **Oolong tea** 1 teaspoon (about 3g) per 200ml cup
- **Pu erh tea** 1 teaspoon (about 3 to 4g) per 200ml cup
- **Herbal infusions** 1 to 2 teaspoons depending on the herb; chamomile flowers need more volume than dense ground spice blends
- **Rooibos** 1 teaspoon per 200ml cup

The traditional British "one for each cup, plus one for the pot" rule works well for black tea pot brewing. For single cup infusers, just one teaspoon per cup. If a tea tastes thin, add more leaf; if it tastes harsh, don't add less, change the temperature or the time first.

Brewing time by family

Brewing time is the second variable that significantly affects cup quality. The standard times:

Tea family	Brewing time	Notes
Black tea (everyday)	3 to 5 minutes	4 minutes is the standard British target; 3 for lighter, 5 for stronger

Tea family	Brewing time	Notes
Black tea (single origin Darjeeling)	3 to 4 minutes	Lighter character shows best at shorter times
Black tea (heavy Assam)	4 to 5 minutes	Bold character wants a full brew
Green tea (Japanese sencha)	1 to 2 minutes	Short brewing; oversteeping produces bitterness fast
Green tea (Chinese dragonwell, Mao Feng)	2 to 3 minutes	Slightly longer than Japanese greens
White tea	4 to 7 minutes	Longer brewing for the delicate character
Oolong tea	3 to 5 minutes (first infusion)	Excellent for multiple infusions; subsequent shorter
Pu erh tea	3 to 5 minutes	Strong, bold character; multiple infusions excellent
Herbal infusions	5 to 10 minutes	Herbs need longer extraction than tea
Rooibos	5 to 10 minutes	Doesn't go bitter; can extend brewing for stronger cup

The multiple infusion technique

One of the major advantages of whole leaf loose leaf tea over tea bags: you can re brew the same leaves multiple times, getting different cups from the same pinch of tea. This works particularly well for:

- **Oolong teas:** often best on the second or third infusion as the leaves continue to unfurl and release deeper character
- **Pu erh teas:** traditionally re brewed multiple times, often 6+ infusions from the same leaves
- **Premium Chinese green teas:** dragonwell and similar respond well to 2 to 3 infusions
- **Premium black teas:** single origin Darjeeling and similar can give 2 good infusions

The technique: brew the first cup at the standard time, then re pour fresh hot water over the same leaves for the second cup, typically extending the brewing time slightly each round (add 30 seconds per infusion). The first infusion pulls out the most soluble compounds; later infusions bring out deeper, more layered character. For multi infusion teas, the per cup cost drops dramatically while flavour quality stays high.

Cheaper teas exhaust on the first brew. Better teas keep going. It's one of the quickest ways to tell if what you bought is worth the shelf space.

Step by step black tea brewing

The classic British black tea pot brewing approach for 4 cups:

1. **Fill the kettle with fresh cold water** and put it on to boil
2. **Warm the teapot** by swirling a small amount of hot water inside, then discarding
3. **Add 5 teaspoons of loose leaf black tea** (4 cups + 1 for the pot)

4. **Pour the just boiled water** over the leaves; fill to the appropriate level
5. **Stir once and put the lid on**
6. **Brew for 4 minutes**
7. **Stir once more, then pour through a strainer into cups**
8. **Add milk and sugar to taste**

The whole process takes about 5 minutes from cold and produces a noticeably better cup than tea bags from the same brand. For single cup brewing, use a basket infuser, 1 teaspoon of leaves, and 200ml of just boiled water; same 4-minute brewing time.

Step by step green tea brewing

The Japanese style approach for sencha:

1. **Bring water to the boil** then let it cool to 70 to 80°C (about 1 minute off the boil)
2. **Warm the teapot**
3. **Add 1 teaspoon of green tea per cup**
4. **Pour the cooled water** over the leaves
5. **Brew for 1 to 2 minutes:** no longer
6. **Pour through a strainer immediately**; don't leave leaves to oversteep
7. **Drink neat, no milk**

For the second infusion, brew 30 seconds to 1 minute. Many premium Japanese green teas give 3 excellent infusions from the same leaves.

Common loose leaf brewing mistakes

- **Boiling water on green or white tea:** the most common mistake; produces bitter cups and conclusions that "I don't like green tea". Cool the water first to the temperature the tea asks for; a thermometer or a temperature-controlled kettle is the reliable way to tell, because cooling time depends on how much water is in the kettle
- **Squeezing the bag or basket:** the harshest tannins are last out. Let it drip; don't crush it
- **Brewing in the cup:** leaves keep extracting while you sip. Use a teapot or remove the infuser when time's up
- **Old water:** water that's been boiled, cooled and re boiled is flat. The dissolved oxygen is gone and so is the brightness in the cup. Fresh cold water every time
- **Cheap leaf for a poor brew:** a poor leaf doesn't get better with technique. If you're going to bother with loose leaf, start with something the seller will stand behind
- **Oversteeping black tea** more than 5 minutes typically produces astringent over extracted cups; use a timer
- **Underleafing** using too little tea produces thin, weak cups that get blamed on the tea quality
- **Brewing in a cold pot:** the cold pot steals heat from the water; warm the pot first

Storing loose leaf tea

Tea is sensitive to four enemies: light, heat, moisture, and air. Store loose leaf tea in:

- **Airtight container:** ideally opaque (metal tins or dark glass)
- **Cool location:** away from the oven, hob, or other heat sources
- **Dark cupboard** not on a sunny shelf
- **Away from strong odours:** tea absorbs nearby smells; don't store next to spices or coffee

Properly stored, most teas keep well for 1 to 2 years. Green tea is the most perishable (8 to 12 months for peak freshness); pu erh actually improves with age and can be stored for decades. See the tea storage guide for the full storage detail.

What we stock

Browse the loose leaf tea range across all categories. The most bought loose leaf suitable teas on teas.co.uk:

- Yorkshire Tea Original Loose Leaf Tea, 250g
- Yorkshire Tea Gold Blend Loose Leaf Tea, 250g
- Dilmah Ceylon Pure Green Loose Leaf Tea, 100g
- PG Tips Original Loose Leaf Tea, 250g
- Twinings English Breakfast Loose Tea, 125g
- Taylors of Harrogate Yorkshire Tea Loose Leaf Tea, 250g

For the wider category context see the black tea overview, the green tea overview, the oolong overview, the white tea overview, and the matcha overview. For comparisons across the wider tea landscape, see also: Yorkshire Tea, Teapigs, Twinings, Clipper.

Worth the switch

For most British drinkers the obvious starting point is loose leaf versions of teas you already drink. If you're a Yorkshire Tea drinker, brew Yorkshire Tea Loose Leaf in a pot for a week and compare it to the bagged version; if you drink green, try a quality leaf like Teapigs Mao Feng. The difference shows from the first cup.

Don't be put off by tea shop talk about temperature precision and traditional methods. The basics are just teaspoon, water at the right heat, time, strainer. Get those right and you can pick up the finer techniques whenever your interest grows.

For the wider context see the ideal water temperatures guide, the ultimate caffeine guide, the tea storage guide, the teapots and infusers guide, the black tea overview, the green tea overview, the matcha overview, the Yorkshire Tea deep dive, and the Teapigs deep dive.

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